TATE, ALICIA SALEMME, Ph.D. Special Education Administration in North Carolina: Who is Leading the Field? (2009)
Directed by Dr. Marilyn Friend. 123 pp.

The purpose of this study was to survey special education administrators (N = 108) in North Carolina to identify their characteristics and factors that contribute to their staying or leaving the field. Variables included licensure, teaching experience, LEA information, and personal demographics as well as factors that would contribute to remaining or leaving the field of special education administration. Two open-ended questions addressed the least and most satisfying aspects of this role and important characteristics and knowledge needed to be effective.

The majority of North Carolina special education administrators were female, Caucasian, and former special education teachers. Job satisfaction was ranked as the most significant factor for remaining in the field whereas lack of administrative support was ranked as the most significant factor for leaving. The least satisfying aspects of the job included lack of program funding, legally-related compliance issues, and communication issues. The most satisfying aspects included making a difference in the lives of students with disabilities and collaboration with colleagues and community. Knowledge noted as necessary for success in the field were knowledge of special education methodology and law as well as administrative/leadership skills.

The findings of the study inform the growing issue of special education administrator attrition and assist state and local leaders as they recruit and retain current special education administrators to lead the delivery of special education.

SPECIAL EDUCATION ADMINISTRATION

IN NORTH CAROLINA:

WHO IS LEADING

THE FIELD?

by

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A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of The Graduate School at
The University of North Carolina at Greensboro
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

Greensboro
2009

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# CHAPTER I

# INTRODUCTION

In the United States, more than 19,000 administrators have the primary responsibility of leading and supervising special education programs and service delivery in local education agencies (LEAs) (U. S. Department of Education, 2006). The challenge for these school administrators is to direct system-wide initiatives that redefine leadership in ways that support the use of proven practices and link administrative interventions to increased educational achievement for each student who has a disability and all the students who are in their charge (Boscardin, 2007). Administrators of special education have a unique role within school systems. Their daily tasks intersect with all aspects of a district. Curriculum and instruction, transportation, compliance with federal and state laws, personnel, community partnerships, and food and nutrition are just a few examples. They must be administrative generalists, disability specialists, and partners with other administrators who have responsibilities in these areas to ensure the success of student with disabilities and the professionals who serve them. As a result, special education administrators must practice collaborative leadership.

In North Carolina, special education is experiencing the need for innovative reform efforts in teaching practice and administration in order to ensure students with disabilities graduate with the skills needed to succeed in the twenty-first century global economy (NC State Board of Education, 2006). In addition to the challenges of meeting

the needs of students with disabilities in the twenty-first century learning paradigm, special education administrators in North Carolina are facing drastic cuts in funding at the local level due to the recent economic downturn, increased focus on meeting adequate yearly progress (AYP) goals as identified in No Child Left Behind (NCLB), and a severe shortage of qualified special education classroom teachers. In spite of the temporary relief that may be offered through the economic stimulus money granted during the 2009 school year, special education administrators will continue to face monumental issues. It should thus come as little surprise to find that retention of special education administrators is a growing concern. Bays and Crockett (2007) state that the increased demand for special education administrators exceeds the supply of candidates who are well prepared to lead instruction for diverse students in effective, supportive, and inclusive ways.

Special education administration in the twenty-first century is a challenging endeavor due to the roles and responsibilities that special education administrators face in today's world (Obiakor, Rotatori, & Burkhardt, 2007). These roles and responsibilities have continued to undergo dramatic shifts consonant with the changing roles and responsibilities of all school administrators (Bakken, O'Brian, & Sheldon, 2007). Lashley and Boscardin (2003) note becoming an effective special education leader for the twenty-first century requires that administrators work collaboratively with teachers, parents, other school administrators, and policymakers to bring resources, personnel, programs, and expertise together to solve problems of practice for all students.

The convergence of administrative challenges and other trends and issues in the field of special education in recent years has changed the face of special education in general and special education leadership specifically. The shift in service delivery from a dual to a more unified system that joins the traditions of general and special education requires all educational leaders to employ knowledge and skills traditionally situated in the domain of special education administration. Thus, it is important to explore the changing face of special education administration.

This study uses special education administration in North Carolina as an example to inform the field of broader issues. The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NC-DPI) has developed a recruiting and training program for new special education administrators. This program is one effort in addressing the administrative challenges of leading special education programs in the twenty-first century. Part of becoming a leader in the field is to build the leadership capacity of others. Sustained and well-designed leadership development is essential in school systems (Sparks, 2009). Since knowledge about students with disabilities is an important factor in leading special education programs, one way to recruit future special education administrators is to provide opportunities to build leadership capacity in current special education teachers. What impact will these challenges have for recruiting future special education leaders? What can be done to ensure that special education administration is a worthwhile and rewarding professional goal for those who choose that career path?

For this study, special education administrators are those individuals who work in school districts to lead, supervise, and manage the provision of special education and

related services for students with disabilities. They may have titles such as special education director, special needs director, or exceptional children's program director. Special education administrators are responsible for implementing the provisions of the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA) as well as state and local statutes and policies and procedures that stipulate a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment (LRE) for all students with disabilities (Lashley & Boscardin, 2003). Specifically in North Carolina, local education agencies must ensure that each person employed as a special education administrator meets the following requirements:

1) Hold a master's level licensure in special education or a related area of master's level licensure in administration and/or supervision;

   a. Individuals holding a master's level licensure in special education or a related area must complete 9 semester hours of graduate level coursework in administration and/or supervision and;

   b. An individual holding master's degree in administration and/or supervision must complete nine semester hours of graduate level coursework in special education;

2) Obtain a passing score on the appropriate Praxis examination;

3) Be recommended for licensure by an LEA

Provisional licenses may be granted to individuals working toward licensure as a special education director (North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2007).

Crockett (2002) describes a model of special education administration that challenges administrators to engage in ethical practice, maintain individual consideration, promote equity under the law, provide effective programming, and develop productive partnerships. What is lacking is information on how current administrators who do not have a special education background can operate in this model. Because a provisional license can be granted to anyone to be a special education administrator as long as that individual is working on licensure, a special education administrator can lead a program before completing even one administrative or special education course.

The rationale for conducting this study began with observations as a special education administrator in North Carolina. Although I met the licensure requirements as a special education administrator with the completion of the M.Ed. degree in special education, I had minimal administrative experience and coursework. Most of my on-going training was and continues to be on-the-job and doctoral experiences. Recently, it has become increasingly obvious that as I embark on just my fifth year of administration I am considered a veteran. At a recent state conference for the Council of Administrators of Special Education (CASE), a colleague led a discussion about the recruitment and retention of North Carolina special education administrators. Sixty-five out of 115 special education administrators had left their position within the past 18 months (Snyder, 2009). This turnover included retirements, relocations, dismissals, and voluntary attrition. This number suggests a 68% turnover rate for special education directors. How will this affect the field?

Special education faces a critical shortage of teachers that is projected to grow larger in the coming years (Billingsly, 2007). It is not a far reach to understand the implication for special education administration. As the number of special education teachers decreases, so does the number who will move into special education administrative positions. As a result, it is likely that fewer and fewer special education administrators will have the experience and background of working directly with students with disabilities and possessing first-hand knowledge of IDEA.

### Statement of the Problem

The literature base for special education administration is sparse. Instructional leadership has been studied since the inception of public education in the United States, but few studies have addressed the supervisory practices used to ensure that students who have disabilities receive an appropriate public education (Bays & Crockett, 2007; Swan, 1988). Recent surveys conducted by the Council of Administrators of Special Education (CASE) reveal that special education administration is complex and influenced by following six advanced standards for which evidence-based knowledge and skills have been identified: (a) leadership and policy, (b) program development and organization, (c) research and inquiry, (d) evaluation, (e) professional development and ethical practice, and (f) collaboration (Boscardin, 2009). Operating within these six standards is the challenge for special education administrators who must function day- to- day in what Caruso (2008) describes as the "out of control, information overloaded, over-governed, under-funded world of special education" (p. 3). Meeting this challenge for an extended

period of time is becoming increasingly difficult as evidenced by the number of special education directors in North Carolina who are leaving the field.

The shortage of administrators is well-documented and the shortage of special education teachers exacerbates the shortage of special education administrators (Lashley & Boscardin, 2003). The Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS) of the United States Department of Education (USDE) has recognized the critical need for highly qualified special education leaders by identifying the preparation of leadership personnel as an absolute priority in its leadership preparation grant competition (U.S.D.E. 84.3250, 2008). Given the complex nature of special education administration, this is not surprising. Many administrators leave the field within the first few years. Rude (2008) conducted a survey of CASE members to identify reasons why special education administrators leave the field within their initial years of employment. He found six factors associated with the intention to leave their positions were significantly inter-related. These included (a) the lack of administrative support, (b) burdensome regulation, (c) paperwork, (d) personnel issues, (e) state and federal requirements, and (f) lack of district resources. Also important to note was his finding that the concerns for lack of resources and the resulting legal actions often combined to produce levels of stress that make the role of the special education administrator difficult to define, manage, and balance with multiple demands from competing constituencies. These competing constituencies include the requirements of NCLB and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Both pieces of legislation have focused the attention of leaders in general education and special education on systemic reform,

educational practices, resources, educational services, and the progress of all students (White, 2005). Special education leaders, specifically, have the added stress of legal actions for efforts made to meet both NCLB and IDEA requirements.

Local education agencies face the dilemma of filling vacant special education positions in an era of increased focus and accountability for meeting the needs of students with disabilities. As a result, efforts to retain those currently in the field become even more important. Few data identify those who are currently serving as special education administrators and what they feel are the factors that contribute to staying or leaving the field.

## Research Questions

Given that almost 70 percent of special education administrators in North Carolina have left the field in the past three years, the central question that guides this study is this: Who is leading the field of special education in North Carolina?  Specifically,

(1) What are the characteristics of special education leadership personnel in North Carolina?

    a. What is their education background?

    b. What are their personal demographics (ethnicity, gender, age)?

    c. What is their licensure area?

    d. What is their teaching and administrative experience?

(2) How do current special education directors perceive retention in the field?

    a. What are the factors that contribute to remaining in the special education administration field?

b. What are the factors that contribute to leaving the special education field?

(3) Is there a relationship between the characteristics of special education

directors and their perceptions regarding retention in the field?

a. What is the relationship between age and retention?

b. What is the relationship between age and intent to leave?

c. What is the relationship between gender and retention?

d. What is the relationship between gender and intent to leave?

e. What is the relationship between type of district and retention?

f. What is the relationship between type of district and intent to leave?

In addition to oversight of services for students with disabilities within the district, special education administrators must possess general administrative skills required of other district level administrators such as budgeting; recruiting and supervising faculty and staff; and completing reports required by local, state, and federal agencies. Coupled with these skills and requirements is the need to maintain ongoing communication with all stakeholders, including faculty and staff, other administrators, parents, students, legislators, and community members (Bakken, O'Brian, & Sheldon, 2006). The recruitment and retention of special education administrators plays a critical role in the continuing evolution of the field. Answering the questions posed will provide insight to who is leading the field of special education in North Carolina.

**Overview of the Dissertation**

This research utilized primarily a quantitative design. Data were collected through the use of a web-based survey instrument. The survey queried on demographic and

professional information of participants. The small, qualitative portion of the survey

instrument was comprised of three open-ended questions which asked opinions of the

participants. The participants for the study were North Carolina special education

administrators employed as of June 2009. Because all participants are members of a

discrete population, the dissertation is best defined as a census study.

In Chapter II, the literature is reviewed to develop a framework for the study

based on an understanding of the overall concept of leadership, including transformative

and transactional models. Next, educational leadership and special education leadership is

reviewed, including the impact of the accountability movement. This chapter concludes

with a review of the literature regarding the role of gender. The role of gender cannot be

discounted within any discussion of educational leadership.

Chapter III provides a thorough description of the study design, participants, and

methods. In Chapter IV, the data from the study are presented, including both quantitative

findings and general themes from participant's open-ended responses. Finally, in Chapter

V, the data are interpreted, discussed, and appropriate conclusions drawn.

**Limitations**

Possible limitations to this census study include the relatively small population

size. Currently, 115 administrators supervise special education programs in North

Carolina (114 excluding me). Although all special education programs must comply with

IDEA, differences exist in state and local policies and procedures. As a result, the reader

must make the decision of representativeness and generalizability of the study's findings

to other states. The possibility of bias, in the form of desired responses, may exist due to

my professional relationship with many of the participants. Finally, acute personnel shortages for special education teachers in North Carolina exacerbate administrative shortages. How this affects the shortage of special education administrators is beyond the scope of this specific study.

# CHAPTER II

# REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Special education administrators are faced with many challenges that require a high level of technical knowledge and leadership skills. Effective special education programs are led by administrators who demonstrate the ability to maintain positive relationships with those in other departments of a school district, parents, and the community. In an era of increased focus and accountability for special education programs, serious questions exist about the availability of special education administrators and the reasons they stay or leave the field.

The field of special education has been in a state of continual transition and debate about the best way to implement special education services since the federal government first passed legislation mandating special education in 1975 (Chalfant & Van Dusen Psy, 2007). Special education administrators have the responsibility of developing, planning, and evaluating the implementation of special education services for students with disabilities in school districts. The literature base for special education administration is scarce despite the important role they have in the field.

To more deeply understand the complex nature of special education administration, it is important to explore the overarching concept of leadership. As described in Burn's (1978) seminal book, leadership is one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth. First, the concept of leadership, including transactional

and transformative theories, is reviewed. The state of educational leadership is often a convergence of instructional, operational, and political factors that are represented by transactional and transformative leadership. The second section of this chapter explores the diverse nature of leading in the public education system, including the recent impact of federal legislation No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). Also included in this section is a thorough description of standards for education leadership in order to define characteristics of effective school leaders. The third section of this chapter focuses on special education administration as a subset of educational leadership. The impact of the accountability movement and a description of professional standards for special education administration are provided. Finally, the role of gender cannot be discounted in any review of education leadership. Gender is relevant given that the majority of special education administrators are female. Thus, the chapter ends with a brief review of gender and its impact on educational and special education leadership.

## Leadership Perspective and Theory

Much confusion and disagreement exists about what leadership really means (Bolman & Deal, 1997). It is defined in different ways, but the elements commonly emphasized are to guide, direct, and influence (Jahan, 2007). More important than a definition, regardless of whether looking at organizations, government agencies, institutions, or small enterprises, the pivotal factor needed to enhance outcomes is leadership (Bennis & Nanus, 1985). Effective leaders exhibit certain distinct practices when they are doing their best. This process varies little from industry to industry, professional to profession, country to country (Kouzes & Posner, 2002). Burns (1978)

defined effective leaders as those who induce followers to act for certain goals that represent the values and the motivations, the wants and needs, the aspirations and expectations of both leaders and followers. More recently, Bolman and Deal (1997) and Kouzes and Posner (2002) identified effective leadership as an understandable, universal, and subtle process of mutual influence fusing thought, feeling, and action to produce cooperative efforts in the service of purpose and value of both the leader and the led.

Since the late 1970s the literature on leadership has featured a debate and program of research exploring relationships between transactional and transformational leadership (Hay, 2007). This debate began with the publication of Burns' (1978) large-scale work on political leaders. Burns distinguished between ordinary, called *transactional*, leaders, who exchanged tangible rewards for the work and loyalty of followers, and extraordinary adaptive leaders, termed *transactional*, who engaged with followers and raised consciousness about the significance of outcomes (Hay, 2007).

### *Transactional Leadership*

According to Burns (1978), modal values are the chief monitors of transactional leadership. These include honesty, responsibility, fairness, and honoring of commitments. However, this type of leadership holds no enduring purpose to hold the organization together. That is, transactional leadership is described in terms of management and compliance. In fact, Bolman and Deal (1997) characterized transactional leadership within a structural framework consisting of supervision, control, and the provision of resources for those operating within the organization. The structural frame emphasizes goals, specialized roles, and formal relationships. The organization allocates

responsibilities to participants, creates rules, policies, procedures, and hierarchies to coordinate diverse activities.

Lussier and Achua (2004) define transactional leadership more succinctly as leadership that seeks to maintain stability rather than promote change within an organization through regular economic and social exchanges that achieve specific goals for both the leaders and their followers. Transactional leaders aspire to encourage consistent performance from followers that allows them to meet agreed-upon goals (Bryant, 2003). Transactional leaders provide followers with something they want in return for something the leader seeks. To be effective, a transactional leader must be able to realize and respond to the followers' changing needs and wants (Hay, 2007).

In simple terms, transactional leadership may best be described as the day-to-day mechanics of getting the job done. It promotes the basic need to make a living by completing tasks. Compliance and supervision are likely to be more important than vision and mission. For example, Bryant (2003) defined three characteristics of transactional leaders. First, they work with team members to determine unequivocal goals and make certain workers get promised rewards for achieving those goals. Second, they exchange rewards for worker effort. Third, they respond to the immediate self-interests of followers if those interests can be met while the job is being done. This type of leadership can overestimate the power of authority and underestimate the authority of power (Bolman & Deal, 1997). Although perhaps not the most enduring of leadership styles, it does have an important role. Transactional leadership is crucial to group leadership, and it is just as crucial to the more encompassing forces of executive leadership (Burns, 1978). This type

of leadership may rarely transform an organization, but it is necessary to varying degrees to meet the goals of the organization.

### *Transformational Leadership*

Compared with transactional leadership, transformational leadership tends to be associated with a more enduring leader-follower relationship (Hay, 2007). A transformative leader, simply defined, is a person who can guide, direct, and influence others to bring about a fundamental change, change not only of the external world, but also of internal processes (Jahan, 2007). Whereas transactional leaders manage organizations by satisfying followers' self-interest, transformational leaders inspire and stimulate followers to hold a collective purpose. Unlike transacting leadership, transforming leadership is more persuasive and widespread in the day-to-day pursuit of collective goals through mutual tapping of leaders' and followers' motive bases and the achievement of intended change (Burns, 1978).

Transformative leaders are visionary. The purpose of leading is to create a vision and communicate that vision through shared power and responsibility and well-being. Transactional leaders also encourage followers to become key stakeholders in the organization itself rather than operators. This is achieved through common vision, purpose, and mission that are important to both the individuals within an organization and the organization itself. Though organizational objectives and individual ambitions are satisfied through transactional leadership, the same sense of mutual pursuit of a common purpose is not characteristic of that form of leadership (Hay, 2007). Kouzes and Posner (2002) defined five practices of exemplary leadership that embody transformative

characteristics: (a) Model the way, (b) inspire a shared vision, (c) challenge the process, (d) enable others to act, and (e) encourage the heart. Leaders who embody these characteristics shape and elevate motives and goals of followers. Transformative leadership achieves significant change that reflects the community of interests of both leaders and followers (Bennis & Nanus, 1985).

By the very characteristics of these five practices, it is clear that transformational leadership focuses on community and empowerment rather than management and compliance. This type of leadership addresses emotional as well as conceptual work (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). For those who are more accustomed to top-down, transactional leadership, the difference can be striking. The more adaptive, transformative model creates risk, conflict, and instability because it addresses the issues underlying the problems of an organization and may involve upending deep and entrenched norms (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002). Transformative leaders bring followers together to pursue collective ambitions by expressing and disseminating their personal standards (Hay, 2007). Transformational leadership can be characterized as moral in that it raises the level of human conduct and ethical aspiration of both leader and led, and thus has a transforming effect on both (Burns, 1978).

### *Transactional/Transformative Leadership*

As previously defined, to some degree transactional leadership might be characterized as a leadership of the status quo. Leaders draw authority from established power relationships. In contrast, transformative leadership by contrast is a leadership of change, change within leaders, within their followers, and within the organization of

which they are a part (Hay, 2007). Collins (2001) identified effective leaders who operate within dual patterns. Transactional and transformational leadership can be thought of as dual patterns. A growing orthodoxy is emerging that positions transactional and transformative leadership as complementary and highly related styles (Judge & Piccolo, 2004).

This convergence of transactional and transformative leadership was, in fact, posited long ago by Burns (1978), who stated that reform is ever poised between the transforming and the transactional. That is, transformational in spirit and posture and transactional in process and results. Bolman and Deal (1999) found that lasting reform within organizations requires leaders who combine hardheaded realism with passionate commitment to values and purposes. Further, organizations need vision, but that is not their only need and at certain points in time, vision may not be their most important one. Effective leadership appears to be a successful battle between effectiveness and efficiency, activities of vision and judgment (Bennis & Nanus, 1985). Bolman and Deal (1999) refer to this as the paradox of leadership: how to maintain integrity and mission without making their organizations rigid and intractable. Research suggests that the best leaders employ both transactional and transformative characteristics as a comprehensive approach for leadership.

## Educational Leadership

Leadership in education is an ambiguous and complex concept, and the diffuse and highly fragmented nature of theory and research on school and school district administration and leadership reflects this conceptual fuzziness. School and district

education leaders face a difficult fusion of roles, contexts, and leadership challenges (Goldring & Greenfield, 2002). Divergent perspectives within the academy; among policy makers and constituents at the local, state, and federal levels; and among school and district administrators add to a growing swirl of competing and often conflicting role images and expectations (Goldring & Greenfield, 2002). Leaders of educational organizations are continually confronted with issues and problems: It is the nature of the job. The dilemma is how to handle a wide range of organizational issues effectively and proficiently (Munro, 2008). Because of leaders' impact on school quality and student achievement, developing effective leaders of schools and districts is considered a top priority among researchers and policymakers (Ed Week, 2004).

Over the past quarter century, significant changes have been reshaping this nation. Divergent skill distributions among U. S. population groups, a changing economy, and demographic trends signaling a growing, more diverse population all have a direct bearing on schools and institutions in the twenty-first century (Munro, 2008). The social, political, educational, and organizational contexts in which school leaders work are continually changing, and they are not necessarily changing in harmony. Contexts are continually evolving and leadership, by definition, revolves around managing emerging dilemmas (Goldring & Greenfield 2002). As a result, leadership becomes more difficult because of challenges that are both complicated and unpredictable (Drath, 2008). Increasingly, forces occurring at the global level will have a greater impact on the work of educational leadership (Munro, 2008). Educational leaders must focus on helping people inside and outside the educational setting reevaluate current norms, expectations,

structures, and cultures so that new ways of thinking about teaching, learning, and schooling can emerge (Kochan, Bredeson, & Riehl, 2002).

To lead and manage effectively are enduring role expectations of school leadership (Goldring & Greenfield, 2002). Not unlike the movement from transactional to transformative models of leadership, new ways of thinking about educational leadership are now challenging traditional bureaucratic models of organizations characterized by standardized procedures, division of labor, and expert leaders (Munro, 2008). Leithwood (2007) argues that educational leaders face a crucial dilemma in their efforts to improve schools.  Both theory and evidence have begun to coalesce around transformational approaches to their leadership as best suited to the challenges they face, while the policy environment in which they work largely endorses the continuation of transactional practices.

Goleman (2008) proposes a transformative approach to educational leadership. He defines the essential task of an educational leader as helping people get into and stay in an optimal state in which they can work to their best ability. This typically means creating an atmosphere of warmth and trust, of global rapport, in which people feel good about themselves, energized about their mission, and committed to giving their finest. Technical challenges, such as scheduling and budgeting, are relatively easy to meet for educational administrators with basic administrative expertise and experience. The tougher challenges are adaptive, requiring transformation of existing structures and practices (McCabe & Cunningham, 2008). Frequently, educational leaders are caught in the dilemma of encouraging participation and fostering a consensus model while needing

to rely on individual authority to influence important decisions and outcomes (Goldring & Greenfield, 2002).

Today's educational leaders are working in situations marked by great complexity (Lugg, Budley, Firestone, & Garner, 2002). School and district leaders must tightly connect knowledge, interpretive frameworks, and experiences that promote a complex understanding of teaching, learning, leadership, professional development, organizations, and management, among other knowledge areas (Pounder, Reitzug, & Young, 2002). Twenty-first century educational leaders must help create appropriate school and classroom environments, develop supportive school cultures, ensure the productive use of human and other resources, and become involved in new forms of policy development and implementation. Job responsibilities have been further complicated by expanding demands from external constituencies, rapid growth in research on teaching and learning, changing demographics of our population, and burgeoning access to information resulting from an explosion of new technologies (Kochan et al., 2002).

## Impact of Accountability Movement

The common perception of the years before the era of accountability is that most educational administrators were managers. School boards were happy with principals and superintendents who could build good schedules, discipline students, construct and manage budgets, and deal successfully with the community (Hunt, 2008). Within the last 25 years, however, an era of accountability has been growing with the most recent momentum coming from the NCLB. The simple notion that every child can learn has resulted in sweeping, unprecedented reform in a relatively short span of time (Munro,

2008). Nothing in recent years has brought together and divided more administrators, teachers, unions, legislators, researchers, business leaders, and journalists (Munro, 2008).

The increased focus on accountability has significantly affected education and presents both challenges and opportunities for educational leadership. As accountability has become more prominent, focus has shifted from accountability for inputs or processes to accountability for outcomes (Lugg et al., 2002). Prior to NCLB, districts measured success primarily on the basis of input, such as human and fiscal resources and the creation of programs, rather than on the impact of these factors on academic achievement (Nagle, Yunker, & Malmgren, 2006). More recently, the roles of educational leaders have been changed qualitatively by curriculum standards reforms, more focus on higher-order thinking, high stakes testing, and accountability for student teaching (Kelley & Peterson, 2007). Not only are educational leaders pressed to be more responsible for student learning, but they must also lead planning efforts that involve developing a clear mission and goals for schools, analyzing student performance data, identifying areas that need improvement, developing sustainable programmatic reforms, and facilitating implementation of those reforms (Kelley et al., 2007).

The accountability movement has resulted in a renewed focus for instructional leadership. NCLB and its related policies assume that administrators are motivated to change their schools by meeting high expectations. At the same time educational leaders may have incentives and inducements to follow a more managerial administrative role which focuses actions and decisions on compliance and stability (Goldring & Greenfield, 2002). As such, educational leaders create linear processes for setting organizational

goals and determining how they will be achieved, representing a transactional leadership approach (Leithwood, 2007). However, the new high stakes tests and the detailed reporting of student scores require a more advanced notion of instructional leadership that involves complex analysis of data, application of new technologies, and other responsibilities (Kelly, et al., 2007) representing the need for both transformative and transactional leadership.

One of the most visible and controversial aspects of education reform in the United States today is the demand for public accountability for student learning at all levels of the education system. In the age of NCLB, the stiffest challenges for educational leaders are in the area of academic accountability. NCLB is praiseworthy for the special attention it gives to improved learning for children who have been ignored or left behind in the past (Linn, 2008). This attention creates an opportunity for educational leaders to practice transformative leadership by working with teachers and other staff members in districts and schools to address the academic performance of individual students (Hunt, 2009). The advantage of an accountability system is that it can help not only the leader but also the entire staff to improve student achievement. Leaders can capitalize on external measures to focus a district's efforts to help teachers become more effective educators and to help children become stronger leaders (Lugg et al., 2002).

A new consensus is emerging in the field that strong district leadership is needed to bring about large-scaled improvements mandated in NCLB (Archer, 2008; Nagle et al., 2006). The challenge is finding the right balance between central authority and site-based autonomy. Ideally, districts and schools should feel ownership of a common vision of

instruction (Archer, 2008). And so, educational leaders must play a key role in articulating local expectations with external frameworks (Goldring & Greenfield, 2002). There are certainly frustrations in both building level and district administrators. Administrators are continually called upon to defend the educational processes of their schools and districts and bolster teacher morale in the face of NCLB (Hunt, 2008). Given the likelihood that education accountability is not apt to disappear soon, it makes sense for educators to try to mold accountability-related policies that have a positive, rather than a negative, effect on education (Popham, 2007)

**Contemporary Educational Leadership Policy Standards**

Formal leadership in schools and school districts is a complex, multifaceted set of tasks (Shipman & Murphy, 2007). The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) established a set of 6 common standards in 1996 in an effort to renew the roles of educational leaders. This was one of many efforts at that time that were launched to redefine the roles of educational leaders for the twenty-first century. They presented a common core of knowledge, dispositions, and performances that helped link leadership more forcefully to productive schools and enhanced educational outcomes.

In 2008, the six standards were revised to represent the latest set of high-level policy standards for education leadership. These latest standards provide guidance to state policymakers as they work to improve education leadership preparation, licensure, evaluation, and professional development (Wilhoit, 2008). In revising the standards, the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) consulted with its member organizations and other policy-oriented practitioner-based organizations,

researchers, higher education officials, and leaders in the field (Wilhoit, 2008). The new

standards reflect the information and lessons learned about educational leadership over

the past 10 years. The components of the standards are set out more fully below:

1) An education leader promotes the success of every student by facilitating the
development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of
learning that is shared and supported by all stakeholders.

2) An education leader promotes the success of every student by advocating,
nurturing, and sustaining culture and instructional programs conducive to
student learning and staff professional growth.

3) An education leader promotes the success of every student by ensuring
management of the organization, operation, and resources for a safe, efficient,
and effective learning environment.

4) An education leader promotes the success of every student by collaborating
with faculty and community members, responding to diverse community
interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources.

5) An education leader promotes the success of every student by acting with
integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner.

6) An education leader promotes the success of every student by understanding,
responding to, and influencing the political, social, economic, legal, and
cultural context.

The scope of the ISLLC standards underscores the complexity of the role of being

an educational leader. These individual must not only manage school finances, keep

buses running on time, and make hiring decisions, but he or she must also be

instructional leaders, data analysts, community relation officers, and change agents

(Wilhoit, 2008). In the view of the standards, it is not difficult to find the presence of both

transactional and transformative characteristics of current educational leaders. The ability

to adapt and demonstrate flexibility in using a wide range of leadership skills is vital for

them. Leaders will fail when they take too narrow a view of the context in which they are

working.  That is unless they can think flexibly about the organization and see from

multiple angles, they will be unable to deal with the full range of issues they will

inevitably encounter (Bolman & Deal, 1997).

A fitting testament to educational leaders that continues to hold true today was

articulated in a 2001 report by the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL):

> District leaders do their thing in an arena that is perpetually besieged by a
> potpourri of often conflicting forces:  state laws and regulations, federal
> mandates, decentralized school management, demand for greater public school
> accountability, changing demographics, the school choice movement, competing
> community needs, limited resources, partisan politics, crumbling and outdated
> school buildings and equipment, suddenly expanding or contracting enrollments,
> legal challenges, shortages of qualified teachers and principals, general lack of
> respect for the education professions, the digital divide, and the list goes on. (p.
> 26)

Given these often inhibiting circumstances, the need for informed, committed district

leaders who can move school districts toward high levels of achievement for all students

is greater than ever (IEL, 2001). It is evident that as district leaders, special education

administrators have an important role in this effort.

**Special Education Leadership**

Effective leadership and administrative support for special education are critical issues in today's schools (Bays & Crockett, 2007). Special education administrators are responsible for implementing the provisions of IDEA, state, and local statutes, as well as the specific policies and procedures that stipulate a free appropriate education in the least restrictive environment (LRE) for all students with disabilities (Lashley & Boscardin, 2003). Although a large body of professional literature on educational leadership exists, relatively little research has examined the unique experiences of special education administrators (Muller, 2009; Thompson & O'Brian, 2007). Lashley and Boscardin (2003) described special education administration as the intersection of the disciplines of special education, general education, and educational administration. Navigating through this intersection effectively is increasingly important to the field due to the expanding challenges created by the increasingly complex student population, the rapidly growing number of children from diverse cultural and language backgrounds, and the ever-changing federal and state mandates for delivering special education services to students (Chalfant & Van Dusen Psy, 2007).

Roles and responsibilities of special education administrators have continued to undergo dramatic shifts in tandem with the changing roles and responsibilities of all school administrators (Furney, Hasazi, Clark-Keefe, & Hartnett, 2003; Lashley & Boscardin, 2003; Miller, 2004). Special education administration, however, is unique among other educational leadership practices because it requires a higher level of technical knowledge of many areas. Special education administrators must demonstrate

on a daily basis leadership in human resources, management, micro and macro politics, instruction, and strategic planning. This is not including the added dimension of special education administration that almost all actions and decisions have the potential spectre of due process and litigation. Leadership in all areas is essential for effective administration of special education programs.

Bakken and his colleagues (2006) argue that superintendents, special education administrators, personnel directors, curriculum directors, finance directors, and principals all have unique sets of behaviors when it comes to leadership. The special education administrator must possess general, transactional administrative skills required of other district level administrators such as budgeting, recruiting, supervising faculty and staff, and completing reports required by local, state, and federal education agencies. Coupled with these skills and requirements is the need for special education administrators to maintain ongoing communication with all stakeholders, including faculty and staff, other administrators, parents, students, legislators, and community members. Similar to principals, special education administrators must constantly negotiate competing priorities, balance management, administrative and supervisory duties, monitor legal compliance, and ensure instructional quality for students with disabilities (Bays & Crockett, 2007).

Although the characteristics of special education administration described above suggest a transactional role of leadership, it is imperative for special education administrators to adapt to the changing educational environment by demonstrating transformative leadership skills as well. Effective special education leaders provide the

necessary essential guidance for making program transitions to meet the special needs of children with disabilities and comply with federal and state mandates. However, increasingly they must influence decisions about future direction and policies for serving students with disabilities through proactive vision (Chalfant & Van Dusen Psy 2007). Special education leaders in the twenty-first century must take the time to establish a clear vision and build relationships to work collaboratively among general and special educators, other district personnel, and community partners to create and implement an instructional framework to address the diverse needs of a school or district population effectively (Kealy, 2007). Because special education is about education, and not just about the law, leadership of special education programs extends beyond compliance in addressing potential benefits for students with disabilities. The foundation of special education is inclusive of but should not be dominated by the legal discourse (Crockett, 2002).

### *Framework for Special Education Leadership*

Providing leadership for special education is problematic and influenced by micro-and macro-political dimensions including student and teacher demographics, varied instructional settings, shared leadership responsibility, and the impact of legislation, policies, and reform movements (Bays & Crockett, 2007). One useful organizing framework for guiding the work of special education administrators is Crockett's (2002) *star model.* The framework consists of five core principles, each principle representing a point on a star:

1) Ethical practice: ensures universal educational access and accountability. Leaders demonstrate capability to analyze complexities, respects others, and advocates for child benefit, justice, and full educational opportunity for every learner.

2) Individual considerations: addresses individuality and exceptionality in learning. Leaders are attentive to the relationship between the unique learning and behavioral needs of students with disabilities and the specialized instruction to address their educational progress.

3) Equity under law: provides an appropriate education through equitable public policies. Leaders are committed to the informed implementation of disability law, financial options, and public policies that support individual educational benefit.

4) Effective programming: provides individualized programming designed to enhance student performance. Leaders are skilled at supervising and evaluating educational programs in general, individualized programs in particular, foster high expectations, support research-based strategies, and target positive results for learner exceptionalities.

5) Establish Productive Partnerships: leaders are effective in communicating, negotiating, and collaborating with others on behalf of students with disabilities and their families.

Similar to the star model, Chalfant and Van Dusen Psy (2007) argue the need for visionary special education administrators who can acquire and integrate information and

be informed, effective and articulate problem-solvers. They propose a framework comprised of the following five competencies:

1) Knowledge about evidence-based practices for the identification, assessment, special education teaching methods, and delivery of service systems;

2) Skills in leadership and management with a base in legal foundations of special education, policy development and analysis, and personnel development;

3) Effective communication and collaboration with school faculty, community groups, and families in decision-making and mediating conflicts;

4) Knowledge about and skills for providing culturally responsive education to culturally and linguistically diverse learners;

5) Proficient use of technology that collects and analyzes data and information for determining student and program outcomes.

The Council for Administrators of Special Education (CASE) conducted a snapshot survey asking special education administrators to select three standards that distinguish effective leadership. The findings of that study echo many of the characteristics found in the above frameworks. The results suggest effective special education leaders as those (a) who embrace an educational vision, (b) practice the art of communication and collaboration, (c) exhibit professional ethics, and (d) are insightful in the delivery of instructional programs (Collings, 2008). In making administrative decisions in special education, there is no substitute for implementing IDEA with

integrity (Crockett, 2002). However, as these frameworks suggest, the administration of special education is a complex and comprehensive task.

*Administrator of Special Education Professional Standards*

As a joint effort by the Council for Administrators of Special Education (CASE) and the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), the *Administrator of Special Education Professional Standards* (ASEPS) were published in March, 2009. The development of the ASEPS involved an integrative synthesis of research on evidence-based practices, Q-sort analysis, and a survey of professionals. In order to address the increasing alignment of special education administration with educational leadership practices, some ASEPS closely resemble ISLLC standards. These include leadership and policy, program development and organization, ethical practice, and collaboration (Boscardin, Crockett, & Billingsley, 2009). These standards were developed with the intention of encompassing characteristics directly related to the field of special education and special education administration. Different than frameworks of practice, the standards reflect the changing policy context of American education. The standards form the foundation for aspiring to retiring leaders of special education (Boscardin, 2009). The components of the standards and associated skills for each are set out more fully below:

Standard 1:  Leadership and Policy
- Interprets and applies laws, regulations and policies
- Applies leadership, organization, and systems change theory
- Develops budget in accordance with local, state and national laws
- Engages in recruitment, hiring and retention practices
- Communicates a personal inclusive vision and mission

Standard 2:  Program Development and Organization
- Demonstrates knowledge of general curriculum applications for positive outcomes for students with disabilities
- Demonstrates knowledge of assistive technology
- Demonstrates knowledge of positive school engagement and access to the general education curriculum for students with disabilities

Standard 3:  Research and Inquiry
- Engages in data-based decision-making
- Develops data-based educational expectations and evidence-based program

Standard 4:  Evaluation
- Advocates for and implements procedures for participation in accountability systems
- Develops and implements ongoing evaluations of programs and personnel
- Provides ongoing supervision of personnel
- Designs and implements evaluation procedures that improve instructional content and practices

Standard 5:  Professional Development and Ethical Practice
- Understands ethical theories and practices and they apply to the administration of programs and services
- Understands adult learning theories and models as they apply to professional development
- Develops and implements professional activities and programs
- Joins and participates in local, state and national professional administrative organizations

Standard 6:  Collaboration
- Utilizes collaborative approaches for involving all stakeholders
- Strengthens the role of parent and advocacy organizations
- Develops and implements intra-and intra agency agreements
- Facilitates transition plans
- Implements collaborative administrative procedures and strategies
- Engages in and supports shared decision makings
- Demonstrates ongoing communication, education and support for families
- Consults and collaborates in administrative and instructional decisions at school and local level.

It is interesting to note a particular finding from the survey development process

as described by Boscardin and her colleagues (2009). That is, skill-based items were

more highly ranked than knowledge based items. This would indicate that thorough background knowledge of special education is not necessarily indicative of the ability to complete the tasks of special education administration.

## Impact of Accountability Movement

Special education has become a major concern for school leaders, as their responsibilities have increased to ensure successful learning opportunities for all students, including students with disabilities (Bays & Crockett, 2007). In the current policy context, NCLB requires most students with disabilities to learn the same academic content as students without disabilities. In order to respond to these federal mandates, building principals, special education directors, teachers, and other school leaders alike must be knowledgeable enough to adopt or change policies and practices in the provision of special education services (Chapple, Baker, & Bon, 2007).

IDEA 2004 and NCLB further require that all students with disabilities participate in state and district-wide assessments and have access to the general curriculum. Also, both emphasize higher expectations and higher achievement for all students, including those with disabilities. Participating in state assessment and accessing the general curriculum promote attaining the goal of higher achievement (Sarathy, 2008). Previously, special education administrators were held accountable for ensuring the rights of students with disabilities and following the legal procedures involved in evaluation and placement. Currently, however, accountability has expanded to include ensuring that students with disabilities are making adequate yearly progress (AYP), just like students without disabilities (Bakken et al., 2007). IDEA, although aligned with NCLB, requires

educators to teach special education students differently and sometimes teach them different things, in ways that are ensured through the planning process followed for an individualized education plan (IEP) (Bays & Crockett, 2007). As such, an additional dilemma for special education administrators is the conflict between the individualized nature of special education programming and the standardized nature of NCLB (Bakken et al., 2007). Both acts make clear that meeting diverse learner needs requires cooperation, collaboration, shared responsibility and accountability, along with use of effective educational strategies (Handler, 2006).

Ultimately, as the leader of special education services, the special education director influences the quality of education for every student with special needs within a school district (Thompson & O'Brian, 2007). Special education administrators are key leaders in the school system to which the task of ensuring that accountability assessment does not delve into an exclusionary phenomenon for students with disabilities (Bakken et al., 2007). While raising significant concerns as to how to manipulate the breadth, depth, or complexity level of grade level curriculum to be accessible to students with disabilities and help them attain progress, this legislative challenge also provides the impetus to transform instruction for these students. Research suggests that setting high expectations and enabling students with disabilities access to the general curriculum are essential to meet the requirements of IDEA and NCLB (Sarathy, 2008). The success of students with disabilities on NCLB mandates is dependent on myriad factors, including the capacity of educators to teach students with diverse needs in the LRE (Nagle et al., 2006). Educating students in the LRE is a deceptively simple proposition. The decision-making and

collaborative processes that are involved are nuanced and require a highly effective administrator (Bakken et al., 2007). Special education and general education leaders are challenged to join together to solve problems of practice inherent in a diverse, complex, high stakes educational environment (Lashley & Boscardin, 2003).

### *Instructional Leadership*

Today's educational leaders are expected to provide leadership on matters that influence student achievement (Thompson & O'Brian, 2007). The standards-based movement and the call for greater access to the general education curriculum for students with disabilities demand that special education and general education leaders share responsibility for instructional leadership (Bakken et al., 2006). Instructional leadership on the part of special education administrators necessitates effective collaboration with principals and other school leaders (Bakken et al., 2007). Negotiating interactions at the interface of special education and educational leadership comprises the work of administrators who are responsible for ensuring that students who have disabilities get what they need to learn and that their teachers receive the support they require to do their job (Crockett, 2004). In this way, the practice of special education administration shifts focus from a compliance to an instructional model (Bays & Crockett, 2007).

Boscardin (2004) observed that school reforms and recent federal policies, including IDEA and NCLB, have reshaped the special education administrator's role as an instructional leader in the school system. Experienced special educational leaders who collaborate effectively with others, understand the curriculum, and have specific pedagogical expertise are important resources to school districts (Billingsley, 2007).

Implementing IDEA in a variety of settings while meeting NCLB mandates requires a heightened awareness of the unique needs of learners and the educators who support them (Chapple et al., 2007). For professionals involved in the day-to-day delivery of special education services, the director of special education is a key instructional leader whose job goes far beyond relatively mundane managerial responsibilities such as balancing budgets and developing staffing plans. As the instructional leader of the special education service delivery team, the director is responsible for cultivating an organizational culture where professional staff is committed to teaching students with special needs using the best available instructional practices and achieving the best possible educational outcomes (Thompson & O'Brian, 2007). Bakken and his colleagues (2007) posit the special education administrator's role as an instructional leader is critical to promoting successful outcomes for students with disabilities.

### *Highly Qualified Teacher and Teacher Attrition*

Recruiting and maintaining special education personnel in the schools is becoming increasingly difficult (Chaflant & Psy 2007) due to inadequate supply of teachers and high turnover rates (Brownell, Sindelar, Bishop, Langley, & Seo, 2002). In a time when there is already a shortage of special education teachers, the requirements in recent federal mandates could pose an additional issue for special education administrators. Under NCLB and IDEA, all teachers of core academic subjects must be highly qualified (HQ) in their content areas (Bakken et al., 2006). Special education directors have expressed apprehension concerning their ability to recruit and retain school staff as a result of the HQ mandate in NCLB (Nagle & Crawford, 2004).

Special education directors must not only recruit, but also retain HQ teachers in their efforts to meet NCLB mandates. In order to provide the quality programs necessary for students with disabilities to progress in the curriculum, make progress toward individual goals and objectives, and meet academic standards and AYP (Chambers, 2007), special education administrators must take time to not only learn about why teachers leave their district but also to understand how current teachers view their work conditions (Billingsley, 2007). Supporting the delivery of instruction for students who have exceptional learning needs has serious implications for teachers and students.

Inadequate administrative and supervisory support has been linked to the shortage of special education teachers (Bays & Crockett, 2007). In a review of the literature regarding special education administrator roles in supporting and developing the special education workforce, Lashley and Boscardin (2003) indicated that administrative support is critical to retaining special educators and improving their abilities to have a positive effect on outcomes for students with disabilities. Further, in a case study completed by Billingsley (2007), lack of support from administrators was most frequently ranked as the most important factor leading to a decision to leave the field. In fact, lack of support from district administration ranked higher than inadequate support from the principal giving further evidence for the importance of special education administrative instructional leadership.

The ability to develop a qualified workforce and create work environments that sustain special education teacher involvement and commitment is one of the most challenging aspects of special education administration (Billingsley, 2004). When

personnel feel supported by their administrators, they are less likely to leave, which in turn contributes to the attractiveness of the work place environment (Lashley & Boscardin, 2003). Special education administrators interested in reducing attrition must facilitate the development of better work environments for special educators (Billingsley, 2004). Leaders in special education have a responsibility to find creative ways to mentor and connect teachers to support systems (Chambers, 2007).

### *Special Education Administrator Attrition*

The challenge of recruiting and retaining special education teachers directly affects the retention and attrition of local special education administrators. Clearly, with many special education teachers leaving the field, the number of possible future special education administrators is limited. Two recent studies provide data regarding this issue. First, CASE published the results of a survey that asked current special education directors to identify reasons special education administrators leave the profession within the first years of employment (Rude, 2008). The results were consistent with results of similar surveys regarding special education teacher attrition. The majority of the 292 respondents (58.9%) identified the lack of administrative support as the major factor in a decision to leave the field. This suggests administrative support at all levels is vital for successful special education staffing. The second highest reason identified for leaving the field (54.1%) was excessive paperwork. Legal actions, personnel issues, burdensome regulations, and lack of district finances were the remaining reasons identified. Specific to the roles and responsibilities of special education administration, the CASE survey reported the concerns about lack of resources and the resulting legal actions often

produced levels of stress that made the role of the special education administrator difficult to define, manage, and balance with multiple demands from competing constituencies.

Attrition of special education administrators also has gained attention at the national level. As part of a cooperative agreement with the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Programming (OSEP) and the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDE), results from a survey conducted in the spring of 2009 were published (Muller, 2009). State Education Agency (SEA) representatives were surveyed about the attrition of local special education directors. Some 20 out of 38 respondents reported that attrition is a problem due to the fact that local special education directors are

1. Reaching retirement age and/or accepting LEA buy-outs;

2. Spending a higher proportion of time on compliance and litigation matters and /or data collection and reporting activities;

3. Frequently required to assume additional roles such as McKinney-Vento (homeless education) director or Section 504 director;

4. Not receiving adequate administrative support and/or school board support

5. Facing increasing budget constraints to meet district needs;

6. Confronting increased shortages of qualified personnel.

These results are indicative of the many concerns regarding the complex and demanding roles and responsibilities of special education administrators identified in this review of the literature.

**Gender and Educational Leadership**

The role of gender cannot be discounted in a study of educational leadership. Women have always played a significant role in leading American education, not only as teachers but also as administrators (Polka, Lichka, & Davis, 2008). Women are highly represented in education. Approximately 75% of the educational labor force is female (Polka et al., 2008). However, an emerging body of research on women and educational administration has examined the underrepresentation of women in building and district leadership positions (Banks, 2007; Garn & Brown, 2008; Saks, 1992). Although leadership opportunities for women in school administration began to increase in the 1980s (Saks, 1992), access and entry into educational administration positions is a continuing struggle (Searby & Tripses, 2006). Clear explanations for this struggle continue to elude the field. In terms of advanced training, degrees held, number of years in the profession, and total numbers in the pool from which administrators are drawn, no justification exists for the small number of women who are educational leaders (Banks, 2007).

Leadership theory and practice are evolving and the traditional leadership paradigm is being challenged. Although the supervision area abounds with theories and scripts, historically little has been written on the impact of gender on successful administration (Shakeshaft, Nowell, & Perry, 2007). As a research topic, women in superintendent positions have only been investigated for the past 20 years. As for women as other central office administrators, much less is known because very few studies have been done of women in these positions (Grogan, 2008). Nevertheless, research on and

conducted by women in educational leadership is growing. As a result, women are adding an exciting element to the study of leadership (Banks, 2007).

Since the representation of women in administrative positions has been an increasing matter of scholarly and professional interest, the leadership behaviors women exhibit in their practice is a topic of high relevance especially in special education, which has a high number of female administrators. Studies have shown that women leaders share many commonalities (Banks, 2007). Boatman (2007) wrote of three characteristics that assist effective leadership that she believes are most frequently demonstrated by women. The first is reflection and self-awareness. Women tend not to define themselves by the job. Instead, they embrace a complex and multi-faceted identity and believe that personal awareness is honed by wide exposure to life experiences. Second, women are more eager to share power than to wield it and they demonstrate interactive leadership. As such, empowerment is a characteristic most frequently used to characterize effective women educational leaders. The third characteristic is transformation. Women educational leaders create conditions so that persons, and therefore groups and communities, change to become practitioners of leadership themselves.

In a study that included similar characteristics of leadership, Brown and Irby (2004) surveyed female leaders of inclusive schools. An inclusive school was defined as one that facilitates educational empowerment and progress for all staff and students. Certain attitudes and leadership behaviors specifically attributed to female leaders are particularly effective in building leadership capacity. These include developing a sense of community that is essential in bringing about the type of systemic change necessary to

transform a traditionally-oriented educational organization to one of inclusiveness. Further, they found the vision, caring, collaboration, intuition, power, and information sharing that females bring to leadership are attributes of inclusive schools and indicative of transformative leadership.

In a study about women superintendents, Garn and Brown (2008) found that most participants did not aspire to administrative leadership roles until later in their careers. Rather than aspire to top administrative roles early, participants said that they built confidence and changed their professional aspirations over time. Being identified, encouraged, and recruited piqued their interest in the executive position. In related research, Searby and Tripses (2006) found that reasons for the discrepancy between numbers of women in the teaching ranks and administrative positions include lack of networking, few positive role models, and inadequate sponsorship and mentoring among women.

Once in a position of leadership, however, women demonstrate key distinguishing features of transformative leadership. Boatman (2007) stated that women educational leaders exhibit powerful relational connections in terms of mentoring and support. Many traits thought to be important for twenty-first century transformative leadership, including communication, balance, empowerment, collaboration and vision, are found in both female and male, but they are more natural for women (Boatman, 2007). Research has indicated that effective educational leaders must possess expertise more typically associated with women, including keeping instruction at the forefront and developing relationship with schools and wider community members to foster the

academic and social growth of students (Grogan, 2008; Banks, 2007). Dana and

Bourisaw (2006) concurred that woman's roles as nurturers and collaborators may more

effectively result in improved student performance, but those roles are not typically

viewed as being as valuable as the more traditional leadership roles demonstrated by

men.

A significant number of women educational leaders have backgrounds in

curriculum and instruction, most women have spent more years in the classroom before

entering administration, and most place a high premium on continuing education for

themselves (Grogan & Brunner, 2005). Women see themselves as educational leaders,

perhaps because they enjoy teaching, and administration gives them an opportunity to

foster learning on a greater scale. As leaders, women view the importance of building

learning communities through the instructional expertise they bring to the position.

Grogan (2008) stated characteristics historically attributed to women in the early history

of the United States, namely, the capacity to deal with difficult situations, strength,

resiliency, and the ability to manage enterprises are not unlike educational leaders of

today. Current education leadership represents a much more down-to-earth, messy

business that involves navigating of constantly changing circumstances and dealing with

external forces over which leaders have little control and for which research suggests

women are better .

As knowledge about the experiences of women in educational leadership deepens,

it may help school districts to select, train, and nurture more effective educational leaders

in the twenty-first century (Banks, 2007). What is evident from the review of literature is

that male and female leadership styles overlap and effective leadership should not be relegated to characteristics of gender. Garn and Brown (2008) concluded that effective leaders become adept at utilizing both stereotypical male and female characteristics and reactions to combat difficult situations. Simply put, they are tough or compassionate, collaborative or dictatorial, depending on what the situation requires. They learn to react in neither exclusively traditional male or female ways but rather with the tools they need to accomplish the task or challenge at hand. This knowledge holds promise for addressing the issues regarding the recruitment and retention of special education administrators.

This brief review of the role of gender in educational leadership indicates that female leaders may naturally inhabit transformative characteristics of leadership. These include collaboration, communication, nurturing and mentoring, and building a sense of community. The review also suggests that female educational leaders are more inclined to demonstrate instructional leadership due to longer experiences in the classroom environment than their male counterparts. These same characteristic have been identified in this chapter as key components of effective special education leadership. This may help explain why it seems women pre-dominate the field of special education administration.

Few data identify who are leading special education programs. Literature also is sparse regarding the challenges of special education administration in the twenty-first century. Research suggests these challenges contribute to a growing attrition rate of special education administrators in an era of increased focus and accountability for meeting the needs of students with disabilities. This study uses special education

administration in North Carolina as an example to assist state and local leaders in the

recruitment and retention of special education administrators.

# CHAPTER III

# METHOD

The administration of special education is being delivered by a wide range of professionals from varying backgrounds and experiences. Local education agencies face the dilemma of filling vacant special education positions in an era of increased focus on accountability for meeting the needs of students with disabilities. The shortage of special education administrators is well-documented, exacerbated by the shortage of special education teachers who might eventually see that role as their career path (Lashley & Boscardin, 2003). Almost seventy percent of special education administrators in North Carolina have left their positions in the past three years. As a result, efforts to retain those currently in the field has become even more important. Few data identify those who are currently serving as special education administrators and what they perceive are the factors that contribute to staying or leaving the field. Given the number of new special education administrators who enter the field each year, a need exists to understand their background and experience and thus their capacity to lead and influence that the field.

In this era of accountability, special education leadership is both challenging and complicated. Special education administrators must demonstrate varied forms of leadership in order to run an effective special education program. The purpose of this study was to provide insight into the administration of special education, enhance the understanding of the complexities of the field, and provide a meaningful guide to action

for retaining special education leaders at the district level. Specifically, it was designed to address these questions:

1. Who is leading the field of special education administration in North Carolina?

2. What are special education administrators' views regarding their decision to stay or leave?

## Design of the Study

A survey method was utilized for this study. Survey research has some clear advantages. First, the use of surveys allows problems to be investigated in realistic settings. Specifically, this study surveyed those individuals who are currently working as special education administrators in North Carolina. Second, survey research is a familiar format in almost all areas of life. As a result, participants do not need extensive directions or training for how to complete a survey. Survey research has become more prominent within the field of education. Survey use in the educational community has grown significantly as a method to collect data and present evidence in high-stakes decisions (Derrington, 2009). Additionally, local school systems often conduct school and community surveys that focus on school factors such as operations, working conditions, and the community's perception of the schools (Wiersma & Jurs, 2005). Finally, survey methods have the advantage of allowing the researcher to collect information from a large group of people with relative ease and efficiency (Mertens & McLaughlin, 2004).

Some cautions exist when choosing survey research. Causality is difficult to establish because many intervening and extraneous variables may be involved. Therefore,

the researcher may not be certain whether the relationships between independent and dependent variables are causal or non causal. Another caution is that inappropriate wording or placement of questions within a survey may bias results. Specific to this study were concerns about the existence of some bias on survey responses because of my professional relationship with the participants as a member of the population. Also, several questions which requested demographical information assumed participants had either a special education or teaching background. There were not questions specifically targeted for other special education-related experience such as school psychology or speech/language pathology. Nonetheless, a survey method was chosen over other designs such as interviews and focus groups due to the number of special education administrators in North Carolina. A survey method allowed efficient and effective collection of data to provide an overview of the factors that characterize the North Carolina special education administrator population.

As defined by Creswell (2005), it is possible in survey research to study an entire population when it is small and can be easily identified. This type of survey study, sometimes called a census study, permits conclusions to be drawn about the entire population. The population of North Carolina special education administrators meets these criteria; hence a census study was selected as the research design. Using a census design, random sampling and hypothesis testing are not necessary. Because the data were collected at one point in time, the survey meets the definition of cross-sectional. Cross-sectional designs have the advantage of measuring current attitudes, beliefs, opinions, or practices (Creswell, 2005).

It is important to note that the cross-sectional census design for this study has characteristics of a mixed-method approach. Creswell and Plano-Clark (2007) define mixed methods as a research method that focuses on collecting, analyzing, and mixing both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study or series of studies. Furthermore, they have defined the need for mixed method design when quantitative data can be enhanced by qualitative data. The acquisition of qualitative data provides a deeper understanding of the research questions than an exclusively quantitative approach. These data allows for exploration of the inner experiences of participants to determine how meanings are formed and discover unknown variable (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This study did not include the qualitative data that is rich in context and detail that is a hallmark for qualitative research (Morse & Richards, 2002). However, because the survey included open-response items, analysis of both qualitative and quantitative data to meet the minimum criteria spelled out in Creswell and Plano-Clark's (2007) definition of mixed-methods research.

My personal biography played a role in choice of the survey delivery mechanism. As a current director of special education in North Carolina, I am familiar with the prevalence of on-line communication in the field. Electronic communication is conducted in the day to day business of special education directors at the local and the state level. It is also an important networking and collaboration tool among directors. The act of survey completion may be considered a form of information exchange. Information exchange is facilitated when a degree of trust exists between the actors involved (Bartholomew & Smith, 2006). As a result, a web-based survey was chosen over a mailed questionnaire. A

higher response rate was anticipated because special education directors are already familiar with the technology, and the research was being conducted by a peer. Both the method and population choice for this study were selected partly on the convenience of being a member of the population.

Though online data collection is relatively new among educational researchers, several benefits have already been identified (Lefever, Dal, & Matthiasdottir, 2006). For example, web surveys guarantee a rather short timeframe for the collection of responses and are time and cost saving (Mertler, 2002). Also, the recipient can respond immediately on receipt, and data can be transferred directly into a database for analysis (Wiersma & Jurs, 2005). Some evidence suggests that web-based surveys result in higher response rates. In a survey conducted by Lee, Frank, Cole, and Mikhael (2002), thirty-three percent of the participants responded to their questionnaires within 24 hours of the survey launch resulting in a much higher response rate than earlier surveys sent and returned through mail. Aligning the survey with the established online network of special education directors was anticipated to have a positive effect on survey response rate. Carbonarar and Bainbridge (2000) point out that an easy access to surveys for all participants is essential in online data collection as well as a built-in security system to ensure credibility and anonymity.

To address all of these components, a web-based survey company was utilized as the format for conducting the online survey. This provided a variety of options for question types in the final survey design including multiple choice, rating scales, and open-ended. Also utilized was the customized skip logic feature. This feature allowed

participants to skip questions that did not apply to them, facilitating a more efficient and user-friendly experience. The use of an online survey and data collection method allowed gathering and downloading information in multiple formats. An account was purchased with a web-based survey company in order to construct the survey as well as gather and analyze data. The site employs multiple layers of security to make sure data remain private and secure. This feature helped ensure the confidentiality of the participants.

## Participants and Setting

Currently, North Carolina has 115 special education administrators in the public school system. Because this was a census study, the entire population of special education directors in North Carolina was surveyed. The directors were those who served in local education agencies. As the researcher, I did not participate in the survey. During the data collection phase, six special education director positions were vacant for a total number of participants of 108. Private school special education directors were not included as participants due to their unique circumstances and the inaccessibility of their contact information.

## Instrumentation

The survey used in this study was developed using these procedures:

1.  A review of literature was completed in order to develop a deeper understanding special education administration. The similarities and differences of other education administrative positions and special education administrative positions were established through the lens of transactional and transformative leadership characteristics.

2. Survey items were generated based on that review

3. Dissertation committee members provided feedback to each draft and revisions were made accordingly

4. Colleagues also provided feedback on the initial draft

Once a draft of the instrument was completed, reviewed, and revised, a pilot study was conducted. The participants for the pilot survey were 15 special education administrators who were not in director roles. Because the purpose of the pilot study was to gather input and feedback on the survey instrument, it was important to not involve special education directors who would be participating in the study itself. As a result, the administrators chosen for the pilot study consisted mainly of program specialists and assistant directors from the southwest region of the North Carolina as identified by the Exceptional Children's Division of the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction. This region includes 10 of the 115 LEAs. Questions comprised basic demographics to identify key characteristics of the population and the draft instrument, including other survey questions from smaller surveys previously utilized by the Council of Administrators of Special Education (CASE) (Rude, 2008).

Participants were asked to review the survey and provide feedback regarding format, content, and types of questions asked. An open invitation for additional input was also given. As a follow-up, I met with four of the participants for a group interview to gather specific information and ideas for the final survey. A web-based survey was not utilized for the pilot study so that participants could make notes and provide written feedback for each individual question. Nine out of 15 participants responded to the pilot-

study survey, a response rate of 60%. Both in the group interview and on the returned survey instruments, most of the participants provided feedback on the wording of specific questions, answer choices, and the basic format and appearance of the survey. The most frequent comment made by participants concerned the need for a web-based survey as the final instrument. All information was reviewed and incorporated in the final instrument development.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the special education director population in North Carolina, the final survey included both quantitative and qualitative measures. Personal characteristics were divided into demographic information about the respondent (i.e. age, gender, ethnicity, education level, etc.), teaching experience, administrative experience, licensure areas held, and estimated length of employment as a special education director. Other information included characteristics of their school districts, their administrative roles and responsibilities, and identification of their supervisors. Such background information was important to the study in order to identify characteristics and factors contributing to the retention of special education administrators.

The second part of the instrument included questions that asked the respondents to identify and rank a variety of factors. First, factors were listed that contribute to remaining in the field. These factors included job satisfaction, job security, administrative support, financial compensation compared to other employment options, support from colleagues, and professional growth/opportunity for career advancement. Second, factors that would contribute to leaving the field were enumerated. These factors

included lack of administrative support, excessive paperwork, legal/due process issues, federal/state regulation, local policies, and lack of needed financial resources. Finally, the survey included two open-ended questions. The first asked participant opinions about the most and least satisfying aspects of their job. Second, the respondents were asked to discuss the most important characteristics or knowledge relate to success in the position.

**Procedures**

As a member of the population being studied, I had access to contact information for the potential participants. As a result, no other collaborators, individuals, or agency participated in the recruitment of participants or collection of data. Institutional Review Board approval was granted with exempt study status. An individual account with a web-based survey company was arranged for collecting and storing all data via its secure site. Although the population was identified as special education administrators in North Carolina, the survey tool was designed to not identify specific directors with their responses. To protect participant confidentiality, no personally identifiable information was included in the survey. Given the design of the survey and the use of anonymous data collection, no breach of confidentiality was anticipated. Because this study consisted of characteristics and opinions of special education administrators, minimal to no risk existed of any potential misuse of information should an unexpected breach occur.

Using the e-mail contact list for North Carolina special education local education agency administrators posted on the Department of Public Instruction Exceptional Children Division website, I sent an initial e-mail describing the purpose of the study to each special education director in June, 2009. This e-mail detailed the assurance of

confidentiality. The e-mail informed them of the study, requested their participation, and provided a link for the web-based survey site should they consent to participate. The first contact resulted in several returned emails from LEAs of directors who were no longer employed or who had changed their contact information from the last post on the Department of Public Instruction website. To ensure contact with all current special education directors and increase participation, a copy of this original email was sent to the four regional special education administrator consultants a week after the initial contact and forwarded to each special education director within their regions. Regional consultants communicate electronically with their directors on a weekly basis, and they meet face-to-face on a monthly basis. The utilization of regional consultants ensured that all possible participants were contacted because they had the most up-to-date contact information for the directors in their regions. Data were collected from June 15 until July 15, 2009.

## Data Analysis

### *Analysis of Quantitative Data*

Data were entered into SPSS version 15.0 for Windows. Descriptive statistics were computed on demographic data. Frequencies and percents for gender, age range, and ethnicity were reported. Specific data analyses for each research question follow:

*Research Question 1: What are the characteristics of special education leadership personnel in North Carolina?*

To examine research question one, descriptive statistics were calculated for demographic data. These included personal demographic data (age, ethnicity, and

gender), educational background and experience, and licensure. Descriptive statistics included frequency and percentages for nominal data and means and standard deviations for continuous data.

*Research Question 2: How do current special education directors perceive retention in the field?*

  To examine research question two, descriptive statistics were calculated to explore which factors contribute to professional retention and intent to leave. Descriptive statistics included means and standard deviations ranked in descending order to evaluate which factors are most likely to lead to professional retention or intent to leave. Participants were asked to rank (7 = most likely and 1 = least likely) which factors contribute to professional retention and intent to leave. Professional retention items included factors such as job satisfaction, job security, administrative support, compensation, colleague support, and career advancement. Intent to leave subscales included lack of items such as administrative support, excess paperwork, legal issues, federal and state regulations, personal issues, local policies, and lack of necessary financial resources.

Research Question 3: Is there a relationship between the characteristics of special education directors and their perceptions regarding retention in the field?

  Spearman rho and bi-serial correlations were utilized to analyze of possible relationships. Spearman rho demonstrates the degree of monostatic relationships between two variables that are arranged in rank order. Bi-serial correlations are computed when a variable has been collapsed (Vogt, 2005). To examine research question 3(a), seven

Spearman rho correlations were conducted to assess if a relationship existed between age and retention (job satisfaction, job security, administrative support, compensation, colleague support, career opportunity and other).

To examine research question 3(b), seven Spearman rho correlations were conducted to assess if a relationship exists between age and intent to leave (lack of administrative support, excess paperwork, legal issues, personnel issues, regulations, policies and lack of finances)

To examine research question 3(c), seven point bi-serial correlations were conducted to assess if a relationship existed between gender (male vs. female) and retention (job satisfaction, job security, administrative support, compensation, colleague support, career opportunity and other).

To examine research question 3(d), seven point bi-serial correlations were conducted to assess if a relationship existed between gender (male vs. female) and intent to leave (lack of administrative support, excess paperwork, legal issues, personnel issues, regulations, policies and lack of finances). For questions 3(c) and (d), the collapsed variable was gender.

To examine research question 3(e), seven point bi-serial correlations will be conducted to assess if a relationship existed between district (rural vs. suburban/urban) and retention (job satisfaction, job security, administrative support, compensation, colleague support, career opportunity and other).

To examine research question 3(f), seven point bi-serial correlations were conducted to assess if a relationship existed between district (rural vs. suburban/urban)

and intent to leave (lack of administrative support, excess paperwork, legal issues, personnel issues, regulations, policies and lack of finances). For questions 3(e) and (f) district (rural vs. suburban/urban) was the collapsed variable.

*Qualitative Data Analysis*

Constant comparison coding was utilized as a means of identifying themes from ongoing data collection and analysis. Creswell (2005) noted constant comparison is an inductive data analysis procedure in grounded theory research of generating and connecting categories by comparing incidents in the data to other incidents, incidents to categories, and categories to other categories. Responses to the two open-ended questions at the end of the survey instrument were read a minimum of three times per question to obtain an overall impression of the participants' responses. Next to each response, labels were generated to reflect initial coding. From these labels, a general category scheme was developed. The purpose of converging quantitative and qualitative information is to provide a rich and detailed analysis of the research questions. Educational outcomes are complex and often influenced by a variety of factors (Wiersma & Jurs, 2005). Qualitative data were used to reinforce quantitative information and provide a more comprehensive understanding of who is leading the field of special education in North Carolina. Specifically, these items queried the most and least stratifying aspects of the job and the characteristics and knowledge most important in order to succeed in the position?

In summary, this study was designed to gather data about who is leading special education programs in North Carolina public school systems. An online survey was chosen as the most convenient and efficient method for gathering data from a large group

of participants throughout the state. Personal demographic data enhanced understanding about this population. In addition, qualitative data provided further insight into the complexity of the field, thus providing a guide to action for retaining district special education administrators.

## CHAPTER IV

## RESULTS

### Survey Responses

The purpose of this study was to answer the question, "Who is leading the field of special education in North Carolina?" Few data identify those who are currently serving as special education administrators and the factors they perceive as contributing to staying or leaving the role. Information gained from this study provides insight into the administration of special education, enhances the understanding of the complexities of the field, and provides a meaningful guide to action for retaining special education leaders at the district level.

Of the 115 North Carolina special education administrators, 70 completed the study. As the researcher, I did not participate in the study and six other positions were vacant during the data collection period for a possible participant number of 108. Thus, the overall response rate was sixty-five percent. Sixty-six (94.3%) of these completed the entire survey.

### Quantitative Results

Research question 1 asked "What are the characteristics of special education leadership personnel in North Carolina?" To examine this question, descriptive statistics including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations were computed for questions on the first section of the survey instrument. Of the special education

administrators surveyed, the majority (N = 32; 46%) held a bachelor's degree in a special

education related area (e.g. special education, speech language pathology, psychology), 9

(13%) had received a bachelor's degree in another area of education (e.g. early

childhood, math, PE), and the remaining respondents (N = 29; 41%) indicated various

non-education based bachelor's degrees such as criminal justice, journalism, and political

science. All of the participants had a master's degree. The majority (56%) of special

education directors had received their master's degree in special education, school

psychology, or speech language pathology. Almost a third (N = 20; 29%) obtained a

master's degree in school administration. Six of the participants reported master's degree

in both a special education area and school administration. Twenty-nine participants

(41%) had also obtained a doctorate, the majority of these (52%), in the area of school

administration. One special education director obtained a doctorate in special education

administration.

A majority of the special education directors (64%) reported that they were

currently licensed as a special education teacher (see Table 1). Of those, 60% were

licensed in the area of intellectual disabilities and 47% were licensed in the area of

learning disabilities. All of these respondents were licensed in more than one disability

area or had obtained a cross categorical license. A large majority of special education

directors (71%) reported direct experience as a special education teacher (see Table 1).

The majority (33%) of these directors had between 6 and 10 years of teaching experience.

One director reported less than two years of classroom experience. The same number of

directors (N = 11; 22.9%), reported between 3 and 5 years or between 11 and 15 years of

teaching experience. Only nine directors (18.8%) indicated 15 or more years spent in the

special education classroom (see Table 2).

**Table 1**

*Special Education Licensure and Teacher Experience*

|  | Yes | | No | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | N | % | N | % |
| Are you currently licensed as a special education teacher? | 45 | 64.3 | 25 | 35.7 |
| Have you been a special education teacher? | 48 | 70.6 | 20 | 29.4 |

**Table 2**

*Years Experience Teaching Special Education*

| Years Experience | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| 0-2 | 1 | 2.1 |
| 3-5 | 11 | 22.9 |
| 6-10 | 16 | 33.3 |
| 11-15 | 11 | 22.9 |
| 15+ | 9 | 18.8 |

When asked to identify the disability categories of students represented in their teaching experience, 89.6% of the respondents (N = 48) identified experience teaching students with mild intellectual disabilities. The same number identified experience teaching students with serious emotional disabilities. In the area of students with learning disabilities, 87.5% reported having teaching experience. Three out of four directors (75%) indicated experience teaching students with other health impairments. Only six directors reported experience working students identified as deaf and deaf/blind (see Table 3). Twenty special education administrators reported no experience teaching students with disabilities.

The majority of special education directors (77%) reported experience teaching special education at the elementary level, 65% at the middle school level, 56% at the high school level, and 21% at birth through the kindergarten level (see Table 4).

A large majority of the respondents (88%) reported having to perform administrative duties as part of their teaching experience (see Table 5). Those duties were described as assistance with scheduling and acting as department chair.

Twenty-three (34%) North Carolina special education administrators reported current licensure as a general education teacher (see Table 6). Of these administrators, 20 provided information regarding their areas of licensure. Slightly less than half percent of these directors were licensed in the area of elementary education. Only 2 directors indicated secondary licensure. Sixty percent reported middle school, with several having dual elementary and middle licensure. Other areas of licensure reported included physical education, music, and health.

**Table 3**

*Disability Categories Represented in Special Education Teaching*

| Disability Category | Unmarked | | Marked | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | % | N | % |
| Autistic | 44 | 62.9 | 26 | 37.1 |
| Deaf/Blindness | 64 | 91.4 | 6 | 8.6 |
| Developmentally Delayed | 51 | 72.9 | 19 | 27.1 |
| Deafness | 64 | 91.4 | 6 | 8.6 |
| Hearing Impaired | 47 | 67.1 | 23 | 32.9 |
| Intellectually Disabled (Mild) | 27 | 38.6 | 43 | 61.4 |
| Intellectually Disabled (Moderate) | 37 | 52.9 | 33 | 47.1 |
| Intellectually Disabled (Severe) | 55 | 78.6 | 15 | 21.4 |
| Learning Disabled | 28 | 40.0 | 42 | 60.0 |
| Other Health Impaired | 34 | 48.6 | 36 | 51.4 |
| Orthopedically Impaired | 48 | 68.6 | 22 | 31.4 |
| Multiple Disability | 50 | 71.4 | 20 | 28.6 |
| Speech/Language Disabled | 48 | 68.6 | 22 | 31.4 |
| Serious Emotional Disabled | 27 | 38.6 | 43 | 61.4 |
| Traumatic Brain Injured | 50 | 71.4 | 20 | 28.6 |
| Visually Impaired | 55 | 78.6 | 15 | 21.4 |

**Table 4**

*Grade Level Special Education Teaching Experience*

|  | Unmarked | | Marked | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Grade Level | N | % | N | % |
| Birth through Kindergarten | 60 | 85.7 | 10 | 14.3 |
| Elementary | 33 | 47.1 | 37 | 52.9 |
| Middle | 39 | 55.7 | 31 | 44.3 |
| Secondary | 43 | 61.4 | 27 | 38.6 |

**Table 5**

*Special Education Teacher Administrative Duties*

|  | Yes | | No | |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | N | % | N | % |
| In your special education teacher experience, did you have administrative duties assigned to you? | 42 | 87.5 | 6 | 12.5 |

**Table 6**

*General Education Licensure and Teaching Experience*

|  | Yes | | No | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
|  | N | % | N | % |
| Are you currently licensed as a general education teacher? | 23 | 33.8 | 45 | 66.2 |
| Have you been a general education teacher? | 15 | 22.4 | 52 | 77.6 |

Of the special education administrators who held licensure in general education, 15 (22%) reported experience as a general education teacher. The majority of these respondents,  (N = 5, 33%) taught general education for less than two years; four (27%) reported more than 15 years of teaching experience, three (20%) reported between 11 and 15 years  experience, two (13%) reported between 6 and 10 years and 1 special education administrator reported between 3-5 years experience (see Table 7).

For the 15 special education directors who reported general education teaching experience, 11 (73%) had experience at the elementary and the middle school level. Only three of these directors (20%) had experience at the pre-school level and seven (46.7%) reported experience at the high school level. Of the special education administrators with general education teaching experience, (N = 11, 73.3%) noted having administrative duties such as assisting with scheduling and serving as department chair.

**Table 7**

*Years Experience as General Education Teacher*

| Years Experience | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| 0-2 | 5 | 33.3 |
| 3-5 | 1 | 6.7 |
| 6-10 | 2 | 13.3 |
| 11-15 | 3 | 20.0 |
| 15+ | 4 | 26.7 |

When asked about general education administrative experience the majority of directors (58%) responded negatively (see Table 8). Of the 42% who indicated general education administrative experience, 86% served as an assistant principal, 61% had experience as a district-level administrator, 43% were principals, and 11% reported experience as an associate/assistant superintendent (see Table 9).

**Table 8**

*General Education Administration Experience*

| | Yes | | No | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | % | N | % |
| Have you been a general education administrator? | 28 | 41.8 | 39 | 58.2 |

**Table 9**

*Type of General Education Administration Experience*

| Grade Level | Unmarked | | Marked | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | % | N | % |
| Assistant Principal | 46 | 65.7 | 24 | 34.3 |
| Principal | 58 | 82.9 | 12 | 17.1 |
| District-Level Administrator | 53 | 75.7 | 17 | 24.3 |
| Associate/Assistant Superintendent | 67 | 95.7 | 3 | 4.3 |
| Superintendent | 70 | 100.0 | 0 | 0.0 |

A large majority (N = 57, 89%) of the special education directors reported that they have the NC special education program administrator's license. This license can be obtained by meeting the coursework and Praxis test requirements as identified by the Department of Public Instruction, or through participation in the NC New Special Education Director Institute. Frequency and percents conducted on responses to the question "How many years have you been a special education administrator at the district level?" reveal that most (N = 24, 37.5%) have between 6 and 10 years of experience in the field. Fourteen (22%) reported between 3 and 5 years experience, 10 (16%) had between one and two years, 9(14%) had over 15 years, and 6 reported between 11 and 15 years experience as a district level special education administrator. One director reported less than one year of experience in the field (see Table 10).

**Table 10**

*Years Experience as Special Education Administrator*

| Years Experience | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| < 1 Year | 1 | 1.6 |
| 1-2 | 10 | 15.6 |
| 3-5 | 14 | 21.9 |
| 6-10 | 24 | 37.5 |
| 11-15 | 6 | 9.4 |
| Over 15 | 9 | 14.1 |

Because this question did not specify the type of administrative experience, data may reflect prior experience as a program specialist or assistant special education director.

Special education directors were asked to indicate the number of years they had served in their current position. Responses range from less than one year to over 15 years (N = 3, 5%). The majority of directors (N = 38, 59%) indicated between 3 and 10 years of experience in their current position, 16 (25%) reported between 1 and 2 years, and four (6%) reported between 11 and 15 years (see Table 11).

Frequencies and percents regarding anticipated next career step of special education directors revealed that 63% of the directors planned to finish their career as a special education administrator. Only 31 administrators provided information regarding their next career steps.

**Table 11**

*Years Experience in Current Position*

| Years Experience | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| < 1 Year | 3 | 4.7 |
| 1-2 | 16 | 25.0 |
| 3-5 | 20 | 31.3 |
| 6-10 | 18 | 28.1 |
| 11-15 | 4 | 6.3 |
| Over 15 | 3 | 4.7 |

Many of these respondents (N = 15; 48%) reported they planned to work as an associate or assistant superintendent as their next career step; nine (29%) anticipated a move to higher education; and six (19%) planned to retire. An equal number of respondents (N = 5, 16.1%) planned to become a superintendent or building level administrator, and four (12.9%) planned to return to their former building level position of teacher or school psychologist (see Table 12).

An equal number of respondents (N = 16; 25%) reported having between three and five years and between six and 10 years before retirement or leaving the field. The majority (N = 19; 29.7%) of administrators reported 11 or more years, while a small number (N = 6; 9.4%) reported less than two years before retirement or leaving the field.

The remaining special education administrators (N = 7, 10.9%) reported leaving the field within the year.

**Table 12**

*Frequencies and Percentages for Responses to Survey Question 20: "Approximately How Much Time Remains Until Retirement/Leaving the Field?"*

| Response | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| Less than a year | 7 | 10.9 |
| 1-2 | 6 | 9.4 |
| 3-5 | 16 | 25.0 |
| 6-10 | 16 | 25.0 |
| 11-15 | 10 | 15.6 |
| Over 15 | 9 | 14.1 |

Frequencies and percents on responses to the survey question regarding to whom special education directors report revealed that most (N = 41; 63.1%) of the directors report directly to either an associate or assistant superintendent. However, a large number of directors (N = 27; 38%) report directly to the district superintendent (see Table 13). The majority of special education directors (83.1%) reported being responsible for other programs in addition to special education. Of the 54 directors who provided further information about additional duties, 34 supervised Section 504 and 22 supervised the

Academically Gifted program. The presence of other supervisory duties demonstrates the multi-faceted role of special education administration in most districts.

**Table 13**

*Direct Supervisor of Special Education Directors*

| Supervisor | N | % |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Superintendent | 27 | 41.5 |
| Executive Director | 3 | 4.6 |
| Associative Superintendent | 15 | 23.1 |
| Assistant Superintendent | 26 | 40.0 |
| Other | 4 | 6.2 |

Three questions on the survey instrument were designed to gather school district information. A large majority of special education administrators described their district as rural (N = 45, 70.3%). Of the remaining administrators, nine (14.1%) described district as suburban and 10 (15.6%) as urban. The minimum average daily membership of the school district was 1,100 and the maximum was 132,000. The minimum amount of students receiving special education on the last reported headcount was 100 and the maximum was 10,510 (*M* = 1493.44, *SD* = 1860.25). These results are summarized in Table 14.

**Table 14**

*School District Demographics*

|  | N | Min | Max | *M* | *SD* |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| What is the Average Daily Membership (ADM) of your school district? | 63 | 1,100 | 132,000 | 12,957.24 | 20,197.15 |
| Approximately how many students were receiving Special Education on Last reported Headcount? | 64 | 100 | 10,510 | 1,493.44 | 1,860.25 |

This section of the survey instrument concluded with questions designed to gather personal demographic data. The majority of North Carolina special education administrators are female (N = 50, 76.9%). Other data in this section included ethnicity and age range. A summary of results these results are shown in Tables 15 and 16.

**Table 15**

*Ethnicity of Special Education Directors*

| Ethnicity | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| White | 56 | 86.2 |
| African-American | 8 | 12.3 |
| Hispanic | 1 | 1.5 |
| Asian | 0 | 0.0 |
| Other | 0 | 0.0 |

**Table 16**

*Special Education Director Age Ranges*

| Age Range | N | % |
|---|---|---|
| < 30 | 1 | 1.5 |
| 31-40 | 9 | 13.8 |
| 41-50 | 18 | 27.7 |
| 51-60 | 34 | 52.3 |
| > 60 | 3 | 4.6 |

*Perceptions of North Carolina Special Education Directors Regarding Retention*

Research Question 2 addressed how current special education administrators perceive retention in the field. Specifically, it queried regarding the factors that would contribute to remaining or leaving. To examine research question 2, frequencies and percents were conducted on retention and intent to leave. Factors that would contribute to remaining in the special education administration field were (a) job satisfaction, (b) job security, (c) administrative support, (d) financial compensation compared to other employment options, (e) support from colleagues, and (f) professional growth/opportunity for career advancement. The factors were ranked from 1 (least significant) to 7 (most significant) in order to assess what factors would contribute to remaining in the special administration field. On *job satisfaction*, the majority (N = 39, 60.9%) of the participants claimed that this was the most significant factor contributing to

remaining in the field. Also identified as a highly significant factor (N = 34, 53.1%) was

*administrative support*. The factors *job security* (N = 28, 43.8%), *financial compensation*

*compared to other employment options* (N = 22, 34.4%), *support from colleagues* (N =

27, 42.2%), and *professional growth and opportunity for career advancement* (N = 24,

36.9%) were identified as significant. These results are summarized in Table 17.

**Table 17**

*Factors That Would Contribute to Remaining in the Field*

| Factor | 1 | | 2 | | 3 | | 4 | | 5 | | 6 | | 7 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| Job Satisfaction | 0 | 0.0 | 1 | 1.6 | 0 | 0.0 | 3 | 4.7 | 4.7 | 3 | 18 | 28.1 | 39 | 60.9 |
| Job Security | 4 | 6.3 | 3 | 4.7 | 4 | 6.3 | 5 | 7.8 | 10 | 15.6 | 28 | 43.8 | 10 | 15.6 |
| Administrative Support | 0 | 0.0 | 1 | 1.6 | 0 | 0.0 | 4 | 6.3 | 8 | 12.5 | 17 | 26.6 | 34 | 53.1 |
| Financial Comp. Compared to Other employment options | 0 | 0.0 | 1 | 1.6 | 4 | 6.3 | 9 | 14.1 | 10 | 15.6 | 22 | 34.4 | 18 | 28.1 |
| Support from colleagues | 0 | 0.0 | 0 | 0.0 | 3 | 4.7 | 3 | 4.7 | 9 | 14.1 | 27 | 42.2 | 22 | 34.4 |
| Professional growth/ opportunity for career advancement | 2 | 3.1 | 3 | 4.6 | 1 | 1.5 | 11 | 16.9 | 12 | 18.5 | 24 | 36.9 | 12 | 18.5 |

Factors that would contribute to leaving the special education administration field

were (a) lack of administrative support, (b) excessive paperwork, (c) legal/due process

issues, (d) personnel issues, (e) federal/state regulations, (f) local policies, and (g) lack of

financial resources. The factors were ranked from 1 (least significant) to 7 (most

significant) in order to assess what factors were most likely contribute to leaving the field. The majority (N = 39, 60.9%) of special education administrators claimed that *lack of administration support* was a significant factor that would lead them to leave the special education administration field. This corresponds to administrative support as being a significant factor in remaining to the field. An equal number of directors (N = 13, 20.0%) most often ranked *excessive paperwork* as both '3' and '6', suggesting that it was a significant factor to some and not such a significant factor to others. Special education administrators (N = 15, 23.4%) ranked *legal and due process issues* as highly significant. The factors *personnel issues* (N = 17, 26.2%) and *federal and state regulations* (N = 15, 23.4%) were both most often ranked at '5' by directors. Directors (N = 15, 23.4%) most often ranked *local policies* at '4' suggesting its neutrality in determining whether or not it would contribute to leaving the special education administration field. Finally, directors (N = 21, 33.9%) most often ranked *lack of finances* as '6,' demonstrating it as a significantly contributing factor for leaving the field. The results are summarized in Table 18.

Research Question 3 was asked to determine possible relationships between the characteristics of special education directors and their perceptions regarding retention in the field. To examine research question 3(a), seven Spearman rho correlations were conducted to assess if a relationship exists between age and retention factors (i.e., job satisfaction, job security, administrative support, compensation, colleague support, career opportunity, other). The results of the correlations are presented in Table 19; no significant correlations were found.

**Table 18**

*Factors That Would Contribute to Leaving the Field*

| Factor | 1 | | 2 | | 3 | | 4 | | 5 | | 6 | | 7 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % | N | % |
| Lack of Administration | 3 | 4.7 | 1 | 1.6 | 1 | 1.6 | 2 | 3.1 | 4 | 6.3 | 14 | 21.9 | 39 | 60.9 |
| Excessive Paperwork | 4 | 6.2 | 10 | 15.4 | 13 | 20.0 | 9 | 13.8 | 10 | 15.4 | 13 | 20.0 | 6 | 9.2 |
| Legal/Due Process Issues | 3 | 4.7 | 8 | 12.5 | 7 | 10.9 | 8 | 12.5 | 10 | 15.6 | 13 | 20.3 | 15 | 23.4 |
| Personnel Issues | 6 | 9.2 | 8 | 12.3 | 9 | 13.8 | 7 | 10.8 | 17 | 26.2 | 13 | 20.0 | 5 | 7.7 |
| Federal/State Regulations | 6 | 9.4 | 13 | 20.3 | 8 | 12.5 | 5 | 7.8 | 15 | 23.4 | 12 | 18.8 | 5 | 7.8 |
| Local Policies | 7 | 10.8 | 12 | 18.5 | 9 | 13.8 | 15 | 23.1 | 12 | 18.2 | 9 | 13.8 | 1 | 1.5 |
| Lack of Finances | 2 | 3.2 | 4 | 6.5 | 5 | 8.1 | 7 | 11.3 | 8 | 12.9 | 21 | 33.9 | 15 | 24.2 |

**Table 19**

*Spearman rho Correlations between Age and Retention (Job Satisfaction, Job Security, Administrative Support, Compensation, Colleague Support, and Career Opportunity)*

|  | Age | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Variable | *r* | *p* |
| Job Satisfaction | .131 | .301 |
| Job Security | .077 | .544 |
| Administrative Support | .043 | .738 |
| Financial Compensation Compared to other Employment Options | .088 | .487 |
| Support from Colleagues | .091 | .473 |
| Professional Growth/Opportunity for Career Advancement | -.001 | .995 |

*Note.* * $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$

To examine research question 3(b), seven Spearman rho correlations were conducted to assess if a relationship exists between age and intent to leave (lack of administrative support, excess paperwork, legal issues, personnel issues, regulations, policies and lack of finances for special education program). Results are shown in Table 20. For this research, the level (alpha= 0.05) was selected for the analysis which is the most commonly designated value in social science research. An alpha of 0.05 or below ensures a 95% confidence value (Lipsey, 1990). A significant positive coefficient was indicated between age and lack of finances, $[r_s (60) = .257, p = .044]$, suggesting that as

respondents indicated older an older age range, there was an increase in the variable lack of finances for special education program. Hence, older participants tended to rank the lack of finances as a factor that would contribute to leaving the special education administration field.

**Table 20**

*Spearman rho Correlations between Age and Intent to Leave (Lack of Administrative Support, Excess Paperwork, Legal Issues, Personnel Issues, Regulations, Policies, and Lack of Finances)*

|  | Age | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Variable | *r* | *p*\* |
| Lack of Administrative Support | .057 | .654 |
| Excessive Paperwork | -.042 | .740 |
| Legal/Due Process Issues | -.041 | .747 |
| Personnel Issues | -.021 | .868 |
| Federal/State Regulations | -.072 | .572 |
| Local Policies | -.153 | .255 |
| Lack of Finances | .257 | .044* |

*Note.* $^{*}$ $p < 0.05$, $^{**}$ $p < 0.01$

To examine research question 3(c), seven point bi-serial correlations were conducted to assess if a relationship existed between gender (male vs. female) and retention (job satisfaction, job security, administrative support, compensation, colleague support, and career opportunity). The results of the correlations are presented in Table 21; no significant correlations were found.

**Table 21**

*Biserial Correlations between Gender and Retention (Job Satisfaction, Job Security, Administrative Support, Compensation, Colleague Support, and Career Opportunity)*

| | Gender | |
|---|---|---|
| Variable | $r$ | $p$* |
| Job Satisfaction | .107 | .400 |
| Job Security | -.042 | .742 |
| Administrative Support | .095 | .453 |
| Financial Compensation Compared to other Employment Options | .239 | .057 |
| Support from Colleagues | .237 | .059 |
| Professional Growth/Opportunity for Career Advancement | .075 | .555 |

*Note.* * $p<0.05$, ** $p<0.01$

To examine research question 3(d), seven point bi-serial correlations were conducted to assess if a relationship existed between gender (male vs. female) and intent

to leave (lack of administrative support, excess paperwork, legal issues, personnel issues, regulations, policies and lack of finances). Results are shown in Table 22. A borderline negative coefficient was revealed between gender and excessive paperwork, ($r_s$ (63) = -.245, $p$ = .050), suggesting males tended to rate excessive paperwork as a significant factor in a decision to leave the special education administration field.

**Table 22**

***Biserial Correlations between Gender and Intent to Leave (Lack of Administrative Support, Excess Paperwork, Legal Issues, Personnel Issues, Regulations, Policies, and Lack of Finances)***

| | Age | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Variable | *r* | *p*\* |
| Lack of Administrative Support | .027 | .830 |
| Excessive Paperwork | -.245 | .050* |
| Legal/Due Process Issues | -.016 | .899 |
| Personnel Issues | -.058 | .644 |
| Federal/State Regulations | -.136 | .284 |
| Local Policies | .050 | .690 |
| Lack of Finances | .056 | .664 |

*Note.* \* $p$ = to or <0.05, \*\* $p$<0.01

To examine research question 3(e), seven point bi-serial correlations were conducted to assess if a relationship exists between district (rural vs. suburban/urban) and retention (job satisfaction, job security, administrative support, compensation, colleague support, career opportunity and other). The results of the correlations are presented in Table 23; no significant correlations were found.

**Table 23**

***Biserial Correlations between District (Rural vs. Suburban/Urban) and Retention (Job Satisfaction, Job Security, Administrative Support, Compensation, Colleague Support, and Career Opportunity)***

|  | District | |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Variable | *r* | *p*\* |
| Job Satisfaction | .011 | .931 |
| Job Security | -.099 | .436 |
| Administrative Support | -.058 | .649 |
| Financial Compensation Compared to Other Employment Options | -.079 | .537 |
| Support from Colleagues | .131 | .302 |
| Professional Growth/Opportunity for Career Advancement | .123 | .333 |

*Note.* \* *p*<0.05, \*\* *p*<0.01

To examine research question 3(f), seven point bi-serial correlations were conducted to assess if a relationship exists between district (rural vs. suburban/urban) and intent to leave (lack of administrative support, excess paperwork, legal issues, personnel issues, regulations, policies and lack of finances). The results of the correlations are presented in Table 24; no significant correlations were found.

**Table 24**

***Biserial Correlations between District (Rural vs. Suburban/Urban) and Intent to Leave (Lack of Administrative Support, Excess Paperwork, Legal Issues, Personnel Issues, Regulations, Policies, and Lack of Finances)***

| | District | |
|---|---|---|
| Variable | $r$ | $p^*$ |
| Lack of Administrative Support | .166 | .186 |
| Excessive Paperwork | .003 | .982 |
| Legal/Due Process Issues | -.190 | .133 |
| Personnel Issues | -.024 | .854 |
| Federal/State Regulations | -.006 | .965 |
| Local Policies | .132 | .300 |
| Lack of Finances | -.042 | .744 |

*Note.* $^*$ $p<0.05$, $^{**}$ $p<0.01$

**Qualitative Results**

*Question 1*

In the open-ended section of the survey instrument, Question 1 asked "Thinking about your work across the course of a year, what are the most satisfying aspects of your job? What are the least satisfying aspects?" Of the 70 directors who responded to the survey, 62 provided comments. Utilizing aspects of constant comparison coding, themes and categories were identified for the most and least satisfying aspects of special education administration based on the director's responses.

**Most satisfying aspects of the job.** Three overarching themes emerged from the data: making a difference, program improvement, and collaboration. These themes tended to overlap, and all three were sometimes evident within the same remark or comment. A description of each theme follows:

*Theme 1: Making a Difference*

When commenting on the most satisfying aspect of being a special education administrator, the vast majority of North Carolina directors mentioned the ability to make a difference or help others. Over 50 individual statements were identified as falling into this theme. One director commented

> The most satisfying aspect of the job is the ability to do good things for kids and the professionals who serve them.

Improving outcomes for students was one of the most significant categories in being able to make a difference. Numerous remarks and thoughts were devoted to various aspects of student achievement or outcomes as characterized by the following two comments:

> The most satisfying aspect of the job is going into classrooms and seeing smiles on children's faces then they learn something that they thought they couldn't.

> Most satisfying is knowing that you are indirectly impacting EC students by providing them with the materials and services they need to be successful.

A category related to student achievement was having the opportunity to improve the ability of special education professionals to do their jobs. Many special education directors mentioned they were able to a make a difference in student outcomes by collaboration with and providing professional development for the special education teachers and staff. One director wrote:

> The most satisfying aspects of my job are facilitating the career growth in the teachers, supporting the staff to take chances, and experiencing the growth in the academic levels of students.

Similarly, another director commented

> The most satisfying aspect is providing appropriate education for our EC students and assisting professionals in finding their niche in the field.

The ability to make a difference was not limited to students and staff. Directors often mentioned their work with families, districts, and colleagues as part of their job satisfaction.

> It is satisfying to work with students and families to find successful interventions and strategies.

> The most satisfying part of the job is seeing students, parents, and teachers succeed due to programs you implemented.

*Theme 2: Program Improvement*

The ability to build and/or improve the delivery of special education was evident in many comments. Directors expressed that one way to make a difference for students is to improve the overall district special education program. As one director noted

> The most satisfying is developing a plan to improve services for students with disabilities and seeing implementation of the plan makes a difference for students.

Another director commented

> I find the most satisfaction in coordinating innovative, effective programs to students.

> For some directors, implementing or improving specific programs within their

district were was the most satisfying part of their job:

> Implementing Response to Intervention (RTI) and Positive Behavior Support because of the potential positive impact these initiatives have on all children and staff.

> Most satisfying has been the progress our students have made in the establishment of new cooperative ventures with mental health and community vocational programs.

> Implementing all the new programs that are helping students with disabilities improve their reading.

Special education program improvement and development is a fundamental role of the special education administrator. Most departments and programs within a school district are in a state of continuous improvement. The special education program is no exception.

*Theme 3: Collaboration*

Collaboration was another theme that emerged from special education director comments. Working with other school district personnel, special education staff, community members, and families were all mentioned as positive aspects of the job. One special education director wrote,

> Being part of a team whose focus is on helping all children succeed and be included, along with having the opportunity to meet and work with many different school and community leaders is the most satisfying part of the job.

Perhaps understanding that effective special education programs cannot run in isolation, another director commented,

> I like to be a problem-solver and work with others to try to deal with the many issues that arise in the course of a year.

The opportunity to network and learn from colleagues and others in the special education administration field was another example of collaboration as stated in the following comments:

> Most satisfying is working with school and central office administration, working with the state department and other directors in the state.

**Least satisfying aspects of the job.** When reviewing the responses provided from special education directors about what they felt were the least satisfying aspects of the job, three themes emerged:  communication or dealing with others, compliance, and

funding.   Unlike the themes in the previous section, these themes are relatively independent of one another.

*Theme 1:  Communication/Dealing with Others*

Although North Carolina special education directors perceive collaboration is one of the most satisfying aspects of their job, they report that communication is one of the least satisfying. Communication issues were mentioned in some way in almost all responses. Directors reported difficulty communicating and interacting with a variety of people. Parents were mentioned more often than other individuals. Some examples are below:

Dealing with parents who feel entitled to all they want, not what is necessary.

Dealing with demanding, unrealistic, and belligerent parents.

The least satisfying is dealing with nasty, mean parents who treat you subserviently.

Least satisfying is spending time and resources to meet unrealistic demands from parents.

One director mentioned the impact advocates have played in the relationship with parents, resulting in job dissatisfaction:

Least satisfying are the contentious relationships when families are coached to be dissatisfied with school services by outside agencies and advocates and encouraged to file formal complaints with state and federal agencies.

Communicating and dealing with teachers and other school personnel were also reported as least satisfying aspects of the job. Representative comments are below:

The least satisfying aspect is working with people who have a relaxed work ethic and lack of concern for children and the job.

The lack of cohesiveness and continuity between special education administration and general education administration is the least satisfying aspect.

Least satisfying is having to struggle to get colleagues to understand and buy-in to special education initiatives.

Dealing with personnel issues.

*Theme 2: Compliance*

Ensuring that special education programs are compliant with state and federal regulations and the threat of due process for non-compliance were reported by many directors. The constant threat of legal issues, sometimes for issues the director has no direct control over, such as decisions made in IEP meetings, are a negative aspect of the job. Some of the comments by directors made that illustrate this are these:

The least satisfying aspects of the job are meetings with attorneys, dysfunctional court systems, and paperwork/compliance.

Endless paperwork for compliance, legal issues.

Ridiculous amounts of paperwork, and parents who threaten legal action with every conversation.

*Theme 3: Funding*

The final theme that emerged as the least satisfying aspect of being a special education director was funding. Because IDEA continues to be an underfunded mandate, and with the unique circumstances of the national economic downturn at the time of the

data collection, it was an issue mentioned by a large number of directors. One director, in

particular, felt strongly regarding funding as reflected in these comments:

> Special education is governed by abstract and ambiguous terms such as "least restrictive environment," "free and appropriate education," and "due process." A director has to be able to navigate these terms while providing services in an environment of "unlimited wants" from parents and teachers but scarce resources provided by the government. This seems to get harder every year. The federal government seems to increasingly provide mandates but does not provide accompanying increased is resources. Special education is definitely the victim of "unfunded mandates."

Most other directors mentioned the frustration of being unable to adequately fund the

necessary services and staff needed to meet the needs of their students.

> It is hard to deal with lack of finances. The finances don't equate to providing some necessary services for certain kinds of kids.

> Least satisfying is the many budget cuts for services.

### *Question 2*

The second question in the qualitative section of the survey asked, "Thinking

about your role as a special education leader and manager, what are the most important

characteristics to possess and knowledge to have in order to succeed in this position?"

The responses did not reflect a clear distinction between "characteristics to possess" and

"knowledge to have." Two distinct themes emerged from the comments provided by

special education directors:  (1) special education knowledge and (2) leadership.

*Theme 1:  Special Education Knowledge*

Almost half (29) of the 62 directors who provided answers to this question reported that having a basic knowledge of special education is necessary to succeed in the special education director position. The knowledge base was evident in two succinct categories:  special education law and special education content. Special education director remarks made clear that although school law is a necessary component of many administrative positions from time to time, special education directors must deal with the threat of legal action in almost every aspect of their job. A sound understanding of not only federal legislation but also state and local policies and processes is a key component for the effective special education administration as represented by the following representative responses

> A law degree is helpful, but if you don't have one, you earn one in the course of doing this job . . . no matter the LEA.

> You must be able to provide guidance related to legal aspects of special education.

> Knowing the legal issues and being able to think like an attorney is most important.

> You must possess an unnatural understanding of laws, regulations, and policies. Directors have to have a good working knowledge of federal and state policies and regulations.

The second category in this theme relates to special education content knowledge. The majority of participants in this study had a background in special education. Therefore, many stressed the importance of not only needing knowledge of special education laws and regulations, but also an understanding of instructional practices for

various disabilities. Special education knowledge was mentioned 25 times in participant

responses. Some examples included are these:

> Effective directors need to have curriculum "smarts" and knowledge of/experience in teaching special education.

> You must understand the needs of students with disabilities.
> Content knowledge is important. A strong background in special education helps.

*Theme 2: Leadership*

The second theme that emerged from the responses of special education directors

is leadership. Within this theme, both transactional and transformative forms of

leadership became evident as distinct categories. The transactional activities were

described as the managerial/administrative role special education directors must

demonstrate to be effective. Transformative activities were described as that of a change

agent and compassionate advocate on behalf of students with disabilities and those who

serve them. Examples from both categories are provided below.

Many participants reported that in order to be successful in the position, special

education directors must have strong organizational and time management skills due to

the complex nature of the job. One director wrote,

> Professionals in the special education field are going to be asked to do an awful lot of work. It is easy to get spread too thin and burn out. Therefore, I believe time management skills are a must as well as the capacity to prioritize activities.

Similarly, another director noted,

Success in this job means an ability to multi-task and have strong time management skills. The job is very stressful and you must find ways to deal with the stress.

Basic administrative functions were also evident in many of the responses provided by special education directors that are reflective of transactional leadership qualities. In particular is the area of fiscal, and personnel management. For example,

Special education directors must be on top of budgetary and personnel changes.

You must have an understanding of budget, fiscal and personnel issues and solutions.

To be successful as a special education director you must learn how to hire great staff. Also, you must have positive/effective management skills.

The importance of transactional leadership characteristics for effective administration of special education is summed up by one director who wrote:

You must be flexible, roll with the punches, know special education law, network with others, know your finance officer, keep accurate records of funding, find out about hidden agendas, and listen and think carefully before acting on impulse.

The second category for this theme is transformative leadership. Most often cited under this category was the need for effective special education administrators to demonstrate compassion and/or an affinity for those they serve. Some examples follow:

Successful directors have a natural affinity for special education and children with disabilities.

You must have a sense of fairness and respect for others as individuals.

You must have compassion and an empathy for children.

Successful directors have a "calling" to serve children.

Related to compassion is the notion of advocacy. Several special education directors mentioned the importance of being an advocate for their programs and the students they serve by standing up for what they feel is right:

To be successful you must be an advocate in the face of adversity and/or resistance.
Always keeping the child first and not taking things personally is important when making tough decisions.

You must develop a thick skin and make decisions for the students all the time; not for parents, advocates, attorneys, or administrative convenience.

Another characteristic of transformative leadership, the ability to empower others and communicate a vision, was also reported to be important for success by many directors as evidenced by the following comments:

You must be able to build a team and use personnel effectively by delegating and not micro-managing.

The most important skill is to understand adult learners and to be able to provide the professional development, coaching, and group support to help them implement new strategies to be more effective in their instruction.

The ability to get people to move to do something they choose not to do is important.

You must remember to constantly recognize your staff for the work that they do in this tough field, and you must inspire people through your passion for special education and work ethic to want to follow your lead.

Phrases such as "seeing the big picture," "thinking outside the box," and "ability to collaborate and work with diverse groups of people" were also transformative

characteristics present in the responses of special education directors. Also noted in one of five responses was the need for a sense of humor. One director wrote:

If you don't have a sense of humor, don't get in the field.

A sense of humor may not be a necessary characteristic of transformative leadership; it was deemed an important one to possess in the eyes of many North Carolina special education directors to succeed in the position.

The survey responses and data analysis provided a deeper understanding of who is leading the field of special education administration in North Carolina. Basic demographics and factors impacting decisions to leave or remain in the field were identified. Also identified by North Carolina special education administrators were the most and least satisfying aspects of the job and the knowledge and characteristics needed to be successful in the position. In the next chapter, the results from the data are discussed in order to provide further reflection and conclusions about who is leading special education in North Carolina.

**CHAPTER V**

**DISCUSSION**

Because those who know special education the best are those who live it every

day (Thompson & O'Brian, 2007), current North Carolina special education directors

were surveyed to develop an understanding of who is leading the field of special

education administration in North Carolina. Participants were asked questions about

demographic characteristics, including their background, experience, and school districts.

In addition, participants were asked about their intention to stay or leave the profession,

specifically, the factors that would influence their leaving and the conditions that would

encourage them to remain.

Administrators of special education hold a unique role in school districts. No

other central office position has the responsibilities inherent with supervising programs

for students with disabilities. The superintendent is the one person who is ultimately

responsible for all students and programs in a district. Similarly, the special education

administrator has the same overarching responsibility for students with disabilities.

Consider the special education program encompasses students ages 3-22; fiscal

management of local, state, and federal funding; transportation; food and nutrition; and

teacher recruitment and retention, as well as that of support staff such as school

psychologists and related service personnel. Special education administrators directly or

indirectly supervise staff larger in number than most individual school staffs or central

office departments. As a result, in order to efficiently and effectively implement and supervise the delivery of special education, their work constantly intersects across all other components of a school district and the community at large.

Special education administrators have an essential role in assisting in the running of a school district, ensuring the quality of special education services and working with teachers and parents in the education process (Muller, 2009). North Carolina special education administrators perform their job under considerable monitoring by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction for procedural compliance and improvement of student outcomes. Ultimately, the special education administrator influences the quality of education for every student with special needs in the district (Thompson & O'Brian, 2007). Their role as an instructional leader is critical to promoting successful outcomes for students with disabilities. Equally important is the special education administrator's role in establishing a positive culture for meeting the needs of the staff and students in their programs. Their ability to communicate with personnel as well as their leadership skills can have either a positive or negative effect on this culture. With the shift in focus to accountability, as well as the contentious matters surrounding the implementation of NCLB and IDEA, special education administrators must be more proactive in the planning, implementation, and communication of special education programs and procedures (Bakken et al., 2006). This is in addition to the many other roles most special education administrators have within a school district.

This research indicates that 83.1% of North Carolina administrators also supervise other programs, most frequently Section 504 and AIG programs. As a result,

special education administrators develop competencies in procedural knowledge more so than do other administrators. These include procedures, statutes, and regulations as well as the techniques that reside in the in the knowledge and practice of special education (Passman, 2008). Given all the challenges special education administrators face, it is curious why anybody would want such a complex job. In the open-ended section of the survey, North Carolina special education directors provided comments regarding the constant pressure of fiscal management, procedural compliance, due process, and accountability standards. By itself, the stress regarding the threat of legal action was present in over 80 responses. Most administrative colleagues do not face this type of consistent procedural and legal scrutiny by NC-DPI, school boards, parents, advocates, and other community stakeholders. Yet despite the extreme stress, people continue to assume special education administrative positions. This study helped develop a deeper understanding of who is leading the field of special education in North Carolina and the reasons why they stay or leave the position.

### A Description of North Carolina Special Education Administrators

North Carolina special education administrators, overall, are experienced special educators. The majority of special education directors in North Carolina have at least six years of experience as a special education teacher, primarily at the elementary level. Several directors indicated experience in a related field such as school psychology or speech language pathology. The qualitative data indicate that a background in special education is one of the most important characteristics to possess and knowledge to have in order to succeed in the position. Both regulatory and special education content

knowledge were cited as key components of effective special education administration. Based on the results of this study, it would appear that the majority of North Carolina special education administrators have this knowledge based on their special education experience prior to moving to their current position.

Results of the survey point to limited experience as a special education or other school or district level administrator in the current population of North Carolina special education administrators. Forty-nine of the administrators reported fewer than 10 years of experience, with 25 reporting five years fewer. These findings indicate that although all North Carolina special education administrators have at least a master's degree and 89% hold the North Carolina special education administrator's license, few have preparation in educational leadership or administration. Fewer than half reported any prior experience as an administrator. This suggests that the majority of special education directors transitioned directly from teacher to administrator and learned leadership and management skills on the job. Taking into account the relatively few years of direct special education or other education leadership with the lack of higher education administrative preparation of the population as a whole, it appears that most special education directors in North Carolina tend to learn how to do the job by doing the job.

Another conclusion that can be drawn from this study is the apparent lack of diversity in the current population of special education directors in North Carolina. The vast majority of participants were Caucasian (86.2%). Research indicates similar racial composition of the student population. The most recent data available from the North Carolina Disproportionality Report (2004) found approximately 1.3 million students

attending public school in North Carolina. Of these students, 57.5% were Caucasian and 31% were African American. This report examined the status of particular racial/ethnic groups of children being identified is specific disability categories. Based on North Carolina's criteria at that time for significant disproportionality, the disability categories of intellectually disabled and serious emotionally disabled were a major concern. Given that North Carolina is a state that has struggled with disproportionate representation of African-Americans identified in special education as intellectually or seriously emotionally disabled, it is important to note that only eight of the participants were African-American. Because there is no evidence available to indicate that African-American special education directors collectively did not participate in the research, a reasonable conclusion is that North Carolina has a disproportionate representation of Caucasian special education directors compared to the special education student population.

Although the sample was limited to special education leadership positions in North Carolina, the results may mirror a lack of diversity in educational leadership positions in general (Thompson & O'Brian, 2007). This is consistent with an earlier study of North Carolina administrators conducted by Gates, Guarino, SantibaNez, Brown, Dastida, and Chung (2004) which found that 80% of district level administrators were Caucasian and 19.4% were African-American. Though relatively few studies on minorities in educational leadership positions have been completed, available research suggests that African-American administrators tend to be very closely tied to and have a deep understanding of their students and of the communities in which they work (Banks,

2007). Two of the important duties of a special education administrator are to (a) ensure the appropriate identification of students with disabilities and (b) maintain communication and ties to the community. Clearly, it is imperative that future leaders from diverse backgrounds be encouraged to enter the field of special education.

A study by Gates et al. (2004) found that only 44.5% of district level administrators in North Carolina were female. Brown and Irby (2004) found that female administrators tend to inherently operate under a transformative leadership paradigm and were particularly effective in building leadership capacity, developing a sense of community and facilitating a culture of inclusiveness. Although research indicates an underrepresentation of women in district level administrative positions, a majority of special education programs in North Carolina are led by females (Garn & Brown, 2008). The findings of this study would appear to support the earlier research of Brown and Irby (2004). Specifically, North Carolina special education directors reported the necessity to demonstrate an ability to empower others, advocate for inclusiveness of the special education program and students with disabilities within the district, and communicate a vision of collaboration and respect. These represent transactional leadership skills that are characteristic of female administrators. Understanding in the field of special education administration will continue to be restricted, however, as long as there are limited perspectives due to limited diversity of males and African Americans in leadership roles (Thompson & O'Brian, 2007).

**Special Education Administration Attrition**

The findings of this study suggest that North Carolina will experience significant attrition of current special education administrators within the next 6-10 years. Although most of the population reported their intent to finish their career as a special education director, they also reported their intent to retire in that time-frame. This is to be expected because over 50% of the directors are between 51 and 60 years old. Given that special education administration in North Carolina, and nationwide, is becoming ever more complex, challenging, and stressful, the number of administrators who actually will finish their careers in this position is yet to be seen. Recent research identifies a variety of causes for local special education administration attrition. These include retirement, threat of due process or legal complications, additional duties, lack of support from supervisors, federal and state accountability mandates, and lack of special education program funding (CASE, 2008; Muller, 2009). The results from this study support these findings.

Lack of administrative support was ranked as the most significant factor that would lead the majority of North Carolina special education administrators to leave the field. These results mirror studies about special education teacher attrition. Research suggests that teachers are more likely to leave teaching or indicate intent to leave in the absence of adequate support from administrators and colleagues (Billingsley, 2004). Open-ended responses of North Carolina special education administrators point to the importance of administrative and colleague support. Participants noted the importance of being included by their supervisors in district planning and decision-making regarding

policies and procedures at the district office level. Also noted several times was a lack of cohesiveness and continuity between special education and general education administration. Many special education administrators remarked on frustration regarding their attempts to facilitate a sense of accountability for students with disabilities on the part of school and district administration. This is difficult enough when trying to share responsibility for special education programs with building principals. However, if support for special education programming is not felt from direct supervisors such as associate superintendents and district superintendents, then special education administrators' efforts often are futile.

Effective leadership of special education programs necessitates effective collaboration with principals and district level administrators. The standards-based movement demands that special education and general education leaders share responsibility for instructional leadership (Bakken et al., 2007). Hence, understanding, respect, and support from direct supervisors or administrators comprise a fundamental component for remaining in the special education field at the special education teacher and administrator level. This study supports the necessity of collaboration between general education and special education administrators in order to meet the diverse needs of students with disabilities in school districts. The special education administrator alone cannot make the necessary decisions for areas of a district's operation that affect special education programs, including transportation, human resources, and curriculum to name just a few.

Legal or due process issues were other significant factors North Carolina administrators indicated that would contribute to leaving the field. Although participants clearly reported that working with students and improving student outcomes were the most satisfying aspects of the job, the pull of other duties, such as legal issues, must be addressed (Bakken et al., 2007). Muller (2009) found limited understanding of legal requirements under state and federal law as well as a higher proportion of time spent on compliance and litigation matters were some of the causes of local special education administrator attrition nationwide. Unlike many district administrative positions, virtually every decision local special education administrators make is subject to challenge. Dealing with this type of pressure highlights the connection between job satisfaction and administrative support that is evident in the qualitative data. Being able to handle the stress of due process and legal matters, as well as the ability to devote the necessary time involved for solving legal problems, is contingent on the understanding and support of those who supervise special education administrators.

Another factor North Carolina special education administrators identified significant in their consideration of leaving the field was a lack of financial resources for special education programs. In fact, the one correlate of experienced directors leaving that was significant was lack of funding. Experienced directors understand that funding is key to being able to do their jobs. With experience comes the knowledge that other challenges can be worked through, but when budgets are tight, leaving the profession is a viable option. They are closer to the age and experience when they have the opportunity and the wherewithal to leave the profession than are younger special education

administrators. Given the current funding issues due to the economic downturn, it appears to be likely from this study that those who have the option to leave may do so at a rate faster than might have been anticipated in a more prosperous time.

Thompson and O'Brian (2007), in a study of Illinois special education directors, found that being able to effectively and efficiently manage financial resources is a foundational competency of special education administrators. Given the lack of state required educational and/or administrative leadership training of current North Carolina special education administrators, it can be assumed that most did not possess this competency prior to taking their current position. In North Carolina, special education administrators must be able to navigate and manage a variety of local, state, and federal budgets. The federal budgets have the added challenge of strict monitoring and reporting of every penny spent. The number of special education budgets is dependent on the size of the district. However, at a minimum there are at least one federal and three state budgets. Currently, additional budgets from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) also must be managed with extensive documentation and reporting of spending. Financial support to special education delivery at the district level also illustrates the importance of administrative support. Local special education administrators must be able to rely on the superintendent and board of education for local funding. This has been the case throughout the history of the field because IDEA has always been and continues to be underfunded, an even more critical issue due to the recent economic downturn.

Special education administrators who lack administrative support engage in a never-ending battle of wills between themselves and their supervisors for appropriate spending of special education dollars. The increase in special education funding driven by the economic-stimulus law is bringing new attention to an unusual provision in IDEA: districts are allowed, in some cases, to cut back on the local funds they use to pay for special education programs when they get more money from the federal government (Samuels, 2009). This unique situation may result in special education administrators facing requests by supervisors to pay for special education positions once paid with local or state funds with ARRA funds. That is, they may feel pressure to supplant local and state funding with federal funding. Even as there is the potential to use stimulus money for needed special education program improvement in the short term, the districts' maintenance of effort in providing their share of funding could be reduced for years to come. This struggle alone is enough to discourage many special education administrators from remaining in the field.

Finally, research suggests that paperwork is a major contributor to role overload and conflict in the special education field (Billingsley, 2004). Based on the results of this study, a correlation exists between being a male director and leaving the profession due to excessive paperwork. Men cited excessive paperwork as a significant factor that would result in a decision to leave the profession to a greater degree than did women. One could argue that this correlation could lead to more men leaving the profession because the amount of paperwork is increasing due to the newly added requirements of the ARRA. However, one could also argue that it does not make much difference, since men are a

marked minority of special education administration in NC, as demonstrated by this study.

## Retention of Special Education Administrators

### *Job Satisfaction and Administrative Support*

Although the literature on special education administrator retention is limited, based on the findings of this study several factors would contribute to North Carolina special education administrators remaining in the field. Both job satisfaction and administrative support were identified as most significant factors for remaining in the field. Clearly, having administrative support is one key component for having greater job satisfaction. Serving the needs of students with disabilities requires multiple leaders across school and district levels (Billingsley, 2007). Therefore, commitment from school boards, superintendents, direct supervisors as well as building principals for meeting the needs of students with disabilities cannot be disputed. Special education administrators who do not have this commitment and support are more likely to experience levels of stress that result in leaving the field. Further, special education directors do not usually possess the level of authority needed to enforce systemic change. They must rely on the support of top-level district administrators to ensure that accountability and responsibility for student with disabilities is intentionally distributed among special and general education teachers, principals, other key district staff, and the special education administrator. Policy makers and superintendents interested in retaining special education administrators must facilitate the development of better work environments (Billingsley,

2004). When a special education administrator has the support of colleagues and the superintendent, such a positive work environment is more likely to be established.

### *Knowledge of Special Education Law*

North Carolina special education directors reported that having a solid knowledge base of special education law was essential for success in the position. As a special education administrator, a common request heard from supervisors and building level administrators is to help keep them out of court. IDEA is reportedly the fourth most litigated federal statute (Freedman, Bisbicos, Jentz, & Orenstein, 2005). As a result, the more knowledgeable and confident special education administrators are about IDEA regulations and policy, the better equipped they may be to face potential due process or legal challenges. Special education administrators who are able to balance their desire to make a positive difference for students with disabilities with the legal implications of their decisions may be better equipped to deal with the stressors of the job and stay in the field. Feeling confident in the ability to meet legal challenges also contributes to overall job satisfaction.

### *Other Factors Affecting Retention*

Other key variables concerning what keeps special education administrators in the field emerged from the responses to open-ended questions. These factors are interrelated in terms of personality or leadership style and include having a sense of humor, having 'thick skin,' and being flexible. It seems intuitively logical to say that special education directors who are able to deal with the considerable stress of the job through humor may last longer in the field. Several administrators in the study stated that this was a "must." A

sense of humor, appropriately applied, has the power to diffuse tense situations and keep in perspective a crisis that seems overwhelming. The use of humor is also an effective tool to building positive and collaborative relationships with district level colleagues, school-level administrators, and special education staff.

The ability to be flexible and as one participant remarked "roll with the punches" is another trait that is likely to keep special education administrators in the field. The special education administrator role often changes dramatically over the course of the day. Within just a 30-minute period, this professional could work on balancing a budget, resolving a parent complaint with a lawyer or advocate, making funding decisions, coaching or supporting a staff member, and answering a call from the press or school board member, to name just a few. Those administrators who are naturally inclined or have learned to multi-task or jump from one task to another without losing focus would be less likely to build up levels of stress that would affect their decision to leave the field.

Finally, it appears from the study that directors who develop a 'thick skin' and who do not tend to take things personally are less likely to reach a point of stress and frustration that would cause them to leave the field. It has been said that if a special education administrator is not making somebody angry, then she probably is not doing her job. Within the school district, special education administrators are the advocates for students with disabilities and those who provide service delivery. As such, they often are challenged by building principals regarding issues of funding, staffing, least restrictive environment, material and supplies, and compliance. Special education administrators are also stewards of special education funding and may be at odds with those in the district

who want to use funds for purposes outside of special education. The first step for parents when they have a complaint regarding the provision of services for their child is to contact the special education administrator. Each of these has the potential for unpleasant and uncomfortable conversations or confrontations. It is not unusual to feel personally attacked in these situations. Being able to look beyond the immediate line of fire and to remember that, in most cases, criticism or confrontation is directed at the program and not necessarily the administrator is easier said than done. But those who are able to keep this perspective may be more likely to remain in the field for extended period of time.

**Limitations**

There may be limitations to this study in that the participants were special education administrators from North Carolina. Caution should be exercised in generalizing these findings to special education administrators from other states. The roles and responsibilities may differ somewhat from state to state, and differences between this sample and a nationally representative sample are likely. The absence of minority and male respondents also limits the generalizability of these findings. Finally, as a member of the sample population, there may be some bias of responses due to the professional and collaborative relationships between the researcher and respondents. Others interested or concerned with the unique role of special education administration and the factors that affect retention and attrition in the field should conduct similar studies and draw conclusions based on their specific context.

**Recommendations**

*Future Research*

The responses to the survey questions have raised additional questions. For example, this survey did not investigate how many current North Carolina special education administrators had experience in other support positions such as a program specialist. Although program specialists may have more direct contact with a special education administrator and have the opportunity to see, by observation, the issues and complexities of supervising district special education programs, I would posit that nobody has a true appreciation for the stresses of the job until actually doing the job. Research should continue to focus on the relationship between special education administrators' professional experiences and attrition/retention.

Little research has been directed toward improving administrator skills. It is important for administrators to reflect on tasks that are germane to the actual administration and management of special education programs (Lashley & Boscardin, 2002). More research is needed on the complexity of the special education administrator's role. No other district level administrative position requires the level of technical knowledge, political savvy, legal background, and managerial skills as the special education administrator. Hence, research should focus on strategies for mentoring and providing support to new special education directors in an effort to keep them in the field.

Finally, as changes to the education landscape unfold, the challenge for education administrators is to redefine leadership practices in ways that support and improve

teaching and learning (Boscardin, 2007). Future research should focus on how special education administrators can fulfill the requirements of instructional leadership in order to meet NCLB requirements and still perform their legal, fiscal, and compliance driven responsibilities as identified in IDEA.

*Practices for the Field*

In order to address the issue of a growing shortage educators who are willing and able to lead special education, attrition and retention of special education administrators must be addressed. To do this, state education agencies and district superintendents and school boards must gain a deeper understanding and appreciation of the unique and complex role of the special education administrator. Special education administrators are consistently faced with the challenges of politics, funding and resource shortfalls, personnel issues and staff shortages, accountability pressures, legal and procedural compliance, and more. The key to overcoming these obstacles requires teamwork, motivation, empowerment, and communication (Chambers, 2008).

As this study has shown, job satisfaction and administrative support are key factors for keeping special education administrators in the field. District superintendents, school boards, and other district personnel must be encouraged to regularly communicate appreciation for the work of special education administrators. Attention should be paid to their working conditions, their roles and responsibilities, and strategies to prevent them from leaving the field. This study further supports recommendations by Muller (2009) regarding administrative and district support for retaining special education administrators. That is, provide adequate levels of support for special education directors

so that the job does not become overwhelming, support the acquisition of skills through ongoing professional development, offer mentoring programs for new directors, and promote alignment of special education programs with other district level programs to eliminate what has been termed a silo approach, meaning that special education often operates as a separate program within the district rather than as a part of the district's entire operation.

Finally, the special education administrator role often is solitary. There is only one such position in each district. At the LEA level, the opportunity for collaboration with other district level administrators should be provided. Also, the importance of collaboration with other special education administrators throughout the state education agency (SEA) cannot be disputed. NC-DPI Exceptional Children's Division coordinates a New Special Education Director Institute for special education administrators with less than 3 years of experience. Each institute runs for a two-year period and provides not only the opportunity to gain knowledge required for performing the job (e.g., fiscal management, monitoring and compliance), but it also offers the opportunity to form collaborative relationships with peers. Being able to connect with others who truly understand what it is like to be a special education administrator is fundamental in dealing with the daily stresses that may lead to leaving the field.

## Conclusion

The field of special education continues to change dramatically. Special education administrators should play a critical role in the continued evolution of special education in the twenty-first century. Soliciting the ideas and perspectives of special education

administrators clearly is critical to obtaining a greater understanding of leadership issues in the field (Thompson & O'Brian, 2007). These data support common sense expectations held by those with direct experience in the field in North Carolina. They also provide concrete and practical considerations regarding the recruitment and retention of special education administrators in North Carolina. Leaders in special education who can turn the facts about the complexities of the role into thoughtful practices have an opportunity to make a tremendous difference for both students with disabilities and other educators (Chapple et al., 2007).

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