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The purpose of this study was to learn about the practice of special education administration from veteran special education administrators. Research questions include: What institutional arrangements support special education administrators' work? What personal and professional commitments keep special education administrators engaged in their practice? How do special education administrators manage the conflicts inherent in the position? What roles and functions are enacted by special education administrators in their school districts?

A brief history of special education and the laws that have shaped the provision of services is given. Case law is examined in relation to components of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2012) and how the results of case law have altered interpretations of the law. The multifaceted and complex roles of special education administrators are discussed.

Eight special education administrators in North Carolina were interviewed individually. The interviews were audio recorded. Each participant verified their information by reading the transcript of their interview. Data were organized by codes, categories, and themes. Each theme was then viewed through Bolman and Deal's (2013) four frames. Describing, examining, and explaining the practices of veteran special education administrators provide rich information to inform local school districts and preparation programs on the required skills and qualities to be successful as a special education administrator.

Four major themes emerged across all the information: focus on the individual student and his/her needs, collaboration among school level personnel, effective communication and trusting relationships, and support for special education within and beyond the district. Each theme includes categories that elaborate on the complex practices of special education administrators. These practices are done with humility, patience, kindness, discernment, flexibility, self-confidence, and with a sense of humor.

The skills and qualities potential special education administrators should possess or have the capacity to learn include a knowledge base of all the aspects of special education programming including the laws and policies; fiscal and budgetary knowledge; recruiting, hiring and retaining qualified personnel; and advocacy skills. Organization and program development skills are needed to implement the requirements of federal, state, and local laws and policies. Research skills are needed to stay abreast of current research and using data to make decisions. Conducting program evaluations to determine their effectiveness is needed. Providing and securing professional development for teachers, teaching assistants, parents, and all other service providers as well as finding resources are practices found in veteran special education administrators. Collaboration with a variety of stakeholders is necessary for successful special education programs. Ideas for future research include looking at student outcomes in relation to the amount of time the special education administrator has been in the position, how other central office staff turnover effect the special education administrator, and how well superintendents understand the role of a special education administrator.

SPECIAL EDUCATION ADMINISTRATION:

WHAT DOES IT TAKE?

by

Emily F. Summey

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Approved by

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Committee Co-Chair

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Committee Co-Chair

This work is dedicated to Ted, Margaret, Elam, Brandi, and Victoria for your support, love, and belief in me.

APPROVAL PAGE

This dissertation, written by Emily F. Summey, has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Co-Chair _____

Committee Co-Chair _____

Committee Members _____

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Date of Acceptance by Committee

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Special education is specially designed instruction to meet the unique and individual needs of children with disabilities at no cost to the parents (EHA, 1975; IDEA, 2004). Special education administration includes assuring students with disabilities receive a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment, supervising and managing the special education and related services, and implementing federal, state and local laws, policies and procedures that stipulate the regulations for services to students with disabilities (Lashley & Boscardin, 2003). The struggles encountered by special education administrators that result in leaving the position are well reported (Muller, 2009; Tate, 2010). Conflicting mandates, litigation, lack of adequate funding, and difficult parents are just a few. These struggles are present in most districts; however, some special education administrators continue in the position dealing with these struggles. Through this study, I want to better understand the practices of special education administrators who are veterans in this role in order to identify commonalities among those who continue despite the struggles encountered in special education administration. Understanding the practices of veteran special education administrators may inform local public school systems and preparation programs for special education administration regarding the preparation, selection, and support of

leaders in special education, thereby promoting the benefits of consistency in special education programs.

Students with disabilities are to be afforded similar opportunities to achieve as their non-disabled peers. Consistency in leadership provides the continued focus on improving these opportunities (Fixsen, Blase, Naoom, & Wallace, 2009). Consistency in program priorities improves teacher retention and results in better outcomes for students with disabilities (Billingsley, Crockett, & Kamman, 2012). Improving retention of special education administrators may result in less litigation, fewer conflicts, and better results for the students with disabilities.

As a classroom teacher, one's influence extends to the students in the class or school. In contrast, a district leader's influence reaches principals, teachers, students, and the community. Teachers and administrators share the intrinsic motivation to help children. Special education administrators should be intrinsically motivated to help students who have significant challenges. Sometimes the intrinsic motivation is not enough to endure the struggles and challenges of the position. In this study, the supports, commitments, conflicts, and responsibilities of the position will be explored as these relate to the practices of veteran special education administrators.

Each school system sets its own priorities in special education to some degree. However, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requirements are the same across the country. In North Carolina, the regulations to implement NC General Statute 115C Article 9 are aligned with the federal regulations that implement IDEA. Interpretations differ, resulting in different implementation practices in districts, but

generally administration of special education programs is quite similar across school districts within the same state. IDEA provides consistent requirements for school districts electing to use federal money to support special education; thus, the core job responsibilities of special education administrators are comparable across school districts in the state and nation.

Turnover of special education leaders negatively impacts achieving long term goals. Districts with changes in special education administrators may have higher rates of teacher and staff turnover, parental complaints, and litigation. These factors combine to make improvements over time more difficult to attain (Billingsley et al., 2012). Changes in personnel, even at the central office level, can have an effect on the achievement of students with disabilities (Billingsley et al., 2012). The turnover rate for special education administrators is largely due to the occupational stress of the position (Begley, 1982; Conner, 2012). There are incompatible legislative mandates, multiple areas of expected expertise, and multiple, simultaneous, and conflicting accountabilities to districts, principals, teachers, parents and students (Wheeler & LaRocco, 2009). The benefits of continuous program improvement and student achievement are supported by consistency in special education administration.

Tate (2010) reported the average tenure of special education administrators is three to five years. Many things have changed since 1975 with the passage of the Education of All Handicapped Children Act including several reauthorizations of the law which is now referred to as IDEA. Studies have been done on the attrition and retention of special education teachers (Billingsley, 2007) and a few address administrators

(Muller, 2009; Tate, 2010). The preparation, professional development, and practices of special education administrators should be examined to better understand the complexities that exist in the profession.

This research addressed the following overarching question: What can we learn about the practice of special education administration from veteran special education administrators? Research questions include:

1. What institutional arrangements support special education administrators' work?
2. What personal and professional commitments keep special education administrators engaged in their practice?
3. How do special education administrators manage the conflicts inherent in the position?
4. What roles and functions are enacted by special education administrators in their school districts?

This qualitative study was conducted using interviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Lichtman, 2013) that allow special education administrators who have held the position for an extended time to explore and explain the factors and qualities that have influenced their tenure. Individual interviews were conducted to gather richer, detailed descriptions of experiences pertaining to their practice and their longevity. Questions were open ended to gather all relevant information related to supports, commitments, conflicts, and responsibilities of the participants' practice. Interviews were conducted one-on-one at a

mutually agreed upon time and location for the participants. Information was gathered from eight participants.

Participants will be directors of special education who have held the position for at least six years in the same school district in North Carolina. Factors that contribute to remaining in the position include administrative support, job satisfaction, mentors, and collaboration (Collin, 2009). More detailed information is needed to support these previous findings, gain deeper understanding to inform leadership programs and school systems to increase the longevity of special education administrators, and improve the practice of special education administrators.

Data analysis included organizing the responses into codes, categories, and themes based on patterns or regularities given in responses to the individual interview questions (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). This study supports Singer's (2000) findings that special education research needs to include more qualitative research in public school settings to study the complex systems of the organization. Given the complexities and individual features of the organization of educational districts, the struggles associated with special education administration, and the importance of consistency in administration for continuous improvement and student achievement, a study of what it takes to be willing and able to provide leadership in special education is needed to aid in rethinking opportunities for special education leadership preparation and retention.

Historical Considerations

Efforts to support students with disabilities in the United States have been documented as far back as 1899 in New York City. Humanitarians created separate

programs and schools to address needs of students with disabilities. Elizabeth Ferrell was instrumental in establishing these early special education programs focused on students' individual and unique interests and aptitudes. Project-based learning activities that resulted in marketable skills were the focus. Elizabeth Ferrell also trained teachers to work with students with disabilities. She is credited for establishing the Council for Exceptional Children (Kode, 2002).

The issue of an adequate education was brought to light in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), a landmark discrimination case wherein laws establishing separate schools for black and white students were deemed unconstitutional. African American students were segregated in separate schools that were found to be fundamentally inadequate. In the 1970s law suits were filed based on the discrimination of children with disabilities being denied their pursuit of an education. The Education for the Handicapped Act in 1970 was an outgrowth of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) addressing the need for programs to educate disadvantaged students and students with disabilities. This national interest and attention led to the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975. The law was later named Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The appropriate education of students with special needs moved from a social consciousness to a legal mandate for public schools, following the original anti-discrimination reasoning in *Brown*.

Twenty-first Century schools should be inclusive of students with disabilities. Advances in technology have removed real and perceived barriers that some students with disabilities could not cross. Access to global information is now at our fingertips

(Shaw, 2004). Multiple literacies are added to and integrated with the traditional math and reading to include financial, media, and multicultural literacies among others in 21st Century schools. School and student success is measured more by measurable outcomes rather than textbook-driven memorization (Shaw, 2004). Many jobs in the future do not exist now, so students with disabilities must be prepared (Shaw, 2004). The instructional leadership for this preparation as well as the direction for compliance with federal and state mandates has become the responsibility of special education administrators.

Special education administration evolved as programs for students with disabilities were created. Early in special education history, these were set up as separate programs. Students received instruction either in special education or general education. Special education programs were segregated with different curricula than general education programs (Blatt, 1987). The need for someone with expertise to oversee these unique programs, understand and implement legal requirements, and assure students received benefits from their school program gave rise to the role of special education administrator (Kode, 2002). As the federal and state laws were passed and better understood, special education programs became integrated with general education. The role of the special education administrator has started a transformation from running segregated parallel educational systems to integrating specialized instruction and services with general education curricula and programs. Now, special education administrators have the responsibilities of assuring students with disabilities are educated with nondisabled peers as much as possible and assuring the rights of these students and their parents are understood and observed.

Licensure requirements and qualifications for special education administration vary across states (Tennessee Department of Education, n.d.; Virginia Department of Education, 2007; West Virginia Department of Education, n.d.). In North Carolina, special education administrators require a master's degree as part of the criteria for these positions (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, n.d.). Even though the Council for Exceptional Children (2009) generated advanced standards for special education administrators, these standards are not uniformly utilized among states and local school systems. The responsibilities and knowledge necessary for an effective special education administrator are multifaceted and vast.

Special education administrators must understand the mandated processes of locating, identifying, evaluating, and providing intervention through specialized instruction and services for students with disabilities. Special education administrators assure qualified professionals are available to conduct needed evaluations. Individualized Education Programs (IEP) are the cornerstone of IDEA and must be developed by IEP teams in accordance with federal and state guidelines (20 USC §1414(d), 2012). Monitoring IEP teams in implementing eligibility criteria appropriately is the responsibility of special education administrators. Special education administrators must assure IEP teams are knowledgeable about all the components of the IEP. Procedural safeguards are in place to provide opportunities for families of students with disabilities to question decisions and/or assure the process of making decisions are followed. Parent participation is mandated in IDEA (IDEA, 2012). Many times parents do not know the regulations or their rights in making educational decisions. Special

education administrators are responsible for ensuring families are afforded parity in educational decisions. The CEC (2009) advanced standards identify comprehensive knowledge and skills special education administrators need to master to be most effective.

Along with assuring compliance with IDEA, the special education administrator must assure compliance with state procedures, case law, and local policies. Programmatic responsibilities are also a part of special education administrators' duties, including ensuring appropriately qualified personnel are working with students. Monitoring caseloads and class sizes is necessary to assure appropriate services and instruction can be delivered (Szwed, 2007). Special education teachers and related service providers must be correctly licensed to serve students with disabilities. Special education administrators also work closely with human resources departments in this area. Professional development must be prepared and organized to meet each professional's areas of expertise to facilitate appropriate services to students with disabilities. Students with disabilities must receive instruction that allows them to participate in school and in extracurricular activities just as nondisabled students. The results of receiving specialized instruction must be positive for the student. Showing growth on state assessments and closing the achievement gap with nondisabled peers is a focus of special educational administrators (Burrello, Lashley, & Beatty, 2001).

Competent financial management is important to properly staff and fund instruction as well as accommodate special needs. Students who need special transportation because of their disability must be identified, routes organized, and the

transportation determined and provided. Special diets and procedures must be followed as medical doctors have ordered. Grant writing is necessary to access funds for specialized programs and service. Accurate record keeping is required to guarantee error free audits for federal, state, district, and grant funds. The special education administrator must have good open communication with transportation departments, child nutrition departments, and curriculum and instruction departments to make sure students with disabilities can have appropriate access to education (Cash, 2013).

As educational responsiveness to the needs of students with disabilities continues to evolve, the role of leaders in special education continues to expand. The special education administrator is charged with the complexities of providing instructional and organizational leadership within the bounds of expanding legal mandates and often decreasing resources while remaining responsive to parents, service providers, and educators to assure positive outcomes for students with disabilities. What we can learn about the practice of special education administration from veteran special education administrators is key to understanding what it takes to be willing and able to provide consistency in leadership necessary for progress.

Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework that encompasses multiple perspectives was selected for this study to offer a wide array, yet bounded way, of viewing leaders' perspective of their practices. Bolman and Deal (2013) developed the four frames model to organize experiences into frames or perspectives from which people may view experiences. Leadership in organizations has been studied using the four frames model to organize and

explain organizational functioning. Bolman and Deal refined the four frames by synthesizing the explanations of organizational functioning into four different perspectives that may occur simultaneously. The perspective one uses to see situations allows multiple viewpoints and options of responding. These four frames are identified as Structural, Human Resources, Political, and Symbolic. Each frame has characteristics that describe the central concepts, leadership, and features of organizations.

In the four frames model, the Structural frame consists of how an organization is structured through concepts including organizational charts, roles, goals, policies and procedures. The Human Resource frame focuses on the concepts of how people interact with each other and organizations. The Political frame includes the dynamics of the distribution of power within the organization. The Symbolic frame centers on the concept of organizational culture, including ceremonies, celebrations, and mutually understood practices (Bolman & Deal, 2013). This conceptual way of looking at how structures of organizations operate allows leaders to use these lenses to aid in understanding and responding to resolve problems or improve solutions.

Structural, human resource, political, and symbolic characteristics will be used to further the understanding of the practices of special education administrators in this study. School systems are organizations that could benefit from being studied using the four frames model to determine what is missing and to explain how the leaders operate individually and collectively. Organizations need leaders with managerial wisdom as well as visionaries. Using this multiple perspective approach to analyze educational systems by reframing brings insight to issues or provides a different way of looking at a

situation that aids in understanding others' perspectives, gaps in knowledge, or communication and if the items or issues are truly beneficial (Bolman & Deal, 2013). School systems, and more specifically special education leaders, may also gain insight by analyzing their programs using Bolman and Deal's model. These four frames applied to an organization aid in understanding successes and failures of initiatives and programs. Examining special education administrators' experiences and practices using the four frames may provide valuable information to school systems in the retention of special education leaders.

Bolman and Deal's Four Frames

Bolman and Deal have written about understanding and managing organizations since 1984. The four frames model evolved over time to provide managers and aspiring leaders with powerful ways of thinking about opportunities and difficulties. Several companies were examined through the lens of each of the frames. Each one of the frames operated differently for different companies. For example, the structural frame can be tight or loose. Some companies had a tight structure that was controlling, which provided security (Bolman & Deal, 2013). For these particular companies this use of the frame worked well. Other companies had very loose structures and it served those companies well because it allowed for creativity. The central concepts of each frame can be implemented with variation in organizational processes while accomplishing a desirable outcome.

Leadership in organizations has been studied using the four frames model to organize and explain successes and failures. Leadership exists in relationships and

perceptions influence thoughts, feelings and actions. Effective leadership from the structural frame may emphasize analysis whereas from the symbolic frame there may be an emphasis on inspiration. Effective leadership from the human resource frame may have a focus on empowerment while from the political frame advocacy may be emphasized. By utilizing the four frames approach, blaming others, blaming bureaucracy, or thirsting for power can be avoided because those are fallacies that are usually not helpful in approaching, correcting, or building processes and procedures, ceremonies, or building coalitions and relationships (Bolman & Deal, 2013). School systems, individual schools, departments within a school system, or a large school would benefit from using the four frames to better understand their efforts and the outcomes. Likewise, special education administrators may also gain insight in analyzing their programs and leadership using the Bolman and Deal model.

Structural frame. The structural frame consists of how the parts of an organization are arranged (Bolman & Deal, 2013). Organizational charts, roles, goals, policies and procedures are considered. This frame enhances the desired environment and constrains the undesired aspects. The structural frame can be centralized and function as departments, or it could be multi-dimensional and decentralized; it can be closed and rational or open and natural. Many times the arrangement is attuned to the required tasks and goals. The environment is indicative of the structure. There is usually an organizational chart to show the hierarchy or chain of command in an organization. Strong structural control focuses on tasks, facts, and logic. Processes are implemented to address issues. In education, especially in special education programs, policies and

procedures regarding compliance are very important. Special education programs within a school or school system often have organizational charts so employees will know who to call first when they have issues. This chain of command results in higher morale because people know the path to follow to find answers to questions (Bolman & Deal, 2013). The experiences and perceptions of veteran special education administrators regarding the organization of the special education program within the district structure, the support system for special education administration, the conflicts that arise and are addressed within structures, and the scope of work of the special education administrator can be considered for analysis within the structural frame.

Human resource frame. The human resource frame consists of how people interact with each other and the organization (Bolman & Deal, 2013). Needs, skills, relationships, and empowerment are important aspects of this frame. The organizational and human needs are aligned. The human resource aspect includes caring for people. Matching abilities to needed skills results in higher performance. Hiring the right people and keeping them by rewarding them well, protecting their jobs, and providing promotions from within are examples of positive aspects. In other words, investing in employees is the core of the human resource frame. People who find work to be satisfying and meaningful are more likely to be retained. When people feel useful and important, the organization profits (Bolman & Deal, 2013). Educational systems function highly in the human resource frame. Relationships administrators cultivate with employees and the relationships teachers build with parents are important to having a smooth-running operation. In special education, relationships among all stakeholders are

important. Trust built between parents and teachers is crucial in support of education and more importantly the success of the student (Bakken & Smith, 2011). Aspects of the veteran special education administrators' experiences that can be considered within the human resource frame include their perceptions of relationships within the organization, their caring for and management of personnel, the conditions that support their longevity, their response to needs in conflict, and the role and effectiveness of teams that impact special education.

Political frame. The political frame includes attaining power either by building coalitions or by authoritative means (Bolman & Deal, 2013). Building a power base, control of rewards, decisions involving allocating scarce resources, bargaining, and negotiating are all in the political frame. Sources of power come from authority include control of rewards, coercive power, information, expertise, personal power, and access and/or control of the agenda. Coalition power includes alliances and reputation. In schools, the system of how states allocate resources is very political. Even at the federal level the allocation of resources comes with strict guidelines. School systems are often a reflection or a smaller version of the same leadership structure. Local political issues may be different, but often the topics of conflict or struggles are similar. A leader who operates in the political frame operates by clarifying wants and what one can get, assessing the distribution of power and interests, building alliances with stakeholders using persuasion as the first method, negotiating as the second, and coercion, if necessary as a last resort, to get what is desired (Bolman & Deal, 2013). Practices employed by

veteran special education administrators regarding program advocacy, political pressure, conflict management, and negotiation can be viewed from the political frame for analysis.

Symbolic frame. The symbolic frame includes more cultural activities, like ceremonies, celebrations, and mutually understood practices (Bolman & Deal, 2013). These acts are understood as to who does what and when. The traditional practices indicate shared vision and beliefs. Groups of people are bound together through these rituals and ceremonies. Ceremonies also continue celebrating achievements. Leaders who act in the symbolic frame lead by example, use symbols to capture attention, communicate a vision and respect, and use history to tie in the long-held beliefs (Bolman & Deal, 2013). School systems often operate in the symbolic frame when refraining from change and hanging on to how education has been delivered in the past. Old habits die hard; some need to continue and some need to be laid to rest. The symbolic nature communicates how schools do things and/or for what they stand. The experiences and perceptions of veteran special education administrators regarding traditions, celebrations, symbols on conflict and resolution, and the culture of special education within the school system can be considered within the symbolic frame.

Summary

Bolman and Deal's (2013) four frames model of organizations is used as the conceptual framework for this study because of the multidimensional views it provides. The structural, human resource, political, and symbolic perspectives will be used as the lenses to help understand processes, roles and functions, successes, and disappointments in organizations. These four frames aid in understanding successes and failures of

initiatives and programs in organizations. Many businesses and companies have been analyzed focusing on management and leadership. The results can be applied to school system's special education programs and their leaders. Examining special education administrators' experiences using the four frames provides valuable information to school systems in the retention of special education leaders. A conceptual framework that encompasses multiple perspectives was selected to offer a wide array, yet bounded, way of viewing leaders' perspective of their practices.

The next chapter provides a brief history of special education and the laws that have shaped the provision of services. Case law is examined in relation to elements of IDEA (2012) and how the results of case law have altered interpretations of the law. The multifaceted roles of special education administrators are described and how the CEC standards for special education administrators apply to their practices.

Chapter III includes methodology and definitions of key terms. The setting of the study is described as well as participant selection, their characteristics, and brief descriptions of each participant. Data collection and analysis is explained as well as trustworthiness, subjectivity and positionality, and ethical considerations. Chapter IV details the themes that evolved from the study. Finally, Chapter V answers the research questions using Bolman and Deal's (2013) frames for organizations. Limitations and future research possibilities are discussed.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

This chapter provides a brief history of special education and the laws that have shaped the provision of services for students with disabilities. Case law is examined in relation to important elements of IDEA (2012) and how the results of case law have altered interpretations of the law through time. Empirical and non-empirical published articles were included that addressed these interpretations, their implementation, and the effects on special education programs and their administrators. The multifaceted roles of special education administrators are described and how the CEC standards for special education administrators apply to their practices.

Special education has occurred in many places where educators and socially minded activists saw the need for caring for and educating children with atypical needs. Humanitarians who valued every life as meaningful, worked to create programs, albeit segregated, to enrich and improve the lives of children who were excluded from schools, ignored, or abused because of their distinct differences (Blatt, 1987). As an example, Elizabeth Ferrell established the first special education program in New York City in 1899. The program was built around each individual child's unique abilities. Ferrell's methods were based on the acquisitive and imitative instincts of each child, meaning each child was taught according to his or her interests and curiosities in a manner each could learn best. Nontraditional materials were used instead of books and lectures, which were

the traditional teaching method in schools for typical children. Manual training, sewing, cooking, wood working, metal working, and drawing were utilized so children could become productive members of society with useful skills. Ferrell went on to establish the Council for Exceptional Children, the nation's leading professional organization for special educators, and train many other teachers on meeting the needs of diverse learners (Kode, 2002).

In 1954 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Brown v. Board of Education* that segregated schools were inherently unequal. This case supported African American children having access to equal educational opportunities in public schools. In the 1960s, parents of children with disabilities began filing lawsuits claiming that their children's exclusion from public schools based on their disability constituted discrimination and violated the Constitutional provision for equal protection of the law. In 1971 the Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children (PARC) filed a lawsuit against the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania for excluding children with mental retardation from public schools. In 1972, *Mills v. Board of Education of District of Columbia* addressed the issues of suspending, expelling, and excluding students who had identified differences in behavior including hyperactivity and emotional disturbance as well as those students with mental retardation. The rulings of the courts in these cases and others resulted in provisions for a free public education for children with disabilities.

In North Carolina the assignment of students to address desegregation was turned over to local school boards, thereby subtly delaying desegregation following *Brown*. By making this change, the state was not practicing segregation, but local systems could

continue their practices. In 1965 local school boards signed an assurance of compliance to the 1964 Title VI, Civil Rights Act which indicated a plan for voluntary desegregation (Ayscur & Dorosin, 2014). In 1969 local control of student assignment was repealed at the state level; segregation was determined to be unconstitutional (Currie, 2004). In *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* (1971), the Supreme Court ruled that integrated schools could be achieved through busing students. Some school districts worked to desegregate schools and North Carolina was seen a model for other southern states (Ayscur & Dorosin, 2014).

Special education in North Carolina consisted mostly of residential schools for the students with severe cognitive disabilities, blind, and Deaf. As early as 1949, the state had 25 teaching positions to serve students with disabilities in a variety of settings including public schools, special schools, home instruction, and residential programs across the state (Templeton, 2006). During this time, the state of North Carolina offered some services however school districts were not particularly active in providing services. Some private agencies stepped in to support children with special needs and their families (Templeton, 2006).

The federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 was amended in 1966 to include funds given to states for developing promising programs for disadvantaged students, including students with disabilities. In 1970 this section of ESEA, Title VI, was replaced with the Education of the Handicapped Act, thereby grouping and enhancing the grants to states for teacher preparation and pilot programs for students with disabilities (Yell, 2012). Sparked by *PARC* and *Mills*, many other claims

were filed based on discrimination or denial of educational services for students with disabilities. This led to a national inquiry on the number of students with disabilities and their educational access. The results indicated that less than half of all students with disabilities were receiving an appropriate education—about one-fourth were receiving a less than appropriate education and another one-fourth were receiving no educational services (Blatt, 1987).

In 1975, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act required a nationwide commitment to educate students with disabilities in public schools. The law, renamed as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1990, provides federal funds to states to assist in providing educational services to students with disabilities. Specific requirements for providing a free appropriate education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) were included. Several reauthorizations since that time have added more specifics in several areas. Administering these requirements in local school districts resulted in the need for oversight by personnel with expertise in this area. To support states and local education agencies in creating and administering special education programs, states and universities developed preparation programs and licensure patterns for special education administrators.

Special education is integral to the success of students with disabilities in schools today. Students are globally connected due to technology advancements and have many more opportunities now than students in the past. The world is much more accessible. Students with disabilities need to be able to compete and be successful in life. Living

independently and being a productive citizen is now a reality for some who were bound by perceived barriers and now non-existent limitations of the past (Shaw, 2004).

Just as general education has taken on the task of providing a 21st Century education for students, special education has also taken on the task on behalf of students with disabilities. Learning is transforming from time-based, memorization of facts, textbook-driven, passive, and fragmented curriculum to outcome-based, new skills learned, research driven, active, integrated, and interdisciplinary curricula (Shaw, 2004). Instead of focusing on reading, writing and math, the focus now includes the arts and creativity; financial literacy; media literacy; social/emotional literacies; eco-literacy; cyber-literacy; physical fitness and health literacies; and globalization and multicultural literacy (Shaw, 2004). Students need to be prepared for jobs in the future that currently do not exist (Shaw, 2004).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

IDEA (1997) provides states and local school systems the requirements in implementing special education programs for students with disabilities. This federal law includes guidance in how states access funds and the expectations for the use of the funds. The main purpose is to provide assistance to ensure all children with disabilities receive a free appropriate public education (FAPE), including special education and related services designed to meet their individual and unique needs to prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living (IDEA, 2004). Improving the effectiveness of educational services for students with disabilities is monitored through individualized education program (IEP) teams by setting goals and reviewing progress.

Special education administrators monitor individual student progress by collecting data from a variety of sources to assure students with disabilities are receiving a free appropriate education addressing academic and functional skills. Students with disabilities are to participate in general education settings as much as possible along with the provision of specialized services to ensure educational benefits. The rights of students with disabilities and their parents for a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment are protected (IDEA, 2012). Requirements for finding, evaluating, identifying, and serving these students; protecting student and parent rights; and parent participation in the process are outlined in the law (IDEA, 2012).

States are responsible for annual reporting to the federal Office of Special Education on the status or progress on the implementation of IDEA. Currently, there is a shift in the reporting requirements. In the past, compliance has been more of the focus in assuring students are graduating, suspended less frequently, participating in state assessments, and measuring proficiency on state assessments, among other indicators. The shift to results-driven accountability include states selecting one general target to report versus 21 indicators as before. States submit a state systemic improvement plan to outline its efforts to improve the outcomes of students with disabilities called Part B Annual Performance Report (IDEA, 2012). Strategies and efforts that focus on improved outcomes for students with disabilities are now the focus, as well as, continuing to ensure compliance with IDEA requirements. Each school district in North Carolina is required to submit its information on compliance and the new 'improved results' component to the state. The state compiles the districts' information and submits the state's information to

the federal Office of Special Education. Each year, every state is rated in one of the three categories: meets requirements, needs assistance, or needs intensive intervention. These ratings and areas of need help a state get the coordinated support and technical assistance from the federal office of special education (IDEA, 2012). In turn, the state agency also rates each district as meets requirements, needs assistance, or needs intensive intervention and offers local school districts differentiated support in areas of need (Yell, 2012).

The major function of IDEA is to provide specialized instruction and services to children with disabilities to prepare them for life's opportunities in the future. In public schools this means access to the general curriculum, the opportunity to progress from grade to grade, an opportunity to meet grade level standards, and graduation with a diploma equipped with the skills needed for a productive life (Yell, 2012). Leadership in special education requires a unique set of skills to assure these outcomes. The wide range of responsibilities in administrating special education programs at the district level include fiscal planning and management; knowledge of curricula; instructional methodologies; supervision; education law and especially special education law; professional development of teachers and related service providers; knowledge of evaluation procedures; working with community agencies, parents, and advocates; and working effectively with other administrators at the school and central office level (Billingsley et al., 2012). One must be knowledgeable and skillful in leadership and policy; program development and organizations; research and inquiry; individual and program evaluation; professional development and ethical practice; and collaboration. These areas are the six standards that special education administrators need to meet

according to CEC (2009). Each standard includes sub standards organized by knowledge and skills of special education administration and advanced core content.

The leadership and policy standards include understanding the significance of laws, interpretations and regulations that need to be followed that were discussed in the previous section. Understanding educational leadership and theories of organization, emerging issues and trends, and the various committees and boards that impact schools, students, and services is important to the success of education and the success of each child. Fiscal management, budgeting, and the use of funds is important to assure the special education services are meeting needs. Special education administrators need to share a vision and mission of special education that includes meeting the needs of families and students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment and promoting an inclusive framework. Recruiting, hiring, and mentoring new teachers and service providers is important to retaining and promoting the success of students (CEC, 2009). Leading special education programs is multi-faceted and requires in-depth knowledge and skills.

Decision making for students with disabilities has become decentralized. In North Carolina, a step was made in 1997 when Administrative Placement Committees were deemed not in compliance with IDEA (1997). Administrative placement committees would review IEP team decisions and approve or disapprove the decision. This practice had the potential of not abiding by the IEP team decision, which is not in keeping with federal requirements (IDEA, 2012). Decisions made by students' individual education program teams are final. Administration at the central office level

started focusing efforts on empowering local education agency (LEA) representatives, usually school level administrators, to facilitate decisions for students with disabilities in compliance with federal and state laws and regulations (IDEA, 2007; Elementary and Secondary Education, 2006; NCDPI, 2013). School level administrators have many responsibilities to manage. Special education issues are some of the most litigious and can take a tremendous amount of time (Lashley, 2007). However, special education represents a small part of the total school population. Ongoing training is needed to keep special education an integral part of the total school. Special education administrators must convey their knowledge of the laws, regulations, and programs to school level administrators. As well as ensuring programs are effective, special education administrators also must provide professional development to school level administrators, teachers, and parents (IDEA, 2004).

The components of IDEA are locating and identifying children with disabilities or child find, evaluations, eligibility, individualized education programs, procedural safeguards, and parent involvement. To assure compliance to these components and address the new measure of improving student outcomes, special education administrators must have knowledge and skills to address all these areas.

Child Find

Children who are suspected of having a disability are required to be evaluated by the public schools, if the child is between the ages of three and 22. Child find (20 USC §1412(a)(3)(A), 2012) is a component of IDEA that requires public schools to find, evaluate, and provide special education services, if the child is found eligible. All

children, regardless of where or if they attend school, are homeless, or are wards of the state must be located, evaluated, and offered services, if they meet the eligibility criteria for special education. A teacher, parent, or other state agency may also initiate a request for an evaluation. The evaluation is used to determine if the child has a disability or not and to determine the educational needs of the child. IDEA is further clarified for local school districts and states with case law. Interpretations vary among professionals in special education. The following cases have impacted the interpretations of child find.

Court cases pertaining to referrals and child find include *Jamie S. v. Milwaukee Public Schools* (2012) and *Knable v. Bexley* (2001). Delaying evaluations and services to students, as well as not including the parent in the decision-making process, are all violations of the child find provisions of IDEA. *Jamie S v. Milwaukee Public Schools* (2012) became a class action suit citing non-compliance of IDEA by delaying and prolonging the child find provision of identifying, locating, and evaluating students suspected of having a disability. Milwaukee Public Schools (MPS) had not complied with IDEA child find provision since 1998. MPS tried to avoid a class action suit by claiming that child find was a limited component of IDEA and not a systemic problem. The district court found child find is more than a limited component but an extremely important element in implementing IDEA. The judge found MPS had violated the child find provision of IDEA in several areas. Parents were not invited to referral meetings. Meetings were denied or delayed which resulted in students not being identified and provided special education and related services. This systematic misinterpretation of

child find resulted in a different understanding and required changes in the practice of child find.

In *Knable v. Bexley* (2001), the student was enrolled by the parent in a private school through fourth grade. The student's doctor recommended a more structured educational setting, so the parents enrolled him in Bexley Public Schools starting with the fifth grade. He exhibited disruptive behaviors during the year. In sixth grade he was evaluated, placement was discussed, but no decision was made. The school recommended a placement in a school for students with severe behaviors; however, the parent requested residential placement. During the time of discussion about an appropriate placement, the father requested an Individualized Education Program (IEP). The school confirmed they did not have an IEP for the student. Due to behaviors at home the parents admitted their son to the hospital and requested another meeting with the school and again asked for an IEP. Placement continued to be discussed even though the student returned to the same school for the second half of his sixth grade without an IEP in place. The school sought placement and so did the parents, independently of each other, resulting in different locations for services. Throughout this time no IEP was developed. The school implemented a plan while the student was enrolled there. The parents chose to send their son to the private residential school and a year later filed suit for private school tuition reimbursement. Bexley Schools violated child find by not developing an IEP in a timely manner with parent participation. While the school evaluated the student in a timely manner it did not develop the IEP within 90 days.

Parents were awarded private school tuition reimbursement as a result of the school district's inability to develop an IEP and thus satisfy the child find provisions of IDEA.

In *K.A.B. v. Downingtown Area School District* (2013), parents filed a due process complaint when the child was in the third grade alleging the special education the child was receiving was not enough for the child to make adequate progress. The child was adopted from Russia as a four-year-old. Parents requested evaluations once in preschool and twice a year through first grade resulting in the child's ineligibility for special education services because he was learning English as a second language. Throughout this time, the child was receiving English as a second language (ESL) services and interventions in reading. During second grade, another evaluation was conducted to determine if the child had a disability. He was deemed eligible for special education with a learning disability in reading. An IEP was developed noting weaknesses in focus, attention, and organization and special education services were provided. Later in the year an evaluation was provided indicating deficiencies in the area of speech and language. The school considered the evaluation and updated the IEP with new goals. During third grade an independent educational evaluation was conducted indicating areas of need in reading, writing, spelling; speech and language, articulation; focus, attention, organization; and low self-esteem, perfectionism, and anxiety. With these results the IEP was revised and services were provided as well as ESL services. Halfway through third grade the parent filed a due process complaint alleging the school district had failed to identify and provide appropriate services to the child in a timely manner. The parents refused extended school year services and choose to place the child in a private school

starting with fourth grade. The judge found the school had not violated child find when they waited until second grade to evaluate student for a disability considering his limited English proficiency. All areas of need were addressed in the IEP when the information was provided to the IEP team. Therefore, the school was implementing child find correctly by addressing deficiencies that were not the result of learning English as a second language as they could be determined.

In *El Paso Independent School District v. Richard R.* (2008) the school district repeatedly delayed a special education evaluation even after the student had failed to make adequate progress. The student was receiving interventions, and the school delayed the special education evaluation waiting for the interventions to show progress. This case solidified that when parents request a special education evaluation, schools shall not delay the evaluation to implement interventions. Implementing interventions to correct skill deficits and monitoring progress has become part of the information used to help in determining if a student has a disability or not. Interventions prior to a special education evaluation could avoid misclassifying a student with a disability when instruction addressing the identified skill deficits corrects the area of need.

The interventions and evaluation must occur simultaneously when a request for a special education evaluation is received.

All of these cases help states and local school districts understand how to conduct child find and clarify the laws and regulations pertaining to when and how a referral to and evaluations for special education should be conducted. Clarifications on implementing Child Find are provided in federal and state regulations and policies.

Interpreting and implementing child find is extremely complicated. Medical practices, parents and other agencies notify schools that they think a particular child may have a disability and request an evaluation. Addressing all these requests requires time to screen, observe, and evaluate, if needed, and to determine if the child, in deed, is in need of special education. Many of these requests are made not because there are deficits or differences in learning, or the child may be suspected or having a disability but rather just because they can request an evaluation in the name of child find.

The responsibilities of ensuring the processes of child find in a school system belong to the administrator over special education services. Many schools use a team process for determining which students are in need of evaluations to determine the need for special education. The 2004 IDEA Amendments introduced the term early intervening services to prevent the over-identification of students with disabilities by allowing districts to use a portion of their federal special education funding to develop and utilize scientifically based approaches to reading and behavioral support for students who have not been identified for special education services (34 C. F. R. Part 300.646(b)(2), 2012). Instructional interventions that address identified skill deficits are implemented, and data are collected on student performance on the skill. Progress monitoring entails collecting comprehensive data on the on-going results of interventions. If the student does not make progress, the data collected through this progress monitoring are used to see if another teaching method or strategy improves the student's attainment of the skill. When interventions are not successful, more intensive strategies are recommended, and ultimately the student can be referred for an evaluation to determine

whether s/he has a specific learning disability. The intent is to address deficits in learning before special education is needed.

Among the revisions of IDEA in 2004 is permitting the identification of students with specific learning disabilities by using either a response to intervention (RtI) process or the traditional discrepancy model in which standardized tests are used to determine a significant discrepancy between academic potential and achievement. RtI requires the use of research based interventions data as part of the information used to determine eligibility for special education and related services.

The response to intervention or multi-tiered system of support model typically includes three tiers. The first tier is the standard course of study that is provided for all students, often referred to as core instruction. The advent of the Common Core State Standards has resulted in that curriculum serving as the standard curriculum in most states. If a student is not making progress, interventions are implemented with the individual student within the regular education classroom by general education personnel. If these interventions do not result in improved learning, more strategic supplemental interventions are provided in tier 2. Tier 2 interventions are still the responsibility of general education, and they may be implemented with small groups of students. If these even more targeted strategic interventions are not resulting in increased learning to the point that the student is on track to close the gap between current and expected performance, then tier 3 interventions are added in addition to tier 1 and 2 interventions. These interventions are the most intensive. At tier 3, a student could be determined eligible as a student with a specific learning disability and an individualized education

program (IEP) could be developed (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011). Fuchs, Fuchs, and Compton (2012) find these assistance teams serve an important purpose in assuring interventions are provided to assist in not overly identifying students with disabilities. When parents feel their child needs to be considered for special education services, they may request an evaluation. Involvement of parents in pre-referral team meetings result in fewer students referred for special education (Schrag & Henderson, 1996). *El Paso Independent School District v. Richard R.* (2008) found that an evaluation cannot be delayed waiting for this process of interventions. The interventions and evaluations must occur simultaneously when a written request for an evaluation is received.

Conducting child find is more than addressing concerns of students presented by others. School systems must seek students who may be in need of special education. There are many ways to communicate this service to the public. Posters and brochures are delivered and posted in schools, doctor's offices, community agencies, child care centers, etc. Notifications may also be posted on school system websites, published social media and word of mouth. Special education administrators are responsible for implementing child find in their district. They also must assure other district and school level personnel understand child find for appropriate implementation.

Preventing unnecessary referrals, knowledge of pre-referral intervention processes, methods of communication among multiple stakeholders, and collaborating with others to enhance opportunities are listed by CEC (2009) as standards that are important to child find activities. Special education administrators must ensure child find is understood by school personnel, parents, and the community so unnecessary referrals

can be avoided. Implementing pre-referral interventions in a timely manner when skill deficits are recognized requires communication and collaboration with school level personnel and parents. Special education administrators understand child find, communicate this requirement to others, ensure it is being followed, and follow up with others when there are misunderstandings and excessive and needless referrals.

Evaluation

Once a referral is made, a team consisting of a general education teacher, a special education teacher, the parent, and a local education agency (LEA) representative—the IEP team—makes the determination if and what evaluations are needed (20 USC § 1414(a)(b)(c), 2012). If evaluations are needed, as decided by the IEP team, parent consent to conduct the evaluation is required. If the parent refuses or fails to reply to attempts to gain consent to evaluate, the school district may use due process procedures to gain parental consent to evaluate. If a school district follows due process actions to gain an evaluation, if eligible, parents still must provide consent for services. Taking a parent through due process procedures may impact the school parent relationship. If the child is eligible and is deemed in need of special education service, the parent must give consent for these services to occur. Maintaining a working relationship with parents may produce more positive benefits for the child, if teachers and parents are working together, rather than using adversarial measures of filing a due process claim (*Clyde K. v. Puyallup School District,* 1994).

If a referral or a request for an evaluation is received, the IEP team reviews all existing data, including grades, curriculum based assessments, attendance, information

provided by the parent, and any other information that may have an impact on the student's education. Once all this information is reviewed, the team determines if further evaluations are needed or not. Evaluations consist of a variety of assessments including functional, developmental, motor, communication, social, adaptive behavior, psychological, and academic information to determine the areas of need.

Parents must be involved in the decisions concerning evaluations, services and placement. Evaluations and plans need to be completed and developed in a timely manner. When a parent and the student assistance team of the school have different opinions concerning the student, many times a special education administrator is contacted to review the documentation provided by the assistance team and the parent. Upon review, the special education administrator advises the assistance team and the parent.

One of the first cases involving schools and students with a disability was *Hobson v. Hansen* in 1967. Washington, DC Schools were using aptitude tests to assign students for class placement. These tests were standardized on middle class white students. The results placed African American students in lower basic tracks, segregated schools and denied them an equal educational opportunity. The U.S. District court found tracking based on IQ unconstitutional.

In 1970, *Diana v. California State Board of Education* was a U.S. District class action claim of misidentifying students with cognitive deficiencies based on inappropriate evaluations. Nine Mexican Americans were identified as having cognitive deficits and were placed in special education. The tests were given in English, which was not the

students' native language. When tests were given in the Spanish, their native language, they scored above the criteria for needing special education. The district court ruled that students could not be placed in special education classes based on culturally biased tests and evaluations had to be administered in a student's native language. Students from different cultures and with different languages should not be the reason for special education evaluations.

In 1979 there was another case about minority students and inappropriate evaluations. *Larry P. v. Riles* involved six African American children at an elementary school in California placed into special education classes that focused on functional skills and not academic areas based on the results of an intelligence test. There was a disproportionate number of African American students in the special education class for cognitive deficiencies. Schools were not allowed to use just one test score to determine placement as an outcome of the U.S. District case. In fact, intelligence testing results were banned as information used in placing African American students in special education. In California, classes for the educable mentally retarded were eliminated because of using inappropriate standardized intelligence tests.

In 1980, *Parents in Action on Special Education (PASE) v. Hannon,* the plaintiffs contended misplacement of two African American girls in a program for educable mentally handicapped (EMH) students was based on racial and cultural biased intelligence tests. The U.S. District court judge determined commonly used standardized tests were not culturally or racially discriminatory. Placement of these students was

based on more information than just the intelligence test scores. This decision is counter to *Hobson v. Hanson* (1967) and *Diana v. California State Board of Education* (1970).

Mattie T. v. Holladay (1981) was a U.S. District Court N.D. Mississippi class action case. Students with disabilities were served mostly in separate settings. Very few students with disabilities spent much time with nondisabled peers. The evaluation process resulted in minority students being over represented as students with disabilities. The state of Mississippi had seven years to correct these practices under the Mattie T. Plan. The decree was modified to be terminated in 2003, 20 years later with the 1997 reauthorization of IDEA. The state of Mississippi had revamped its assessment process to refrain from discriminating against minority students and test them in a timely manner.

Crawford v. Honig in 1994 reversed the ban on using intelligence tests for placement purposes. The Ninth Circuit judge stated that the ban of intelligence tests for EMH placement was improperly applied to all special education evaluations for African American students. Intelligence tests can be one piece of information that is considered with other information in determining placement in special education for African American students.

In *Pasatiempo v. Aizawa* (1996), three parents contended they had requested an evaluation for their children. The Department of Education in Hawaii differentiated special education evaluations and formative evaluations. Special education evaluations were on a different level and parents were provided procedural safeguards. Formative evaluations were conducted to aid in determining the need for alternative teaching strategies due to achievement delays and difficulties in adjustment. For the formative

evaluations, procedural safeguards were not provided. On appeal, the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals found that schools may deny a parent's request for an evaluation, but the school must also provide the parent's rights to request a due process hearing to contest the decision.

In *Foster v. District of Columbia Board of Education* (1982), parents placed their daughter with learning disabilities in a private school. The parents requested the public school to pay the tuition for the private school. A meeting reviewing the student's placement was not held or requested by the parent or the school. The district court judge found that delays in reviewing progress and placement does not necessarily result in tuition reimbursement.

More recent cases from a district court include two that held school systems responsible for evaluating students who reside in the district but attend private schools: *M. A. v. Torrington* (2013) and *District of Columbia v. J. W.* (2014). *M. A. v. Torrington* (2013) involved a student with severe allergies who was not deemed a student with a disability. Parents placed their son in a private high school and then sued the public school for lack of child find and FAPE. The public school evaluated the student and the student was not eligible for special education. The school did not have to pay for private school tuition or monetary damages. In *District of Columbia v. J. W.* (2014), parents placed their child in a private school and then asked the public school for an IEP. The school's response was that once the student was enrolled in their schools, an IEP would be developed. The district court judge found IDEA requires local school agencies to

offer FAPE and an IEP to eligible student residing in the district. Parents may then refuse the services, but the offer must be developed and presented.

IDEA mandates a reevaluation every three years (20 USC Chapter 33 § 1414 (a)(B)(ii), 2012). If there are significant changes in student's academic performance or disability; or if there is a significant change in placement a reevaluation may occur more frequently. Traverse City Area Public Schools had improved services to students who were deaf and had hearing impairments. An IEP team met and determined the local school to be the least restrictive environment and developed IEPs for two students whose parents wanted to continue to have their children educated in the residential school they had attended for three years. The parents contended that the residential school teachers who knew the students were not included in the meeting. The district court concluded that the move from a residential school to a local public school was a substantive change of placement. Therefore, a reevaluation was needed to have current information on the students. After comprehensive evaluations were obtained, a meeting including the residential school's teachers needed to be held (*Brimmer v. Traverse City Area Public Schools*, 1994).

Parents can request an independent educational evaluation (IEE) at public expense. The school district must consider the IEE but is not obliged to act on the results or the recommendations. In *T. S. v. Board of Education of the Town of Ridgefield and State of Connecticut Department of Education* (1993), parents appealed to the Second Circuit District Court contending the school conducted a censored and orchestrated meeting, not giving enough value to an IEE provided by the school district. The judges

agreed with the district court that ample consideration was given to the IEE. The Second Circuit Court of Appeals defined 'consider' to mean reflect on or think about the evaluation report. There is no requirement to implement any of the recommendations.

Special education administrators must assure the professionals in a school are trained and licensed to administer evaluations (CEC, 2009). Reports must be well written in a language parents can understand. The evaluation results must also be reviewed and analyzed to determine if the student's needs revealed in the evaluation meet the criteria for needing special education. The IEP team determines what evaluations to administer and what data to collect to use in making a determination based on criteria outlined in IDEA. Parents, as part of the team, also have input as to what areas need to be studied. Continuous professional development must be provided to assure teams operate as intended (CEC 2009). Special education administrators must be aware of decisions IEP team make concerning evaluations. Infrequently, all members of an IEP team understand IDEA to the extent needed to assure defendable decisions. Training principals and teachers is a continuous need that requires revisiting.

Evaluation instruments need to be free of cultural biases and given in the student's native language. The special education administrator must assure appropriate evaluations and personnel are available to meet this standard. Disproportionality must be monitored and processes in place to assure no cultural, racial, disability group, or category are over represented. Through reporting requirements, some districts are found to have a disproportionate number of students either by race or disability category. Steps to improve evaluation practices must be put in place to correct the disproportionality in

the district. Special education administrators direct these practices. Students in private schools who are suspected of having a disability must be evaluated and offered services if they meet the eligibility requirements. The special education administrator is responsible for making sure the procedures and policies are followed in the district for evaluating students who live in the district and attend private schools. Teachers from private schools may be required member of the IEP teams if they have taught the student or have expert knowledge on how the student learns. Special education administrators must locate and secure IEE providers who meet the criteria in IDEA.

Eligibility

Once evaluations are conducted and information is gathered, the team meets to review all the data. At this meeting the following three questions are answered based on all the data collected:

1. Does the student meet eligibility requirements of at least one of the fourteen disability categories?
2. Does the disability have an adverse effect on educational performance?
3. Is the student in need of specially designed instruction?

If yes is answered to all three questions, then the student may be considered a student with a disability (20 USC Chapter 33 § 1414(d), 2007). This decision must be based on multiple sources of information. Other factors must be ruled out as the cause of the disability before a student is found to be eligible for special education. The need for special education is based on the disability and not the lack of appropriate instruction in reading and math, English as second language, or environmental factors such as socio-

economic status. The dynamic of reaching an eligibility decision has been considered in numerous court cases. Failure to address all aspects of eligibility can result in corrective measures by a school system including financial responsibility for those measures.

In *W.B. v. Matula* (1995), the parents claimed their child was denied a free appropriate public education by Mansfield Public Schools through failing to find their child eligible for special education. Parents continually shared behavioral concerns but because the student was functioning at and above grade level academically, the decision was made by the school to not evaluate for special education. During first grade the student was found eligible for a Section 504 plan, but no services were provided. Later in the year the school agreed to evaluate based on a report provided by the parents, which included a diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). The parents felt the school's evaluation did not address all areas of concern. The school agreed to an independent educational evaluation. The results of the independent educational evaluation included diagnoses of Tourette's syndrome and Obsessive Compulsive Disorder in addition to ADHD. The following school year the parents requested reclassification to a higher level of services under IDEA. Over two years of filing a total of four petitions, the case was resolved in district court. The parents were awarded damages for the school's failure to find the student eligible for special education. The Mansfield Public Schools did not address all the expressed needs from the parents, even after multiple requests.

In *Muller v. East Islip* (1998), the Second Circuit Court of Appeals agreed with the United States District Court of Southern New York that determined the student was

eligible for special education and subsequently entitled to private school tuition reimbursement. The student was adopted from Thailand at age four. She did not speak English or Thai and was virtually non-verbal. Kindergarten through fourth grade she was identified as a student with speech and language impairments and received special education services. During fourth grade, she exited special education services but continued to receive remedial help in reading through seventh grade. During seventh and eighth grades, she had poor grades. In ninth grade, she exhibited behaviors of not coming to school, cutting classes, not finishing assignments, etc. Halfway through her ninth-grade year she attempted suicide. She was hospitalized for three days. She returned to school and continued to do poorly. The parents admitted her to a psychiatric facility for evaluations. She remained there 25 days and was released to a day treatment program for three weeks. At the end of the day treatment, she returned to school. After approximately two weeks of school the parents readmitted her to the psychiatric residential facility. She was discharged with diagnosis of oppositional defiant disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and depression with the recommendation to attend a residential treatment facility. The parents followed the recommendation and the child was placed in a residential facility. The following school year, her 10th-grade year, the parents requested for the school system to pay for the residential facility. A referral was made, evaluations were conducted and the student was found ineligible for special education. The parents asked for a hearing. The impartial hearing officer and, upon further appeal, the state review officer concluded that the student was appropriately identified as not having a disability under IDEA and not entitled to private school tuition

reimbursement. Upon further appeal, the decision was reversed and the school was ordered to identify the student as a student with serious emotional disabilities, pay for private school tuition reimbursement and attorney's fees.

Consistency in determining eligibility across schools in a district or across school districts in a state is the responsibility of special education administrators (CEC, 2009). Each state department of education determines what information is needed in making the decision of whether a student has a disability or not. Information to be collected for each disability category and the criteria for eligibility is established by each state. Once all the information is collected including observations, classroom, local, and state assessment information, standardized evaluation results, and information provided by the parent, the IEP team discusses the collected data and determines if the student meets the criteria for a disability category. The categories include intellectual disabilities, autism, specific learning disability, other health impairment, traumatic brain injury, visual impairment, hearing impairment (including deaf and blindness), developmental disability, multiple disabilities, speech language impairment, orthopedic impairment, and serious emotional disturbance. Assuring IEP teams make appropriate decisions concerning eligibility involves continuous monitoring and professional development. Special education administrators conduct frequent record reviews to monitor the processes and the outcomes. If errors in processes are found professional development is provided to correct processes. Special education administrators become involved in situations where parents continually request evaluations to assure the IEP is looking at all areas of concern and addressing the students' needs. Good communication within the IEP team is

imperative to make the best decision for a student. Special education administrators model such behavior and train IEP team members in thoroughly considering all pieces of data collected for a student suspected of having a disability.

Individualized Education Program

The Individualized Education Program (IEP) is a statement of the of the child's present level of performance in academic and functional skills, measureable annual goals, how progress toward the goals will be measured, the anticipated special education and related services to be delivered, participation with nondisabled peers, accommodations and supplemental aids and services, dates of initiation, frequency, location and duration, and transition services to accompany postsecondary goals for students who are 16 or older. Students must be in the least restrictive environment to have the opportunity to progress in the general curriculum and make progress toward IEP goals (20 USC § 1414(d), 2012). The least restrictive environment is considered to be the natural environment for any typical child or student. For school-aged children, the least restrictive environment is the general education setting. If removal from that setting is required, explanations must be given in the IEP explaining why the child is removed.

The IEP is developed and reviewed annually by the IEP team. This team must consist of a local education agency representative who is qualified to provide or supervise special education, is knowledgeable about the general curriculum, and is knowledgeable about and can commit resources of the school; at least one general education teacher, at least one special education provider, and the parent. Someone in attendance must have the capacity to interpret evaluation results and instructional implications. This role can

be filled by an existing previously mentioned member. The parent may, at their discretion, bring someone who is knowledgeable about the child or his/her condition. The student with a disability may also attend when appropriate. The IEP team has the responsibility to determine the needed services for the child to make progress toward the annual goals and to progress in the general curriculum. All of these services are free and the parent does not pay extra for any services provided under IDEA. Parents who believe the public schools are not offering appropriate services have avenues to address deficiencies in the program through procedural safeguards. A free appropriate public education shall be delivered in the least restrictive environment, meaning students with disabilities will receive their education as much as possible with nondisabled peers. A free appropriate public education is a required component and the subject of several court cases that impact the decisions of the IEP teams as the team determines what an appropriate education for each student may be.

Board of Education of the Hendrick Hudson Central School District v. Rowley (1982) was the first special education lawsuit to go to the Supreme Court. The ruling was that an interpreter for a child with a hearing impairment was not needed because the student was making better than average grades and advancing easily from grade to grade. This set the precedent that IEPS should be written for the student to receive an adequate education, not necessarily one that would maximize potential.

In 1993, *Big Beaver Falls Area School District v. Jackson*, the Commonwealth Court of Pennsylvania judges affirmed the Special Education Appeals Review Panel's finding that the IEP contained procedural and substantive errors: the IEP was revised

without parent or current teacher participation; the area of disability was changed without a reevaluation; and a change of placement was made based on suspensions totaling over 15 days. The IEP was not individualized to address the student's unique emotional needs. Compensatory education was awarded.

IEP teams should include the person who will provide the special education. The absence of a teacher directly involved in the development of the IEP who will also implement the IEP may create an invalid IEP. In *Brimmer v. Traverse City* (1994), two siblings were attending a residential school for the deaf. The school system where the parents lived improved their programs and wanted to educate the siblings in the local school. Because the school held IEP meetings and developed IEPs without the teachers from the school for the deaf, the District Court for Western Michigan concluded the residential school teachers needed to be included in developing the IEPs as well as the local school needed to conduct evaluations prior to the change in placement.

IEPs must be developed addressing the needs of the student in the least restrictive environment. Settings that do not provide the opportunity for interaction with nondisabled peers were found to be non-compliant in *Grim v. Rhinebeck Central School District* (2003). The United States Second Circuit Court of Appeals denied private school tuition reimbursement because the private school did not have non-disabled peers. The statement of the present level of performance should include how the disability interferes with progress in the general curriculum and should be linked to the annual goals. Annual goals must address each area of need identified in the present level of academic achievement and functional performance, must be measurable and must be

specific. Goals should be written so that students have a reasonable chance of meeting the goal in a year, too ambitious goals are deemed inappropriate, as well as goals that do not support a year's worth of growth.

The Fourth Circuit Court decided in favor of the parents in *Carter v. Florence County School District Four* (1991) because the annual goals were not rigorous enough. The goals were written to attain four months of growth in a year. IEP teams must justify if the student will be removed from nondisabled peers by explaining why. An explanation as to why goals cannot be accomplished in the general education class based on the student's disability must support the amount of time spent outside the general education setting (*Thornock v. Boise Independent School District*, 1988). Boise Schools did not produce a complete IEP for the parents to consider and compare with the private school educational program their son was attending. The Supreme Court of Idaho ruled the school district had not offered FAPE.

Reporting progress on IEP goals must be based on a review of the data collected. There must be methods of measuring the progress of goals. Anecdotal notes, observations and other subjective means are not adequate to report progress. *County School Board of Henrico County; Virginia v. R. T.* (2006) stated that systematic data collection that can be collected, graphed, and analyzed are needed to support reported progress. The United States District Court of Eastern Virginia found in favor of the parents that the IEP of the private school including goals and data collection were written to better determine progress than that of the public school in addressing the student's unique, individualized needs. If students do not make educational progress, IEPs may be

invalid (*Hall v. Vance County Board of Education*, 1985). The United States Court of Appeals Fourth Circuit found an inadequately prepared IEP does not provide FAPE and resulted in parents getting residential private school tuition reimbursement for multiple years.

Transition plans are required for students who are 16 years old and until they complete secondary school either by earning a diploma or turning 22 years old. The United States Eighth Circuit District Court in *Yankton School District v. Schramm* (1995) found that transition plans must be meaningful for the student, discussing all areas of need and providing services to support postsecondary goals. Areas of need that should be discussed include instruction, related services, community experiences, employment, adult living skills, daily living skills, and a functional vocational evaluation.

IEP teams make decision based on consensus. Parents are equal participants on the IEP team. Parents cannot reject or refuse parts of an IEP. If there are items where there is agreement, then those parts are implemented. In cases where team members disagree, an interim special plan must be developed until the areas of disagreement are resolved. In *Buser v. Corpus Christi Independent School District* (1994), parents alleged the school failed to meet procedural requirements of providing them an equal opportunity to participate in IEP meetings. The parents were not notified when short term objectives were mastered. Their claims were not supported by the presented evidence so the United States Court of Appeals, Fifth Circuit found in favor of the school district. IEPs are written collaboratively with all members providing information in their area of expertise. They may not be developed prior to an IEP meeting and presented to the parents. Parents

must be afforded meaningful participation in the development of the IEP. A draft IEP may be ready prior to the meeting, but changes and suggestions from the parents must be considered otherwise it is considered a violation of the free appropriate public education requirement of IDEA as predetermination as found by the United States Court of Appeals, Ninth Circuit in *H. B. v. Las Virgenes Unified School District* (2007).

Once IEPs are developed, every teacher of the student needs to be aware of the goals and implement any supplemental aids and services, accommodations, and modifications the student needs as listed in the IEP. General education teachers are responsible for implementing accommodations in their classes for students with disabilities. In West Virginia Circuit Court, the judge held for the parents and awarded compensatory and punitive damages because a general education teacher refused to give oral tests to a student with a learning disability. Given oral tests, the student passed the courses, without the accommodation, he did not receive credit (*Doe v. Withers*, 1993). IEPs are legally binding documents developed by a team consisting of specified roles which includes the parent.

The special education administrator must assure that each IEP addresses all components required by IDEA. IEPs are the cornerstone of IDEA and must be written in accordance with the federal law, state laws, state policies, and in keeping with court cases, especially federal circuit courts where the school is located. IEPs must include a present level of academic achievement and functional performance, measureable annual goals, how those goals will be measured, when progress will be reported, the specialized instruction to be provided to (a) advance toward the goals, and (b) to progress in the

general curriculum, participation in the educational environment with and without nondisabled peers, accommodations in the general curriculum and assessments, and if alternate assessments are needed and why. An explanation must also be provided why the student is removed from nondisabled peers, if they are any time during the school day to receive special education. Continuous research, reading, and professional development is needed for special education administrators to understand the nuances of individual student situations and guide IEP teams in understanding the essences of IDEA, case law, and how those impact individual students and schools. CEC (2009) standards include promoting a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment, advocating the use of evidence-based practices, and meeting the needs of students with disabilities and their families. Special education administrators must understand the environmental and cultural situation of each student and family; the continuum of program options and needed services; the process for developing the IEP; developmentally appropriate practices; parts of the general curriculum where the student can access to be engaged and successful; connection of grade level standards to specialized instruction; the use of assistive technologies; and implementing practices that are individualized for each students' unique characteristics (CEC, 2009).

Compensatory education must be offered if students do not receive a free appropriate public education according to their IEP. Special education administrators must monitor IEP services and their delivery. Providing professional development to all service providers on appropriate implementation of IEPs is a strategy to help prevent compensatory services. If compensatory services are warranted the special education

administrator must assure the services and the documentation of those services. CEC (2009) developed many knowledge and skill principles under Program Development and Organization and Research and Inquiry to address many issues covered by an IEP. Improving instructional practices based on current research, evaluating instructional practices based on current assessment data, making decisions based on data that support individuals and their families, and setting educational expectations of student growth are all included (CEC, 2009).

Special education administrators need to be aware of the specific attributes of a case and the results. Professional development provided to special education personnel include details of cases. There may be similar situation in districts that haven't been challenged. Making changes in local processes to better assure IEPs are developed and implemented according to federal, state, and case law is the responsibility of the special education administrator. Special education administrators are accountable to the local board of education, the state education agency and the requirements of IDEA in guaranteeing IEPs are developed using multiple sources of data, writing challenging yet attainable goals, providing services in the least restrictive environment, and addressing transition. Work surrounding IEPs require the knowledge and flexibility to address each student's unique needs. Much of a special education administrator's time and effort go into reassuring IEPs are appropriate.

Least Restrictive Environment

The least restrictive environment (LRE) is defined as follows:

> To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are not disabled, and special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability of a child is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily. (20 U.S.C. 1412(a)(5), 2012)

The IEP requires a statement explaining the extent, if any, the student will not participate with nondisabled peers in the general education class. *Mattie T. v. Holladay* (1981) defined LRE to mean the educating of children with disabilities with children who are not disabled as defined by IDEA. *Sacramento City Unified School District v. Rachel H.* (1994) used the following four factor balancing test to determine the least restrictive environment:

1. What is the educational benefit of a student with a disability being in a general education class room full time?
2. What are the non-academic benefits of being in a full time general education class?
3. What is the effect of the student with a disability on the teacher and students in the general education class?
4. What is the cost compared to other options?

The United States Court of Appeals Ninth Circuit found the least restrictive environment for Rachel, a student with a moderate intellectual disability, was full time in a general education classroom with a part time aide to assist in modifying the curriculum.

In *Clyde K v. Puyallup* (1994), a 15-year-old student with Tourette's syndrome and ADHD was moved to an alternative program after his behavior problems escalated. His behaviors spiraled from violent confrontations, name calling, profanity, vulgarity, and making sexually explicit remarks to students to hitting and kicking furniture and hitting, pushing students, and assaulting a school staff member. Parents initially agreed with options presented, however over the course of a few months alleged everything the school did to appease the parents and follow IDEA was contested. In allegations that the least restrictive environment was violated, the United States Court of Appeals, Ninth Circuit used the four-part test outlined in *Sacramento City Unified School District v. Rachel H.* (1994). The court determined the alternative placement was the least restrictive environment because the student experienced no academic benefit, minimal non-academic benefit, his presence had a negative effect on students and teachers, and he imposed a danger to others in his home school.

In *Poolaw v. Bishop* (1995), the IEP team determined the needs of a student who was profoundly deaf would be best served at the state's school for deaf and blind. The parents contested, wanting their son to stay in the local school where they resided. The United States Court of Appeals, Ninth Circuit found in favor of the school's IEP team. In *Hudson v. Bloomfield* (1997), parents were advocating for their child with a moderate intellectual disability to be in a general education class the entire school day. The school

district, however, recommended more time in a special education class where instruction on daily living skills could occur rather than completely academic school day. The District Court, E.D. Michigan found in favor of the school. Even though the school was not the student's home school (i.e., the school she would attend if she were a student without disabilities), this school offered programs to address her functional needs in addition to her academic needs. She would still be participating with non-disabled peers for half of each school day. Replicating a parallel curriculum at her home school was not needed because a program in the district already exists and could be accessed.

Flour Bluff v. Katherine M. (1996) was a case concerning a deaf student who had attended a special regional school since the age of 18 months. In the middle of third grade her mother wanted her transferred to her residential school which she would attend if she did not have a disability. The special education committee noted that the residential school could not offer a superior program to the regional school and denied the parent request. The decision was also based on the shortage of professionals to work in schools with students with disabilities. This posed a challenge in providing the needed services at both schools. The review officer ruled that the IEP was not written based on the student's individual needs but rather on the programs offered at each school. The hearing officer ruled that she should attend the school closest to her home. Flour Bluff appealed the decision to the United States Court of Appeals, Fifth District. The district court contended the IEP team violated the least restrictive environment component by ruling that she attend a school further away from her home. The hearing officer's decision was repealed because she incorrectly interpreted the least restrictive

environment provision. A student should attend school as close as possible to the child's home is not in the law, but is in the regulations. More weight was given to the regulations than the law according to the district court of appeals. However, in implementing the previous ruling the student had enrolled in her home district, making the decision of the appeal moot.

These cases on least restrictive environment seem to be conflicting. In one case (*Hudson v. Bloomfield*, 1997), the LRE was determined to be part time special education and part time general education. In another (*Sacramento City Unified School District v. Rachel H.,* 1994), the LRE was the general education class full time. These students had similar intellectual disabilities. *Flour Bluff v. Katherine M.* (1996) and *Poolaw v. Bishop* (1995) concerned students with hearing impairment and deafness. The LRE for one was the local school and the other was a separate school setting. Special education administrators need to understand each student's unique circumstances, parents' and students' goals, and school personnel's perceptions of students to determine the least restrictive environment. As *Hartmann v. Loudoun* (1997) stated in the discussion, placement of students needs to be left to the parents and school personnel who understand the programs and student's needs most of all. It is best to leave these decisions out of the legal arena.

CEC (2009) leadership and policy standard indicate a responsibility to promote a free appropriate education in the least restrictive environment. A special education administrator monitors the decisions of IEP teams to assure more restrictive settings are not selected for students. Participation with nondisabled peers can be for many reasons:

academic, social, behavior, and independence are a few. A continuum of services must be provided to accommodate the numerous needs of students with disabilities. Effective special education administrators have the knowledge, discernment, and flexibility to view each student's unique situation and provide services that allow the student to receive these services. The least restrictive environment has many conflicting interpretations and decisions are made not based on the availability of services but rather what the student needs to gain educational benefit.

Procedural Safeguards

Parents must be informed of their rights; simply sending a copy of statutes and regulations does not suffice. Parents must have information explained and provided in a form that is understandable. Procedural safeguards are in place to protect the rights of a child with a disability and their parents (20 USC Chapter 33 § 1415, 2012). Parents have the right to examine all records, to participate in meetings and to obtain an independent educational evaluation. Parents must be informed of their rights on an annual basis, upon referral, upon request, upon a state complaint, and if an evaluation is requested by the parent. These safeguards should provide a complete explanation of student and parents' rights, be written in the parent's native language, and be written in understandable language (20 USC § 1415(d)(2), 2012). If a child with a disability is a ward of the state, homeless, or the parent is unknown, schools must assign a surrogate parent. Parents are also to receive a prior written notice whenever a proposal or refusal to initiate or change identification, evaluation or educational placement of a student with a disability is considered. Parents are afforded the opportunity to a facilitated IEP team meeting, to

request mediation, to file a complaint, or to request a due process hearing to resolve disputes.

If a student with a disability violates a code of student conduct, there are procedures to determine if the behavior is a result of or directly related to the student's disability. This is called a manifestation determination. If a manifestation determination is made that the behavior is a result of or directly related to the disability, there are limits to suspension and expulsion options. The IEP team must address the behaviors by reviewing and revising the IEP and or developing a behavior intervention plan to proactively prevent future non-desirable behaviors.

In *Max M. v. Thompson* (1983), the public school evaluated a student and recommended he receive psychotherapy; however, the school did not offer to provide it. The parents obtained the needed therapy, and then a due process case was filed. The parents were awarded reimbursement of the costs of providing the needed therapy for their son by the District Court of Illinois.

Students with disabilities who have challenging, disruptive behaviors in relation to or because of their disability may not be suspended because of their behaviors for more than ten days during the school year. The Supreme Court case of *Honig v. Doe* (1988) explains the school's responsibility to meet the students' needs related to the disability. Students who bring a weapon, sell drugs, or inflict serious bodily injury may be moved to an interim placement for up to 45 days. If a due process claim is filed concerning the removal of a student from school the stay put provision is invoked. That means the student must remain in the last agreed upon placement the IEP team determined until a

decision is made by the hearing officer (20 USC § 1415, 2012). If the student was placed in an interim 45-day placement because of weapons or drugs that becomes the stay put location.

Parents may request an independent educational evaluation (IEE), if they disagree with the school system's evaluation. Schools may either pay for the independent evaluation or file due process to determine if their evaluation is appropriate. Parents may provide evaluations from outside sources. If so, IEP teams must consider these evaluations in making determinations about the special education program. Parents may be reimbursed for an independent evaluation, if procedural safeguards have been violated. In *Akers v. Bolton* (1981), parents sought to have children with epilepsy covered under IDEA. The parents obtained an independent evaluation and then asked to be reimbursed, however, the school's evaluation was deemed appropriate so no reimbursement was offered or required.

If parents question whether a school system followed appropriate procedures in the identification, evaluation, or placement of a student in special education, there are resolution processes developed in each state. Filing a state complaint can result in mediation or a resolution session. A due process hearing can also be requested (20 USC § 1415 (c), (e), (f), 2012). Collaborative problem-solving of issues in disagreements is stressed in the law. Resolution opportunities do not prolong or prevent either party from proceeding to a due process hearing. Hearing officers are assigned to be objective, impartial parties to hear both sides of the issue. Hearing officers usually have a background in either law or special education. IDEA stipulates the training and role of

hearing officers, including free from influence of either party. The Supreme Court ruled that the burden of proof is on the party filing a due process claim for inappropriate processes such as evaluations, IEPs, or placements (*Schaeffer v. Weast*, 2005).

Monetary awards to prevailing parties can include reasonable attorney fees, tuition reimbursement (*Colin K. v. Schmidt*, 1983, *Forest Grove School District v. T. A.*, 2009), punitive damages when the school either fail to meet the terms of the law (*Anderson v. Thompson*, 1981; *Doe v. Withers,* 1993; *Max v. Thompson,* 1983) or intentionally violate student's rights (*Taylor v. Honig*, 1992). In *Colin K. v. Schmidt* (1983), the United States First Circuit Court found the school system responsible for paying private school tuition. This case involved two children with specific learning disabilities who resided in Maryland. Their local school system funded a private school placement. The family moved to Rhode Island and enrolled the children in a private school that was recommended by their previous private school. The local school district in Rhode Island refused to pay for private school and wanted the students to attend the public school. The IEPs developed by the local school system were deemed inadequate and the school system was ordered to rewrite the IEPs; which they did, with the placement still in the local school district. The severity of the learning disabilities was such the court found placement in a public separate class not sufficient for the students to receive educational benefits therefore private school tuition was awarded.

In *Forest Grove District v. T. A.* (2009), the Supreme Court ordered the local school district to pay for private school tuition. This case went to the Supreme Court because prior to the parents placing the student in a private school, he was found not

eligible for special education services based on an evaluation the school conducted. During administrative review, the school was ordered to conduct another evaluation to determine if the student had a disability. Again, the school found the student ineligible for special education and related services. The district court found the evaluation to be substandard because it did not address Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). The school district contended it did not have to pay for private school tuition because the student had not previously received special education. In conclusion, IDEA does not categorically bar courts from providing adequate relief to families who find FAPE in a private school, if it was not offered in the public school.

In *Anderson v. Thompson* (1981), parents refused the public school placement in favor of a private school placement. The district court concluded the public school placement was appropriate and the public school should pay for a transitional phase from the private school to the public school. Parents refused the placement and continued to keep their child in the private school. The parent appealed to the United States Seventh Circuit Court of Appeals seeking compensatory damages and attorney's fees. The court denied damages because the school had not acted in bad faith and denied attorney's fees because at the time, the federal law did not provide attorney fees. In contrast, in *Doe v. Withers* (1993), damages and attorney fees were awarded. In this case a general education teacher refused to provide the IEP specified accommodations to a student with disabilities as discussed earlier.

In *Max v. Thompson* (1983), the District Court of Illinois awarded reimbursement to the parents for the school district's recommended psychotherapy, which it did not

provide. However, no attorney's fees or damages were awarded. The school was not found to have acted in bad faith. In *Taylor v. Honig* (1992) the United Stated Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals concluded no personal rights were violated by the mental health agency or the school district. A student who exhibited serious emotional disturbances was recommended for a residential placement. In seeking a placement, the parents refused other programs or the student was not accepted on five different occasions. The parent located a private residential mental health facility and the mental health agency refused the placement. Eventually, the student was placed in the private residential facility at public expense, however, the individual rights of the student were not violated, because all the parties involved were searching for an appropriate placement for the student.

The CEC (2009) standards of Professional Development and Ethical Practice include knowledge and skill principles that support understanding and advocating for students' and family rights. Special education directors must be moral and ethical in their practices and model such behavior for teachers, parents, and other administrators. Special education administrators are contacted by parents when they are unhappy with school level decisions. In these cases, the special education administrator must ensure each party is knowledgeable about their rights and offer solutions that are in line with IDEA and the needs of the student. Providing professional development to teachers and families on understanding exceptional learning needs is part of the responsibilities of a special education director. Assisting parents to understand their rights under IDEA may seem counterproductive if the perception is one of school personnel and parents not

agreeing. A special education administrator works to assure parents not only receive a copy of the procedural safeguard but also understand them. Parents confide in special education administrators when school level decisions are not agreed upon or not understood. Special education administrators walk a fine line between assisting and helping parents understand their rights and assuring school personnel understand their obligation of implementing IDEA for every student with a disability. When a complaint or case against the school district is filed, special education administrators have a limited amount of time to investigate the situation, address any errors made by school personnel and respond to the state education agency addressing the concerns.

Parent Involvement

The parent of a child with a disability is defined as a biological, adoptive, foster, or step parent. Someone acting as the parent who lives with the child and is legally responsible for the child's welfare could also be the parent. If a parent is unable to be located a surrogate parent is appointed to act as the parent in making educational decisions (20 USC Chapter 33 § 1401 (22), 2012).

Parents are required members of the IEP team. Their presence and opinions should be constantly sought and is highly valued. School administrators are prohibited to make some educational decisions unilaterally. The IEP team is responsible for the referral determining what, if any, evaluations are needed, eligibility of a disability criteria including the determining if specialized instruction is needed; the specifics of what the specialized instruction includes- special education, related services, supplemental aids

and accommodations; and gaging if these services are meeting the unique needs of the student. Parents are required members of the team.

Non-custodial parents have the right to be involved in their child's education. According to *Lower Moreland Township School District* (1992), when parents have joint custody and the court is silent on who has decision making authority, both parents retain their rights under IDEA. Foster parents may also be considered parents, especially if there is a long-term arrangement. These decisions must be made on a case by case basis. Surrogate parents are required, if the parents are unknown and not located after reasonable effort. In a case settled out of court, *Jesu D. v. Lucas County Children Services Board* (1985), the state superintendent of Ohio was required to issue a memorandum detailing the specifics of selection and training surrogate parents to assure the rights of students with disabilities were protected.

CEC (2009) addresses the importance of collaboration with families. Encouraging effective communication with all stakeholders and offering support for families helps parents become more effective communicators and advocates for their child. Parent involvement is not only mandated in IDEA; it fosters a good working relationship between families and schools.

Special education administrators serve as a sounding board for parents who need to share their story, including frustrations with teachers and schools but also success stories or personal private information they do not want to reveal to the child's school. Parents of children with disabilities need encouragement and support in their own journey of navigating the processes of school and special education. Special education

administrators fill a role of advocacy, understanding, linking families with supports, and sometimes just listening. Listening to parents validates their importance and lets them know someone cares about their child. Caution must be exercised when listening to parents to keep confidential information confidential and offering support to the parent who may not know how to ask. If parents view the special education administrator as an advocate for the child, relationships can be salvaged and rebuilt. Educating the parents of students with disabilities about their rights to be active participants in the educational decisions concerning their child empowers them. When questions arise, parents will contact the special education administrator to get an unbiased opinion on issues they may be struggling with how to handle. Special education administrators serve as a source of information and comfort to parents of students with disabilities.

Section 504

Section 504 of the American with Disabilities Act is important to discuss because it protects students with disabilities who may not have protections under IDEA. Students with disabilities who do not require specialized instruction are protected from discrimination by Section 504. As an anti-discrimination law, it extends beyond educational services to include architectural accessibility, extracurricular and nonacademic activities. It also covers postsecondary schools, child care centers and summer recreation programs if these programs receive federal funding. IDEA provided a pathway to resolve disputes which increased litigation concerning the education of students with disabilities. Many times Section 504 is listed along with IDEA as being

violated. Public school personnel may not have been aware of Section 504 and its requirements because it does not have funding tied to implementing the provisions.

The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 is a federal law that prohibits discrimination based on a disability. Section 504 of the law applies to educational institutions and programs that accept federal funds. In 1990 the American with Disabilities Act was amended to conform with the definition of a disability to the definition in the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. In 2008, the American with Disabilities Act was amended. In effect, this amendment broadened the definition of a person with a disability but the regulations did not change (ADA, 2008). Section 504 reads,

> No otherwise qualified individual with a disability in the United States, as defined in section 705 (20) of this title, shall, solely by reason of his or her disability, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance or under any program or activity conducted by any Executive agency or by the United States Postal service. (Rehabilitation Act of 1973)

Section 705 (20) states "any individual with a disability means any individual who- has a physical or mental impairment which for such individual constitutes or results in a substantial impediment to employment and can benefit in terms of an employment outcome . . ." (Rehabilitation Act of 1973). Section 504 is about preventing discrimination based on a disability in educational programs that receive federal funds. This includes most public schools.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act addresses many of the same components as IDEA. Locating and identifying every student with a disability and notifying the parents of the school system obligation to provide a free appropriate public education to students

is very similar to child find in IDEA. The provision of providing transportation is also listed if it is needed to get an eligible child to the needed services.

The evaluation procedures to determine eligibility for section 504 supplemental aids, benefits, and services are to be developed by the local school district. The procedures include assuring that assessments used are validated for the specific purpose they are used. Any evaluations need to be administered by trained personnel as outlined in the instructions. The evaluations and assessments used need to assess the areas of educational need without reflecting the effects of the suspected impairment. Multiple measures or sources of information should be used to determine educational decisions. Reevaluations should also occur periodically to determine the continued need of services.

Eligibility under section 504 as a person with a disability includes anyone who has a physical or mental impairment, has a record of the impairment or is regarded as having an impairment which substantially limits one of life's major functions, such as walking, speaking, and learning, which are ones usually associated with acquiring an education. The ADA also includes eating, sleeping, standing, lifting, bending, reading, concentrating, and communicating as activities that could be limited and need accommodations to access educational services.

Special education and related services are listed as means to assure the disability is not causing any discrimination to the access of educational programs. Decisions regarding the needed services and or accommodations are made by a team of people who are knowledgeable about the child, understand and can interpret evaluations and are knowledgeable about placement options.

The least restrictive environment terminology is not used in section 504, but preference should be given to the natural regular environment with nondisabled peers. Proximity to the child's home is also a consideration to be deliberated. Students who are eligible should be educated with non-disabled peers to the maximum extent possible. Nonacademic services are also considered and discrimination from activities such as recess and meals is also protected.

Procedural safeguards are developed by local school districts and should address notifications, a review procedure, and the opportunity for parents to examine school records. If the parents have differences in opinion with the team that made the decisions, there are means developed by the school district to allow for review, and legal representation if needed. As a confident method of obedience with this component, complying with IDEA assures meeting the requirement.

Parent involvement is not as regulated in section 504 as it is in IDEA; however, parents are to be informed and should be included as a member of the team who make the decisions on evaluation, eligibility and educational placement.

In some school districts, administrators of special education programs also administer section 504 programs. Since section 504 is unfunded, many times supplemental aides and accommodations are provided by a 504 plan. If a student with a disability is in need of specialized instruction and or related services they have an IEP under IDEA. Throughout section 504 the regulations state that following the required components of IDEA meet the standards in section 504. It is common practice to divide students with disabilities into the two categories of having an IEP or 504 Plan. Students

who need specialized instruction and related services most usually have an IEP. Students with disabilities who can be successful with environmental, sensory, or testing accommodations, are usually provided those services through a 504 plan.

Summary

The complexities of IDEA and Section 504 outline requirements that are supported with corresponding regulations. Court cases also help to clarify the intensions of law makers in formulating IDEA. It is clear that referrals are generated from multiple sources including teachers and parents. Several court cases cite child find provisions and the responsibility of schools on locating, evaluating and serving students with disabilities. In evaluating students suspected of having a disability tests should be racially and culturally non-discriminatory. A number of court cases concerning using an intelligence test as a determinant factor in providing special education especially in a setting removed from non-disable peers has been challenged. Intelligence tests shall not be used as the sole factor in making an eligibility determination.

IEPs are the cornerstone of IDEA. An IEP is a document outlining the special education for an eligible student. The IEP lists strengths and needs in functional and academic skills, goals, accommodations, and the location, duration, and frequency special education and related services are provided. Students with disabilities are to be educated in the least restrictive environment while providing a free appropriate public education. In the field this is commonly referred to FAPE in the LRE. Court cases abound concerning IEPs. Parents may challenge goals, the amount of services, the location of services, and FAPE in the LRE. IEP teams made up of specified members are

responsible for creating an IEP that helps the student attain the written goals and progress from grade to grade. The LRE is justified and, if the student is removed from nondisabled peers, the team must explain why. Numerous court cases address private schools and residential schools. Schools are responsible for these placements, if they are found to be the most appropriate to address the needs of the student. Tuition payment is ordered in some cases because private school placement is the LRE and addresses the unique needs of the students.

Procedural safeguards are an integral part of IDEA. These outline the steps parents can take, if they feel IDEA is not being implemented as it should. Dispute resolution options are made available to aggrieved parties. Parent involvement is critical in providing services to students with disabilities. Parents are important members of the IEP team and need to take an active role in providing information about their child. Parents are afforded many ways of participating in an IEP team. Court cases concerning parent involvement address the rights of noncustodial parents and educational decision making authority.

Section 504 is an anti-discrimination law that protects students with disabilities in educational settings. Accommodations must be made to afford a student with disabilities access to the education environment and curriculum. School districts can comply with section 504 mandates by following IDEA requirements. Many court cases use IDEA and section 504 as a basis for in due process claims.

The role of special education administrators in assuring IDEA and Section 504 are implemented is an important part of their practices. Communicating the requirements,

weighing in on controversial situations and offering options to allow parents and school personnel to reach decisions that results in providing appropriate services to students so they can meet IEP goals, have access to the general education curriculum and progress from grade to grade. The complexities and conflicting interpretations create atmospheres that can be difficult to navigate. Special education administrators must have the knowledge and confidence to proceed in providing professional development and the patience and kindness in address differing interpretations of local, state, and federal requirements.

Role of Special Education Administrators

The requirements, regulations, case law, and interpretations described above are part of the road special education administrators must navigate. The knowledge, skills, and dispositions a special education administrator must encompass are complex. As interpretations and guidelines change based on emphases placed on different components of the law, special education administrators must have the capacity to understand, explain, and guide the twists and turns of conflicting practices. In this section, licensure, qualifications, preparation, and additional responsibilities will be discussed.

Licensure and Qualifications

Qualifications to be in the role of a special education administrator vary greatly across states. Most states require a master's or doctoral degree in special education, a related field, and/or administration. A state licensure examination also may be required in some states. The prerequisites for the position include general central office administration positions and/or school level administrative positions (Tennessee

Department of Education, n.d.; Virginia Department of Education, 2007; West Virginia Department of Education, n.d.). In North Carolina, special education administrators must have a master's degree in special education or school administration. If one holds a master's degree in special education, then nine semester hours must be obtained in school administration. If the master's degree is in school administration, then nine semester hours in special education are required. Adding special education administrator to licensure necessitates taking a state required assessment in either special education or school administration (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, n.d.).

Preparation

Little attention has been given specifically to special education administration preparation and licensure. Lashley and Boscardin (2003) produced a brief on the availability, licensure, and preparation of special education administrators. They reported that no competencies were recognized nationwide, resulting in an inconsistency among states on the requirements to be a special education administrator. Thereafter, the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) issued standards and responsibilities for special education administrators. The standards include philosophical, historical, and legal foundations; characteristics of learners; assessment, diagnosis, and evaluation; instructional content and practice; planning and managing the teaching and learning environment; managing student behavior and social interactions; communication and collaborative partnerships and professionalism and ethics. These standards were generated by conducting a research based survey with members of CEC (CEC, 2009). These standards are not uniformly utilized by all states or school systems.

Responsibilities

Special education administrators are responsible for ensuring IDEA is implemented appropriately including making sure students with disabilities are correctly identified, educated by qualified personnel, and are progressing toward grade level standards as explained in this chapter. Responsibilities of special education administrators also include activities that are not about the provision of special education. Many requests from the state level include reporting throughout the year on various aspects of special education programs. If any special funding is requested and granted, midyear and end of year reporting is required. This includes student specific information as well as overall programmatic information. There are annual requests for personnel data and caseload information, registration of groups of students, documentation of monitoring activities, documentation of professional development, and submission of grant applications. Periodic fiscal reporting is also required on all funds received.

Attending meetings is also required to attain and share information relevant to special education programs. State wide meetings and regional meetings provide a platform to exchange information. Within the school district, central office personnel meetings, principal meetings, and teacher meetings provide avenues to disseminate and collect information. All of these meeting require different levels of planning. Presentations must be geared to the audience and requisition of information must be organized with clarity to receive accurate information. Planning for portions or entire meetings requires time and collaboration.

CEC standards (2009) for special education administrators addresses many aspects of supervising and assuring high quality programs for students with disabilities including leadership and policy; program development; research and inquiry; program evaluation; professional development and ethical practice; and collaboration with multiple stakeholders. These are practiced in child find through collaboration with families and outside agencies. Securing appropriately licensed personnel to conduct evaluations and explain evaluation results are a part of leadership and policy. Eligibility criteria for each disability category consistently applied across a local school district supports the leadership and evaluation standards (CEC, 2009). Research and inquiry and evaluation standards support continuous improvements in programming for students with disabilities. Professional development for and the ethical practices of special education service providers enhance instructional practices to yield better outcomes as measured by the IEP. Providing a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment is a skill listed within the leadership and policy standard. The rights of students with disabilities and their parents as presented in procedural safeguards situates in ethical practices. Parent involvement is supported in all six of the advanced standards of knowledge and skills special education administrators possess.

In this chapter a brief history of special education is given. IDEA and some of its important components concerning public schools are discussed. Referrals and child find are more clearly outlined based on several court cases since 1995. Evaluations include several cited cases that delineate for what public schools are responsible. As part of child find students suspected of having a disability are to be found, evaluated, and served.

Reevaluations and independent educational evaluations are discussed in several court cases. Eligibility criteria can vary from state to state. IDEA allows some flexibility. States clearly stipulate the data to be considered. The decision of eligibility is the responsibility of the IEP teams answering the three eligibility questions in IDEA. IEPs are the cornerstone of IDEA. Components of an IEP have been questioned in court resulting in clarification of goals, services, team participation, and implementation. The least restrictive environment for a student to receive a free appropriate education is mandated. Procedural safeguards are stipulated so parents who feel FAPE in the LRE is not provided have avenues to contest decisions concerning special education. Some court cases have found a violation of the process of getting and providing special education to be a denial of FAPE. Facilitated IEP meetings, mediation, and due process hearings are avenues to reconcile differences of opinions. In some incidents, parents are awarded attorney fees and damages based on inadequate services or interpretations of laws and regulations. Court cases assist in helping school districts understand the interpretation of IDEA.

Special education administrators must be licensed to hold the position. States vary on the requirements needed for the job assignment. The responsibilities of a special education administrator are multiple and varied. They work with schools and parents differently to ensure effective and legally sound education and services are provided to children identified with a disability. Special education administrators must ensure all needed supports are available to teachers, parents, general educators, special educators, and students. By working with general education teachers and parents, the need for

special education can be avoided by providing interventions to address lapses in learning. Special education administrators offer support and expertise in techniques necessary to identify what course of action to take. Open, yet confidential communication pathways with all stakeholders, administrators, school personnel, and parents are needed to best support and effectively educate a child. Special education administrators must have good listening skills, high ethical standards, mediation skills, and problem solving attributes to successfully complete all the required components of the obligation.

Bolman and Deal's framework will be used to view all the roles and duties of special education administrators and how optimally they are performed. This framework looks at how leadership roles vary and the impact this may have on effectiveness, stability, and confidence in the school system. It is a means to identify what works well in all the varied dynamics of special education administration. By reflecting on the structural, human resource, political, and symbolic frames, experiences are explored to identify strengths and weaknesses in the special education hierarchy. The next chapter will discuss the methodology for conducting the study.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY

The need for special education administration has grown and become more complicated since 1975 when the Education for All Handicapped Children Act was passed. Guidance provided at the federal level created a need for someone within states and school districts with expertise in special education to assure the implementation of special education according to the law. Studies have shown that the average tenure of a special education administrator is three to five years (Tate, 2010). The context of special education administration has changed over the history of the implementation of IDEA. Given these factors, the preparation, professional development, and practice of special education administration would be better informed by collecting and understanding the perspectives and experiences of veteran special education administrators.

The responsibilities of special education administrators have been explained along with the CEC (2009) professional knowledge and skill standards for special education administrators. This study shares administrators' understandings of the purpose of their vocation, reveals factors they feel have aided in their job tenure, examines the effects of their longevity on their practice, and analyzes these factors through the lenses of the framework by Bolman and Deal (2013). Factors that contribute to success in the position include administrative support, job satisfaction, mentors, and collaboration (Collin, 2009; Tate, 2010). The overarching question for the study is: What can we learn about the

practice of special education administration from veteran special education administrators? Research questions include the following:

1. What institutional arrangements support the work of special education administrators?
2. What personal and professional commitments keep special education administrators engaged in the practice of special education administration?
3. How do special education administrators manage the conflicts inherent in the position?
4. What roles and functions do special education administrators exercise in for a school district?

Methodology and Research Approach

This was standard qualitative study using interviews (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Lichtman, 2013). Qualitative research begins with a passion for a topic. An over-arching question captures the basis for the study and creates room for more specific questions to capture the experiences and perspective of the participants (Agee, 2009). The openness of qualitative research allows the researcher to address the intricacies and complexities of special education administration (Glesne, 2016). Because they are dynamic and multi-directional, more qualitative studies need to be conducted to capture the experiences and perspectives of special education administrators and allow for discoveries that could lead to new understandings about the practices of special education administrators (Carter, 2011).

Qualitative research is a positioned activity that puts the researcher in the world of the participants. As such, to strengthen the study the researcher must be reflective and transparent (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005). Qualitative research data collection occurs in the participants' natural environments (Creswell, 2009), allowing them to be in familiar surroundings and comfortable. A qualitative approach allows for reflection and collaboration with participants to better understand and interpret the practices special education administration. Quality indicators for qualitative studies were developed by Patton (2003) which helps reveal the complexities of qualitative research. The checklist to consider when conducting qualitative research includes three major categories: selecting the approach to best answer the research questions, collecting high quality, credible data, and analyzing/reporting the findings. Care must be taken when considering the items under each factor because using a checklist for a qualitative study could structure and possibly limit the parameters of the study to limit the openness of collecting unforeseen categories or themes (Reynolds et al., 2011).

Key Concepts and Terms

A *special education administrator* for this study means the person operating at a district level to ensure the provision of services for students with disabilities. He or she may also be referred to as a special education director, exceptional children program director, special needs director, special administrator, or exceptional children program administrator.

For the purposes of this study, a *veteran* means a special education administrator who has been in the same position in the same system for at least six years.

Students with disabilities refers to students ages three through 21 who have been determined eligible for special education and related services. They may also be referred to as students with special needs and exceptional children.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is the federal law that is enacted to ensure children with disabilities have access to a free appropriate public education addressing their unique needs in the lease restrictive environment.

The *Individualized Education Program (IEP)* is a document that contains all the required components to assure students with disabilities can access their education. It prescribes the specialized instruction and related services the student will receive to address the goals that are developed based on the present level of academic achievement and functional performance.

IEP Team is a group comprised of the parent, a regular education teacher, a special education teacher, a local education agency representative who is knowledgeable about the general curriculum, can supervise special education and can allocate resources, someone who can interpret evaluation results, and the student when appropriate. The parents may also include other individuals who have knowledge or expertise about the child.

Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) is the special education and related services provided to preschool through high school students with disabilities as outlined in the IEP. These services are provided at no charge to the parents.

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) refers to students with disabilities being educated to the maximum extent possible with non-disabled students. Removing students

with disabilities only occurs when the education in the regular educational environment cannot be achieved using supplementary aids and services.

Parent of a child with a disability is the natural or adoptive parent, guardian, or person acting in the place of the parent, such as a step parent, grandparent or a person who is legally responsible for the child's welfare.

Parent involvement is a requirement that is woven into all components of IDEA. Consent by the parent is necessary to evaluate and to provide special education services. Parents are also members of the IEP team. Even though decisions are reached by consensus, parents have avenues to dispute decisions (IDEA, 2012).

Special education is the specially designed instruction and related services that addresses the unique needs of the child with a disability.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act is an antidiscrimination law. Students with disabilities cannot be discriminated against by educational programs receiving federal funds. Students who do not require specialized instruction and need accommodations have 504 plans to assure equitable educational opportunities (ADA, 2008). Students with IEPs are also protected from discrimination under Section 504.

Institutional Arrangements refers to the structure and organization of the school district.

Structural Frame refers to how organizations are arranged including organizational charts, roles, goals, policies, and procedures.

Human Resource Frame refers to how people understand and interact with each other.

Political Frame includes the dynamics of the distribution of power within the organization.

Symbolic Frame focuses on the culture of the organization including rituals and ceremonies.

Study Setting

This study was located in public school districts in the state of North Carolina. Interviews with participants were held in mutually agreed upon locations. Preference was given to the participant's professional place of work because this location might augment and prompt experiences and influence the content provided using visual memory cues in the professional space. The location was private so information was not constrained. The spaces were comfortable so the participants felt free to converse. A quiet, safe place also decreased or avoided distractions and interruptions (Mears, 2009).

The number of students served in participants' districts differs greatly as average daily membership ranges from 1,200 to 54,000 students. The number of schools in each district ranges from three to over 80. The number of students with disabilities served in represented districts ranges from under 200 to over 7,000 students. Additionally, the percentage of students identified with disabilities in each district varies from 13% to over 20%.

The responsibilities of special education administrators vary from district to district. In some districts the special education program is the administrator's sole responsibility. Others have many additional responsibilities, including administration of one or more of the following: Mental Health, Medicaid, 504 plans, the North Carolina

State Improvement Project (NC-SIP) in Reading and Math, counselors, social workers, school nurses, and alternative programs. Additionally, all are responsible for supervising programs and personnel that provide related services including speech language pathologists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, behavior specialists, literacy specialists, program specialists, and teachers. Supervising programs and personnel includes responsibility for providing professional development activities for these groups.

Participants and Selection Criteria

Eight participants were chosen from those who were current directors of special education and who had served for at least six years in the position in the same school district in North Carolina. The names and email addresses of all special education directors are listed on the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction Exceptional Children Program website. Potential participants were emailed or called on the phone to ask if they were eligible and willing to be a participant in this study. Purposeful selection included the special education directors who have remained in the same system as the director of special education programs for at least six years. As a member of the group studied I may have some unintended biases. This was addressed by answering the interview questions and including my results as one of the participants. Also having known the participants for many years as peers, they may have been more or less candid in their responses than if someone they had not known was inquiring. Participants represented a wide and even distribution among sizes of school districts.

Participant Characteristics and Districts Represented

Interview participants included special education administrators who work in North Carolina public school districts. All eight participants have been in the same position and school district for more than six years. One participant has served as a special education administrator for over 30 years across several districts.

Participants' routes to arriving at their current positions as special education administrators vary. Five participants majored in special education and are former special education teachers. Another participant is a former general education teacher, another a former school psychologist, and the last a former social worker. Some participants were assigned to their administrative position without applying or interviewing; others applied, interviewed, and were hired.

Participants shared their reasons for wanting to become special education administrators. Nancy, Leigh, and Jackie knew from childhood that they wanted to work with students with disabilities in some capacity and their motivations came from being intrigued with how students with disabilities differed from typical students, an interest in the challenges these students faced, and how they could help students with disabilities overcome these challenges. They stated they had a passion for working with people with disabilities. Steve indicated that due to religious beliefs, working with students with special needs helped fulfill his belief that he should make a difference in people's lives; working in special education affords many opportunities to make such a difference. Having a personal connection was important for one administrator who makes a connection with each of her students by knowing their goals and tracking their progress.

Participant Descriptions

Jackie Flynt, Director of Exceptional Children at Hillside County Schools

Jackie started her professional career as a clinical psychologist working in mental health. When her children were young, she stayed home with them. During that time a school psychologist went on maternity leave, Jackie covered the maternity leave through a contract with the mental health agency. She enjoyed it so much she returned to school to add school psychology to her license and then obtained a position with the school system as a school psychologist. In her last year as a school psychologist she worked closely with the special education administrator who was implementing new programs and making changes in the special education program that were exciting for Jackie. The special education administrator accepted another position outside of the school district, and the superintendent asked Jackie if she would be the special education director. Jackie accepted the position because she wanted to see the new programs continue.

Hillside County is a high performing rural district with under 20 schools. As a district, it is making a change from school based management to more central office management. Professional development opportunities are mandated by the central office, which is a recent change. Some schools embrace that change and others continue to operate as site based. This paradigm shift for the most part has been positive for Jackie. There are almost 1,300 students with disabilities in the system which is almost 19% of the student enrollment. The people who work in the central office are supportive of special education. Jackie is part of the curriculum and instruction team. She explains why she is committed to helping students with disabilities.

> My commitment was the inspiration of kids that have struggled so hard with learning or even walking or talking. Getting to watch them every day, helped me put everything in perspective. What were my problems? What did I ever have to complain about in comparison? Being in an environment where you're inspired by people that you're helping, and then getting to work with staff who have this intense commitment to do something that's really hard. It truly is rocket science to try to teach [special needs] kids how to read and how to access the general curriculum. My passion is trying to make sure that we have the resources so that we have the student teacher ratio that's good and that we have the best staff that we can possibly find in front of our kids. It's not an intellectual thing, it's just kind of an emotional connection. It's heart to heart. I see those kids, and I want them to be successful. I don't want to put any barriers in their way. They have enough challenges already . . . That motivates me to keep plugging away at it, because I think we're making a difference.

Jackie uses a team approach in her position relying on her program specialist to supervise the elementary schools and she focus on middle and high schools. They collaborate to make mutual decisions. Jackie describes relationships as an important aspect of her role. Relationships with principals are built from working through difficult situations together. When there is a good solution and outcome, she feels trust is also built for future situations. The same is true for relationships with parents. When difficult times are resolved, trust is built.

Jackie says motivation for continuing in the positon is that this position is not boring. No two days are alike. There is variety and challenges. She and others who are passionate about their work can problem solve and implement solutions. Working with others, she feels she is ultimately making a difference in students' lives.

Amy Goins, Director of Exceptional Children Services at Grier City Schools

Amy works in a small city school system with three schools, one elementary, one middle and one high school. The number of students with disabilities is less than 200.

Amy reports directly to the superintendent. She appreciates the closeness that comes with working in a small system. They are like family. Amy relocated there because her husband got a job in the area. She did not plan on a career in special education but enjoys the challenges that it brings.

Amy explains her educational path to special education administration:

> I had double major in college in political science and sociology, because I was going to go to law school . . . I went to law school for a year and a half and decided it wasn't what I wanted to do. I quit law school.

Amy started in working in a daycare as a substitute until she was asked to be the director because she had a four-year degree. This was her first experience in administration and she loved it. The pay was not sufficient so when a parent in daycare shared with her the process of lateral entry, she pursued a job in the school system. She describes her job:

> I got a job in a special program . . . It was a grant-based two-year program to see if they could help kids who were at risk of going to juvenile court. Well, when I was in college I did my internship for sociology in juvenile court . . . Since I had that experience with the courts, I got hired for this job . . . I didn't know a lot about education. I ended up going back to school and working on my masters. I was working on a master's in special education and my licensure at the same time while teaching.

When the grant ended, Amy got a job in a school district as a special education teacher teaching second and third grade, self-contained. She explains her progression in that district: "I worked all those kids back in the general education class. Then I taught fourth, fifth, and sixth grade and I worked all those kids back in to the general education class. After that they moved me to middle school." Her husband accepted a job in Grier so they moved. Grier didn't have any open positions in special education so she worked

as a social worker for four years. She was based at the elementary school. That is when she started providing Christmas for needy families. When the EC director left, the district was looking for someone with a master's in special education. Amy let the central office know that she had a master's degree in special education and she got the job.

Many times in a small system people in the central office are responsible for multiple programs. Amy continues to oversee the Christmas program for needy families, as well as homeless, preschool, safe and drug free schools, counselors, nurses, special education, and the 504 program.

Amy interacts well with parents, teachers and principals. She stated, "I've been doing this a long time. Even principals will call me and say, 'What should I do about this?' or 'Let me know what you think about this,' because they know I know." She is always smiling and ready to help any school, classroom teacher, student, or parent who shares a need. In problem solving solutions for students, she shares with parents that she would not suggest or do anything with their child that she would not do with her own son. Teachers and other administrators in the district trust her judgment because of the difficult situations she has worked through in the past.

Amy continues in the position because she can see students succeed. Working with the parent of a young child with a significant disability and watching the child grow and learn and parallel to that working with the parent through denial, frustration, and acceptance. Amy, the parent, and the student celebrate together when the student graduates and gets a job in a place the student is loved and appreciated.

Taylor Rice, Director of Special Programs at Shook County Schools

Taylor grew up in Shook County. She knew in high school she wanted to be a special education teacher. She graduated from high school in the top of her class and went to a four-year university across the state to earn her degree. She returned to teach in the high school where she graduated. She found her niche in a separate setting teaching life skills to students with disabilities. Her principal encouraged her to get her master's degree in administration rather than special education because Taylor was motivated to learn all she wanted about special education. She started her master's program and was asked to apply to be the assistant director for special education. She was in that position for about 2 years, and when the director left she became the director. She has been there for seven years. The first year she cried a lot and questioned if she had done the right thing. Since then she gained confidence, knowledge and respect and feels confident about her ability and practices.

Shook County is a rural county with under 20 schools. The number of students with disabilities is above 18% of student enrollment. There have been several changes in the superintendent and other central office personnel within the past 10 years. These changes have resulted in not having a clear plan for the system. With each change, different initiatives were pursued and then dropped when there was a different person was in the position. Taylor has experienced different levels of collaboration with other directors. Some have been very supportive and Taylor feels they were successful in accomplishing common goals. Others seemed to work their own plan without including Taylor or considering students with disabilities in the initiative.

Taylor has five support positions that assist in implementing the initiatives within the special education program and Section 504. Taylor has an assistant director, a preschool coordinator, a program specialist, a behavior specialist, and a compliance specialist. The assistant director is involved in transition and NC SIP in math. Taylor is involved with NCSIP in reading and delegates other responsibilities to her team. She is very much involved in every area. Her main frustration is the recursive nature in leading special education programs. Taylor says,

> It feels like our job sometimes is never ending. You feel like you never finish something sometimes because it's just recycling. You feel like you get done with a budget, now you have to do an amendment to it, and then you feel like you've done an amendment, now you forgot your justification statement, it's something all the time, it's always cycling. When you do get to do a project and you feel like you finally finished something and you can see some outcomes and results, that's when you feel like you can celebrate.

Taylor finds the motivation to continue in the position from the relationships she has built and the challenges in the position. She feels a strong connection with students, teachers, and parents in her system. The relationships she has with co-workers also help her to endure tough times and celebrate with her when issues are resolved. The challenges and camaraderie keep her motivated to continue.

Steve Douglas, Director of Exceptional Children at Forest County Schools

Forest County is a larger school system in comparison to the rest of the state. Forest County has over 50 schools. There are over 3,000 students identified as having a disability. That is over 13% of the student population. Forest County has a new superintendent with less than three years in the position. Other system level

administrators have held the same positions for several years. Steve has been the director of exceptional children in Forest for over 15 years. In describing his responsibilities, he says,

> I'm over the special education program. I'm over the special education accountability, data and process. I'm over the professional development and training support that undergirds special education. I'm the person [who is responsible] when we get in trouble legally, procedurally or concerning process.

He did not reference his relationship with others in the central office. He reports to the assistant superintendent over curriculum and instruction. However, he did speak of working in teams as being an integral part of his work in special education.

Steve came to Forest County from a small city district and before that he was a special education administrator in another state. Steve has immense experience administering special education programs. He became a director after teaching ten years in a special education classroom. He landed the job of director of special education because his superintendent asked him on a Friday to start as the director on Monday. He was convinced to take the position over the weekend, as he says,

> I wasn't sure I wanted to go into administration, but what they did use eventually was it makes a difference if you have somebody who really understands what it's like to deliver services, to administer the services, and so I said okay, I'll try it. So Monday morning I went to the central office, I sat down. I got a call from the state director, who told me that our state funds are cut off, our federal funds are cut off, and you have six months to come up with a plan to reinstitute effective special education services in the county or you're to federal court. My initial reaction was I think I'd rather go back to my classroom and not deal with this. It was awkward at first because it was a small county. I was a peer of the other teachers and suddenly I'm the boss.

He began as a problem solver and implemented programs to keep funding coming to the system. He really had no idea what he was doing, but he learned as he went along. He said the first year was great. Everything he suggested the school board agreed to do. After the first year was over and the system was no longer at risk for losing special education funding, Steve's requests did not get a yes quite as quickly as it had before. He met some challenges then in advocating for special education programs.

Steve has a special education leadership team with whom he meets on a weekly basis. He explains everything he has to do so they will understand when and why their request or action cannot be granted. To add a program means taking away from something that already exists in the system. Instead of him making the decision, he lets the team have input and usually their recommended action is what Steve does. Those decisions then trickle down to the schools so everyone can understand why certain programs are implemented, some not, and others stopped.

Steve's motivation for continuing in the positon is that he wants to make a difference in the world. He sees his role as improving outcomes for people with disabilities so they can participate in society as productive citizens. His mission in life is to leave the world a better place. His work to improve the lives of people with disabilities is fulfilling his mission. People are more accepted, appreciated, and utilized to get things done. Steve is happy when he sees a person with a disability participating in our world with nondisabled peers.

Nicholas Sherman, Director of Exceptional Children at Coalton County Schools

Nick Sherman did not intend to be in special education as a career. His father wanted him to go into banking. Nick majored in middle school math education. When he graduated, there were no math teacher positions open so he substituted wherever he was needed. As it turned out, he was needed in a special education classroom. The special education teacher was absent much of the time, and Nick was the substitute. When the teacher left, Nick was the long-term substitute for the remaining of the year. The students could not do middle grades math, but he was able to bond with the students. Specialized instruction was not his forte but the relationships he built with them and classroom management was unlike any the students and school had experienced. He continued in the position for several years before earning his administrative degree. He then was an assistant principal and principal in the same district. Nickolas describes his path to becoming a special education administrator:

> My four years were up as the principal fellowship requirements of being in a school, site-based. The superintendent came to me and said the principal at the high school really needs to get out and he wants to come back to elementary. I want you to be our special education director because you're the only in the county who understands it. You have the administrative background and I want you to do that.

Nick works in a mid-size district with almost 15.5% of the student population identified as having a disability. There is one high school, one middle school, and four elementary schools. The largest school has around 800 students.

Nick is responsible for special education and 504. He approaches his responsibilities as being an influence in as many areas as he can. He will share his

thoughts and ideas if he is at the table. He wishes his expertise was sought more from principals and other central office personnel. Nick understands special education as gray compared to black and white general education. Each situation is unique and he strives to ethically do the job with integrity. With all the gray areas, interpretation of written policies and procedures must be used to make the best decision for students with special needs. Nick enjoys visiting the schools, getting to know the students, and listening to the teachers' concerns. He does not feel he has the power to make significant changes in his school system. He feels his role is to manage the special education program and keep to schools compliant with IDEA and Section 504 requirements. He says, "I have to take special education and Coalton County Schools and blend them together. I'm good at that, looking at the big picture."

Nick continues in this position because he realized he is good at it. It may not be the most exciting job, but he always brings attention back to the individual child and what he or she needs, not the behavior or the action, but the child. His family inspires and supports him. He understands the needs of the students with disabilities and he does not get emotionally entangled. Nick is able keep the focus on the student when others emotionally lose sight of the child.

Nancy Alton, Director of Exceptional Children at Sidney County Schools

Nancy knew she wanted to be a special education teacher since she was a young child in elementary school. She was introduced to the special education class at her school that was in the basement. She visited the class often and wondered why they were in the basement. She was fascinated with the differences in each student. She wanted to

figure out how they thought and why. Nancy went to college, majored in special education ant began her teaching career. She taught in private schools and public schools. She returned to college to earn her master's degree in administration. She spent some time as a principal and then was asked to be the special education administrator for her district. She agreed to do it for one year. After that year, she realized she could never return to being a principal.

Sidney County Schools is close to a large urban area in the state. It has over 25 schools, including over 14 elementary schools, six middle schools, four high schools including an early college and an alternative school. There are fewer than 2,300 students with disabilities identified with close to 15,000 students over all. Turnover in leadership roles within the central office is not an issue in this district. Nancy works well with others and feels she is an integral part of the curriculum and instruction team. She and curriculum directors plan professional development opportunities for all teachers. She is consulted and a part of instructional decisions that are made for the district. There are positions that are part general education and part special education who support instruction across the continuum.

When asked what motivates her to continue in the position, Nancy says she still has things she wants to do. There are goals that not been met and she wants to see these goals reached. The goals include more inclusive practices and more community collaboration. When asked about her motivation, Nancy said,

> I decided to be in special education when I was in the second grade. Special education is such a part of who I am that I would need to get support to get out. I have my bad days, but this is what I do.

Nancy wants to see some of her goals reached before she leaves the position. She says she is not done yet. There are still things to do!

Madison Henry, Senior Director Exceptional Children and Support Services at Drexall County Schools

Madison started teaching in Drexall, her rural home community when she graduated from college. She worked in other surrounding systems as a program specialist and a director for several years before returning to her home county to be the director of special education. Drexall serves over four thousand students and 14% of them are identified as students with disabilities. Her route into special education administration consisted of her being asked to apply. She was asked to be a program specialist which took her out of the classroom. A few years later she was asked to apply to be director in another system. She did and was hired for the position. When the director position opened up in her home county she also applied and was hired.

Madison interacts with principals, teachers and parents on a regular basis. When faced with a difficult situation, she likes to help others process information so they can come up with a solution that is within the parameters of IDEA and other requirements. That is tiring work. She says,

> [I] always try to keep questioning and pulling out of people ideas. Usually at some point trying to take these ideas and make them work in difficult situations so they feel like they were the ones who contributed. I think part of that is not telling people what to do all the time, which is really hard when you know what to do. I don't feel telling people what to do really helps them process the situation. Talking through it usually helps them to process the information so they can come to their own conclusion about what needs to be done. They do own it.

Madison finds motivation for continuing in the position as just not being finished. She relaxes and unwinds on her yoga mat. Madison is close to being able to retire. Before retirement she has things to do before she is able to leave and feel good about it.

Leigh Swiney, Director of Exceptional Children at Smythe County Schools

Leigh knew she wanted to work with people with disabilities from a young age. A special education teacher was instrumental in her becoming a teacher. Leigh was intrigued by people with disabilities and is interested in knowing how they think and learn alternative ways to accomplish day to day activities. She started out teaching adults with significant disabilities and then later she taught in a preschool program for children with disabilities. She came to public schools later in her career teaching student with mild disabilities after obtaining her master's degree in learning disabilities.

Smythe County is a rural school district containing under 20 schools. Students with disabilities are over 13% of the student population. Leigh is a member of the curriculum and instruction team. Her supervisor is the assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction. Smythe County is a high performing district. Special education programs are usually an afterthought and not included in all initiatives from the beginning.

Leigh is responsible for the special education programs. Principals hire teachers and teaching assistants at their schools. Itinerate personnel that serve multiple school is hired and supervised at the central office by the special education administrator. Principals and other central office personnel call Leigh when they have questions. She is seen as an expert in the areas of special education law and mental health services. Her

relationship with parents are described as if she needs to know them, she does. Many she has worked with over multiple years. It is almost like an old friend calling rather than a concerned parent which is how the relationship got started in the first place. She takes time to listen to parents and others when they call with a concern.

Leigh has a passion for people with disabilities. Her ultimate goal is to have every student ". . . totally integrated into everyday society." She loves helping students and teachers. She enjoys seeing students succeed. She also enjoys the challenges that come with special education and that every day is different.

Data Collection

Interviewing is the most common data collection method in qualitative studies (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008). The researcher as the tool used to collect data needed to be familiar with the environment and nature of the professional role to understand the perceptions of the participants (Creswell, 2009; Shopes, 2011). In-depth interviews provided an avenue for gathering information in the natural setting and attempting to make sense of the meanings people bring to their own experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Attached as Appendix A is the protocol of interview questions.

Individual interviews were utilized to gather detailed information: preparation for the position, length of time in the position, how they came to be a director, educational background, past positions, areas of licensure, and administrative roles and responsibilities. Interviews were conducted at a convenient time and location for the researcher and participant. The researcher visited the location where the participant

works for five of the interviews. The opportunity was available to probe for more information. All questions were open ended to gather all relevant information. The overarching research question is: What can we learn about the practice of special education administration from veteran special education administrators? Guiding questions and probes are detailed in the crosswalk provided in Appendix B. Follow up questions were added to gain more details. Information was recorded, transcribed, and member checked to assure the account is trustworthy.

Individual interviews were used to explore views, experiences, perspectives, beliefs, thoughts, feelings, behaviors, meanings, interpretations, and motivations (Creswell, 2009; Woods, 2011) of veteran special education administrators to gain detailed understanding of their experiences and perspectives (Lichtman, 2013; Singer, 2000). The researcher questioned and interacted with participants to uncover complexities inherent in the lives of special education administrators (Glesne, 2016). Interviews were conducted face to face. Each participant was interviewed one time. These sessions were recorded, transcribed, and member checked. Transcriptions of interviews were sent to the participants for the opportunity to clarify and guarantee the information was an accurate account of the material. Individual interviews allowed for each participant to share experiences resulting in multiple perspectives (Fontana & Frey, 2000) that could provide information to school districts and administrator training programs on the factors and how they affect longevity and practice. More detailed information is needed to support previous findings and gain more information to inform leadership preparation programs and school systems.

Information was gathered on participants' educational background, positions held prior to becoming a director, and their licensure pathway as well as their school district context, administrative experiences, and leadership practices. Documents provided information on the school districts, such as organizational charts, number of schools, number of students, and number of students with disabilities were collected. Many times, special education directors supervise more than special education, so their job responsibility documents were also collected. Documents were used to get an overall picture of where special education programs were situated within the district and to support interview data. Comparisons were made among the districts revealing that the public school districts in North Carolina can be arranged from largest to smallest based on ADM and then divided into four equal groups, there were two participants in the study from each group. This represents the continuum of district sizes in the state.

Interviews

Individual interviews were conducted face-to face in a variety of settings. Five interviews were conducted in participants' offices, two in locations other than participants' offices, and one was held in a hotel room during a Directors' Spring Conference. Some administrators' offices were small and cluttered. Others were roomy, spacious, and well decorated. All meeting locations were free of major interruption. Some phone calls were answered during the interviews. Most calls seemed to be from principals who had questions. Sometimes the questions were answered and other times arrangements were made to talk at a later time. The average time it took to complete interviews was 91 minutes.

Each interview was audio recorded. Recorded interviews were transcribed. Transcripts were then sent to the participants for member checking. Participants were asked to review and clarify their transcribed interview information for accuracy. Some participants made minor changes and returned them ready for analyses. Others made no changes to the transcripts, simply returned them, and wished me luck with the study. Member checking took over a month for some participants. All interview transcripts were returned with participants' indication of validation and satisfaction with the content.

Data Analysis

Data analysis allowed for the interpreting and understanding of the particular factors that support the administrative practice of veteran special education directors. The data acquired through individual interviews was organized into codes, categories, and themes based on patterns or regularities given in the responses (Creswell, 2009). Care was used to not negate the contextual meaning of the interview data. Keeping the original intent of understanding the practices of veteran special education administrators helped focus data analyses (Glesne, 2016). Deep and extensive reviews of transcripts occurred multiple times paying close attention to content and language. Emerging patterns and different points of interest were noted (Mears, 2009).

Field notes, a reflective journal, and documents were reviewed with the transcripts to better understand the participants' information. Notes were made in margins and lists were made of categories to mark relative information. Rudimentary coding initiated the analytic process. Codes were named and organized as data was analyzed. Repeated categories across transcripts were noted. These categories were

organized and the transcripts were read again to determine if these common categories were significant. Further analyses resulted in renaming, reassigning, and dividing codes to organize into categories. Codes and patterns were analyzed, arranged, and rearranged to identify themes. Marked passages were re-categorized multiple times until supported themes were realized. Once themes were determined, supporting categories were structured under each theme. During the drafts of organizing the themes, categories and notes, other themes emerged. Sections were rewritten and data was reorganized. Appendix C summarizes codes, categories, and themes.

A peer reviewer collaborated with the researcher for validity. The peer reviewer has ten years of ng experience and has completed 12 course hours in research methodology and program evaluation including qualitative and mixed methods. She reviewed the transcripts and list of categories. Discussions included questions and suggestions on the organization of the data. Other supporting documents, observation notes, and reflective journal kept by the researcher were used to corroborate the findings. Analyzing qualitative data was inductive as themes and categories emerged for the raw data. Deductive analysis occurred when the data was applied to a preexisting framework (Pope, Ziebland, and Mays, 2000). Finally, Bolman and Deal's four frames were used to analyze, organize, and discuss findings.

Trustworthiness

Qualitative research validity can be verified by engagement with participants. Having spent many years in the field, I have developed a trust among and understanding of the culture of special education administrators. Multiple data sources were used to

assure data collected and reported are accurate. Member checking, peer review, the use of documents, researcher notes, and transcripts aided in triangulation to validate data. Sharing transcripts and drafts of information assured the information presented through the data is accurate. Observational notes were taken before, during, and after interviews to provide a rich description of the context in which the data was collected. Creswell (2009) suggests enhancing accuracy by using a peer to review and ask questions so the interpretation is understood beyond the researcher which increases the validity of the study. A graduate student at the university served as the peer reviewer to provide an external audit and reflection of data and coding. All of these measures aided in confirming the data reported is a valid and true representation of the practices of veteran special education administrators.

Subjectivity and Positionality

As a member of the group of special education administrators to study, I am an embodied subject of what I studied. As a native of North Carolina who has spent over 27 years in special education with 18 years in administration, there may be some unidentified subjectivity in data collection and analyses. My perspective or interpretation is laced with my background and experiences (Glesne, 2016) and is shared with participants in the study. I was careful to remain open and fair-minded in collecting data. Advantages to being a member of this group include access, comfort level in sharing data, and trust. Disadvantages arise in the researcher making assumptions and being familiar with the topic, people, and experiences. This may also be a limitation in the interpretation of the data and the perspective of reported soft skills. I remained objective

and made the familiar strange in recording notes and responding to participants (Saldana, 2011). In analyzing data particular care was taken to not embed my own interpretations into participants' data. External audits also checked the analyses to confer or disagree with interpretations.

Ethical Considerations

In accordance with the guidelines of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG) regarding the protection of human participants, a request for review was submitted to the UNCG Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval to interview seven to twelve participants for this study. After receiving IRB approval, participant recruitment and data collection began. A description of the study was provided to each participant. The informed consent was signed and collected indicating that participation was voluntary and could be withdrawn at any time prior to or during the data collection process. The potential of risk was minimal for the participants in this study. After approval from the IRB at UNCG there were no new risks the participants experienced.

There were no professional or academic disadvantages in participating in the study. The information gathered in the interviews is kept confidential. Participant names, anyone participants mention, names of school districts, and schools were changed to allow for anonymity. Specific information that could easily identify a particular school system was withheld to maintain confidentiality. Member checking for accuracy of responses was conducted. A peer reviewer read the transcripts and was provided a list of categories from the researcher. Several discussions were held with the peer reviewer

concerning the organization of categories and themes. These discussions increased the validity of the study.

Summary

This chapter describes the methodology used in this study. Qualitative interviews allow for rich descriptions and deep understandings of the practices of veteran special education administrators. Research questions are reiterated with a crosswalk of more detailed probes to assure as much information as possible is gathered. An explanation of using multiple interviews in natural environments is included as well as how participants were selected. Purposeful sampling was used to identify potential participants. Consent to participate was obtained. Anonymity is provided for participants and school systems.

Data collection procedures of face to face individual interviews are explained. The preferred method of one on one, face to face interviews is stressed and was used for each interview. Guiding questions are provided for individual interviews that address the complexities and multiple aspects of the practice of veteran special education administration. Data analysis of coding and categorizing are explained with the framework of Bolman and Deal to structure the study. Validity of the study was secured through multiple data sources, member checking for accurate information, and peer review of findings and analyses. Subjectivity and positionality are explained and care was taken to remain as objective as possible. Exploring and including my own experiences will permit my responses to be included in the study. Ethical considerations are described in securing IRB approval. The advantages and disadvantages of participating in this study are explained.

The practices of special education administrators evolve with reauthorization of laws, case law, and interpretation of regulations and procedures. Veteran special education administrators have persevered in the position with all these changes and varied roles including satisfying competing mandates from multiple stakeholders; implementing laws, regulations, and procedures; providing professional development; managing budgets; and handling other assigned responsibilities. Upholding ethical standards and having the knowledge and skills as outlined in CEC's standards for special education administrators must also be present. Describing, examining, and explaining the practices of veteran special education administrators provide rich information to inform local school districts and preparation programs on the required skills and qualities to be successful as a special education administrator. Four major themes emerged across all the information: focus on the individual student and his/her needs, collaboration among school level personnel, effective communication and trusting relationships, and support for special education within and beyond the district.

In the next chapter these themes will be discussed in detail. Each theme includes categories that elaborate on the complex practices of special education administrators. These practices are done with humility, patience, kindness, discernment, flexibility, self-confidence, and with a sense of humor.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to examine the practices of special education administration from the perspectives of veteran special education administrators to better understand the complexities that exist in the profession. Research questions include the following:

1. What institutional arrangements support the work of special education administrators?
2. What personal and professional commitments keep special education administrators engaged in their practice?
3. How do special education administrators manage the conflicts inherent in the position?
4. What roles and functions do special education administrators exercise in for a school district?

Themes

Eight veteran special education administrators with cumulatively over 90 years of experience in special education administration were interviewed to find out the practices that increase their longevity in the same school district for more than six years. Four themes emerged from the data. First, veteran special education administrators focus on the individual student and his/her needs. They work to understand the student's needs

and keep those needs at the center of attention. They work with others to determine what is best for the student. Second, these veteran special education administrators collaborate with school personnel. They work with principals concerning students and personnel. They have an in-depth knowledge of federal and state law and regulations. They train school level personnel so schools will operate effective and compliant programs. Third, these veteran special education administrators explained how they effectively communicated with others and the importance of trusting relationships. Providing more inclusive practices was shared by five administrators and this progress made in special education programs was built on effective communication and relationships with central office personnel and with parents. These veteran special education administrators deal with conflict by building and/or maintaining relationships to facilitate collaboration. They see and share positive aspects and outcomes to build capacity for personnel to improve and to celebrate students. Fourth, these special education administrators support special education within and beyond their school district. They provide and arrange professional development to support specialized instruction and service delivery. They search for and provide resources for other administrators, teachers, families, and students. These administrators network with other special education administrators, service agencies, professional organizations, college and university personnel, and state and federal legislators. The results of the work affect special education within and beyond their own districts. They plan for future special education programs by laying the groundwork to prepare for program improvements.

These four themes are interrelated. Focusing on individual students' needs does not happen without effective communication or collaboration. Supporting special education within and beyond the district cannot happen without collaboration, effective communication, and understanding students with individual needs. The four main themes are tied together with attributes these veteran special education administrators express either by example or explanation. They include self-confidence, perseverance, flexibility, kindness, humility, patience, humor, and discernment.

Focus on the Individual Student and His/Her Needs

Seven out of eight special education administrators' referenced students as the central focus of their work. Keeping the child's needs at the center of attention, and doing what is best for the student, were recurring sentiments. Nancy stated, "Schools are a place of education for children, not a place of employment for adults." Regardless of adults' feelings, administrators indicated they ensure the student is kept at the center of attention in IEP meetings and in other student-related decisions. Much of a special education administrator's time is spent explaining why students with disabilities need special considerations in academics, behavior, and life skills. The one transcript where focusing on students' individual needs was not a theme was more about interactions with adults. When discussing students, that director referred to her previous students who are now in their late 20's and 30's. She did not have a connection with her current students. She was more involved with budgetary and personnel matters.

Understanding student needs. Three administrators shared specific examples of how they maintain focus on student needs. Others shared more general information

regarding their connections with students and their needs. Amy, from a small district, reads all students' IEPs; she stated, "I'm not ever going to make any decisions for a child that I wouldn't make for my own son." Steve shared that he called two schools and told the principals to hire substitute teaching assistants to assist two different students. One student was having mental health issues and the other student has a degenerative muscular condition in which deterioration was occurring much more rapidly than expected. Both of these students were experiencing crises during the school day and needed more supervision than the current personnel were able to provide. Madison says, "I've always tried to step down to the student level of why I do what I do." Nancy said, "I'll dance with the devil and crawl across broken glass naked if that's what it takes to get something for my kid." She has a personal commitment to do whatever it takes to help students with disabilities. "We exist to serve," she said. Common sense also needs to be modeled in adjusting class wide expectations where students with disabilities are included. Steve gave the example of the expectation that all students will run 100 yards to pass physical education. If a student in a wheelchair is in that class, the expectations need to be modified. The student who uses a wheelchair does not need to be excluded from the class, rather alternative expectations can be developed in order for students to pass the course. Discernment is used to make decisions that are in the best interest of students and efficiently use limited resources. Veteran special education administrators in this study understand the diverse needs of students with disabilities and feel their role is to ensure those needs are met.

Keeping students' needs at the center of attention. An important part of a special education administrator's role is keeping the student as the focus when people are meeting to make decisions. Nick commented that at some meetings he needs to "help bring everybody back to the center point of the child, not the behavior or the action, but the child and what they need." He offered specific instructions to address the behavior needs of a student because he understands the disability. Leigh shared the following story of a student who has orthopedic impairments:

> He can't use his arms, hands, legs, and feet like everyone else. He does walk and can carry his book bag. However, he has difficulty and does not carry his own breakfast or lunch tray. As a first grader, he can't complete assignments or do worksheets using a pencil. He can write, but it takes him much longer. His attention span is very short, which has as much to do with not getting work done as his physical differences. His kindergarten and first grade teacher both requested a one-on-one [assistant] for him. Cognitively, he is typical. This child wants to be independent and tries his best to keep up with his peers. If he had an assistant with him all the time I fear he would miss out on peer interactions and be more limited by someone doing things for him. He is learning to use a Chromebook with a touch screen to do some of his work in class. That has been a problem-solving process.

Jackie does not want to put any barriers in students' way. They have enough challenges already. She feels it is a noble calling to work with kids that have special needs and feels honored to be a part of that experience. She stays "really laser focused on the needs of the students." Decisions that special education administrators make are based on the unique needs of each student to remove barriers and provide equal access to educational opportunities.

Determining what is best for the student. Special education administrators receive requests from schools, teachers, and parents. These requests are made because

someone feels the request will solve or address a problem area. Care is taken to assure the best option for the student rather than the adults. The following three stories exemplify the process for determining what is best to address students' needs.

Leigh shared a story about a child who has missed 50 to 60 days during every school year for the past four years. He was behind because he wasn't in school. His mother wanted him homebound because he was embarrassed about being so far behind. Leigh explained to the parent that the homebound setting would not catch him up. He needed to be in school to get regular instruction as well as specialized instruction to address his skill deficits. Attendance continued to be an issue, but the demand for homebound has been dropped.

Jackie shared a story about hearing that a parent was going to ask for a one on one to be with her child who was in the general education classroom earning As and Bs. The mother wanted someone to sit by her and tell her to pay attention. The administrator assigned a teacher to sit beside her for two weeks and prompt her to pay attention. During those two weeks, the student's grades dropped from passing to failing. When the IEP meeting was held and the mother made her request, Jackie said, "You know, I thought that was a good idea too, and we tried that for two weeks and look at her grades. You can see she went from passing to failing, so I don't think that's the direction we need to go. That resolved it." She said another administrator told her that until you try what the parents are asking, it's a hypothetical discussion.

Nick indicated he knows the students he needs to know, such as students who have extremely unique needs or those whose parents have had many questions over the

years. He has known some students since they were 2 and a half years old. Now, when he sees certain students they have a connection and relationship beyond special education. He stressed getting teams to think outside their comfort zone in how to deal with students with disabilities. Nick shared the following story:

> [When we] get people to think outside their box, we are successful. There was a child that I remember in elementary school pitching fits in my office when she was in second grade and [me] growing with her. We got her to the high school and I had a staff where I really had to sit down and spell it out for them. The staff, EC and regular, did not want to deal with her. But when I talked about the [student's] plan I had an administrator that had just enough understanding of the mental health world that she was willing to work with us and the plan worked. We got her through school; she got her high school diploma.

Special education administrators are lithe in problem solving a variety of situations. Nick said special education is a gray field. "There's a lot of things in there that aren't in a manual. They're not in any policy, they're not in any legal brief, and it's an interpretation in the moment." Jackie stated, "You really don't need to eliminate anything when you are trying to decide on the best course of action." Special education administrators explore options in determining the best decision for students.

Veteran special education administrators focus on individual students through understanding the needs, and keeping the needs at the center of attention to determine what the best options are to address the unique needs. This understanding of students, their needs, and options come from years of knowing and growing with students, teachers, and families. Understanding the history of what has been requested, tried, denied, and new options requires more than three years to completely comprehend.

Veteran special education administrators can discern requests with confidence and help problem solve individual students' unique needs.

Collaboration among School Level Personnel

Collaboration with principals was mentioned by all participants. Special education administrators problem solve with principals to help them reconcile local policies and federal law with specific needs in their schools. They also collaborate with principals concerning special education personnel. Veteran special education administrators are knowledgeable in special education topics and other areas depending on the needs of the district. They practice patience with school level personnel in helping them understand special education. Humility is also practiced when working with school level personnel. Effective collaboration takes skill in not appearing to have more factual knowledge than other team members. Veteran special education administrators relay their knowledge concerning special education programs in ways that are palatable to other team members. Veteran special education administrators are patient when collaborating with personnel at the school level. Along with patience, humility is practiced to represent a more welcoming approach in collaborative efforts to positively affect the outcomes of students with disabilities. This is a nuance that these special education administrators practice to achieve desirable outcomes for students.

Working with principals for students. Special education administrators are self-confident and knowledgeable regarding IDEA, state policies, and local options to promote student success. When dealing with conflicts, communication is vital. Madison said, "I know people need to be heard, and I know that there's always two sides to a story

. . . negative doesn't have to be just a terrible thing, it's just a way to improve." Directors understand different opinions and collaborate to find solutions. Madison shared this story:

> The other day a principal called. He wanted to send a kid back [to the alternative program]. There was a situation with him and another kid that went to court. He was not supposed to be close to the other kid. They're already starting to get in fights, and he's only been back a few days. Both are EC, so they're stuck on the same schedule track. After I explained the whole retaliation thing my suggestion to him was to call my program specialist. I said call her and let her help you figure out a better track for one of the kids.

Veteran special education administrators exercise patience when working with principals. School level administrators do not always understand the laws and policies guiding special education programs. Veteran administrators exercise patience when working with principals in giving them information in increments that are relevant to situations and allow them time to process the information that pertains to them at the time. They lead others to have a better understanding of providing services to students with disabilities using a variety of methods. Leigh shared that kindness and understanding, along with patience is used in working with principals. Steve said,

> We have to show a lot of patience with the children. We have to show a lot of patience with the adults we work with, because we live in a world of exceptions. Many of them would like to believe that they live in a world of rules and this is how the process works. Our process doesn't always work in a predictable manner.

Nancy responds quickly to principals when they need support. She does not want them waiting on her to make a decision. Having experts to assist special education administrators in dealing with student specific situations, as Nancy says, ". . . does free

up some time to do some innovative, creative things that really make this job fun." Nancy also said there is a lot of good collaboration when there is ample time.

Nick sees his purpose as ensuring the kids are treated right. Over-assertiveness can be ugly, so he subtly helps people understand by persistently holding his ground. He shared a story of a student's refusal to work in a particular class. The teacher was confronting the student which caused the student to escalate to slamming books down, throwing items, and cursing. The teacher wanted the student out of his class. Nick instructed the teacher to only tell the student three times to get to work. If the student does not do the work, document that. Without being confronted the student attempted the work, and there were not any behavioral disruptions. Later in the week the behavior specialist came and provided time for the student to makeup the work in another location. The misbehavior was resolved after a few weeks. "It's getting people to take time to think outside their box." Perseverance and patience is needed when other administrators are making a paradigm shift in their views on special education. When a principal told Nick angrily, "That child is not coming . . . back on my campus," Nick practiced patience. That student may not, but at a later time explaining to the principal the "history of abuse and neglect that was going on" in specific student situations, the principal may need to acknowledge there is more to a student's behavior than the behavior itself. In relation to principals, Leigh shared that she is trusted to know special education laws, policies, and best practices. She offers options and then possible outcomes so principals can make a decision they can support, understand, and explain. Investigating options empowers principals to see different perspectives and may lead them to think differently

about some students with disabilities. Taylor said she did not have individual successes. In special education, it is all of us together because of the kids. Student needs are so unique and so complex that it takes many people to help them. Jackie stressed listening and trying to understand another perspective. It is really hard to stay angry when the best interest of the student is central.

Steve sends cards and writes thank you notes to principals stating that he really appreciates their taking the time and effort to work with students with disabilities and their commitment to good outcomes for them. A story was shared about a high school student who was not motivated to come to school. Nancy went to his home to get him to come to school. A few years later while she was eating at a restaurant, the former student who was working as a waiter recognized her and told her he would not have graduated from high school if had not been for her. She went on to say it was not just her, other people at the school did that, too. Veteran special education administrators work with principals collaboratively to ensure positive outcomes for students with disabilities.

Working with principals for personnel. In larger districts, special education administrators may not have to worry about maintaining working relationships with all the principals. They have other staff who work with principals on a regular basis. Those administrators have the opportunity to make hard decisions such as telling a principal they are wrong and need to do something a certain way to follow law, policies, and procedures. In contrast, smaller district special education administrators need to maintain those relationships because there is no other staff to continue working with the principals on numerous other issues.

Most administrators indicated the hiring of school level personnel is done at the school with the principal. Jackie shared that in the past there would be ten candidates for a position and the top three would be great choices. Now they do not have three candidates for a position from which to choose. Principals hire whoever they can find; then it is up to people in special education to train that person to do the job. Nancy shared heavy involvement in hiring special education personnel. Screening and interviewing are done at the central office and then the candidates are sent to the school to meet with the principal. The principal and special education administrator then collaboratively decide on the best candidate.

Nancy indicated that some principals and some assistant principals were her contacts. A contact was identified for each school and special education information is sent to that person. These administrative contacts have more training to better understand special education processes. She said, "I have the time to build a little bit stronger relationship and help establish philosophy and understanding of things." Taylor commented that as a special education administrator she "knows what our needs are of certain personnel, but you're going to have to learn over time what the strengths are of certain personnel." She also said, "You wouldn't go into special ed. unless you really like challenges and are a problem solver." It takes a lot of time to provide everyone the opportunity to communicate their needs and find a solution. Madison stated that it was hard not to tell people what to do when she knows what to do. When people are allowed to talk through situations and process the information they can reach their own solutions; then they own it. Nancy sends baskets of candy or take-out lunch to special education

departments in different schools as special treats. Jackie will also provide lunch for a group of special education teachers or bring a dessert to a meeting. She said, ". . . anytime I can do something nice for them I do."

Patience is often practiced waiting for a principal to ask for advice or help. There are situations where the special education administrator is aware of a situation, but the principal is resistant to help, after all, it is their school. Madison said, "The flame is going higher and spreading faster. That's when I get the call from others." Experienced special education administrators know when they need to interject themselves in situations and when to be patient. Personnel working in or with the special education programs must also be shown patience. Steve commented that he has the same conversation over and over again with people in the transportation department about the requirement of providing transportation to schools outside the residency attendance area for school age and preschool students with disabilities. Patience is practiced ". . . that you're not in there just to make their lives difficult, or this really is a federal law, or yes, we really do have to do this, even though it may be inconvenient . . ." says Steve. Special education personnel are also extended patience when noncompliance is repeated over and over again, even when there are have been one-on-one directions provided to the personnel.

Veteran special education administrators collaborate with others to improve access to educational opportunities for students with disabilities. Several participants acknowledge principals and teachers to show appreciation for their effort, time, and accomplishments.

Administrator professional capacity. Special education administrators are knowledgeable about IDEA, state laws, federal regulations, state policies, other initiatives within their district, personnel, and specialized instruction. They use common sense in situations where their expertise is requested.

To effectively collaborate with others, veteran special education administrators demonstrate self-confidence, perseverance, flexibility, kindness, and knowledge in ways that are acceptable and not threatening to stakeholders. Special education administrators share their professional capacity with others using patience and humility. All of the administrators voiced being knowledgeable, from doing research on their own to having finite degrees. Nick stated, "I do try to ensure that we are meeting the policies and procedures, that's where I can affect instruction." He was appointed to the position and was told, "`I want you to be our special education director because you're the only one in the county that understands it." Some special education administrators also oversee the North Carolina State Improvement Project (NCSIP) in their district. They are in schools coaching and helping improve implementation of programs and best practices. Other special education administrators are the nonviolent crisis intervention trained instructors for the district. Several directors noted they are also the director of mental health services. Jackie stated,

> We do have a knowledge base about how instruction needs to be for kids that learn differently. We really do need to be experts and be the smartest people in the room when we are trying to figure out how to help the most challenging students.

Special education administrators are trusted to know what the rules and regulations are. Jackie stated, “Our superintendent only wants to know that you’ve got everything handled.” People in Taylor’s district ask her a lot of questions and ask her opinion. She feels teachers come to her with concerns and ask for help in handling situations. Leigh stated, “I like being trusted and respected for my expertise.”

Veterans do not report communicating with school level personnel with authority but rather in a way that may change the school level administrators’ way of perceiving student with disabilities and their capacities. They do not take credit for the good things they do. Two administrators shared how they had set up some special education programs. Years later, in a conversation with others who did not know where the special education program originated indicated they were good programs. Neither shared that they were the ones who set it up years ago.

Special education administrators are involved in research on individual student levels, federal law, related court cases, and current scholarly research publications. Nancy said she uses research to guide and set the tone for her personnel. Amy shared that she read the entire IDEA and all the comments. She highlighted sections, took notes, and then made an outline to assure she had that knowledge. Nick shared, “I did my little study, I am not the language reading specialist in our district, but I did my research and realized for the needs of these teachers that we had, that [a particular program] was not the right way to go.” Madison stated that you have to keep up with the research: Medicaid, assistive technology, transitions, and adequate communication systems for all the children and all are important. “At the end of the day you are worn out,” she said.

Even though special education administrators must have knowledge on a variety of topics, they also state that they do not have all the answers. Nick said, "I'm not an expert. I share my thoughts and ideas." Amy shared, "If this plan doesn't work, we'll reconvene and we'll figure out something else. Sometimes you've got to dig deep and figure it out as a team as you go." Jackie said she did not need anybody telling her she does a good job. She knows she does her best every day. She shared, "At night when I lay my head on the pillow, and I think, 'did I earn the taxpayers' money? Did I do a good job for my kids and for my teachers and staff?' and that's all I need." Getting credit is not her issue. Yet Nick also said, "You think that you know it all. I've recognized I don't know it all." A participant that has been a principal shared that as principals they are trained and believe they all are all-knowing. "As a special education director I know it's not always that way."

Taylor stated she feels like she has little power, but teachers and therapists respect and listen to her. Nick said, "They look to me as if I'm the all-knowing because I've been around a little while, but I'm not." Madison can make recommendations for programs, but cannot make it happen if it is not the school's initiative. Leigh said, "Power seems like a strong word for being a good steward of tax payers' money and taking care of students with disabilities."

Special education administrators are not in their roles to be acknowledged. Leigh said, "I love helping students and teachers." Taylor said she hears positive things, but she tries to be humble about it. Jackie stated that she is the least power hungry person in their system. She is able to admit when she is wrong and admits "I don't always know the

answer and can admit when a decision wasn't good." She also shared, "I'll do everything that I have control over, but there's certain things I don't and I'm not going to worry about it . . . I'll trust in a higher power to have a good outcome."

In conclusion students with disabilities do not fit into most molds our schools have created. Veteran special education administrators work collaboratively with principals and other school level personnel bestowing knowledge of laws, policies, and best practices concerning special education programs in non-authoritarian ways. They exhibit patience, humility, and discernment in collaborating with others to best meet the unique needs of students with disabilities and maintain working relationships with school personnel and parents. Maintaining a relationship with principals and others at the school level is critical in making decisions in the best interest of students. Veteran special education administrators are also cognizant of working with teachers. Principals as their direct supervisors must be kept in the loop pertaining to optimal student based decisions. However, a special education teacher who understands special education better than their immediate supervisor may have questions only another follow expert in special education can answer. Veteran special education administrators must know how to work with teachers without undermining the principal teacher relationship. Kindness, patience, and flexibility are exercised to guide discussions for the best interest of students.

Effective Communication and Trusting Relationships

The importance of communication and relationships was stressed by every participant. Effective communication with a variety of stakeholders and building trustworthy relationships exemplify how special education administrators work with

others to support inclusive practices. Participants reported the importance of having positive relationships and effective communication with central office and special education personnel and parents. Seeing and sharing the positive in students and staff are necessary components of creating trusting relationships. Humor was also shown to be a recurring quality to enhance communication and relationships. Special education directors have a personal connection in their work which positively influences the broad array of relationships they must maintain.

Inclusive practices. Special education administrators are constantly working toward more inclusive practices in their systems. Effective communication and trusting relationships are a foundation to improving inclusive practices. Amy was proud of the inclusiveness of students with disabilities. She said,

> Our EC teacher and our EC kids are included . . . in everything, staff development, parent training; we're a part of the school. I just got a video sent from the principal of when our kids came back from Special Olympics. They lined up every single student in the school along the halls. The athletes came down the hall in wheelchairs and the students all cheered them on. You could hear the kids say, "Oh, they got medals!" The EC teachers were crying because they didn't know the school was going to do it. It was wonderful!

Nancy shared the story of the process of providing more inclusive practices in the system by moving some classes from a separate school into traditional schools at elementary, middle and high school levels. "The public thought we were trying to close the whole school down. This is a beloved school. You can't just shut it down. There's been some kids there that can function in inclusive settings." Nancy is spending a considerable amount of time meeting with

> . . . people, we had to provide written things that helped clarify what inclusion is, what the law says about inclusion, what the law says about least restrictive environment, really focused on that, and take the time to just listen and then continue to check back with people.

Steve shared a story about an outside agency and inclusion:

> The Kiwanis do a holiday winter party. They were calling it a Christmas party. They were having Santa Claus come in, they were inviting all the kids and inviting the preachers from their churches. They were asking us to pay for the transportation. They were asking us to use school property. I had to say we can't do that. We can't call it a Christmas party. We're not going to say no if the Kiwanis want to do something for the kids, but you've got to find some other place. We'll work with you. Some of these preachers, at one of their churches said we cannot invite the non-Christian children. We have over 100 languages in our district. We have kids that are Hindu, Buddhists, Jewish, and Muslim and they were leaving those kids out. They thought they were being kind.

Communication and relationships within special education. Effective communication and relationships with a variety of stakeholders takes finesse. Participants in districts that have special education leadership teams teach others how to be sensitive when communicating with different stakeholders. In special education, there may be humor only those in special education can appreciate. Leigh shared the use of acronyms with alternative meanings and teasing others within the office about needing certain accommodations. Taylor shared that on days when it is particularly hectic, they joke about the kind of day it is. Madison collects the funny things teachers say and do, and with their permission, shares them at meetings. Humor helps special education personnel handle situations that otherwise could be depressing. Finding humor in oneself and with others is a strategy used by participants that is needed to continue in special education.

Steve and Nancy have personnel in lead positions who oversee different grade levels or service areas. These directors meet on a regular basis with their lead staff for several reasons. These local leaders keep the director informed of situations that are occurring in schools and the needs of schools or of specific students may have. They also inform the local leaders on state or federal changes that are coming and eliciting the leads' assistance in addressing all these needs and requirements with the limited funds that are in the special education program. Steve does this to help the leads have some ownership and understanding of why certain things can't be done and it is not just because the director said no. "I want them to get the big picture so they can see how all the pieces fit together." The local leaders then have an understanding of the limited funds and the best way to use them. They, in essence, become the director's voice in their respective areas. Nancy said she supports the lead staff by providing a lot of training so they become the experts in their area. When the director needs information on a specific topic, she turns to her expert in that area. The leads communicate with principals and teachers in their area and hearing information from them is just like hearing it from the director.

Nancy also will tell teachers if they need to pursue another career. She stated,

> If you are not doing your job and the principal approaches me, I'm 100% in that principals' team on court to help them get you where you need to be. If we can't, one of two things happen. We're going to come in and we're going to support you and we're going to do everything we can to get you where you're going to be, and either you're going to get better, or you're not. If you get better, wonderful. If not, I will be the one to pull the plug. I can walk out but the principal has to still live there.

Special education administrators show kindness intentionally to the people with whom they work, from sending notes to providing gifts. Steve said, "You have to pay attention, and when somebody's hurt, family event, something like that, speak to them and send them a card." In one district, the special education department celebrates any professional or personal event by providing lunch, heavy snacks or desserts for everyone in the department, to the extent other departments refer to them affectionately as the Eat Continuously department.

Several participants reported the importance of being kind to everyone. Nick stated, "You gotta make every single one of them feel special . . ." When participants have conversations with personnel about not continuing in their job, Nancy shared that you ". . . have to document, document, document." When the development plan did not work, you try to be kind about it and lead them to make the choice to not continue. Taylor gives multiple chances for success in placing personnel in different jobs to try to find areas where the employee could do better, but sometimes they have to be let go. Madison said, "If you're part of letting somebody go, let them go with dignity. I think that's real important."

Special education administrators shared examples of the need to be flexible when working with others, in their daily practices and in solving problems. In discussing how to capitalize on personnel's successes Steve said,

> Ideally, you try and give people some freedom, some flexibility, and the ability to do, work on, accomplish things in areas they feel committed to care about, feel like they're making a difference, if they can work in that area.

Taylor explained that in working with her staff it is case by case. "They're all different, and they all react to different things, good and bad, and you have to know that."

Communication and relationships within the central office. Communication and relationships are important within the central office at all levels including with the superintendent and assistant superintendents. Madison stressed the importance of being able to meet with the superintendent when needed, even though the superintendent is not her direct supervisor. She stressed that the superintendent believes in and supports the special education program. Most superintendents do not have a background in special education and their experiences with special education may be limited. Communication with other directors in the central office included being involved in the curriculum and instruction team. Nick is not responsible for other programs, but said, "If I can get my fingerprints in there and make it other people's thoughts, not trying to make it my program, but making it everybody else's program to help benefit every student, [it helps] my kids as well." Nancy said she and the other curriculum directors jointly plan all professional development for all teachers.

Sometimes superintendents issue blanket directives that are counter to special education law and policies and best practices. Special education administrators must have patience to explain to the superintendent in private how the directive is not aligned with special education requirements. When the superintendent does not provide an exception to the directive, the special education administrator must exercise flexibility and patience in finding alternative solutions.

Special education administrators use humor with their personnel. Some find humor to lighten stressful situations. Steve shared a story that occurred many years ago. It was a small elementary school that contained a special education class for students up though the age of 21. That particular day the office secretary was absent, so was the special education teaching assistant, and there was not a substitute. The principal had to run a quick errand just as the new special education administrator for the district arrived. The new administrator said she would wait in the office for the principal to return, not to worry. Just as he left the special education teacher came to the office saying she had to go to the restroom but could not leave Wanda unattended. Wanda was an older student that could never, ever be left alone. As the special education director, she said, "Not a problem, I will watch Wanda for you." When the teacher leaves, the superintendent drives up. The special education administrator sees the superintendent and feels she should go meet him at the door. So, she gives Wanda a stapler and sits her in the receptionist's chair and tells her to pretend she is the secretary. She walks out of the office to the front door and escorts the superintendent back to the office where Wanda is sitting, naked. The special education administrator continues to usher the superintendent past Wanda and into the principal's office. Without batting an eye she says, "You know, it is so hard to find good help these days!"

Special education administrators rarely have complete control of their daily agendas. When principals or teachers request assistance, those issues are addressed at that time. When the superintendent asks for something, plans for the day are dropped to respond to the request. Taylor shared,

> It's one thing after another, juggling, having a plan for the day and having to throw it up in the air because something else happens and you have to address that instead of what you thought you were going to do that day.

Another administrator enjoys the challenge, whatever it is. Nick shared,

> It can be a frustration but it can also be a celebration that you handled that challenge, there was resolution and it came out for the good. Now you pick back up your to do list and try to accomplish what you can tomorrow.

In planning for a meeting Taylor had the agenda set and then questions started coming in about students with vision loss. She quickly secured the teacher for visually impaired to present and changed the entire agenda. "I want to have some flexibility to meet the needs of the people that are there."

Many of the participants explained how support is requested from them. Madison provides guidance in any situation she is asked. She is questioned by curriculum directors on how to fit students with disabilities in initiatives such as Read to Achieve, instructional technology plans, and the Title I plan. She said, "I feel like we're respected as far as our knowledge goes." Amy described their central office, "we are like a family and work together, and we have a lot of collaboration. You can depend on the people that you work with and you can agree to disagree." Several administrators referred to working closely with their finance officer to make sure they are financially supported when there are costly solutions.

Communication and relationships with parents. Communication and relationships with parents initially are sometimes not the most positive interactions. Many times when a special education administrator hears from a parent it is because the

parent is dissatisfied with some aspect of the student's education. Nancy shared the importance of building positive relationships with parents:

> If they're already distrusting you because they read on the Internet that they should distrust you because you're an administrator and that we're all out to get you- there's a lot of sites about special education that portray us as really horrible people. You've got to go in with your guns loaded with all your information or they won't give you what you need. There are some parents that's just perfect, they just feed off of it. Really from day one, you're at a disadvantage in building a relationship with them.

Amy said, "You've got to really develop that relationship and trust and get to know someone. I think that's why it's so important that I read the IEPs. If I meet with parents, I know what's on their [child's] IEP." Leigh reported, "I listen to the parent and acknowledge that I hear what they are saying, just listening makes them comfortable with the issue they are upset about." Several participants shared stories about interactions with parents. Leigh shared,

> A parent requested a hearing to challenge the IEP team's decision to not evaluate her son. The principal called and said she had requested a hearing. Since the student was no longer identified as a student with a disability, I thought the only option was to request mediation. I called the parent to discuss her concerns. She was agreeable for me to observe the student and talk to him and then call her back with my thoughts. So, I visited the school and chatted with him and some of his classmates. I called her back and shared how he was a leader in his class, other students looked up to him, he spoke well and I did not see any indication of needing specialized services. She was very appreciative of my time and accepted my commendations for her son.

Administrators must keep an open mind and be flexible. Taylor and Amy shared similar stories of interactions with parents who moved into their district from larger districts. Taking the time to listen and understand their apprehension helps initiate a positive

relationship. Both administrators shared good outcomes from spending time with the parent to hear their concerns then offered solutions that addressed the parents' concerns. Taylor shared,

> You have those couple of families that stick with you forever, it seems to be reoccurring. Over time you keep working with them and you keep working it, creating a rapport with them so that it doesn't feel so daunting when they call.

Jackie and Steve shared stories of parents who initially were difficult. As the years passed, these parents became supporters and advocates for the special education programs in the districts. Jackie, Steve, Leigh, and Amy remarked that some of these parents later call to share the students' accomplishments and successes such as graduating, getting a job, and continuing their education after high school.

Parents need to be heard and as Nancy stated, "You want to ultimately be a safety valve for them to come and let off steam." That helps as Jackie said, "we're finally getting close to having the same vision and moving in the same direction." Special education administrators prepare for the worst-case scenario just in case and then resolve issues usually at a level that is not the worst case.

Communication with parents is extremely important. Amy shared an initial conversation held with a parent:

> "We'll just have to call our attorney," and I said, "Well, you can, that'll be fine. I can wait, or we can talk first and try to figure out what's going on." It was really a minor thing and he just blew it all out of proportion because where he came from, he was used to everybody having to sue. . . . Every time I see him now, he really likes me.

Nancy shared the following:

> If somebody posts something on Facebook about being mad and somebody sees it, we are going to follow up the next morning with a phone call to that parent and we're going to let them know we saw that they're unhappy with something and "Would you like to come in and talk with us?" So we meet it head on. We don't ignore it.

Kindness is extended to families and parents. Sometimes going through a difficult situation with a family results in a stronger trusting relationship. When faced with defensive and demanding parents Amy said, "We usually just sit down and talk to people." When potentially argumentative exchanges occur, veteran special education administrators do not take things personally. Jackie described how she handled those interactions:

> Sometimes when people are being nasty I envision a big bag of garbage thrown at me, and if I know that I didn't have anything to do with the garbage, I don't take it personally. In my mind I just duck to avoid being hit and let it go on by and realize it's their issue.

Taylor reported taking the time to go meet with them shows that you truly care about their child. She went on to say, "You're nurturing the parent as much as you are the kid, and lots of times that's what you have to do." Respectable communication is a skill veteran special education administrators use with multiple stakeholders to maintain working relationships.

Dealing with conflict. Participants indicated they seek a deep level of understanding when addressing conflicts. Nick stated, "Well, conflicts are always going to be there. It doesn't have to be special education. There's always some kind of

conflict, but it's something we need to all resolve together." Leigh indicated how these conflicts can be resolved. "I respond to conflicts with kindness and understanding. Trust is built with confidentiality. Saying I'm sorry goes a long way." She reports when other people are upset, she remains calm and kind in her reactions. Special education administrators are called to attend meetings that could become contentious or there is a contentious history. They need to trust the opinions of others, know as much firsthand knowledge as possible, and exercise discernment when decisions need to be made. Relying solely on the law or state policies is not enough. When there are six students in wheelchairs in one class, there may be a need for more than two adults. Depending on the level of dependence of the students, more adults may need to be assigned to that class.

Veteran administrators model good judgement to address the student's needs rather than saying 'no' the particular request. Discernment lends itself to asking why the expensive equipment or one-on-one assistant is requested. The goal is to allow the student to do or access something they currently cannot do or access. Once the goal is understood by the team, usually a more reasonable solution is found that is accepted by the entire team. Veteran special education administrators exercise discernment rather than get anxious about an extreme request. Using common sense results in better outcomes for the student and the team. Relationships among team members remain intact if not strengthened.

When parents have not accepted the limitations of their child, patience must be practiced to maintain a good relationship. When they do accept their child as having some limitations, we are there to offer support and strategies to assist the student in being

as independent and responsible as possible. Maintaining a trusting relationship is stressed when parents lash out at special education personnel. Participants take the time to investigate conflictive situations to figure out the root cause. Once that is determined, teams can problem solve the issues. Conflicts are addressed head on. Nancy stated,

> This is the perception, this is what I hear and this is what I know. This is what I see, and just trying to always approach it from to understand why the person might be upset or helping them to find a resolution to either their anger, their hurtness or whatever is happening with them at the time.

Special education personnel continue to have the best interest of the student as the focus and not taking negative comments personally. Special education administrators communicate with personnel after difficult or argumentative meetings. When a parent files charges against a school district, a hearing is scheduled. Steve spoke of this situation and the parents did not show up. The school district must pay their attorneys and the court reporter even though there was no hearing. Steve explained that the same thing may happen two or three times before a judge will dismiss the charges. After all of these aggravating interactions with parents and others, special education administrators continue to persevere in implementing quality special education programs for students with disabilities and building relationships with parents.

Veteran administrators use humor in a variety of ways for several reasons. Humor lightens the emotions of a tense situation and creates a stronger bond between professionals who are working together to solve a difficult problem. Jackie said she had no sense of humor and jokes in her office had to be explained by other staff. She appreciates humor and understands the need for it. All of the other participants reported

using humor or exhibited humor in the interviews. Amy said she was a funny person and makes jokes. She smiles most of the time. She uses humor as a strategy to gain alliances. Nancy loves to play practical jokes. She does not have the opportunity to do as much of that in the position of special education administrator. She sees humor in what students say and do but is careful to not laugh at them. She says, ". . . that's a little bit of how you get your jollies is laughing at some of the funny things kids do." Nick's sense of humor was evident throughout the interview. He made several jokes, puns, and remarks that were humorous. For example, when asked, "What do you celebrate," he answered with my wife's birthday and my anniversary. He went on to answer the question in relation to special education programs.

Participants voiced a personal connection with students with disabilities. Jackie stated working in special education is an emotional connection. She is obligated to try to make a difference:

> When students come back after they graduate and say you made a difference you realize that keeps you connected. Those little stories when you are out in public and meet kids and see their success and know that their relationships with you and other staff in special education helped to set them on the right path.

Madison said she did not go to visit classes in her schools because when she did go to a school, someone was in trouble or there was a major problem. She misses having a positive connection with teachers and students. Madison misses spending time with students. She stated, "I don't have as much involvement with students as I used to and I miss that. I loved it when I'd go to the schools, I knew all of them." She also commented that everybody is owning the kids now. It is not just a special education

issue. "We all have our eyes on the same target, and that's helpful." Her commitment to special education administration is the inspiration of students that have struggled with learning or even walking or talking. It's heart to heart. She wants them to be successful. Steve stated,

> I believe that what one does needs to make a difference in the world, this makes a difference in the world for people that cannot do for themselves. It's been rewarding, it's been something that has made a significant difference in my life just by watching it make differences in other lives.

Seeing and sharing the positives. Special education administrators can see the positives in a variety of situations. Leigh said, "my supervisor says I always see the positive side of things and think the best about people." Acknowledging the work of students and personnel is important when gaining support for areas of improvement.

Good things that are happening for students are acknowledged either individually or in group settings. Taylor said, "We do a really good job . . . when people have successes to make sure they are recognized, even small successes." In sharing positives, Leigh commented,

> When our students excel . . . we celebrate . . . I do not want students with disabilities to be recognized because they have a disability, I want them recognized for the people they are and the great things they do.

Improvements in graduation rates are celebrated in several districts. Participants reported different ways of sharing and celebrating these successes. Nick celebrates students moving out of separate settings prior to high school so they have the opportunity to earn a diploma. Taylor shares the status of indicators and celebrates when

requirements are met and there are improvements in graduation rates. Nancy shared they had a party to celebrate the increase in graduation rate and the decrease in dropout rate. Jackie shared that seeing former students in the work force earning money and having benefits like health insurance ". . . is a big cause for celebration."

Several participants commented on the Educator of Excellence recognition at the state special education conference to showcase the work of exemplary personnel. Nick admits not nominating a teacher every year if a teacher has not earned the nomination. He believes this recognition should be earned with making improvements in their practice or increased student achievement. Status quo does not earn the nomination. Jackie shared that it is a big deal in her district. Several administrators collaborate on the letter that describes why this person was selected. Leigh shared that the Educator of Excellence is recognized at special education teacher meetings and at the local school board meeting. The nomination letter is read to the board and the board of education publically congratulates the teacher and has a picture made with them. "People need to be patted on the back and rewarded with nice things said about them," stated Nancy.

Acknowledging others' work is important. Special education personnel work in some environments where very small successes occur. These must be celebrated even though outside special education, these successes may not be noticed or appreciated for all the practice and hard work that went into them. Steve tries to show the staff how much they are appreciated and keeps reminding them how successful they are being. Bragging on people, rewarding them, and putting them in the limelight are ways to show appreciation of personnel going above and beyond. These successes are shared with

principals and others. They are shared through newsletters, emails, sending cards, sending pictures, and writing articles about the success. These can be kept, shared with family, and placed in a scrapbook. Recognizing the accomplishments of teachers and having the opportunity to share them occurs during meetings. Amy has a drawing every month from personnel that have been nominated by their peers for doing a good job with a difficult student, parent, or situation or who consistently works hard. Nominations include the name of the employee and the reason for the nomination. These nominations are shared throughout the system through email in order to prompt more nominations. Three names are drawn at the end of every month and the employees get 30 minutes of time off. The employee and principal then agree when this time can be taken. Results from audits are shared and folks are recognized for consistently doing well with compliance issues and/or student outcomes.

Nancy will not adjourn a meeting with teachers until at least ten people share something good that has happened. Another practice is for her to go around the room and say something positive about personnel so they will feel important and appreciated. Leigh shared that she finds opportunities to celebrate with principals and teachers on issues that can be directly related back to them. Telling principals and teachers sincerely that they play a critical role in a specific success and their efforts are recognized and appreciated. Nancy shared that within their district they have banquets and receptions to highlight accomplishments of employees.

Sharing positives is a good segue to address areas in need of improvement. One initiative that was being implemented in Hillside was student led IEP meetings. Teachers

who implemented this were featured to the rest of the district sharing successes and areas for improvement. This practice had more meaning for teachers in Hillside because they were local examples, not commercially prepared information. This recognized teachers for their successes and at the same time identified areas that needed improving. Ideas for improving could also be shared by the teachers who reflected on their own practice. Personnel who have done a good job are rewarded with advantages not offered to others. Jackie shared,

> I'm good at reframing things in a positive light . . . I try to look for what was good from the experience and then develop an improvement plan to support staff . . . You can come out of that conversation without damaging the person's humanity.

Madison tries to put a positive spin on issues that are negative and cannot be ignored. Telling a teacher they are doing a good job even when they are not is an effort to try to help them do a better job. She said, "You're doing a good job at this, but you have to keep up with this." Care is taken in this type of situation to not perpetuate less than acceptable work.

Taking advantage of successes and extending the same opportunities to others is a practice in which several participants engage. Taylor said,

> Any little bit of success you can find, you try to replicate it, have them become a leader in that area. If they're wanting to present and to share, we want them to do that so they recognize their success and others do too.

Some personnel can come up with their own solution to a problematic situation when they are given some time and motivation to think about it. Madison described a situation

where confidential information was being discussed when and where it should not have been. When approached, the person denied the allegation. Given some time to think about it, the employee replied to Madison that she had come up with a solution. Madison replied, "Bravo! That's a good idea. Try it and see what happens." Nancy will send a congratulatory card or email to a student or staff member when they have accomplished something. In summary, Jackie said, "Give credit where credit's due." ". . . Massaging the egos and finding the positive and all that good stuff. It's tiring work . . ." says Madison. There is a lot of team work in special education and you have to insert the positives. It makes a difference when you can share the positives. Steve shared, "It leaves people with a better impression of special ed." In conclusion, Jackie stated,

> I like feeling like I am helping to get the right people on board and giving them resources to be effective and making a difference in kids' lives . . . You get to problem solve and you get to implement the solution. You get to work with really cool people that are passionate, fun, and committed . . . You get to work with people who get up and come to work every day believing they can make this world a better place. You can see the difference they do make in the lives of individual children. It's a noble calling.

Effective communication and trusting relationships are important in promoting inclusive practices. Trusting relationships and effective communication within the special education program and central office could be different depending on the size of the district. Larger districts have people in positions to directly support schools whereas smaller districts must maintain working relationships because they are involved with school personnel on a variety of issues. Effective communication is important with parents. These relationships sometimes last the student's school career. Special

education administrators deal with an assortment of conflicts with parents, personnel and other central office personnel. Seeing and sharing the positives with all stakeholders strengthens relationships and makes dealing with conflicts less contentious. Lastly, with the seriousness and importance of special education programs, all participants appreciate and use humor, kindness, discernment, patience and humility as strategies to persevere in their role.

Support for Special Education Within and Beyond the District

Veteran special education administrators support special education programs and personnel in the following ways: providing professional development, providing resources, building professional networks, focusing on serving people with disabilities beyond their district and planning for the future. Professional development is provided within and outside their district to build the capacity of special education personnel. Special education administrators provide resources to build capacity within their district.

Professional development. Special education administrators are responsible for providing professional development to teachers, service providers, principals, other central office personnel. They educate other agencies and the community at large about special education laws and policies concerning students with disabilities. Jackie shared her responsibility is to assure all staff know how to accommodate students with special needs, how to navigate special education processes, know about disabilities, know about autism, and know about differentiated instruction. Amy said, ". . . getting information or doing research and reading things we see what we can do with it." Learning new things and bringing the knowledge back to staff is part of the job responsibilities. Nancy

willingly shares her knowledge and provides resources to her staff so they can fulfill their responsibilities, have access to advice and support, and become experts in areas of interest. Leigh, Nancy, and Jackie shared that they offer book studies to groups of personnel to expand their thinking and to see different perspectives. Taylor shared that she has had to train her compliance specialist on how to word things, to be aware of how what one writes may be perceived by the receiver, especially in emails.

Madison shared that she tried to recognize unique skill sets of people and develop those versus telling someone that is not in their job description. As long as they do the job that is expected she likes helping people find their passion, their talents, and supporting them in developing those talents to benefit the special education program. She also allows specialists in her system to pick their preferred responsibilities as long as all the responsibilities are covered. Everyone has to do some things they prefer not to do, but paired with preferred activities, personnel are more likely to stay.

Leigh said she shares legal information to make sure the right decisions are made. She said, "I want to educate them so that if they make a decision, it's with all the information available from me." Nick wants his school administrators to know there are options; there is nothing predetermined and there is nothing absolute. He provides different options for solutions that are supported by policies. Steve shared how every little step, every little piece of what one does for students, one lesson, one word at a time combined with all the other small pieces each one does can change that child's life and the community. Several administrators shared they have assisted charter schools, other educational programs, and special education personnel outside their district.

Veteran special education administrators provide an array of professional development opportunities to a variety of stakeholders in and outside of their district. Teachers are supported through professional development opportunities and creative problem solving.

Resource provider. Many administrators feel a very important part of their job is to support teachers and provide resources so they can better serve students. Resources provided include needed supplies, materials, and equipment. Special education administrators share information in laws and policies as well as knowledge from other sources within their district and to others beyond their district.

Jackie said, "My passion is trying to make sure we have the resources so we have the student [to] teacher ratio that's good and we have the best staff we can possibly find in front of our kids." When faced with tighter budgets Madison indicated digging deeper and being much more creative in recognizing resources to support teachers. She stated, "You have to recognize resources wherever you can find them and sometimes it works out, sometimes it doesn't." Amy shared that she went to local companies searching for a solution to an equipment need for a specific student and found one who donated the equipment. Exercising discernment is most evident when the situation involves a student's unique need. Discernment is used when selecting technology, working with personnel, having expectations for students with disabilities, and in attaining desirable outcomes. Jackie described using the voice typing tool in Google. Previously, staff were scribing for students. She said,

> I don't need to be paying a teacher with twenty years' of experience to write for a kid when every computer in the district has Google Docs on it. All a student has to do is open a Google Doc, click that check mark in Tools for Voice Typing and start dictating.

Cuts in budgets created a necessity to search for less expensive options to allow access to school environments and provide services and devices for students with disabilities. Several administrators state they do not have all the answers but will find them. Leigh turns to the state policies to answer questions school personnel may have. She believes providing the source for her answer increases her credibility and trust. His also builds capacity by providing sources to empower school level administrators.

Professional networking. Special education administrators turn to peers as resources. Taylor and Jackie indicated they learned the most from other special education administrators. Building a network of other administrators was vital when they first started in the position and continue to be used years later. Jackie car pooled with another director to meetings and said,

> We realized that we learned a lot from each other while traveling to training. I think brainstorming with people that have been in the job of EC Director and walked in the shoes and had the same challenges, that's my best network.

Taylor commented,

> We support each other and I think you get it from mentors. When you're really confused, out of ideas, and you don't know what to do about a situation, you can call people like Leigh and Steve to ask for guidance.

Several participants reported answering questions from special education administrators who work in other districts or in charter schools. Veteran special education administrators take the time to advise others when they are asked. People new in this role are sometimes referred to experienced administrators for specific expertise. Jackie said when she was new she reached out to other special education administrators and everyone was so very nice and took all the time she needed to understand aspects of the job. She said, ". . . people were very receptive to helping me stay with it [the job]."

Special education administrators find support and success in professional organizations. Leigh commented, "I feel supported from university personnel and professional organization involvement." Special education administrators work closely with university personnel and professional organizations to support further training of teachers and parents. Steve is involved at the local, state, and national level to influence policies and regulations. Jackie stated participation in special education professional organizations is huge, "and if you don't have working and communicative relationships with other EC directors, you won't be able to survive. Everybody needs collegiality." Steve shared that when he has questions or requests he picks up the phone to call leaders in the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), the Arc, the Autism Society, and others to discuss his requests or concerns. They make a difference for people with disabilities across the life span at local, state and national levels.

Broader than the district. Special education administrators feel an obligation to the greater good of special education. Several administrators engage in activities outside of their jobs that support special education. Nick said, "I'm going to train everybody that

comes into this county as if they could be in the county, but if my training's going to go somewhere else, it's going to go somewhere else to help children." Several participants shared that they have set up residential programs for people with disabilities, trained agencies for day programming for adults with disabilities, were adjunct instructors at universities, and developed special education programs in the private sector and other countries. Steve sponsors state wide field days for children that are deaf and blind. Of course the students in that county can participate, but it is much larger than one county.

Special education administrators get calls from charter schools asking for assistance in setting up special education programs, functional behavior assessments, behavior intervention plans and manifestation determinations. Many times these requests are handled by the director. Other times they are referred to their special education staff who have expertise or another school system's director of special education who is physically closer. Nick summed it up nicely by saying, "It's a way to actually make a real difference in the world on a day to day basis, seeing the world get better."

Planning for the future. Administrators are planning for the future of their programs. Nancy has spent the last several years getting the lead staff trained in leadership. Now the focus is shifting to getting them trained as coaches to better support teachers. Leigh has a vision for people with disabilities to be totally integrated where they are accepted, happy, and productive members of everyday society. Taking small steps by integrating students with disabilities into their home school is a step in that direction. Currently most students with disabilities including those with significant disabilities in the school system are served in their home schools with opportunities to

participate with nondisabled peers. Nancy saw the opportunity when she became a director ". . . to really make some changes in the whole system that needed to be changed, some philosophical changes, that could make a difference."

In conclusion, veteran special education administrators provide an assortment of professional development opportunities for a variety of stakeholders within and outside their respective districts. They also are resourceful in obtaining needed supplies and equipment. They strive to increase their own knowledge base by networking with a variety of professional groups. Working beyond their own district to support special education and planning for the future within their district, veteran special education administrators are committed to special education.

Summary

The first major theme that is revealed in the study looking for what it takes to be a special education administrator is focusing on individual students by understanding students' unique needs, keeping the student at the center of attention when determining the best solutions. These decisions are not made in isolation, but collaboratively with teams. Collaboration among school level personnel is the second major theme which encompasses working with principals in relation to students and personnel using information found in laws, policies, court cases, and best practices. The third theme effective communication and trusting relationships are important to promote inclusive practices which is required in IDEA with determining the least restrictive environment. Communication and relationships are important within special education, with central office personnel and with parents. Effective communication and trusting relationships

are important when dealing with difficult situations. Seeing and sharing positive aspects also makes difficult situations less difficult. Difficult, litigious, contentious situations are more bearable when humility, patience, kindness and humor can be found. The final theme, support for special education within and beyond the district is also interrelated to the previous themes. Professional development and providing resources is a part of focusing on individual students; collaboration; and communication and relationships. Veteran special education administrators also stay current with laws, court cases, policies, and best practices by networking with multiple professional and educational organizations. They demonstrate their commitment to special education by working beyond their district and looking to the future of their special education programs.

Special education administrators keep the students at the center of attention. Special education administrators are on a variety of collaborative oriented teams from single student IEP teams to national level teams that influence special education programs for individual students, schools, communities, state level, and nationally. Communication with multiple stakeholders is vital in administering special education programs. Creating and maintaining positive relationships with parents and personnel is important. Veteran special education administrators are problem solvers exhibiting self-confidence, flexibility, and good judgement that seem to enable them to continue in the position. Building the morale of others in this position is supported by their humility, patience, discernment, and showing humor. All the themes and categories are not discrete silos of skill sets. They are interconnected with all the responsibilities of veteran special education administrators.

The matrix in Appendix D exemplifies the link among answers to the questions, themes, and theoretical framework. Chapter IV contains the information organized by the themes that emerged through data analyses. Chapter V presents the information in the context of Bolman and Deal's frames of organization. The themes are woven throughout each question and frame. Bolded text in the matrix indicates a direct link to a theme discussed in Chapter IV.

In the next chapter the research questions will be discussed using these results in relation to the history of special education, laws, case law, and the major components of special education policies. The responsibilities of special education administrators and the information learned from the practices of veterans will be discussed in relation to Bolman and Deal's (2013) four frames of organizations.

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION

This study was conducted to learn about the practices of special education administration from veteran special education administrators. A sample of eight special education administrators from North Carolina who have served in the position for over six years were interviewed. Each participant member checked their transcripts to assure the information was an accurate account of their experiences and perspectives.

More specific research questions include the following:

1. What institutional arrangements support the work of special education administrators?
2. What personal and professional commitments keep special education administrators engaged in the practice of special education administration?
3. How do special education administrators manage the conflicts inherent in the position?
4. What roles and functions do special education administrators exercise in for a school district?

These questions will be addressed through Bolman and Deal's (2013) organizational framework looking at structural, human resource, political, and symbolic frames. The themes presented in chapter IV will be discussed as they relate to each frame and to the research base discussed in chapter II. In summary, all these aspects will

be used to distinguish the practices of special education administration from veteran special education administrators.

Transcripts were reviewed multiple times and organized into codes, categories and themes. The experiences shared about special education administrative practices were studied and the analysis resulted in four major themes.

- Veteran special education administrators have a keen focus on students. They approach student needs by understanding and addressing them to get the best student outcomes.
- They collaborate with school level personnel to better respond to student and personnel issues and provide guidance and training to empower others to understand the laws, policies, regulations, and procedures in special education.
- Veteran special education administrators have effective communication and build trusting relationships within their district. Communicating crucial elements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and implications of case law to school and district level personnel enable them to better address conflicts. Noticing and sharing successes of personnel acknowledges the good work they do that promotes positive outcomes for students.
- The participants support special education with passion. They pursue knowledge to stay current with research and best practices to support students with disabilities. Support is found from other special education administrators and professional organizations. Participants provide support that extends

beyond the district where they work. Finally, they have a vision for the future and current actions and decisions are made with the future in mind.

Institutional Arrangements That Support Special Education Administrators' Work

Structural Frame

The structural frame refers to how organizations are arranged including organizational charts, roles, goals, policies, and procedures. Institutional arrangements refer to the structure and organization of the school district.

Small districts have from one to three people to help support special education programs. They usually consist of the administrator, a compliance specialist, and a lead special education teacher. Medium size districts consist of the administrator, a data manager, compliance specialist, behavior specialist, a preschool coordinator, and sometimes an assistant director. Large districts are organized with several lead positions directly under the administrator. All of the special education administrators had an administrative assistant, some had data managers, and the two largest districts have a person to handle the finances. Half of the administrators are involved in the hiring process of special education personnel. They screen applicants, conduct interviews, and collaborate with principals in the selection of potential employees. Collaboration with school level personnel is exemplified in how special education administrators work with principals to secure special education personnel at the school level (Szwed, 2007).

The organizational layout of each special education program differed. In smaller size districts, special education administrators worked directly under the superintendent. Other special education administrators are part of the curriculum and instruction team

under an associate or assistant superintendent who oversees several programs (Muller, 2009). One administrator reported that she had access to the superintendent whenever she needed, even though her direct supervisor is an associate superintendent. Most administrators reported a rigid hierarchy of only getting to the superintendent through their supervisor.

Human Resource Frame

The human resource frame consists of how people interact with each other and the organization. Veteran special education administrators go to several different entities for support and guidance. Half of the administrators go to other directors when they have questions (Collin, 2009). Some participants reported that the state education agency was helpful while others reported that the state level agency personnel were not helpful. Almost half of the participants look to their own districts for guidance. One turns to policies and problem solves with principals. Special education administrators negotiate using data, trust, and lots of communication on options, scenarios, and explanations to support their work (Billingsley et al., 2012).

Effective communication and trusting relationships are important to assure at the district level, supervisors and superintendents are aware of and understand the issues that are occurring in special education programs (Lashley, 2007). Special education administrators shared their ease of access to the superintendent or frustrations in going through another person to get the superintendent's opinion and support. Veteran administrators reported getting more support from within their special education programs and from other special education professionals at the state or university level

than their direct supervisor, if it was not the superintendent. Veteran special education administrators support the special education programs within their district to assure students' needs are addressed, and quality personnel are delivering services to students with disabilities.

The relationships special education administrators have with multiple stakeholders varies. One reported how decisions were made within the special education program. One described relationships as a family. There is much collaboration across the school and district level administrators (Szwed, 2007). Some reported their supervisors were very supportive and others described their supervisors as managerial; they are left alone to do their job. Within the central office, from one extreme, an administrator feels she is seen as all-knowing to the other extreme that one is left alone due to the complexities of the position and the litigious nature of special education (Tate, 2010). In the middle veterans reported good to great relationships within the central office. One reported the turnover of people in central office prohibit collaboration for needed changes within the system. Relationships with special education teachers and related service providers are reported by the majority to include many meetings and listening to them. Most meetings are concerning the procedure of effectively implementing the components of IDEA. The biggest stressor for some administrators is dealing with parents who are described as hard to get along with (Cash, 2013). Special education administrators support parent involvement by listening to them, taking their calls, and working with them to address issues. Over time these relationships sometimes turn positive and the administrator is called and asked for advice or called to share good

news concerning the student. Relationships with students are reported as wishing they had time to cultivate and have a closer relationship with students. Smaller districts report interacting with their students in schools more frequently and developing relationships. They are involved with IEP development for many of their students. Genuine caring and legitimate interests in others is apparent in veteran special education administrators and how they work to support special education programs.

Political Frame

The political frame comprises the attainment of power. Veteran special education administrators advocate for their programs from personal relationships with students and families to speaking with federal legislators to impact laws that support students with disabilities. Between the two extremes administrators of special education programs provide professional development on the components of IDEA and communicate with a variety of stakeholders in efforts to make a difference in the lives of students with disabilities. Working with parents, teachers, and principals to assure child find activities, timely evaluations, appropriate eligibility, effective IEPs, and the least restrictive settings are discussed as means of advocating for special education (Lashley, 2007) and individual students. Alliances are mostly built with central office colleagues and community agencies. Principals and parents are also mentioned by the majority of administrators as being important partners which supports the requirement of parent involvement in special education decisions. Half of the participants report school personnel as allies in providing specialized instruction in the least restrictive environment.

All special education administrators in this study indicated that using power to get a desirable outcome is not preferred. They rely on experience, expertise, and moral judgment principles to influence others to get appropriate outcome for their program and students. They collaborate with others to find mutually acceptable solutions adhering to applicable laws and regulations (Cash, 2013). Transparent and open communication is also practiced in advocating, building alliances, negotiating and working toward a desirable outcome. Special education administrators support special education within the district, state and federal levels. Autonomy is important; special education administrators are allowed to attend conferences, participate in initiatives of their choice, and spend money wisely to support students.

Symbolic Frame

The symbolic frame includes the culture, traditions, and celebrations of special education programs. Participants reported continuing in the position because of the people with whom they work, job satisfaction, knowledge they possess, and the opportunity to make a difference in people's lives (Tate, 2010). Traditions are mostly relationships that are centered on students: people in outside agencies, people within their district, people from other districts, and being treated with respect for the knowledge of programs that are in the special education. They celebrate implementation of programs when they see student successes such as graduation. Others advocate for more inclusive practices for students with disabilities. Special events where people with disabilities gather to participate in activities for the day are celebrations.

Personal and Professional Commitments That Keep Special Education Administrators Engaged

Structural Frame

Students with disabilities are included in general education. Special education teachers are included in the professional development that is offered for all personnel. This indicates a focus on individual students with disabilities and providing support to meet their unique needs. Veteran special education administrators feel supported by the relationships they have with principals and finance officers (Tate, 2010). Effective communication and trusting relationships helps keep veteran special education administrators engaged in their practice.

Support for continuing in the field is found in the network of other special education administrators, within the district, and within the broader special education arena, including professional organizations and university contacts. Some administrators listed personal supports like home, family and friends that help keep them engaged.

Most veteran special education administrators have a personal commitment to working in special education. Two participants knew from childhood they wanted to work with people with disabilities, others indicate students with disabilities are a passion and inspiration (Tate, 2010). Working in special education administration is a way to make a difference by making our world a better place. Two participants stated that they were good with money management and resolving conflicts. They were asked or told to be the special education administrator because they could do the job.

Human Resource Frame

Work to provide more inclusive practices requires effective communication and trusting relationships (Burrello et al., 2001). Veteran special education administrators commented on relationships—they know who they can depend on. This confidence in trusting relationships is essential for continued engagement in administering special education programs (Lashley, 2007). The commitment to students with disabilities is demonstrated by being trusted, supported by others, and others having confidence in them. They work to make a difference for students to create a future where people have more opportunities, improve services, and positively contribute to society.

Concerning personnel, veteran special education administrators communicate realistic expectations and build on positive experiences (Bakken & Smith, 2011). Collaboration is shown by treating personnel on a case by case basis to grow leaders by allowing them to attend conferences and supporting recognition at the state conference as excellent educators. Veteran special education administrators provide personnel opportunities to become experts in areas of interest which builds teacher leaders to deliver professional development to other teachers (Billingsley, 2007). Training is provided to better serve students in the district; however, veteran special education administrators also understand when trained teachers leave the district they will be helping students with disabilities in other districts or capacities.

Political Frame

The political frame includes the constructive and destructive outcomes of political pressure. Political pressures consist of decreased funding and the lack of support for

traditional public schools. The decrease in funding results in more difficulty providing services for students. This creates the necessity to dig deeper and find more creative solutions to address the unique needs of students. The negative attention traditional public education is receiving results in personnel rallying together in support. It is increasingly more difficult to find qualified personnel to implement special education programs (Muller, 2009) so public education supporters are working more closely together to provide special education services. A lack of qualified people to fill positions is stressful. The negative results are that students suffer from a lack of qualified teachers and service providers. For experienced personnel morale is reduced. Veteran special education administrators work hard to combat reduced morale and be more positive (Carter, 2011). Seeing and sharing the positive outcomes for personnel and students is essential to continue to work in public education for students with disabilities.

Symbolic Frame

Veteran special education administrators use effective communication to share the positive outcomes (Wheeler & LaRocco, 2009). Successes of personnel are celebrated by recognizing those who are doing a good job or those who have come through a difficult situation. The recognitions range from public acknowledgement through emails, cards, highlights in newsletters, and providing lunch to recognitions at local board meetings and at the state special education conference.

Veteran special education administrators feel a personal obligation to do what is right for students with disabilities. Increased graduation rates and individual student successes are also celebrated within the symbolic frame by keeping the needs of students

as the focus and celebrating their individual successes. Some veteran special education administrators shared that they did not take time to celebrate enough. They check accomplishments off and then hurry on to the next task to assure future needs are addressed and the special education program continues to improve. Humor was appreciated by all the participants. Subtle humor to public displays of humor in meetings were shared. Care must be taken with celebrating or using humor that it is not at the expense of others, students or personnel. Veteran special education administrators are cognizant of celebrating successes so all stakeholders are seen in a positive way.

Special Education Administrators Manage Inherent Conflict

Structural Frame

Dealing with conflicts follows a hierarchical arrangement. Someone who is discontented, usually calls the principal or a case manager. From there it goes to the special education administrator. These conflicts are addressed, depending on the source, through meetings, open honest communication, and keeping the focus on the student, if one is involved. The arrangement of personnel lends itself to this process. Difficult situations include disgruntled parents and personnel. Special education administrators keep the focus on the individual student to address concerns. They work with a team to determine what is best for the student. Conflicts with personnel are addressed collaboratively by involving the school level administrator, teacher, service providers, and any other central office personnel that may have expertise to offer (Szwed, 2007). Effective communication is used to address these issues. The majority of the time, once emotions are removed from the issue, differences can easily be resolved. Veteran special

education administrators use time to their advantage when dealing with conflict. Allowing time for reflection for all parties involved is a practice in patience, kindness, and discernment, to best address differences of opinion.

Human Resource Frame

Veteran special education administrators work with principals to address conflicts. Conflicts expressed include moving programs and the community not being happy with the relocation, mediations, meetings with attorneys present, and superintendents not understanding the restrictions on the use of special education funds (Muller, 2009). Veteran special education administrators work to understand the needs and address those needs in a nurturing and kind way. Using effective communication aids in resolving conflicts. Many times students are a part of the conflict, so keeping the focus on the student and determining what is best for the student helps to resolve these conflicts. Kindness, humility, patience, and flexibility are practiced in resolving conflicts so teachers, school level personnel, and other central office personnel are protected from unnecessary blame or responsibility.

Political Frame

Dealing with conflicts can be a circular firing squad. It is important to understand what is at the root of conflicts. In getting there, veteran administrators understand that everyone involved has their own needs and opinions. Collaboration, effective communication, and trusting relationships is imperative in addressing conflicts so the result is in the best interest of the students (Billingsley et al., 2012). Patience is practiced in assuring each person involved is heard and valued. This can be very tiring but

necessary to determine a solution in a way that if not agreeable, is at least understood and acceptable to everyone.

Symbolic Frame

Due to their passion, veteran special education administrators can take what some would consider negative situations and turn them into areas focused for improvement. Seeing and sharing the positives balance the areas of need so personnel are motivated to continue to improve special education programs. Balancing the needs of adults and the needs of students was unanimous in that the needs of the students come first. Tending to adults' needs was discussed as needed and time consuming but less important. Getting the right personnel in the right position matching adult's skills with student needs was discussed (Bakkan & Smith, 2011).

Conflicts are addressed using with kindness, understanding, perseverance, and not over reactive. Time is taken to understand all sides, collect data, and allow people to problem solve as a team. Veteran special education administrators lead teams to find their own solution which allows others to have ownership of the issue, rather than being told what to do. Several options are sometimes suggested by the special education administrator to be considered to lead the team to think of other alternative solutions. Most administrators listed maintaining relationships with other parties (parents, teachers, principals, and superintendents) as more important that the solution to a conflict. The types of conflicts include those with outside agencies, superintendents, others in the central office, school staff, more commonly principals, and the most common parents. These conflicts are usually easily resolved but do occur and take time to address.

Evidences that indicate there is conflict include angry phone calls or emails, loud voices, slamming doors, threatening statements, and guarded communication. The resolutions of conflict are evident by people doing their jobs, calmness in questions, laughing together, open communication, and ultimately someone asking for advice (Carter, 2011).

Roles and Functions Enacted by Special Education Administrators

Structural Frame

Special education administrators oversee the special education program and a variety of other programs (Muller, 2009). Several also mentioned they are responsible for 504, Mental Health, Medicaid, pre-K, and homebound. Most veteran special education administrators are on the same level within the central office as other directors. A few special education administrators also have the title of student services which includes social work and/or guidance programs. Some participants are involved in all curriculum and instruction decisions (Cash, 2013). This exemplifies the effective communication and trusting relationships these veteran special education administrators have with their peers within the central office.

Collaboration among school level personnel working for personnel and students, and sharing expertise is extended to schools and principals (Tate, 2010). Special education administrators offer support by providing advice, guidance, using data, setting up processes, providing professional development, and being involved in contentious issues. Many stated they are proactive but do not have the authority to mandate implementation of advice or guidance to principals or schools. Within the district supporting common goals spans being involved in everything general education is doing,

for example, walk through instruments include special education requirements that principals can observe in classrooms, to sharing thoughts and ideas when they are at the table. Some special education administrators provide professional development to all teachers and consult with other programs on a regular basis.

Human Resource Frame

Half of the administrators chose to apply to the position and half were appointed. For those who chose the position, instrumental influences include former principals, teachers, college professors, families, and students, themselves. Special education administrators serve on curriculum and instruction teams and leadership teams (Szwed, 2007). Within the special education program in middle to small size districts the special education administrator is a part of the following teams: Mental Health, Alternative Programs, Parent Advisory, Autism Problem Solving, Augmentative and Alternative Communication/Assistive Technology, and various professional learning communities. In larger school districts, the special education administrator has support staff to serve in these roles. Veteran special education administrators support special education by providing resources, professional development, and opportunities for professional networking within and beyond their district (Billingsley et al., 2012).

Political Frame

Veteran special education administrators were asked about their sources of power. Three participants indicated they use authority. Most participants denied using coercive power but it was evident in creating actions plans, evaluations, and advising personnel to seek a different profession. All participants acknowledged using information and

expertise; alliances and networks; and reputation as their main sources of power. Most reward personnel by providing positive feedback recognizing successes, and some are selected to attend conferences. They are willing to share information to empower others (Bolman & Deal, 2013). Personal power separate from information was not acknowledged. Access and control of agendas was interpreted by the participants and described as collaboration. They have input in district wide agendas and they allow input from special education personnel for special education agendas. Veteran administrators put a positive spin on negative aspects of practice by pairing positives with areas for improvement to maintain and boost morale (Carter, 2011). Maintaining personnel's dignity effects everyone's morale. Special education administrators negotiate with parents and principals to maintain relationships concerning students (Lashley, 2007). Collaboration, effective communication, and trusting relationships are exemplified in special education administrators' practices. They negotiate with businesses to acquire supplies and equipment and with finance officers regarding how different pots of money can be used. Strategies to gain alliances revolve around positive interactions, respect, and dependability. These practices of support for special education within and beyond the school district are described by the participants.

Symbolic Frame

When asked about the culture of special education, half of the participants indicated special education is isolated, a second thought, a step child, or seen as the fixer. This autonomy has both positive and negative aspects (Cash, 2013; Muller, 2009). The other half indicated the culture was celebrated, supported, actively involved, and that all

really does mean all. The inclusiveness of special education speaks to the collaboration among school level personnel and having effective communication and trusting relationships (Billingsley et al., 2012). Tragedies are respectfully honored. Special education administrators report visiting homes, attending funerals, and sending memorials to students' and personnel's families. Successes are honored through recognitions by giving cards, emails, gift cards, receptions, banquets, and extra resources. Rituals and ceremonies within the special education program for personnel include several annual meetings and professional development opportunities. For students, there are many events such as Special Olympics and other statewide field days. These opportunities for special education personnel and students show a support within and beyond the district. Motivation for continuing in the position is mostly intrinsic for half of the participants. The other half indicates student and personnel successes as their motivation.

Veteran special education administrators use discernment, patience and humility to focus on the individual students to celebrate individual student accomplishments, collaborate with others, share their knowledge to improve special education programs, and build trusting relationships with people who help support special education programs (Cash, 2013). From national level involvement to individual family involvement, veteran special education administrators strive for optimal opportunities for students with disabilities. They collaborate with a variety of people advocating for special education programs (Lashley, 2007). They use effective communication and build trusting

relationships to garner support for students and special education programs. They exhibit self confidence in approaching a variety of stakeholders to support special education.

Special education is unique in that the special education administrator is involved from pre-K through graduation and in all curricula areas. Other central office directors deal with a specific grade span or content area. Special education administrators are involved in all content areas, English learners, testing and accountability, school nutrition, facilities, and transportation. Special education administration collaborates within the central office with all other directors advocating for their program and for specific student needs. Effective communication and trusting relationships are an asset in the practice of special education administration (Bakken & Smith, 2011; Cash, 2013).

Summary

Using Bolman and Deal's frames of organizations and the themes described in the previous chapter, focusing on the individual student is evident across each frame. Structurally, in many of the districts represented, students with disabilities are included with general education. Special education administrators have a passion to work with students with disabilities and collaborate with others to provide the best possible services. The roles and responsibilities differed for each administrator. Conflicts are addressed to maintain effective communication and trusting relationships. Support for special education within the district is found with other central office directors, principals, and with general education personnel.

The human resource frame is represented in all four themes. Focusing on the student was apparent in relationships with a variety of stakeholders. All participants have

relationships and effective communication with most principals to work collaboratively in making decisions by keeping the student the center of attention. They mostly collaborate with parents and principals to better provide services to students with disabilities. Special education administrators get support from the special education personnel at the local and state level and other special education administrators.

In the political frame, veteran special education administrators must keep their focus on the student. They use data, professional development, and communication with principals and superintendents to advocate for their program. Collaboration among school level personnel is evident in special education administrators building alliances with everyone, as three participants indicated. Building alliances leads to effective communication and trusting relationships within the school, district, and state. Most special education administrators use information and their expertise to influence outcomes. The recent attack on public education has led the participants to dig deeper and support public education by working tirelessly to assure a quality education to students with disabilities. They are proactive in in addressing concerns with kindness, understanding perseverance, and using data to transparently problem solve issues. They rely on other directors and people within their system to support their efforts to continue to provide an education consistent to the requirements of IDEA to students with disabilities.

In the symbolic frame participants repeatedly mentioned that they did not celebrate enough and seemed to authentically reflect on how they could celebrate successes more. For the theme focusing on the individual students, it is evident that

administrators making a difference in the student's, families', and community's lives. They use their knowledge to highlight the positive aspects and successes of special education programs and students. Increases in graduation rate are celebrated across districts. On the symbolic level, supports for special education administrators are garnered from the rituals and ceremonies that occur throughout the school year with their personnel in the district. They also garner support from outside the district by attending conferences, networking with other special education administrators, university personnel, and intrinsically. Seeing students be successful is one of the greatest motivators for veteran special education administrators.

Most of the participants have a background in special education. The participants who did not have a background in special education had experience either in a related field or personal experiences with people with disabilities. The participants did not have aspirations of moving up in district level administration. Most have remained at the district level by choice and indicate that they can be an advocate for students with disabilities and make a difference in their lives in school and in the community.

From this study, the literature review, the analysis using the Bolman and Deal's (2013) conceptual framework, and the themes that surfaced the following was learned about the practice of special education administration. Veteran special education administrators are child centered and focused. They addressed students' needs by keeping the welfare of the student and potential success in mind.

Veteran special education administrators collaborate among school level personnel working with principals and others to build capacity at the school level

concerning personnel to benefit students. Their knowledge base of special education laws, regulations, policies and procedures historically, and currently, aid in ensuring the understanding of special education with others within their district. The participants understand the evolving nature of the interpretation of special education due to case law and directed emphases of components of the guidance offered.

Effective communication and building trusting relationships was specified by every participant in promoting inclusive practices and the communication and relationships shared within special education, within the central office, and with parents. They described how they deal with conflicts and how they see and share positive aspects to promote the successes of special education or as segues to address needed improvements. Resolving conflicts by maintaining dignity of the parties involved is a nuance veteran special education administrators practice. In order to have effective communication and trusting relationships there is a history of consistency that the same message is sent concerning special education programs.

Veteran special education administrators support special education within and beyond their district. They provide professional development to teachers and new personnel without regarding the personnel's aspirations. Sharing the knowledge and best practices with staff working in special education is provided when personnel express interest or passions. Special education administrators provide resources to students and families when in need. Veteran special education administrators network with other professionals to obtain new knowledge, identifications of best practices, and current issues in special education. They look beyond their district preparing students to be as

independent and responsible as possible. Several participants shared creating programs outside their district to support people with disabilities outside public schools and in other countries. Their motivation to improve the quality of the lives of people with disabilities is evident.

Along with the above practices, veteran special education administrators also use humility, patience, discernment, flexibility, self–confidence, a sense of humor, and kindness in their practices throughout all four themes. These skills are honed from the vast experiences of the practices of special education administrators have encountered during their tenure. Initiatives that are implemented do not always consider the entire continuum of students with disabilities.

Special education administrators juggle regular education initiatives and try to make them fit students with disabilities. Veteran special education administrators continually connect regular education to special education to create a seamless education for all students.

More studies have reported reasons for turnover in special education administrative positions (Billingsley et al., 2012; Carter, 2011; Cash, 2013; Tate, 2010). This study was conducted to learn about the practices of veteran special education administrators who have served in the same district for at least six years—why they stay, not why they leave. The complexities of their practices are challenging to isolate and then rebuild to create special education administrators who can endure the challenges, find small elements of success, and the motivation to continue.

Recommendations for the Profession

These results should be interpreted as skills and qualities potential special education administrators should possess or have the capacity to learn. CEC's (2009) standards for special education administrators are comprehensive covering leadership and policy; program development and organization; research and inquiry; individual and program evaluation; professional development and ethical practice; and collaboration.

Leadership and policy include having a knowledge base consisting of state laws governing special education, IDEA, Section 504, case law, state and federal regulations, procedures, and processes. Fiscal knowledge is needed to understand funding streams and how to create and follow a budget to assure all services are provided to students with disabilities. Recruiting, hiring, and retaining personnel who are qualified to deliver services to students is needed. Communication skills to advocate for special education programs and promote inclusive practices are important.

Program development and organization is necessary to implement child find, evaluations, and develop IEPs that offer students the best opportunities to achieve grade level expectations. From individual students to systemic programs, special education administrators need to connect educational standards to specialized instructional services. Communication and relationships with others in general education is needed to provide pre-referral interventions and supports that help prevent unnecessary referrals. A knowledge base of alternative augmented communication and assistive technology is needed so students with disabilities can better participate in their education and life in the community.

Research and inquiry includes avenues to improve instruction and services to students with disabilities and their families. Special education administrators use research literature and data-based evidence to inform their decisions about instructional practices. Membership in professional organizations that specialize in leadership and special education is important for support and comradery. Supporting special education within and beyond the district is evident.

Individual and program evaluation knowledge is used in understanding child find, evaluations, and eligibility. Appropriately identifying students with disabilities requires understanding a variety of methods used for evaluations. Program evaluation includes assuring programs implemented are addressing students' needs. Program evaluation is ongoing as students are identified and improve. Supervising programs to ensure fidelity is essential. Understanding individual student needs, and effective communication are needed.

Professional development and ethical practice include making sure procedural safeguards are understood and monitored by special education personnel and parents. Ethical practice includes honesty, flexibility, patience, humility, and kindness. These soft skills are essential for a special education administrator. They also are resourceful in securing or providing professional development on effective educational practices, legal discipline strategies, and instructional improvement.

Collaboration is essential in implementing IDEA, policies, and procedures. Working in teams are required; therefore, effectively communicating goals and

addressing conflicts with parents, within the district, and with other agencies is necessary for successful special education programs.

Future Research

This study did not address student outcomes in relation to the length of time a special education administrator continues in the position. It would be interesting to compare the length of time a special education administrator stays in a district and student outcomes. For example, is the graduation rate higher in districts where the special education administrator has been there for more than six years? Do students with disabilities score higher on state assessments? Is the percentage of students with disabilities in the district a factor that is impacted by the special education administrator staying in the district? Other questions related to student outcomes and the length of the time a special education administrator stays in the district should be explored.

Turnover in other central office positions such as curriculum and instruction leaders and assistant superintendents, and superintendents may be a factor that influences how long a special education administrator continues in a system. Veteran special education administrators have persevered through changes in higher administration. Questions to consider for further research include the following. How does a change in superintendents affect the practices of special education administrator practices? How do changes in other central office administrators affect special education?

The practices of special education administrators are complex. How well do superintendents understand the role of special education administrators? How do superintendents learn to understand the complexities of the practices of special education

administrators? As special education administrators are included more often in curriculum and instruction discussions and decisions, how do these inclusive practices enhance the capacity of district level team, school level teams, and ultimately student outcomes?

The practices of veteran special education administrators include an intrinsic love and appreciation of students with disabilities. Veteran special education administrators focus on the unique needs of individual children to assure better outcomes by collaborating with a variety of stakeholders. Using effective communication and building trusting relationships with others are done as efforts to improve special education programs by making them more inclusive so students with disabilities can become more responsible and independent which leads to improved outcomes. These positive outcomes go beyond improved test scores, but also an improved quality of life post-school. Students with disabilities gainfully employed contributing to society just as nondisabled people is the ultimate goal.

Other questions to consider in future research include the following: are there veteran special education administrators who do not have an intrinsic love and appreciation for students with disabilities? How long do special education administrators continue in the field without collaboration with school level personnel? How long do they stay without the use effective communication or trusting relationships? Are there some who do not have the student at the center of attention when determining student specific decisions? Does flexibility, self-confidence, kindness, patience, humility, or a sense of humor ever undermine or disempower special education administrators?

This study confirms the knowledge and skills of veteran special education administrators are grounded in having a pure passion and care of students with disabilities and their families. They model these skills for parents and other professionals to help students with and without disabilities be more successful in school and life. Kindness, humility, flexibility, patience, self-confidence, and a sense of humor are weaved throughout each theme and with all the people with whom they work. Veteran special education administrators are models and mentors to less experienced administrators within their district and in other districts and states. They also model for parents so they may work with their children with greater skills and interact with other service providers more effectively. They model effective ways of working with students with disabilities and their parents for other educational administrators in the central office and school level administrators. They build capacity in their teachers and other personnel by modeling collaboration, effective communication, and building trusting relationships. Veteran special education administrators' practices are much more than skills that can be taught. They have intrinsic motivation to persevere the conflicts and complexities inherent in the position.

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APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS PROTOCOL

Research question: What can we learn about the practice of special education administration from veteran special education administrators? Guiding questions will consist of the following:

1. What institutional arrangements support special education administrators' work?
    a. Explain the organizational layout of the school system.
    b. How is the special education program organized?
    c. To whom do you turn for: support, guidance, protocols?
    d. Describe the relationships you have with supervisors, directors, principals, teachers, parents, and students within your system and outside your system.
    e. How do you advocate for your program, teachers, and students?
    f. With whom do you build alliances?
    g. Describe how you negotiate with others for your program's benefit.
    h. How do you use power to get a desirable outcome?
    i. What are the understood arrangements that are beneficial to your special education program and continuing in the position?
    j. What do you celebrate?
    k. What are the traditions that aid your continuing in this profession?

2. What personal and professional commitments keep special education administrators engaged in their practice?
    a. How does the school system support your efforts?
    b. Where do you find support for continuing in the field?
    c. Describe the personal commitment you have to students with disabilities and special education.
    d. How do the relationships you have within the system support your longevity?
    e. Define your personal obligation to your profession.
    f. How do you capitalize on personnel's perceptions of success?
    g. How has political pressure affected your commitment to the school system?
    h. Describe the constructive outcomes of political pressure.
    i. Describe the less than desirable results of political pressures.
    j. How do you celebrate successes in the special education program?
    k. Describe any specialized humor or language used to promote understanding within the special education arena.
3. How do special education administrators manage the conflicts inherent in the position?
    a. How are conflicts addressed within the organizational framework?
    b. What is the arrangement of personnel in the special education program?

c. Give an example of how you have managed a particularly difficult conflict.

d. Describe how needs and nurturing are addressed in dealing with conflicts.

e. How do you balance the needs of the program to benefit students with the needs of adults involved in service delivery?

f. How do you respond to conflicts?

g. Explain the conflicts you encounter in your position.

h. What symbols exemplify conflict or the resolution of conflict?

i. What are the cultural meters of a resolution from conflict?

4. What roles and functions do special education administrators exercise in for a school district?

a. What is the scope of your work in your system?

b. Describe your role within the central office.

c. Describe your role relative to schools and principals.

d. How is your expertise utilized to support common goals?

e. Give details of you path to this position.

f. What influences were instrumental in your choices?

g. Explain examples of groups or teams in which you participate and describe their effectiveness.

h. What is your source of power?

i. Authority

ii. Control of rewards

iii. Coercive power

iv. Information and expertise

v. Reputation

vi. Personal power

vii. Alliances and networks

viii. Access and control of agendas

ix. Framing: control of meaning and symbols

i. How have you bargained or negotiated and with whom?

j. What strategies do you use to gain alliances?

k. Describe the culture of special education in your system.

l. How are tragedies and successes honored?

m. Explain rituals or ceremonies that occur within the special education program.

What motivates you to continue in the position?

APPENDIX B

INTERVIEW QUESTION MATRIX

Interview Question	Structural	Human Resources	Political	Symbolic
1. What institutional arrangements support the work of special education administrators?	• Explain the organizational layout of the school system. • How is the special education program organized?	• To whom do you turn for: Support? Guidance? Protocols? • Describe the relationships you have with supervisors, directors, principals, teachers, parents, and students within your system and outside your system.	• How do you advocate for your program, teachers, and students? • With whom do you build alliances? • Describe how you negotiate with others for your programs' benefit. • How do you use power to get a desirable outcome?	• What are the understood arrangements that are beneficial to the/your special education program and continuing in the position? • What do you celebrate? • What are the traditions that aid your continuing in this profession?
2. What personal and professional commitments keep special education administrators engaged in the practice of special education administration?	• How does the school system support your efforts? • Where do you find support for continuing in the field? • Describe the personal commitment you have to students with disabilities and special education.	• How do the relationships you have within the system support your longevity? • Define your personal obligation to your profession. • How do you capitalize on personnel's perceptions of success?	• How has political pressure affected your commitment to the school system? • Describe the constructive outcomes of political pressure. • Describe the less than desirable results of political pressures.	• How do you celebrate successes in the special education program? • Describe any specialized humor or language used to promote an understanding within the special education arena.

Interview Question	Structural	Human Resources	Political	Symbolic
3. How do special education administrators manage the conflicts inherent in the position?	• How are conflicts addressed within the organizational framework? • What is the arrangement of personnel in the special education program? • Give an example of how you have managed a particularly difficult conflict.	• Describe how needs and nurturing are addressed in dealing with conflicts. • How do you balance the needs of the program to benefit students with the needs of adults involved in service delivery?	• How do you respond to conflicts? • Explain the conflicts your encounter in your position.	• What symbols exemplify conflict or the resolution of conflict? • What are the cultural meters of a resolution from conflict?
4. What roles and functions do special education administrators exercise in for a school district?	• What is the scope of your work in your system? • Describe your role within the central office. • Describe your role relative to schools and principals. • How is your expertise utilized to support common goals?	• Give details of your path to this position. • What influences were instrumental in your choices? • Explain examples of groups or teams in which you participate and describe their effectiveness.	• What is your source of power: authority, control of rewards, coercive power, information and expertise, reputation, personal power, alliances and networks, access and control of agendas, and framing: control of meaning and symbols? • How have you bargained or negotiated and with whom? • What strategies do you use to gain alliances?	• Describe the culture of special education in your system. • How are tragedies and successes honored? • Explain rituals or ceremonies that occur within the special education program. • What motivates you to continue in the position?

APPENDIX C

CODES, CATEGORIES, AND THEMES

Frequency	Codes	Categories	Themes
18	Students' needs	Understanding student needs	Focus on the individual student and his/her needs
2	Students' strengths		
2	Common sense		
13	Child/student/kid centered	Keeping the student at the center of attention	
26	Supporting child/student/kid		
3	Provide for		
2	To honor		
10	What is best	Determining what is best for the student	
6	Options for students		
4	Student outcomes		
7	Connections		
6	Problem solve	Working with principals for students	Collaboration among school level personnel
6	Knowledgeable		
7	Confidence		
2	Patience		
6	Teach others		
3	Call for help		
6	Understanding roles		
5	Positive relationships		
8	Supporting principals		

Frequency	Codes	Categories	Themes
6	Hard decisions	Working with principals for personnel	
5	Supporting others' decisions		
5	Correcting decisions		
2	Mutual decisions		
5	Hiring personnel		
7	Available to problem solve		
6	Miscommunication		
4	Show appreciation		
10	Special education law	Administrator professional capacity	
6	Special education policies		
4	Rules and regulations		
5	Specialized instruction		
8	Knowledgeable		
13	Mental health		
15	Coaches and trains		
5	Kindness		
9	Humility		
8	Confidence		
5	Flexibility		
4	Patience		
4	Research		
7	Inclusiveness	Inclusive practices	Effective communication and trusting relationships
4	Humor	Communication and relationships within special education	
4	Delegate		
8	Guidance		
5	Kindness		

Frequency	Codes	Categories	Themes
3	Flexible		
8	Superintendent authority	Communication and relationships within central office	
10	Superintendent support with programs		
9	Support with principals		
8	Trusted by superintendent		
4	Challenge superintendent		
8	Superintendent authority		
8	Other directors		
3	Humor		
10	Listening to parents	Communication and relationships with parents	
10	Advocacy		
1	Parent training		
6	Supporting parents		
8	Positive feedback from parents		
8	Responsive to parents		
5	Preventing conflicts		
5	Educating parents		
8	Humor	Dealing with Conflict	
7	Addressing conflicts		
6	Pressure from parents		
4	Pressure from superintendents		
4	Common sense		
3	Trust		
4	Having a connection		
5	Understanding and resolving conflict		
5	Noticing	Seeing and Sharing the Positives	

Frequency	Codes	Categories	Themes
4	Acknowledging		
12	Celebrating		
5	Graduation rate		
5	Educator of excellence		
5	Personnel		
8	For improvement		
12	Professional development	Professional development	Support for special education within and beyond the district
8	Passions		
16	Empower others		
4	Personnel	Resource provider	
6	Instructional programs		
6	Materials and supplies		
1	Equipment		
12	Knowledge		
8	Technology		
7	Peers	Professional networking	
10	Professional organizations		
5	University personnel		
4	Training other agencies	Broader than the district	
8	Helping other districts		
3	Helping charter schools		
5	Personnel	Planning for the future	
6	Students		

APPENDIX D

MATRIX OF QUESTIONS WITH THEMES

	Structural	Human Resources	Political	Symbolic
1. What institutional arrangements support the work of special education administrators?	• Most offices consist of an administrative assistant, compliance specialist and a lead special education teacher. • Most report to an assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction. In smaller districts, they report to the superintendent.	• Support comes from other special education administrators and other administrators from within the district. Policies are referenced as a resource often used to address issues. • **Relationships** with supervisors, directors, and principals are described as collaborative. **Relationships** with teachers are defined as spending much time in meetings with them. Much time is spent with parents listening and **cultivating more positive and trusting relationships**. Participants reported wishing they had more time to develop relationships with students.	• Advocacy is practiced through **relationships,** professional development and **communication**. • Alliances are built within the central office and outside agencies. • Negotiation is through **transparent and open communication**. • Participants do not prefer using power to achieve a desirable outcome.	• Participants report continuing in the position because of job satisfaction, their knowledge and **making a difference in peoples' lives.** • Celebrations include increase graduation rates and successful program implementation. • Traditions include **relationships and being treated with respect.**

	Structural	Human Resources	Political	Symbolic
2. What personal and professional commitments keep special education administrators engaged in the practice of special education administration?	• **Special education personnel are included in general educations' professional development activities.** • Support for continuing in the field is found in **relationships** with other administrators. • **Personal commitments to students with disabilities** and special education is found in a **lifelong commitment to make a difference for people with disabilities**.	• Longevity is the result of **trusting relationships** • The **desire to make a difference in the world** through helping people with disabilities. • Successes are celebrated and shared through newsletters, emails, news articles, and district and state level recognitions.	• Political pressure has resulted in digging deeper and being more **committed to provide needed services for students**. • **Personnel collaborate and build relationships** based on common goals. • Less than desirable results include a lack of qualified personnel to provide services to students.	• Successes are celebrated through **effective communication** recognitions within the district and at the state level. • **Humor** is appreciated by all participants. They demonstrated **subtle humor to public displays of humor** with teachers.
3. How do special education administrators manage the conflicts inherent in the position?	• Conflicts are addressed within the hierarchy structure. • Within the hierarchy parents speak initially with teachers, then principals, then special education administrators. • **Difficult conflicts are addressed collaboratively.**	• Time, **patience, kindness, and discernment** are used to address conflicts. • **Students and their needs are at the center of attention.**	• Understanding, **collaboration, effective communication, and trusting relationships** are used to respond to conflicts. • Most conflicts are addressed by allowing all parties to be heard and valued.	• Angry phone calls or emails, loud voices, threatening statements, and guarded communications are examples of evidences of conflict. Resolution of conflicts include calmness in questions, and **open communication**.

	Structural	Human Resources	Political	Symbolic
4. What roles and functions do special education administrators exercise in for a school district?	• Oversee the special education programs, some also oversee 504, Mental health, Medicaid, pre-K and homebound. • Special education administrators are on the same level as other central office administrators. • **Collaboration with school level personnel** include providing advice, guidance, setting up processes, and providing professional development. • Special education program requirements are included in walk-through instruments principals use when visiting classes.	• Half of the participants applied for the position and half were appointed. • Instrumental influences include principals, teachers, families, and students. • Team membership include Mental Health, Alternative programs, Parent Advisory, Autism Problem Solving, Augmentative and Alternative Communication/Assistive Technology, and other professional learning communities.	• All participants denied using coercive power. Three uses authority. • Information and expertise, alliances and networks, and reputation are reported as main sources of power. • Most reward personnel by providing public recognition of successes. Access and control of agendas is described as collaborative. Negative aspects are paired with positives to make improvement and boost morale. • Bargain and negotiate with businesses and finance officers. • Positive interactions, respect, and dependability are used to gain alliances.	• The culture of special education is described differently by half the participants. Some programs are seen as isolated, second thoughts or the fixer. Others are celebrated, supported and actively involved in all aspects of the general education programs. • Tragedies are respectfully honored. Successes are honored through recognitions. • Rituals and ceremonies include annual meetings and professional development opportunities. • Motivation for continuing in the position include the **intrinsic desire to work with people with disabilities** and for the student and personnel success.