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A Phenomenological Study of High School Assistant Principals who Supervise Special Education

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A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY OF HIGH SCHOOL ASSISTANT PRINCIPALS
WHO SUPERVISE SPECIAL EDUCATION

by

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study examined the lived experiences of high school assistant principals who lead the Exceptional Student Education (ESE) departments at their respective schools. The role of the school leader is critical and complex. Second to only the classroom teachers, school leaders have the ability to shape the school wide attitude and vision for students with disabilities. Knowing that in the past 30 years, the number of students with disabilities has nearly doubled in size, the expertise of school leaders in special education must also increase. Research on the experiences of high school administrators who serve students with intellectual disabilities and how their experiences and beliefs shape opportunities for students is limited. In addition, there is limited research regarding the prevalence of students with intellectual disabilities and their participation in vocational education and independent skills instruction to support independent functioning and future employment. This study used a phenomenological approach to examine the experiences and beliefs of high school assistant principals who supervise the ESE department at their school. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven participants (*N*=7). Through thematic analysis, six major themes and 21 subthemes emerged. The six major themes were: (a) compliance of special education; (b) administrators' role in faculty/staff supervision; (c) inclusion of students with disabilities in opportunities with their non-disabled peers; (d) lack of leadership preparation; (e) meeting student needs; (f) preparing students for life after school. This study concluded with a thorough examination of each of the major themes and subthemes, and provided implications for leadership development, induction programs for special education leaders, and best practices for serving students with intellectual disabilities.

This is dedicated to my late father, Denis Carroll. When I was in sixth grade, my Dad asked me to earn a "My Child is an Honor Roll Student" bumper sticker for his car. Since that day, I have only wanted to make him proud. I wish he could have seen this.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

On May 3, 2019, 13 students from the University of Central Florida (UCF) graduated

from the inaugural class of the university's Inclusive Education Services (IES) program earning

their Professional Services Certificate in education, hospitality, or social services (Florida

Consortium on Inclusive Higher Education, 2019). These students are part of Florida's

consortium of higher education institutions that serve students with intellectual disabilities from

the ages of 18 to 43. Students in this consortium take college courses and participate in

internships and employment opportunities with their peers. The goal of these programs is to gain

meaningful credentials that increase their opportunities for gainful employment outcomes with

sustained paid employment (Florida Consortium on Inclusive Higher Education, 2019). This

trailblazing initiative is testament to the journey that has paved the way for these graduates.

Further, the success of these programs demonstrates the possibilities for young people with

intellectual disabilities having access to vocational and independent skills instruction to lead the

most independent life possible.

Public Law 94-142 or the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975

(EAHCA), later reauthorized as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act

(IDEA), mandated that all students in each of the 50 states must be provided a free and

appropriate public education, despite disability [(20 U.S.C. § 1412(a)(1), 2004]. Since the

passing of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), students with disabilities are

to be taught in classrooms with their peers and are provided with individual accommodations to

meet the unique needs of each student (U.S. Department of Education, 2010a).

In 2015, President Obama signed into law the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). ESSA was enacted to increase educational equity for all students and contains several vital provisions set forth by IDEA. Under ESSA, students with disabilities are included in state accountability measures, assessed under state standards, and are eligible for a standard high school diploma (U.S. Department of Education, 2017). Furthermore, ESSA mandates that the education for a student with a disability must be equal to the education of student without a disability. As a result, this has led to a student-centered focus that is developmentally appropriate and tailored to individual student needs (National Association of Elementary School Principals [NAESP], 2017).

These federal laws play an extensive role in how school leaders plan for the education of students with disabilities. Embedded in ESSA is a provision for a well-rounded and complete education, which includes an enriched curriculum focused on English, mathematics, science, social sciences, arts, career and technical education, as well as vocational education (NAESP, 2017). Therefore, school leaders serving under the mandates of ESSA and IDEA must have a solid, fundamental understanding of the depth of special education, including the process for evaluation, monitoring, and improving student performance outcomes to serve students with disabilities in their school. School leaders must be competent in reading and interpreting a student's Individual Education Program (IEP) as well as monitoring the effective implementation of an IEP. They must be able to measure the students' progress towards meeting the goals of their IEP, and help teachers maximize the student's full potential while improving students' academic and employability skills (Bateman, Wysocki, Gervais, & Cline, 2017).

Continual changes in legislation intend to improve the equity and access to a general education for students with disabilities. These legislative changes dictate the need for a "more

equitable allocation of resources which is essential for the Federal Government to meet its responsibility to provide education opportunities or all individuals" (Section 601(C) (7), IDEA). The changes provide recognition that all children have the fundamental right to an education, as well as to function as contributing members of society. We must set high standards for all students, and we must provide them the support they need to meet those expectations (Elish-Piper, 2016).

<div align="center">Statement of the Problem</div>

Many students with intellectual disabilities are not receiving vocational and independent skills instruction in high schools, despite the acknowledged need. For example, despite individual and family preference for employment, less than 10% of adults with intellectual disabilities have sustained paid employment (Wehman et al., 2018). This is a challenge for high schools charged with providing an education that will lead to successful postsecondary lives for all students. Despite the knowledge that pre-transition work experiences are associated with positive postsecondary experiences for students with intellectual disabilities, the opportunities for this group to participate in work experiences is still severely lacking (Test, Smith, & Carter, 2014).

Furthermore, the National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center has established evidence-based practices that will help prepare high school students with disabilities transition to postsecondary employment. Yet despite the availability of these evidence-base practices, students with intellectual disabilities continue to experience poor postsecondary outcomes as compared to their typical peers (West, Bartholomew, & Bethune, 2015). In addition, a study completed by Newman et al., (2011) found that students with disabilities are far behind

their peers in critical areas such as postsecondary education, employment, and independent living.

In a comparison of outcomes across disability groups from a National Longitudinal Study in 2012, the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance reported that the outcomes for students with intellectual disabilities are lower in many areas as compared to their typical classmates. Students with intellectual disabilities are less likely to participate in transition planning meetings to discuss their postsecondary goals. Additionally, they are less likely to receive vocational and independent skills education and are less likely to have a job while in high school, or after (Lipscomb et al., 2017).

School leaders play a vital role in providing students with intellectual disabilities an education that supports their postsecondary goals. School leaders have the authority to provide supports and services to provide postsecondary education, apprenticeships, or supported employment during the school hours. Despite their vital role in providing these opportunities, research reveals that school leaders are often unprepared to meet the needs of their students with disabilities due to lack of training (Crockett, 2002; DiPaola& Walther-Thomas, 2003; Doyle, 2002). Yet for students with intellectual disabilities, the degree of success in furthering their education, finding employment, and leading an independent life is shaped by the preparation they receive in high school. High school students that participate in school activities that promote vocational and independent skills, collaboration with multiple resources to serve the unique needs of students with intellectual disabilities, and sustained work experience while in high school lead the greatest chance of sustained employment, and living independently (Test, Bartholomew, & Bethune, 2015).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to examine the lived experiences of high school assistant principals who serve students with intellectual disabilities. This study also explored the assistant principals' beliefs about students with intellectual disabilities and how those beliefs shape the academic opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities at their school. More specifically, this phenomenological study examined the lived experiences and beliefs of assistant principals as they relate to vocational and independent skills instruction for their students with intellectual disabilities. Previous studies have examined the benefits of vocational education for students with intellectual disabilities (Boden, Jolivette, & Alberto, 2018; Southward & Kyzar, 2017) as well as the role of independent skills education for students with intellectual disabilities (Branham, Collins, Schuster & Kleinert, 1999; Minarovic & Bambara, 2007). Literature also exists regarding school leaders' attitudes toward inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities (Carrington et al., 2016; Kurth, Lyon, & Shogren, 2015; Malki & Einat, 2018; Salisbury, 2006). However, there is a gap in the research related to the beliefs that high school assistant principals have about educating students with intellectual disabilities. There is also a gap in literature related to the prevalence of students with intellectual disabilities participating in vocational education and independent skills instruction to support independent functioning and increasing employability skills.

In this study, all high school assistant principals in the state of Florida who met criteria were identified as potential research participants. These data were gathered to inform the fields of school leadership and special education teams regarding the benefits of vocational and independent skills instruction as it relates to the knowledge and beliefs of high school assistant principals who directly support these students.

Research Questions

This phenomenological study of the lived experiences of high school assistant principals explored two fundamental research questions: (a) What are the lived experiences of school-based leaders providing students with intellectual disabilities opportunities to learn vocational and independent living skills during the school day? and (b) What are the beliefs of school-based leaders providing students with intellectual disabilities opportunities to learn vocational and independent living skills during the school day?

Design of the Study

This research study utilized a qualitative, phenomenological research design (Creswell, 2013; Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007; Moustakas, 1994) to answer the two research questions. A phenomenological research design allowed for a rich description of the lived experiences and beliefs of the assistant principals in their own words as they experience their role (Creswell, 2013; Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2014). In this phenomenological study, the researcher collected, reported, and interpreted data to make meaning of the phenomena. Data were collected through the language and conversations samples during a demographic study and semi-structured interviews (Wasser & Bresler, 1996).

This study employed a purposive, criterion sampling method paired with snowball sampling methods (Creswell, 2013; Gall et al., 2007) to identify and select high school assistant principals as participants. To ensure an accurate representation of the phenomena being studied, participants had to meet multiple criteria. Creswell (2013) determined that the selection of the participants is essential to gather the accurate perceptions of those individuals with the lived experiences of the phenomena. Inclusion criteria in this study included: (a) currently employed at a Florida high school as an Assistant Principal; (b) directly supervised the ESE department in

their respective school; (c) held current certification in educational leadership (K-12) in the state of Florida; (d) previously taught a minimum of three years. Research criteria was developed to match the individuals who would have the lived experiences associated with this phenomena.

Data collection for this study occurred through a demographic survey as well as semi-structured interviews. In total, seven (N=7) semi-structured interviews were completed with assistant principals. All interviews were audio recorded after gaining permission from the participants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted at a location of the participants choosing after receiving informed consent (Slavin, 2007).

<div align="center">Operational Definitions</div>

Community-Based Vocational Education - an approach to deliver vocational training for students with disabilities. This approach provides work-related experiences in actual community settings of the home school (Cobb, Halloran, Simon, Norman & Bourexis, 1999).

Exceptional Student Education (ESE) - refers to a Florida program for students with disabilities. The Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services administers programs and services for students in Florida who have a disability. Students with an IEP in Florida are served under ESE (Florida Department of Education, 2019)

Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) - a requirement within the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 20. U.S.C. § 1400) that mandates that all students with disabilities receive an education that (a) is paid for by the public; (b) meets state standards of education; (c) includes grades from preschool to high school level; and (d) is delivered in the manner directed by the students' IEP (Yell & Bateman, 2019).

General Education - refers to the location or setting where foundational skills, knowledge, and "habits of mind" are provided to students. General education also refers to the

teaching and learning of core curricula to provide students with a multidisciplinary, high quality knowledge of subjects (Tuzlukova, Inguva, & Sanchet, 2019).

Independent Skills Instruction - refers to the instruction of self-care, social skills, independent living and other behavior skills that allow students with disabilities to live a more independent life (Test, Bartholomew, & Bethune, 2015).

Inclusion - refers to the time that students with disabilities spend in classes with non-disabled (or typical) peers, in non-special education courses (Test, Bartholomew, & Bethune, 2015).

Individualized Education Program (IEP) - An IEP is defined by IDEA as a "written statement for each child with a disability that is developed, reviewed, and revised in accordance with section 614(d)" (SEC 602<<20 U.S.C.1401>>(14), IDEA).

Intellectual Disabilities - the American Association on Intellectual and Development Disabilities (AAIDD) (2018) defines intellectual disability as "…a disability characterized by significant limitations in both intellectual functioning and in adaptive behavior, which covers many everyday social and practical skills."

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) – the least segregated environment, or the environment in which children with disabilities spend the most amount of time with or around their non-disabled peers (Crockett & Kauffman, 1999).

Occupational Courses - these courses are often for students with intellectual disabilities to learn functional skills, independent living skills, and other work skills (Test, Bartholomew, & Bethune, 2015).

Self-Contained Classroom - refers to an instructional delivery model in which a student with a disability receives all of his or her academic coursework with one teacher, typically in one

classroom. This self-contained classroom is normally a separate classroom, removed from other general education classrooms within the school (Chen, 2009).

Services for Special Education - the services for a student with a disability range from instruction, community resources, development of employment skills, adult living instruction, daily living skills, transition services, transportation services, mobility services, assistive technology, speech therapy, counseling, and related services to meet their unique needs (Indiana Secondary Transition Resource Center, 2011).

Social Skills - refers to the ability of students with disabilities to interact with other students, adults, and employers successfully (Benz, Yovanoff, & Doren, 1997). These include the ability to understand social norms during conversation, completing daily tasks, and interacting with others.

Urban School District - a district with this distinction is classified as a territory within an area that is urbanized, inside of a city with a population greater than 250,000 or more (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.)

Validity Check - a process in which the researcher provides study participants a copy of their verbatim transcript of their interviews conducted as part of data collection. The purpose of the validity check is to allow the participant to determine the accuracy and wholeness of the transcript to thoroughly explain his or her experience/input (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Vocational Education - these courses teach students with disabilities the skills needed for choosing a career and how to be successful in that field. Vocational courses provide hands-on experience in authentic settings. Vocational education allows students to practice and gain competency in employment skills (Baer, et al., 2003).

<u>Assumptions</u>

The following assumptions will be made while conducting this research study:

1. Participants will answer all questions truthfully.

2. Participants are willing to provide responses that will help inform the field.

3. Participants want the best education for their students with intellectual disabilities.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In this chapter, relevant research and literature related to school leadership in five specific domains will be presented. The organization of this chapter will include the literature on school leadership related to: (a) the role of the school leader in special education; (b) educating students with intellectual disabilities; (c) students with intellectual disabilities and access to the curriculum; (d) special education legislation; and (e) leadership preparation to serve students with intellectual disabilities.

Role of the School Leader in Special Education

Across our country, school leaders have assumed the responsibility of meeting educational accountability goals. These goals are grounded in student academic performance outcomes, student learning measures, staff performance outcomes, and parental and community engagement. Crockett, Billingsley, and Boscardin (2019) found that the complex role of school leaders is still evolving. School leaders are becoming more collaborative and utilizing distributive leadership to share responsibilities with others at their school. In high schools, school leaders are managing multiple content areas, sports and athletic programs, arts and cultural performances, business and community relations, and postsecondary planning for their students. The priorities of high school leaders are varied as they have to focus on student learning, professional development, teacher evaluations, and student needs (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003).

Special Education School Leaders are Unique

The inquiry into the unique role that special education leaders have in their school has not been directly addressed in the literature. However, administrators who have been explicitly trained in special education exhibit unique expertise in their ability to deliver services and support to students with disabilities, as well as support the instruction and support of staff (Boscardin, 2007). Special education leaders are faced with high-stress situations that are statistically likely to cause teachers and administrators to leave the field, or the profession altogether. They are burdened with high-accountability standards, bureaucracy, and compliance tasks. Special education leaders also work with limited access to mentoring programs (Billingsley, 2007; Billingsley, Carlson, & Klein, 2004; McLesky, Tyler, & Flippin, 2004). When school leaders lack formal training in special education law and practice, they lack confidence in their ability to make proper decisions that may promote the advancement of their students with disabilities (Pazey & Cole, 2013).

The role of the school leader is critical. The impact of the school leadership on student learning is second only to the role of the classroom teacher. School leaders can shape the school-wide attitude and vision for students with disabilities. School leaders help determine whether a school is inclusive of students with disabilities or chooses less inclusive schedules; or whether students with disabilities have access to all available programs to improve their education depends upon the school leader (Roberts & Guerra, 2017).

Martin (2005) stated that the role of the special education school leader has evolved from the "primary service provider of children and youth with disabilities to more of a collaborator, partner, facilitator, and educator of the greater school community on issues of disability" (p. 1). The role of the special education administrator has indeed evolved to a new, far more complex

role than ever before. Today, special education school leaders are faced with a multitude of concerns from local, state, and federal compliance to increased scrutiny and litigation over special education and more. It is virtually impossible for special education school administrators to be blind to the pressures and responsibilities that face them each day.

Instructional Leadership

The role of the school leader is both complex and demanding. School leaders face the constant demands of increasing school accountability, student and staff safety, facilities maintenance, maintaining stakeholder relationships, and ensuring that all students make adequate progress in mastering state academic standards. However, one of the lesser known roles of the school leader is that of an instructional leader for students with disabilities. While this role is not widely discussed, successful school leaders are actively engaging in conversations related to delivery of the state academic standards and student learning outcomes. Also, school leaders must be mindful of providing support for teachers; conducting classroom visitations; and monitoring the relationship between the delivery of instruction, the monitoring of mastery of state standards, and the performance for all students in the content area (Bateman & Bateman, 2014).

As instructional leaders, school administrators face difficult decisions about which curricular supports to use such as textbooks, manipulatives, and computer software programs. The decision about what to use has implications for students' academic performance as the curricular supports directly impact classroom practices, summative assessment results, and ultimately school grades or rankings.

In Florida, schools are graded on a variety of student achievement measures. In high schools, overall school grades are directly tied to student achievement on state standardized tests, graduation rates, and success in acceleration opportunities. Schools earn their grade based on the percentage of possible points that they earn (See Figure 1). If schools earn at least 62% of the possible points, they will earn an A; if they earn 54% to 61% of possible points they will earn a B; if they earn 41% to 53% they will earn a C; if they earn 32% to 40% they will earn a D; and if they earn 31% or less, the school grade will be an F (Florida Department of Education, 2018e). Consequences of receiving a low school grade include increased oversight and regulation, financial impacts, and community mistrust.

English Language Arts (FSA, FSAA)	Mathematics (FSA, FSAA, EOCs)	Science (NGSSS, FSAA, EOCs)	Social Studies (EOCs)	Graduation Rate	Acceleration Success
Achievement (0% to 100%)	Achievement (0% to 100%)	Achievement (0% to 100%)	Achievement (0% to 100%)	4-year Graduation Rate (0% to 100%)	High School (AP, IB, AICE, Dual Enrollment or Industry Certification) (0% to 100%)
Learning Gains (0% to 100%)	Learning Gains (0% to 100%)				
Learning Gains of the Lowest 25% (0% to 100%)	Learning Gains of the Lowest 25% (0% to 100%)				Middle School (EOCs or Industry Certifications) (0% to 100%)

Figure 1. Chart of School Grade Categories (Florida Department of Education, 2018e)

When a school leader has an authentic understanding of academic expectations, state standards, and best practices for teaching students with disabilities, they can work with teachers to improve their instructional delivery and move towards mastery learning with all students, and

true instructional leadership (Rinehart, 2017). This authentic understanding has not always been the present in school leaders. The role of the school leader has evolved from disciplinarian and building manager to instructional leader and community partner. School leaders have become catalysts for change and a pivotal advocates for student academic achievement (Benoliel & Schechter, 2017). In addition to understanding best practices, instructional leaders are in the best position to engage staff, students, support personnel, business partners, and other stakeholders to work together to meet the needs of all students, including students with disabilities (Benoliel & Schechter, 2017).

<center>Meeting Expectations</center>

Academic reform is contributing to an increase in already rigorous state standards, student performance expectations, and updated implications for federal laws such as IDEA. Given this climate, it is imperative that school leaders are prepared to meet the high state and federal expectations as well as the demands and legal implications of implementing federally protected IEPs (Bateman & Bateman, 2014). Williams and Dikes (2015) found that teachers and school leaders working in special education will make the decision to leave the profession at a rate double than their regular education counterparts. While the reasons for their departure vary, the results of their departure consistently impact their students. In order to find teachers to fill their classrooms, many school leaders are facing the dilemma of needing to hire temporary personnel or underqualified staff (Williams & Dikes, 2015).

A report by the Learning Policy Institute (Podolsky, Darling-Hammond, Doss, & Reardon, 2019) found that in California, almost half of the teachers were awarded substandard credentials to teach children. These included credentials as an intern, temporary certifications, or

<center>15</center>

waivers to certifications. They also found that when teachers lacked full credentials, there is a strong negative correlation with student achievement.

When faced with needing to hire underqualified and temporary staff, school leaders must have the knowledge to provide training and coaching to their team members in order to provide appropriate instruction their students with disabilities. However, Cusson (2010) found that school leaders have deficits in their knowledge and skills when it comes to serving students with disabilities. Effective school leaders should possess the ability to provide for all of their students in an equitable manner, to meet the individual needs of each student. Leaders should use all available resources to deliver a fluid, robust, and dynamic support system for teachers of all students, including students with disabilities (Kozleski & Choi, 2018).

Compliance, expectations, and accountability infiltrate every aspect of public schools. Despite this, a review of published literature in education journals from 1970 to 2009 show that the literature on special education leadership is often commentary or theoretical in nature. Further, the review of abstracts also found that peer-reviewed research studies on special education leadership was in short supply (Crocket, Becker, & Quinn, 2009). This lack of literature is a disservice to the field of special education leadership. In order to strengthen this field and to ensure that empirical research informs practice, more research (not just commentary) is needed (Bateman, 2007).

Educating Students with Intellectual Disabilities

Students with intellectual disabilities have historically been denied the equal access to public classrooms and instead, been assigned to learn in segregated classrooms without proper supports (Anderson, 2018). Legislation under IDEA changed that practice with its mandate

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which states that any student with a disability is to be educated in the least restrictive

environment (LRE). Therefore, students with intellectual disabilities have the right to learn in

the most inclusive classroom with their peers, to the maximum extent possible despite their age

or disability (Alquraini & Gut, 2012). While this provision protects students from being denied

access to educational opportunities, the reality is that the inclusion of students with intellectual

disabilities has not been a common practice. Students with intellectual disabilities in high

schools have not historically participated in inclusive classrooms (Alquraini & Gut, 2012;

Carroll et al., 2011; Sailor, 2014; Sailor & McCart, 2014).

Defining Intellectual Disabilities

The Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps (TASH) in 2000 provided a

definition of severe disabilities as the following:

> "These persons include individuals with disabilities of all ages, races, creeds, national
>
> origins, genders, and sexual orientation who require ongoing support in one or more
>
> major life activities in order to participate in an integrated community and enjoy a quality
>
> of life similar to that available to all citizens. Support may be required for life activities,
>
> such as mobility, communication, self-care, and learning as necessary for community
>
> living, employment, and self-sufficiency" (TASH, 2000, para 1).

The American Association on Intellectual and Development Disabilities (AAIDD)

defines intellectual disability as "…a disability characterized by significant limitations in both

intellectual functioning and in adaptive behavior, which covers many every day social and

practical skills. This disability originates before the age of 18." (AAIDD, 2018, para 1). Finally,

a Florida statute defines intellectual disability as two standard deviations below the norm in both

adaptive functioning and intellectual functioning, and a student who is below the general

adaptive functioning and intellectual functioning during the development periods of children

from birth to age 18 (Exceptional Student Education Eligibility for Students with Intellectual

Disabilities, 2009). Collectively, these definitions provide the reader with not only proper

language, but a comprehensive, working definition of intellectual disability for the purposes of

this study.

Diploma Options for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

In the state for Florida, students with intellectual disabilities have two options to earn

their high school diploma. These options, as defined by the Florida Department of Education

(FLDOE) are the same as their non-disabled peers: (1) a standard high school diploma, or (2) an

accelerated 18-credit option diploma. In addition to these diploma options, students with

disabilities may earn their high school diploma through participation in access points as well as a

diploma in which the student participates in both academic coursework and employment

competencies (Florida Department of Education, 2018b).

Students and families who wish to utilize the academic and employment competencies

diploma option must meet all core academic requirements and an additional one-half credit in a

course that includes employment. State statute mandates that this employment must provide at

least minimum wage pay and as many hours as appropriate for the student. The number of hours

is determined by the IEP team and is outlined in the students' employment transition plan

(Florida Department of Education, 2018b).

To complete all graduation requirements in Florida, a student seeking a diploma using

these access point courses must successfully complete four credits in English, four credits in

mathematics, three credits in science, three credits in social studies, one credit in fine arts, one

physical education credit, and eight elective credits. Parents, IEP teams, and the student may

choose to have students complete elective credits via paid employment as well (Florida

Department of Education, 2018b).

Intellectual Disabilities and Access to the Curriculum

As part of the graduation requirements for students with significant cognitive disabilities

in Florida, a modified set of standards have been created called access points. Access points are

a written expectation of learning that is based on the Florida standards for comparable courses.

Embedded within the Florida standards, access points reflect the intention of the standard, with

less complexity (CPALMS, 2019). Students with intellectual disabilities may complete

graduation requirements through successful completion of access point classes, general

education classes, or a combination of both.

Students with intellectual disabilities often display a variety of deficits or behaviors that

pose challenges in the classroom environment. These include aggressive or self-injurious

behaviors, lack of social skills needed to form and maintain relationships with peers, isolation

from others, and inability to perform requested tasks (Boden, Jolivette, & Alberto, 2018). It is for

these reasons that students with intellectual disabilities need to receive specific instruction in the

areas of vocational education, social skills, and independent living skills. This instruction can be

delivered via community-based instruction, vocational training, modeling of appropriate

behaviors, and behavior instruction (Boden, Jolivette & Alberto, 2018).

Students with intellectual disabilities should receive intervention starting at a young age

as early intervention has been shown to have the most benefit. A longitudinal study of students

who were followed from preschool to adult showed that when students received early

intervention, they had significantly better life outcomes. They found that not only did the

preschoolers who received early intervention have higher academic achievement; but they also

had better health and employment outcomes; were less likely to be involved in criminal activity;

and were less likely to live in poverty. This study demonstrates the critical need for early

intervention for students with intellectual disabilities (Heckman, 2019).

<div align="center">Vocational and Employment Skills Instruction</div>

People with intellectual disabilities should have the opportunity to have an occupation

that allows them to contribute to their community and participate with colleagues and form social

bonds, all of which are a central part of adult life. According to Trembath, Balandin, Stancliffe,

& Togher, 2010) key factors that limit the employability of high school students with intellectual

disabilities include lack of confidence and inadequate work experience. Students with

intellectual disabilities who gain employment boast numerous positive outcomes. These include

having significantly fewer health problems (Robertson, Beyer, Emerson, Baines & Hatton,

2019), becoming less likely to use social service benefits and more likely gain their own

financial independence (Cimera, 2012); and having greater autonomy and financial

independence (Park & Park, 2019).

Proper education in employment or vocational skills are acquired differently across the

state of Florida. Some of the methods used by school districts to educate their students with

intellectual disabilities in vocational and independent living skills include specialized job

coaching, social skills training and/or coursework, community-based instruction, on-the-job

training, and supported employment. These opportunities are afforded to students through on-

campus activities, as well as off-campus opportunities and internships (Florida Department of Education, 2018c).

Courses in vocational education are provided through the state of Florida's Course Code Directory (CCD). The courses outlined within the CCD provide opportunities for students with disabilities to gain employability skills. These courses are: Career Education 9-12, Career Preparation 9-12, Career Experiences 9-12, Career Placement 9-12, Preparation for Entrepreneurship/Self-Employment, and Preparation for Adult Living, Supportive Competitive Employment (Florida Department of Education, 2018d).

Social and Independent Skills Instruction

Expectations of students' behavior while in a cafeteria, on a bus, in a line at the store, or while meeting new people is not always intrinsically understood by students with disabilities. Students with intellectual disabilities need not only academic and vocational education, but social instruction as well (Bateman & Bateman, 2014). There are many situations or scenarios daily where social and independent skills instruction can take place. Inclusive environments where students with intellectual disabilities interact with non-disabled peers, classroom routines that allow students to learn through repetition and feedback, as well as extracurricular activities all support the social skill development of students with intellectual disabilities (Bateman & Bateman, 2014; Zirkel, 2013).

Transition planning and services have provided students with intellectual disabilities an opportunity to learn social skills, as well as independent living skills. Transition planning allows students, families, and IEP team an opportunity to design experiences that will help students with intellectual disabilities later in life. These may include academic and non-academic coursework,

employment skills instruction, preparation for supported or independent living, and leisure skills instruction (National Center on Secondary Education and Transition, 2017). Under federal law, students are entitled to transition services to improve their independent living skills. Schools must provide students and families with information and training opportunities related to independent living (Bateman & Bateman, 2014). This includes allowing the students to determine which living arrangement they desire for themselves, the daily activities they want to engage in, and the ability to make decisions about their own life (Ioanna, 2018).

<u>Special Education Legislation</u>

In much of America's history, students with disabilities often were denied an education, solely based on their disability. This is a stark contrast to education today and the services and accommodations that allow students with disabilities to have access to a free and appropriate education. During the civil rights movement, several court cases helped to set a precedent for the inclusion of all students in general education classes. These cases brought to light the disparity between white students and students of color as seen court cases such as Murray v. Maryland in 1963 and Sweat v. Painter in 1950 (U.S. Courts, n.d.). These cases helped to document the changing culture of education in our country. First, through the desegregation of students of color, then to the inclusion of students with disabilities.

Brown v. Board of Education, 1954

One seminal case was Brown v. Board of Education in 1954. This case was the culmination of state sponsored segregation of students in our public schools. After much controversy, it was the decision of the Supreme Court that separate schools for children were

unconstitutional (U.S. Courts, n.d.). Brown v. Board of Education was a groundbreaking legal case for the provision of education to all students and paved way for all of America's students, including students with disabilities.

Mental Retardation Facility and Community Center Construction Act, 1958

Following the Brown decision, the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare announced the first federally funded teacher preparation programs that would train teachers to work with students of varying needs. This led to the inclusion of students with disabilities in classes with their typical peers, leaving many teachers unprepared to handle the diverse population (Kode, 2002). In 1958, The Mental Retardation Facility and Community Center Construction Act (P.L. 88-164) authorized the allocation of one million dollars for colleges and universities to prepare teachers to educate students with disabilities. The goal of this legislation was increase the resources available to educate all students in public schools, regardless of disability. This appropriation of funds helped colleges and universities develop high-quality teacher preparation programs for pre-service teachers. Florida Universities were awarded almost $240,000 in teacher preparation funds (Heller, 1969).

Elementary and Secondary Education Act, 1965

Several other events in the history of special education helped to lay the foundation for change including the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965. Originally designed as an attack on poverty, ESEA was signed into law by Lyndon B. Johnson to guarantee equal access to an education for all of America's students. This act also provided federal

funding for students disadvantaged by poverty in elementary, middle, and high school levels (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

After the implementation of ESEA, courts affirmed that there is an innate right for every child to receive an education, including children with disabilities and this right is grounded in the equal protection clause of the 14th amendment of the Constitution. In 1972, Judge Waddy ruled that no child should be excluded from a public education, unless that child is provided an alternative public education that serves to meet the exceptional needs of that child. Further, Waddy stated that a prior making a decision about educational placement, a hearing and periodic review of the child's education should be conducted to determine its' appropriateness. Judge Waddy's opinion later became largely known as the Waddy Decree and provided a foundation for special education law (Dunn et al., 1975).

Education for All Handicapped Children Act, 1975

With the foundation of inclusion of all students in the general education classroom in place, other court cases helped to define the rights of children and adults with disabilities. According to Jones (2015), students with disabilities were often denied an education due to their disability until the Education for all Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA), P.L. 94-142 was signed into law in November 1975 by President Gerald Ford. At that time, states that were funded in part through federal dollars were required to provide students with disabilities a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment.

The overarching purpose of EAHCA was to enforce the clause of equal protection under the 14th Amendment of the Constitution. This act provided students with many rights that are still evident today. These include the right to due process, nondiscriminatory testing and

evaluation, and placement in proper settings. EAHCA also guaranteed a free education and an

appropriate education for all students with disabilities. Finally, there were requirements for

Congress to create a checks-and-balances system called "procedural safeguards" (Yell &

Bateman, 2019). This law was monumental in advocating for the equal education of students

with disabilities, much like Brown vs. Board of Education did many years prior (Jones, 2015).

<div align="center">Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), 2004</div>

Beginning with the Compulsory Education Provision of 1899, which mandated students

between the ages of 8-12 years of age to attend school (Kode, 2002), until the EAHCA of 1975

(Jones, 2015), every court case and piece of legislation helped to solidify the foundation for

improving the educational outcomes for students with disabilities. The momentum from these

historic milestones served as the catalyst for implementing laws such as IDEA to protect students

with disabilities.

IDEA is a four-part law that ensures each student with a disability be afforded with Free

Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). IDEA is a reauthorization of the EAHCA signed into law

by President George W. Bush in 2004. The four parts of IDEA include: (1) the provisions of the

law, (2) assistance for students with disabilities, (3) services for infants and children with

disabilities, and (4) federal programs that support students with disabilities (Hulett, 2009).

To ensure that students with disabilities are provided with the resources and opportunities

needed to meet IEP goals, the federal government has placed the "zero reject" principle within

IDEA. In part, this ensures the availability of sufficient resources to provide a complete

education for students with disabilities. This includes the funding of programs and resources that

allow students with disabilities access to public education, qualified special education personnel,

and a comprehensive system of personnel development (USDOE, 2003). These are all established to "provide full educational opportunities to all children with disabilities" (20 U.S.C. 1412 (a) (2)).

Safeguards and protections for students with disabilities are embedded within IDEA. They include team evaluations prior to placements, exclusionary criteria, and a confirmed diagnosis of: mental retardation, visual impairments, autism, traumatic brain injury, orthopedic impairment, language or speech impairments, learning disabilities, emotional disabilities, or other health impairments that require special education and related services (20U.S.C.1401(3)(A) (i-ii)). In addition to the confirmed impairment or disability, there must be a causal relationship between the impairment or disability and the service and needs of each individual student (Hulett, 2009).

The Higher Education Opportunity Act, 2008

President George W. Bush signed into law the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA; P.L.110-315) in 2008 (Higher Education Opportunity Act, 2008). This law included several provisions for postsecondary education for students with intellectual disabilities. When students wish to continue their education at an institution of higher education so that they can gain the skills and knowledge to prepare for gainful employment, they are covered under HEOA Title VII, Section 760 Part D (Higher Education Opportunity Act, 2008).

The greatest implication of HEOA is the shift for students to receive transition skills training from their local school district and to enrollment in colleges and universities in inclusive settings (Johnson et al., 2014). This law also ensures that students are supported in their pursuit of higher education by creating a national center to coordinate student services, provide training

for students, and evaluate students for postsecondary programs. This national center, Think College, is based at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Think College's mission is to improve, develop, and expand options for people with intellectual disabilities to attend college or university (Think College, n.d.).

<div align="center">Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015</div>

Nearly 50 years after the passing of the ESEA, it was reauthorized as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2002, and then later reauthorized again as the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), signed into law by President Obama on December 10, 2015 (U.S Department of Ed, n.d.). ESSA, our nation's most current educational law recommits to providing an equal opportunity for all students to receive an appropriate education. Within ESSA, there are three notable provisions that specifically support students with disabilities. These provisions include (1) the accountability for vulnerable positions (El Moussaoui, 2017), (2) opportunities for students with significant disabilities to obtain a standard high school diploma, and (3) increased autonomy for states to address their performance indicators for students with significant disabilities' academic progress (Parsi & Casey, 2016).

Under ESSA, states have increased flexibility to provide services for their students. States have the autonomy to determine their own accountability goals - large, small, and interim goals. These goals must address student academic performance, English language proficiency, and graduation rates in high schools. Additional flexibility is given to states in the weighting of accountability measures. While academic factors must have a greater weight in the accountability measure, the individual weighting is left up to the state (Black, 2017; Klein, 2018).

Leadership Preparation for Serving Students with Intellectual Disabilities

As stated, there is a gap in the literature concerning the school principal's knowledge of students with intellectual disabilities and the impact this has on the students' education. Current research provides a reasonable justification to support the need for school preparation programs in regard to special education (Bateman & Bateman, 2014; Cusson, 2010). However, programs designed to prepare school leaders have failed to prepare their students and graduates to assume the role of instructional leader, this is especially true when considering students with disabilities. Cusson (2010) conducted a survey to gather data on topics covered in principal preparation programs. The survey specifically focused on how principals were being prepared to support students special education. The results of the survey determined that the most prevalent topics addressed were building relationships, communication within the school, leadership capacity, and leadership vision. Further, the findings revealed that the topics addressed with new principals were directly related to expertise of the professor. Many professors self-reported that their lack of knowledge of special education prohibited them from delivering much, if any special education content in their courses.

In a study conducted by Martin, Bai, Diaz, and Steinke (2017), the researchers examined the knowledge of school leaders who serve students with disabilities at their respective schools. The researchers intended the results of the study to drive the creation of professional development modules to support new school leaders in the area of special education. Their findings indicated that school leaders serving students with disabilities in their public schools needed support in five major areas relating to special education: (1) legal considerations of special education, including requirements under IDEA; (2) best practices in providing

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specialized instruction and services; (3) how to monitor academic achievement for their students with disabilities; (4) how to provide and monitor transitions for students as they move from elementary school all the way to postsecondary opportunities; and (5) how to meet the needs of students and their families.

<center>Need for Leadership Preparation</center>

In the past 30 years, the number of students with disabilities has nearly doubled (Pazey & Cole, 2013). During that time, parents, families, and lawyers have become more informed about the rights and accommodations that are guaranteed to students with disabilities under IDEA and ESSA. Because of the increased awareness, school leaders must also become more aware of the rights and accommodations that are provided to students with disabilities. When students fail to meet their IEP goals districts can be held responsible for their failures (Pazey & Cole, 2013).

In 2007, Florida statutes first required that school leader preparation programs and on-the-job preparation programs provide high-quality training. After development and revisions of this law, proposed leadership standards were created with four domains of effective leadership defined. These domains are: (1) student achievement; (2) instructional leadership; (3) organizational leadership; and (4) professional and ethical behavior (Florida Department of Education, 2019b). Ten leadership standards were established under these overarching domains including (1) student learning results; (2) student learning as a priority; (3) instructional plan implementation; (4) faculty development; (5) learning environment; (6) decision making; (7) leadership development; (8) school management; (9) communication; and (10) professional and ethical behaviors (Florida Department of Education, 2019b).

While student achievement and learning goals for all students are embedded in these standards there are no professional standards that specifically address students with disabilities. The idea of the inclusion of students with disabilities can be found in learning environment (Standard 5). It states: "Maintains a safe, respectful and inclusive student-centered learning environment that is focused on equitable opportunities for learning and building a foundation for a fulfilling life in a democratic society and global economy" (Florida Department of Education, 2019b, para 7). While not specifically stated, this standard implies that principals should have the knowledge to provide inclusive learning environments for their students with disabilities (Florida Department of Education, 2019b).

A report by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (Levin & Bradley, 2019) found that school leaders are leaving their jobs at an alarming rate. During the 2016-2017 school year, the average stay for school leaders was just four years. When determining reasons for leaving their profession, the number one reason stated was a lack of preparation for the role. School leaders are facing high stakes accountability, diverse working conditions, and shortages in finances and teachers and yet, they feel that these concerns were not addressed in their preparation programs, through mentoring or coaching.

<center>Induction Programs for New Leaders</center>

New school administrators are faced with a barrage of new experiences. They have to master technical skills, manage community pressures, track accountability measures, address staff concerns, and address doubts of self-adequacy. All of this occurs in an environment where decisions are made in seconds, dozens of times a day while the leader is trying to create a positive school culture that supports learning (Bellibas & Liu, 2018). New school leaders should

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be provided with strong mentoring and induction programs. Martin, Gourwitz, and Hall (2016) determined that there is a need for preparation programs to specifically address the issues faced by special education leaders as this is not being addressed adequately through traditional leadership preparation programs. Further, they outline a successful mentoring program that includes establishing and working toward specific goals by both the mentor and mentee, facilitation in both personal and professional growth by the mentor, and clear expectations of the mentor-mentee relationship. They recognize not only the importance of this relationship, but the reality of its fragility. Martin and colleagues found that a quality mentoring relationship requires communication, planning, and evaluation which is not always easily accomplished (2016).

Successful induction programs promote opportunities for new school leaders to collaborate with more experienced leaders. In many other professions, the opportunity to learn from experts is mandated for newly practicing professionals through opportunities to practice, with support (Lemoine, Chan, & Richardson, 2019).   Successful induction programs have common components: (a) time dedicated for collaboration between mentor and mentee, (b) deliberate planning, (c) a careful selection of who can be qualified to be a mentor, and (d) training for mentors and mentees on the working relationship (Martin et al., 2016). When new teachers and school leaders are involved in a strong mentoring program and they are confident their ability to provide services and instruction to their students, they are less likely to leave the profession (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). School districts who have invested time and talent to train and appoint school leaders can find additional benefit by providing a high-quality induction and mentorship program to retain their school leaders (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017).

Summary

This chapter reviewed the major research and scholarship relating to school leadership and educating students with intellectual disabilities. Research is needed on the importance of special education leadership and content expertise. Current research supports the benefits of students with intellectual disabilities participating in coursework and instruction related to employment and independent living.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

<u>Introduction</u>

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences, including the beliefs, of assistant principals who serve Exceptional Student Education (ESE) departments in their respective schools. The role of the ESE administrator is multi-faceted and evolving under local, state, and federal legislation such as IDEA and ESSA. School leaders face growing accountability for their students with disabilities' academic performance, complex legal requirements, limited resources, and competing priorities now more than ever before (Crockett, Billingsley, & Boscardin, 2019). With increased accountability, students with exceptionalities, particularly those with intellectual disabilities, are making greater progress towards leading independent lives. Wehman and colleagues (2018) argued that in the past 40 years, progress has been made in only helping students with intellectual disabilities lead independent lives and gain meaningful employment.

While independent living and sustained employment for people with intellectual disabilities has increased, there remains a gap in the literature regarding the need for young people with intellectual disabilities to receive vocational and independent skills instruction while still in school (Lombardi, Dougherty, & Monahan, 2018). Further, research in the vocational and independent skills instruction for students with intellectual disabilities is limited, and many studies are over 30 years old (Baer et al., 2011; Dietrick, 1980; Ehrsten & Izzo, 1988; White, 1983). There is a need to explore the role that high schools play in preparing students with intellectual disabilities for the transition to adulthood through instruction in vocational and independent skills. For this study, a qualitative research design was used to examine the

educational opportunities including vocational, social, and independent skills instruction for students with intellectual disabilities through as told by current assistant principals in Florida's high schools.

Qualitative research is an interdisciplinary field that is primarily based on the experiences of those with direct experience of the phenomena (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). A qualitative research study seeks to collect data to achieve a better understanding of the subject, phenomena, or interactions in a holistic manner. Data is typically gathered directly from participants and the researcher is often the primary instrument for data collection and data analysis (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2016).

Qualitative research is an essential form of educational research (O'Donoghue & Punch, 2003). While other methodologies seek to explain or prove, the central objective of qualitative research is to understand phenomena. Specifically, phenomenology is the study of things, phenomena, and people as they appear to us in life, void of personal bias. Phenomenology seeks meaning from the wholeness of the phenomena by examining the phenomena from all points to gain a complete understanding and vision. Further, in a phenomenological study, the researcher is personally invested or interested in the phenomena she or he seeks to know (Moustakas, 1994).

This chapter presents a summary of the methodological approach used to investigate the lived experiences and beliefs of assistant principals who lead ESE departments with students with intellectual disabilities in their respective high schools. This chapter begins with the purpose of the study, followed by the research questions that framed the qualitative investigation, and finally a rationale for the study design. This chapter will also articulate the processes or

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procedures for bracketing, sampling and participant recruitment, data collection, and data analysis.

Purpose of the Study

This study explored the lived experiences of assistant principals who serve the ESE department in their respective high schools. The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to describe high school assistant principals' lived experiences with students who have intellectual disabilities and to gain an understanding of their beliefs and knowledge as they serve this population of learners. Further, this study focused on the opportunities provided to students with intellectual disabilities to gain the skills and knowledge needed to pursue employment and live as independently as possible. Additionally, the study focused on the beliefs that assistant principals who oversee ESE departments have about vocational and independent skills instruction for students with intellectual disabilities.

To describe the roles and responsibilities of the assistant principals who supervise the ESE department, the researcher conducted interviews with multiple participants and analyzed the data for common themes, trends, and relevant units. For the purpose of this study, vocational education is defined as courses that provide students with opportunities to: (a) further their knowledge related to career options, (b) participate in practical work-related and behavior skills through practice, and (c) gain experiences in school and community settings (CPALMS, 2017.) Data from this study produced results to inform the field of educational leadership and clarify the roles and responsibilities for assistant principals who supervise ESE departments in high schools.

Research Questions

The research questions guided the research design. Specifically, this study used a phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2013) to describe the lived experiences of assistant

principals over the ESE departments in their high schools. This research study explored two research questions:

> RQ1: What are the lived experiences of school-based leaders providing students with intellectual disabilities opportunities to learn vocational and independent living skills during the school day?
>
> RQ2: What are the beliefs of school-based leaders providing students with intellectual disabilities opportunities to learn vocational and independent living skills during the school day?

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative, phenomenological research design (Creswell, 2013; Gall et al., 2007; Moustakas, 1994) to answer the two research questions. A phenomenological research design allowed for a rich description of the lived experiences and beliefs of the assistant principals, in their own words as they experience their role (Creswell, 2013; Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2014). Through the examination of multiple research participants' transcripts, the researcher was able to identify common ideas, practices, concepts, and themes across their shared experiences (Ritchie et al., 2014). According to Creswell (2013) in this methodological design, the researcher is the one that facilitates data collection through open-ended interviews and observations with the ultimate goal of understanding the common meaning for several individuals. This research design focuses on the commonalities of all participants, to ultimately obtain an understanding of the shared phenomena.

Rationale for Research Design

Qualitative research provides a rich opportunity to help inform the field of special education. Some of the most pressing issues can be investigated and explained using qualitative

methods. Likewise, through the use of qualitative methods, we have the ability to generate

knowledge from practitioners of special education, special education school leaders, and students

receiving special education services (Pugach, Mukhopadhyay, & Gomez-Najarro, 2014). The

use of interviews for data collection, such as those conducted with assistant principals of ESE,

have provided a rich description that has the potential to shape educational opportunities for

students (Creswell, 2013).

The data collected using qualitative methods, specifically data collected from interviews,

allows the researcher to speak on behalf of the participant, about his or her own perceptions, in

his or her own words. The use of quotes, examples, and experiences shared allow the researcher

to articulate as the participant intended (Creswell, 2013). In this study, as in other qualitative

studies, the reader makes his or her own interpretations based on actual dialogue and statements

from the research participant.

<u>Instrumentation and Qualitative Research Protocols</u>

Human Research Procedure

The research design and procedures used in this study were based on the

recommendations of experts in the field of phenomenology, including but not limited to the

procedures published by Creswell (2013) and Moustakas (1994). Prior to beginning any data

collection, approval of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of Central Florida

(UCF) was obtained (see Appendix A). This study proposed minimal risk to research

participants, schools, and school districts and informed consent was obtained from all assistant

principal participants prior to any data collection (see Appendix B). All participants were

provided a copy of the informed consent, reminded that their participation was voluntary, and that they had the right not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time.

The confidentiality of research participants was protected through multiple measures consistent with procedures as described by Creswell (2013) and Gall et al., (2007). These measures were submitted to UCF's IRB and accepted. Data collection in this study consisted of a demographic survey and interviews. Any paper copies (e.g., demographic survey) were stored in a locked cabinet that only the researcher could access. Digital data in the form of audio recordings were password protected and accessible only to the researcher. To protect their identity, each participant was assigned an alphanumeric code. Only the alphanumeric codes were used in participant files and in the interview transcriptions. Further, no identifying data were collected from participants (e.g., name, school, school district) at any time in the recruitment or data collection process. In accordance with IRB protocol, all data has been retained in a password-protected file. Paper copies of the Assistant Principal Demographic Data Survey have been uploaded as PDF documents, stored in a password-protected file and will be retained for five years. After five years' time, data will be destroyed.

Participant interviews were transcribed verbatim using a transcription service. Prior to beginning any audio recording, participants were reminded that they should not disclose their name, school, school district, employer, supervisor names, or any other identifying information in their responses. When using the transcription service, the researcher named each file in a manner that did not include identifying information (e.g., P1_B0). The transcription company chosen for this study stores any uploaded files using a TLS 1.2 encryption using a 128-bit AES key, which is the equivalent to a supercomputer taking 149 trillion years to crack the password (Arora, 2019).

Bracketing

Prior to beginning any data collection, the researcher participated in the bracketing process. Bracketing is a process that increases validity of data collection and data analysis by openly acknowledging beliefs and influences (Lichtman, 2013) It is essential that researchers are not only aware of, but put aside their prior knowledge, experiences, and beliefs to be able to accurately describe the participants' lived experiences (Lichtman, 2013; Sorsa, Kiikkala, & Astedt-Kurki, 2015).

The process of bracketing is an important part of the validation of the results of a phenomenological study (Creswell, 2013; Speziale & Carpenter, 2007). Its purpose is to allow the researcher to identify and report his or her background, experiences, education, personal bias, vested interests, prior opinions, biases, and pre-determined assumptions about the study as any of these can influence not only the data collection but also the data analysis (Chan et al., 2013; Creswell, 2013).

In a phenomenological study, the researcher is the instrument for data collection and data analysis (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, the process of bracketing is extremely important, as the data collection can be subjective (Creswell, 2013; Starks & Trinidad, 2007). Subjectivity could potentially influence the data analysis (Chenail, 2011). The process of bracketing is not a one-time process. While the researcher participated in a bracketing interview at the start of the study, the bracketing process continued throughout the study as the researcher continued identifying and exposing his or her own personal assumptions throughout data collection and data analysis. The researcher also routinely monitored their reactions to new, frustrating, surprising, or satisfying information during data collection (Chenail, 2011; Fischer, 2009).

In this study, a number of bracketing procedures were used. These procedures included a narrative of positionality, a bracketing interview, an audit trail of data, and a peer-debriefer (Creswell, 2013; D'Silva et al., 2016; Hycner, 1985; Tufford & Newman, 2010). First, a narrative of positionality was written by the researcher to articulate the perspective she had going into the study. The narrative outlines the researcher's prior experiences, opinions related to the phenomena, and any biases going into the study. This narrative was written prior to any data collection (Berger, 2013; D'Silva et al., 2016).

The second procedure used was the bracketing interview (see Appendix C). This interview was conducted with a colleague of the researcher. The bracketing interview served as an interface between the researcher and the research study (Tufford & Newman, 2010). The interviewer was a graduate student at the same university as the researcher. The interviewer was pursuing a doctorate in Curriculum and Instruction and was selected for several reasons. First, the interviewer was chosen because of the non-administrative role that she held in relation to the researcher (Rolls & Relf, 2006; Tufford & Newman, 2010). She was also selected because she had completed the bracketing interview process herself and had experience using qualitative research processes. The bracketing interview consisted of questions that related to the researchers' educational background, professional experiences, purpose of the study, potential bias's that might arise, and experiences with the phenomena.

The third bracketing procedure that the researcher employed was an audit trail (Connelly, 2016). An audit trail has its origins in financial audits so that an auditor could account for a business' accounts and determine if there was error or fraud (Koch, 2006). In qualitative research, a similar concept can be employed. Audit trails allow an auditor the ability to become familiar with the whole study: the methodology used, the findings, and the conclusions,

including any changes or adjustments that had to be made (Carcary, 2009; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For this study, the researcher kept an electronic audit trail which included the following items: (a) the study instrumentation; (b) the original audio recordings from interviews with participants; (c) verbatim transcriptions of the interviews; and (d) a file with the selected verbatim participant statements, the interpretation of those statements from the researcher, and the assigned meaning of those statements. The use of the audit trail allowed the researcher to refer back to the original data source when needed and identify emerging trends in participant statements.

A peer-debriefer was utilized as a final bracketing process (Hycner, 1985; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The role of the peer-debriefer is to act as a disinterested peer to participate in the data analysis process as a validation method (Cooper, Brandon, & Lindberg, 1998). In this study, the peer-debriefer is a 2012 Doctor of Education (Ed.D) graduate of the University of Central Florida. For her dissertation, the peer-debriefer utilized coding and generating themes and meanings from her own qualitative data. Her familiarity of the coding process of qualitative data made her an ideal peer-debriefer.

To provide the peer-debriefer with all of the tools needed to validate the data accurately, she was provided digital copies of the verbatim transcripts for each participant as well as documents that contain the data analysis. Before the peer-debriefer began, clear instructions were provided to ensure that she was prepared to conduct inter-coder reliability. Before beginning, the peer-debriefer was reminded that her accurate analysis was vital to the validity of the data.

Participant Sampling and Recruitment

This study employed purposive, criterion sampling and snowball sampling methods (Creswell, 2013; Gall et al., 2007) to identify participants (*N*=7) who currently serve as assistant principals in Florida high schools. The seven participants were employed in four different school districts within the state of Florida. The size of the seven participants' school sites varied and the locations ranged from urban to suburban. Each of the seven participants were responsible for supervising the ESE department at their school site including the evaluations of the teachers, support staff, and paraprofessionals within the ESE department. Participants also oversaw the implementation of curriculum and services for all students within the ESE departments at their respective schools. Their oversight included making decisions on curricula used for core academic classes, elective course offerings, and personnel decisions.

Sampling procedures for this research study were selected to provide rich information to describe the phenomena. By using purposive, criterion sampling of participants, the researcher can obtain individual accounts of the lived experiences of participants who have direct experiences with the phenomena (Khan, 2014). Sample size for this study was guided by the richness of data provided by participant interviews. Data collection in this study continued until data saturation was established (Francis et al., 2010; O'Reilly & Parker, 2012).

In qualitative studies, data size is less important than data provided by the participants. Sample size is determined by many factors, the most important of those being: (a) the nature of the study, (b) the ability of the participants to provide a rich reflection on the phenomena, and (c) the study design (Morse, 2000). Further, Boddy (2016), Morse (2000), and Polkinghorne (1989) advised researchers employing a phenomenological design to seek a sample size only large enough to speak to the phenomena, typically between 5 and 10 participants who share

similar experiences, and as such, these similar experiences can be collected and interpreted. In this study, the participant size (*N*=7) was dictated based on the limited scope of the study and the ability of the participants to provide rich data. Creswell (2012) identified participant size as an important factor when gathering the data needed to answer the research questions. A sample size can range from 2 to 25 to represent the homogeneity from the larger sample pool.

Participants in this study were selected based on their ability to speak to the phenomena. All participants met selection criteria and had direct experience as the leader of the ESE department in their school. Participants all had the ability to provide data to help answer the research questions (Creswell, 2013). First, names and email addresses of assistant principals were obtained through district websites. Second, additional participants were recommended through snowball sampling (Creswell, 2013; Gall et al., 2007). Additional participants were identified until saturation was reached.

Participant Criteria

Participant criteria for this study included the following: (a) the participant is employed as a Florida high school assistant principal; (b) the participant directly supervises the ESE department in their respective school; (c) the participant is certified in educational leadership (K-12) in the state of Florida; (d) the participant has previously been a classroom teacher for a minimum of three years.

Participant Demographics

Seven participants were included in this study and represented four school districts in Florida. These school districts were located in central and southern Florida. Of the seven

participants, four were female and three were male. Five participants identified as Caucasian, one as Black, and one as Hispanic. Two participants had earned a doctorate degree, one participant had a specialist degree, and four participants had a masters' degree. The years' experience as a classroom teacher ranged from four to eleven years ($M = 8$). The years of service as an assistant principal ranged from three to 16 years ($M = 7$). The years' experience of supervising the ESE department ranged from one year to six years ($M = 3$). The longest any participant had served as the assistant principal was six years. Three assistant principals were serving in their first year as the ESE administrator.

The participants ages ranged from 35 to 55 years ($M = 45$). The diversity was greatest in the backgrounds of each of the participants. Two participants studied special education as an undergraduate and the other participants studied psychology, English, mathematics, history, and elementary education. All participants held a certification in Educational Leadership (K-12). Two participants were certified as school principals. Three participants were certified in ESE, or held a related certification. A summary of participant demographics is presented in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

P	Certifications	School Where Ed Leadership Obtained?	Highest Level of Education	Undergrad Degree	Years as a teacher?	Courses Taught as a teacher?	Years as an AP?	Years at Current School?	Years as the AP over ESE?
1	VE K-12, Psychology 6-12, Ed Leadership, Principal	Capella	Ph.D	Special Education	10	ESE- All Content Areas	5	5	5
2	ESE K-12, Ed Leadership	UCF	Ed.D.	Psychology	5	ESE General, Social Personal	3	3	3
3	Elementary Ed, Reading, ESOL, Ed Leadership	Nova Southeastern	M.Ed.	Elementary Ed	4	Intensive Reading, Advanced Reading, AVID	5	1	1
4	ELA 6-12, Reading, Ed Leadership, Principal	UCF	Ed.S.	English Education	11	English, Reading	5	1	1
5	SLD K-12, Ed Leadership	Stetson	M.Ed.	SLD	6	EH, SED, Pre-K VE, SLD, EMH, 5th gr Co-teacher	4	2	3
6	Math 6-12, Gifted, Ed Leadership	USF	M.Ed.	Math Education	9	M/J Math 6,7,8	16	8	1
7	History 6-12, Ed Leadership	Nova Southeastern	M.Ed.	History Education	10	Civics, Geography, World History	13	6	6

Researcher's Role

Throughout this study, the researcher served as the main instrument for data collection and data analysis. In that role, the researcher remained objective and open to participant responses (Creswell, 2013). The researcher began this study by identifying and stating positionality and then participated in a bracketing interview (Creswell, 2013; Slavin, 2007). Specific procedures used in in the bracketing process, please refer to Bracketing in Chapter 3. At the end of the study, the researcher ended relationships with participants (Creswell, 2013).

Data Collection Procedures and Instrumentation

As in many phenomenological studies, this study utilized semi-structured interviews as a method of data collection. Using semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to gain a deep understanding of the phenomena, in the voice of the participant (Creswell, 2013; Nicholls & Ormston, 2014; Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2014). This study gathered data from seven participants who had direct experiences with the phenomena being studied. Prior to conducting the semi-structured interviews, a demographic survey (see Appendix D) was given to each participant to complete. The demographic survey included 12 questions and addressed the participants': (a) current professional teaching certifications; (b) education (e.g., what their major was for both their undergraduate and graduate degrees and highest level of education obtained); (c) professional experience (e.g., which courses they taught as a teacher, how many years of experience they had as both a teacher and administrator); (d) demographic information (e.g., gender, age, and race).

Interview Process

Each study participant completed a semi-structured interview with the researcher at a location of his or her choosing. Following the semi-structured interview, each participant was provided a copy of the verbatim transcript as a means of a member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to ensure that the transcript was an accurate account of the interview and captured the experience and comments as represented by the participant. Allowing participants to review a copy of their transcript and provide feedback increases the credibility of the data analysis (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Interviews for this study began on February 5, 2019 and concluded on April 11, 2019. Interviews were conducted in a mutually agreed upon location, at a time most convenient for the participant. In order to protect the participants' confidentiality, increase comfort, and maintain compliance with IRB requirements, the researcher requested that no interviews were conducted at the participant's school site. Interviews were conducted at a variety of times of the day and on different days of the week to accommodate participants' schedules. Interviews conducted for this study ranged in length dependent on the responses provided by the participants. The shortest interview conducted was 13 minutes, and the longest interview was 29 minutes ($M = 21$).

To ensure compliance with IRB requirements, each participant was provided with an informed consent prior to an interview. With the permission of the participant, interviews were audio recorded. Following the interviews, recordings were downloaded on the researcher's computer and then sent digitally to a secured transcription service to be transcribed verbatim (Creswell, 2013). The verbatim transcriptions were emailed back to the researcher and each transcriptions was reviewed while simultaneously listening to the audio recording of each corresponding interview. Listening to the audio recordings while reading the transcriptions

allowed the researcher to redact any potentially identifying information as well as correct any inconsistencies (e.g., AEP versus IEP). After the researcher made any needed corrections, the transcriptions were sent to the participants via the email of their choosing. See Appendix E for the email template used. Data collection was continuous and only ended when the data was sufficient to answer to the research questions (Creswell, 2013).

Interview Questions

This study utilized a semi-structured interview to capture the lived experiences of high school assistant principals. Interview questions were specifically designed to allow participants to share their experiences and beliefs and to elicit a thorough understanding of the phenomenon. Open-ended questions allowed participants to answer questions in detail, and the semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to establish interview questions that could answer the research questions, yet remain flexible enough to permit the researcher to ask probing, or follow up questions that clarified responses from the participants (Creswell, 2013). The questions were designed to encourage the participant to be comfortable with the researcher and to allow the participants to share their experiences and provide in-depth insight into the phenomena (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). Interview questions for this study are presented in Table 2.

Table 2

Interview Questions for High School Assistant Principals

Data Type	Interview Question	Probing Question
Professional Experiences, Prior Education, Training, and Professional Development	Please tell me about yourself including your professional experiences that led you to where you are today.	1. What was your undergraduate major, and what did you teach prior to becoming an assistant principal? 2. Have you received formal training on intellectual disabilities?
Experiences Serving Students with Intellectual Disabilities	Please share your roles and responsibilities serving students with intellectual disabilities at your school site.	1. What daily expectations does your supervisor have of you as an assistant principal? 2. What do you spend the most time doing during the school year as it relates to students with intellectual disabilities?
Beliefs about Serving Students with Intellectual Disabilities	Tell me about your responsibilities as administrator leading the ESE department. Have you made any changes since your appointment, if so, what were they?	1. What do you think, in a perfect world an education for students with intellectual disabilities would look like in a high school? i.e. push-in support, pull-out groups, vocational training, etc.
Beliefs about Serving Students with Intellectual Disabilities	What are the success or challenges that you've experienced related to providing services or programs to students with intellectual disabilities?	1. Who is your support?

Data Type	Interview Question	Probing Question
Opportunities for Students with Intellectual Disabilities to Learn Vocational and/or Independent Skills	At your school site, tell me about the services and educational programs available to students with intellectual disabilities.	
Opportunities for Students with Intellectual Disabilities to Learn Vocational and/or Independent Skills	What role does education play for students with intellectual disabilities in high school?	
Conclusion	Is there anything about your roles and responsibilities related to students with ID that I haven't asked you about that you would like to share?	

Data Analysis

Demographic Data

Each research participant completed a Demographic Survey prior to the semi-structured interview (see Appendix D). The Demographic Survey consisted of 12 questions that addressed the participants': (a) current professional teaching certifications; (b) education (e.g., what their major was for both their undergraduate and graduate degrees, and highest level of education obtained); (c) professional experience (e.g., which courses they taught as a teacher, how many years' experience they have as both a teacher and administrator); and (d) demographic information (e.g., gender, age, and race). The Demographic Survey was administered via pen and paper. Upon completion of the Demographic Survey, the researcher entered the data into an spreadsheet where that data was able to be analyzed and reported. The researcher identified the mean and range for the participants' age, years as a classroom teacher, and years as an administrator. The original survey did not include years served as the administrator over the ESE and this data was later included as emerging data highlighted its importance. Nominal data from the Demographic Survey were also reported.

Interviews

Colaizzi (1978) identified a seven-step process for analysis of interview data. Later, this seven-step process was established as a method for analyzing data from phenomenological studies by Sanders (2003). This process is presented in Table 3.

Table 3

Steps for Interview Data Analysis

Step	Procedure	Description
1	Gaining an Understanding of Each Participants Transcript (Colaizzi, 1978)	To gain the essence of the whole experience, the researcher conducts his or her own interviews. After, each audio recording is listened to and transcripts read. Any ideas or thoughts that are generated from these reviews are written down and documented. Participants are active contributors in this process and provide feedback on their transcripts.
2	Extracting Significant Statements and Responses (Colaizzi, 1978)	This step calls for the researcher to read, and reread transcripts to identify and highlight key phrases and statements. These are extracted and documented for later analysis. These key phrases and statements give the broad meaning of the lived experiences.
3	Formulating Meaning (Colaizzi, 1978)	In this step, general meanings and concepts are formulated. The researcher will extract the key phrases and statements to begin to seek answers to the research questions. From significant statements, the researcher formulates meanings as it relates to the phenomenon.
4	Categorizing meanings into themes (Colaizzi, 1978)	Clusters of common statements and meanings are now created. Emergent themes are grouped from the formulated meanings. Categories of relevant meanings are united in a way to find central themes that define the essence of the cluster.
5	Describing the Phenomena (Colaizzi, 1978)	This step requires that the researcher use the clusters of relative meaning and provide a comprehensive description of the phenomenon under investigation.
6	Describing the Phenomenon Structure (Colaizzi, 1978)	At this step, the exhaustive description is reduced to an essential structure.
7	Member Checking (Colaizzi, 1978)	This step allows participants to conduct a "validity check" (Hycner, 1985, p. 291). This step increases the validity and rigor of the data by allowing participants verbatim transcripts of their interview to provide comments, feedback, corrections, and/or additions as warranted (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

In an effort to ensure that all seven steps of the process were followed, an Excel workbook sheet was created for each research participant. In this document, six columns were created. The first four columns were assigned to steps two through five of the data analysis procedures previously identified by Colaizzi, (1978). Column five was designated for feedback from the peer-debriefer. The last column was designated as a place for the researcher to comment and finalize any discrepancies from the peer-debriefer, if needed. The six columns were named: (a) Significant Statements; (b) Gathering and Identifying Meaning; (c) Organizing into Themes and Clusters; (d) Description of the Phenomenon; (e) Comments from the Peer-Debriefer; and (f) Peer-Debriefer Reconciliation.

To begin data analysis, the researcher had to ensure accuracy of the transcripts by listening to the audio recordings while reading the transcripts several times. In this first stage, the researcher was able to focus on the context of the data and the participant responses. This allowed the researcher to have a complete, deep sense of the interview as a whole prior to breaking it down to individual parts (Creswell, 2013). Next, verbatim statements were extracted from the transcripts that were considered significant and these were then placed in the first column of the document with each statement going into their own cell. The use of verbatim transcripts is important to both preserve the integrity of the transcript and to frame the statements accurately for the peer-debriefer later (Creswell, 2013). After significant statements were placed in Column A, the researcher reviewed each statement, determined meaning, and the description was placed in the corresponding cell in Column B. This step was only possible after the researcher reviewed the significant statements for words, phrases, and sentences that spoke to the lived experiences of that participant. This process continued until all statements from Column A had a corresponding meaning in Column B. Next, the researcher reviewed significant phrases

and meanings and similar expressions were grouped and organized into Column C. This

clustering of descriptions allowed the researcher to narrow the descriptions by assigning themes

to the descriptions and work towards overall themes (see Appendix F).

After these five steps were completed for the first participant, the steps were replicated

for the remaining participants. Once the researcher completed the first five steps of Colaizzi's

seven-step process for all participants, the entire document was sent to a peer-debriefer.   As

stated earlier, the role of the peer-debriefer is to act as a disinterested peer to participate in the

data analysis process as a validation method (Cooper et al., 1998). The peer-debriefer was

provided verbatim transcripts, a copy of the document with verbatim statements, meanings, and

clusters. In addition, the peer-debriefer was provided explicit instructions on the type of

feedback needed and their role in this process (see Appendix G). The peer-debriefer noted their

agreement or disagreement in Column E. Any disagreements were accompanied by a note on the

reason why they disagreed. If there were any disagreements, the researcher reviewed and made a

final determination in Column F. All disagreements were reconciled before moving on to step

six in Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step process.

Step six of Colaizzi's (1978) process requires that the researcher take the emergent

themes from Column D into a more abstract cluster. To complete this step, the researcher had to

reorganize the previously identified themes and meanings. To organize this depth of data, the

researcher created an additional tab labeled "organizing themes." This tab had all previous

themes from all participants (Column C on the first tab), lined up alphabetically in Column A.

On that same tab, Column B was labeled "description of the phenomena." This column was used

to further condense the themes from Column A. When all themes from Column A were

condensed as far as possible, these newly formed themes were copied into a new tab called

"Description of Phenomena." The final step was for the researcher to take the data from this tab, which was placed into Column A, and categorize it into groups and subgroups. These were placed in Column B of that tab and labeled "emergent themes." The final data narrowed down to six broad categories, with multiple subgroups in each broader theme (see Figure 2). This document was then sent to the peer-debriefer for feedback. After feedback was elicited from the peer-debriefer, the researcher reviewed all themes and reconciled all feedback from the peer-debriefer with the researchers original coding.

The final step in Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step process is member-checking procedures. After interviews were conducted, all participants received a copy of their verbatim transcripts for them to review and ensure reliability of data (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). Further, participants were encouraged and instructed to provide feedback, make edits, and include additions as they deemed appropriate (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Column A	Column B	Column C
Significant Statements	Identifying Meaning	Themes & Clusters
	Participant 1	

Column A	Column B	Column C
Significant Statements	Identifying Meaning	Themes & Clusters
	Participant 2	

Column A	Column B	Column C
Significant Statements	Identifying Meaning	Themes & Clusters
	Participant 3	

Column A	Column B	Column C
Significant Statements	Identifying Meaning	Themes & Clusters
	Participant 4	

Column A	Column B	Column C
Significant Statements	Identifying Meaning	Themes & Clusters
	Participant 5	

Column A	Column B	Column C
Significant Statements	Identifying Meaning	Themes & Clusters
	Participant 6	

Column A	Column B	Column C
Significant Statements	Identifying Meaning	Themes & Clusters
	Participant 7	

Participant Tabs

Organizing Themes Tab

Column A	Column B
Themes and Clusters from all participants	Description of the Phenomena

Phenomena Tab

Column A	Column B
All Phenomena Descriptions	Emergent Themes

Figure 2. Flowchart of Colaizzi's Seven-Step Process.

<u>Researcher Positionality</u>

A statement of positionality is a bracketing procedure that is written at the beginning of a study (Creswell, 2013; Speziale & Carpenter, 2007). The researcher completed this bracketing step at the beginning of the study, before any data collection began. Below is the researcher's statement of positionality, including educational and professional experiences as it relates to the phenomena being studied. This statement of positionality will provide the reader with transparent information about the researcher's perspective (Creswell, 2013; D'Silva et al., 2016).

Positionality Statement

My professional background began as a science teacher in a large urban school district. I taught at two high schools in that district before moving into administration. I was first promoted into administration as a dean serving all students within my high school. After one year, I was promoted to an Assistant Principal of Instruction where my duties included supervising the guidance department, creating the master schedule, supervising the science department, the physical education department, and the ESE department.

As a new as assistant principal, I struggled to manage all of my new responsibilities while trying to learn as much as I could about the content areas under my domain as an assistant principal. My largest priority was to learn the legal implications of ESE and to gain a better understanding of the decisions we as a school were making for our students with exceptionalities. Approximately two weeks into my appointment, I was notified that our school had been served an official state compliant and that a meeting was being convened for that very week. I was completely unprepared to determine the lack of appropriate services, options to

resolve the complaint, or the ramifications of my decisions. I felt that there should have been a better induction program for new assistant principals who serve ESE departments.

I am currently a doctoral candidate in a large public university. I have focused my research for this study on the lived experiences and beliefs of assistant principals who serve students with intellectual disabilities. I currently have a master's degree in Educational Leadership and a Bachelor of Science in Science Education-Biology from the same university. In addition to being a doctoral student, I am also a district-level administrator for a large urban school district. I currently serve as an administrator supporting 20 high schools and over 57,000 students.

I fundamentally believe that all students can be successful if provided with the right support. I also believe that there is a lack of knowledge held by school leaders who serve students with more profound disabilities, such as those with intellectual disabilities. Due to my experiences, I believe that there is a true need to provide for induction programs for new school-based leaders who serve students with disabilities. I fundamentally believe that students with intellectual disabilities can become contributing members of society, with many being able to lead an independent life with sustained, paid employment.

I am responsible for this study including the literature review, justification for study, research questions, methodology, developing instruments for data collection, and collecting that data. I am also responsible for the data analysis and conclusions. I felt that there was a need for this study, both through the identification of the gaps in literature and current practice. It is my hope that the findings of this study can add to the current literature related to serving students with intellectual disabilities while in high school.

<u>Summary</u>

This chapter provided the research methodology and data collection procedures that guided this study. This study presented the reader with an explanation of the bracketing process and the steps the researcher conducted before collecting data, during data collection, and during validity checks. This chapter also informed the reader of the rationale of the study design, as well as protocols for data analysis consistent with a phenomenological study.

CHAPTER FOUR: DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction

Within this chapter, the researcher will present findings from this phenomenological study. The following research questions were addressed in this study:

1. What are the lived experiences of school-based leaders providing students with intellectual disabilities opportunities to learn vocational and independent living skills during the school day?

2. What are the beliefs of school-based leaders providing students with intellectual disabilities opportunities to learn vocational and independent living skills during the school day?

Data collection procedures were designed to answer the research questions and to describe the beliefs and experiences of assistant principals as they serve students with intellectual disabilities within their schools.

From the data analysis, six themes emerged: (a) compliance; (b) administrators role in faculty/staff supervision; (c) inclusion of students with disabilities in opportunities with their non-disabled peers; (d) lack of leadership preparation; (e) meeting student needs; and (f) preparing students for life after school. In addition, 21 subthemes were uncovered within each of the themes, and each of the subthemes is presented.

This chapter is presented in two sections, the first section contains participant biographical sketches. The use of a participant biographical sketch allows the reader to have a greater understanding of the background of each of the participants. To protect the confidentiality of study participants, their names have been changed, but the content remains

accurate. To organize the data analysis, this section will present the subthemes under each of the

six overarching themes. To answer the research questions a detailed, thick, rich description is

used with participant words and phrases throughout.

<center>Participant Biographical Sketches</center>

In qualitative studies that include interviews, participant biographical sketches are

provided to give the reader a background of the participants who participated in the study.

Participant backgrounds and experiences were also provided in Table 1 (Chapter 3). These

biographical sketches include additional data that is not provided in Table 1.

<u>Tara</u>

Tara is a 48-year-old black woman who received two undergraduate degrees: one in

special education and one in psychology. Tara began her career teaching at the jail where she

found that many of her students, inmates who were juveniles, exhibited signs and symptoms of

various learning disabilities. After working in the jail, she found the desire to return to school to

earn her master's degree in educational leadership. Tara continued teaching students with

disabilities in multiple content areas in various traditional middle schools in a large, urban school

district. After teaching for over ten years, Tara earned her Ph.D. and is now an assistant

principal where she supervises the ESE department, the student services/guidance department,

the English to Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) department, the world languages

department, and 12th grade discipline and graduation. Tara has been an assistant principal for

five years at her current school. Tara is currently working in a school with over 3,000 students

from diverse backgrounds. Her students live in communities with high poverty.

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Robert

Robert is a 42-year-old Caucasian man who began his career as a mental health counselor after earning his bachelor's degree in clinical psychology. After three years as a practicing clinician, Robert began consulting as a mental health counselor in a large urban school district. Robert was first employed in an alternative school for students with IEPs whose behavior prevented them from being successful in their home school. While at this placement, Robert worked with students to minimize their severe behaviors and transition back to their home school. Later, he became an administrative dean at an affluent high school in a large, urban school district. After completing five years as teacher and dean, he felt the desire to move into administration. Robert went on to earn his Ed.D. degree specializing in educational leadership and began to seek an administrative position where his experience and knowledge of diverse learners could be utilized. Robert is currently an assistant principal at a very affluent, highly successful high school and his responsibilities include supervising ESE, social studies, attendance, and the daily functions of the school clinic.

Shannon

Shannon is a 35-year-old Caucasian woman who is in her fifth year as an assistant principal. Shannon began her career in education as an elementary education major at a university close to where she lived. Before becoming an assistant principal, Shannon was a reading and an Advancement via Individual Determination (AVID) teacher for four years. Shannon earned her master's degree in educational leadership and pursued position in administration. Shannon has held the role of testing coordinator prior to becoming an assistant principal where she was responsible for local, state, and national testing for her school.

Currently, Shannon supervises the ESE, student services/guidance, and English departments at her school. Despite being located within an urban school district, Shannon's school can be described as rural and diverse with a small student body.

Steven

Steven is a 42-year-old Caucasian man who began his career in education as an English teacher. He earned his bachelor's degree in English education and later earned a Master's degree in reading education. Steven taught for over ten years before moving into a support role where he served as a reading coach and administrative dean. For the past five years, Steven has been an assistant principal in two schools. His first placement was in a high crime area, with high poverty and low student achievement. He currently serves as the assistant principal in a more affluent area, with a more diverse student population and higher student achievement. He is currently the supervisor over ESE, science, inventory of items, discipline, and physical education.

Marissa

Marissa is a 55-year-old Caucasian woman who found her calling for education after witnessing her own family struggle with learning disabilities. That experience motivated her to pursue a degree in education. Marissa earned her undergraduate degree in special education/learning disabilities then later a master's degree in educational leadership. As a teacher, Marissa worked with students with varying disabilities from the pre-school level to the high school level in a large, urban school district. After teaching for 11 years, Marissa was selected by her school principal to lead the special education department as the staffing

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specialist. In that role, Marissa was responsible for ensuring state compliance with the implementation of students' IEPs as well as managing IEP teams to determine proper services for the students with disabilities in her school. When Marissa recognized a need for qualified school leaders with content knowledge in special education, she decided to pursue her master's degree in educational leadership. Marissa's first administrative role was as an administrative dean in a small, rural high school. After two years, Marissa was appointed as an assistant principal in a large, urban, school in a community plagued by high crime. Marissa served that school for three years before being transferred to her current position. Currently Marissa is working in a large, affluent school where she is responsible for overseeing the ESE department, the science department, facilities, facility rentals, custodians, career and technical education, and attendance for her school.

Gail

Gail is a 49-year-old Caucasian woman who always believed that she would be a teacher. As a teacher, Gail taught mathematics at the middle school and high school levels. After a successful decade of teaching, Gail's school leaders recommended that she pursue a degree in educational leadership. At the time, she felt that she was ready to move to that next level in her career, and she began her master's degree. Gail is an experienced leader with over 16 years as an assistant principal. Gail is currently the assistant principal over administration, which leaves her responsible for the daily functioning of the school. This role includes facilities, discipline, teacher evaluations, and the special education department. Gail's school is considered fairly large with just over 2,000 students. The school is located in a small school district in an area of diverse backgrounds in terms of ethnicity and socioeconomics.

Denis has been a teacher and school administrator in inner city or low-income schools for his entire career. Denis earned his undergraduate degree in social studies education and began teaching in middle school within a large, urban school district. Denis had a deep love for serving students from neighborhoods with high poverty and wanted to make a difference in the lives of the less fortunate. After 10 years of teaching, Denis earned his master's degree in educational leadership and secured a position as an administrative dean. Later he was appointed as an assistant principal in a large, urban school district. Six years ago, Denis decided to move closer to his family and he has been working as a high school assistant principal. The high school is located in a very large, urban school district. Denis has led many different departments over the span of his career, but he currently supervises 9th grade discipline, the ESE department, and the science department.

Data Analysis Results

In this study, semi-structured interviews ranged from 13 minutes to 29 minutes, with an average interview lasting 21 minutes. All participant interviews were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed to determine essential themes and their respective subthemes. Originally, 114 unique themes emerged from the data (Colaizzi's Step 4). The themes were condensed to 48 exhaustive descriptions of phenomena (Colaizzi's Step 5). After reviewing the transcripts, significant statements, themes, and the corresponding descriptions of phenomena, 21 subthemes were identified which resulted in six main emergent themes. These six themes are: (a) compliance; (b) administrator's role in faculty/staff supervision; (c) inclusion of students with disabilities in opportunities with their non-disabled peers; (d) lack of leadership preparation; (e)

meeting student needs; (f) preparing students for life after school. Table 4 indicated the

frequency of themes from Colaizzi's step four for each of the final emergent themes.

Table 4

Frequency of Themes Represented in Emergent Themes

Theme	Frequency of Themes from Colaizzi's Step 4
Compliance	12
Faculty/Staff Supervision	15
Inclusion	3
Lack of Leadership Preparation	24
Meeting Student Needs	39
Preparing Students for Life After School	23

Results

The results of this study are presented to address the two research questions. The

presentation of data is used as evidence to support the themes and subthemes identified.

Throughout the results, direct quotes from the research participants regarding their lived

experiences are used. This method of presentation is preferred to allow participants to have their

own words and voice in the results, strengthening the credibility of the data analysis and

conclusions.

The use of a thick description which includes participant quotes allows the reader to

understand and consider the entire essence of the experience. The use of quotes and phrases also

adds to the authenticity of the expressed feelings and emotions of the participants and ensures

that the researcher has presented this in an authentic manner (Cope, 2014).

Research Question One

The first research question addressed was "What are the lived experiences of school-

based leaders providing students with intellectual disabilities opportunities to learn vocational

and independent living skills during the school day?" Participants from this study stated that they had a very complex role that was spent supervising a growing population of students with varying needs. In addition, concerns about meeting the students' needs and maintaining compliance were areas that consumed most of their time.

Participants shared that there were challenges in their role to support all students, especially their students with intellectual disabilities. Even while faced with limited resources, participants felt responsible for meeting the academic, social, and transition goals of their students.

Theme One: Faculty/Staff Supervision

All participants in this study, according to participant criteria, directly supervised the ESE department at their respective school. This fact was verified through the interview process. Data from this study suggested that participants experienced an increasingly complex role with competing demands and responsibilities. In their role as the assistant principal overseeing the ESE department, participants have responsibility to their teachers, staff, students, parents, school principal, and the community. Participants have experienced growing numbers of students who receive ESE services including students with intellectual disabilities, which in turn leads to growing numbers of faculty and staff to supervise. This growth in students who receive ESE services comes at a time when the participants are facing limited resources in terms of human capital, facilities, and school budgets.

Theme One, Subtheme One: Large ESE Populations

A shared experience between three of the seven participants was the number of students being served in the self-contained classrooms. Having a large number of students needing small staff-to-student ratios leads to more self-contained units, meaning more teachers and paraprofessionals to supervise. Participant 1 stated: "Um, so my ID unit, uh, we used to have one unit. Now, I'm up to three units. Um, three units started this year" (Participant 7, personal communication, February 5, 2019). When asked how many students with intellectual disabilities are on his campus, Participant 7 stated, "Okay so, oh man that's a good question. We roughly have around, 50. Yup, so it's about 10 to each unit, and we have five units. Yeah, 50, around 50." When asked to explain what it is like to supervise that number of students, he stated:

> Yes. Um, so that difficult part with ESE has been that you have-you have a lot more
> employees because you have so many paraprofessionals. For instance, us, we have five
> units. And each of those units has two paraprofessionals and a teacher. So fifteen
> employees within that department. And so we have, you have a lot of teachers so I'd say,
> you have to find the right fit when it comes to personalities. And considering what the
> students need, you want to have the students with the best people. And it's constant,
> almost like a chess piece. Even throughout the year I move people around, because
> personalities, and often times the teachers start to mimic the students and vice versa.
> They start behaving like the kids. And so there's been times that I've actually had to
> mediate between people worked in a particular unit. (Participant 7, personal
> communication, April 11, 2019)

Participant five shared a similar experience with her large department, especially her team that supports students with intellectual disabilities. When asked what she feels she spends the most

time doing, she stated: "Meeting with teachers to make sure that they're supported; make sure as well plan for student's needs, and planning for even next year" (Participant 5, personal communication, March 21, 2019). Participant 7 also felt that she had to hold some of her staff to a higher expectation, which was at times a challenge.

Theme One, Subtheme Two: Limited Resources

Limited resources continued to be a common experience for most participants. Some of the most common limiting resources were funding, time, facilities, transportation, and quality faculty and staff. Participant 3 shared her recurring experience with limitations to her time:

My principal, her expectations are that everyday I'm in classrooms working with teachers and students on instruction. And there are days where I go home and I said, "Well I got into zero classrooms today." But it ranges, [maybe] I had four parent meetings instead or, you know, we had a student who is going through mental health issues and she was in my office crying all day and that's just what happens. Every day is different but that expectation does not happen daily. I put in my calendar, like today I'm going to this class, this class, this class, this class and then I end up going to the first one, and then that's it. I'm like, all right. I'll try again tomorrow. (Participant 3, personal communication, March 7, 2019)

Participant 2 experienced this same feeling of time being so limited. He stated that not only is human capital a resource that is fading, there is just not enough time to plan for instruction, as he would like. He stated that there is "no time for front loading, no time for planning for the teachers, no time for anything else" (Participant 2, personal communication, February 5, 2019).

A second limiting resource was found to be facilities. Participant 5 experienced this as a problem in delivering the best education to her students with intellectual disabilities. During the interview, participant 5 spoke of this issue with a sincere tone and an optimistic expression that portrayed her very real feelings when she said:

> Thinking of this, facilities, um, is huge and has lots to do with it. Um, I think that they should have access to everything they need, um, for employability purposes to train them because that's what we're preparing them for. For example, we have one- two kitchens, one is really old and not very functional that our students could use. But if we had space where they could run a store, run a small business on campus, learn independent living skills in a place that mimics an independent living skills little apartment. Um, and we have some of it but it's definitely- We only have one room for all of the students but, um, I think facilities is a big thing. You know, we're housed in these portables, not even every classroom has a bathroom. Um, and so what that does is take away an adult that could be helping a student with, with, um, something else and now they're supervising a student down the hall to a bathroom. So, facilities plays a big role in it I believe. (Participant 5, personal communication, March 21, 2019)

A final resource that participants experienced as limited was the quality of teachers and staff to provide high quality instruction while working toward the academic and transition goals for their students. Participant 4 experienced the need for more highly qualified teachers. In his words: "Finding someone going forward to be in that classroom that can met those needs, that has all the certifications that are required to teach all those subjects and be certified in ESE is gonna be a real big challenge" (Participant 4, personal communication, March 8, 2019).

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<u>Theme One, Subtheme Three: Teacher and Paraprofessional Placement</u>

Increasing numbers of students being served in special education leads to an increased need for personnel to educate and support these students. Several participants shared that they have had to reassign responsibilities of their faculty and staff to meet the needs of their students and the school as a whole. Participant 3 shared "I've had to move some paraprofessionals around because we thought that they were better served in the intensive unit, as opposed to our InD unit, or something like that" (Participant 3, personal communication, March 7, 2019).

 At times, teacher and paraprofessional placement and job duty assignments can be difficult. As Participant 7 stated:

> [The] difficult part with ESE has been that you have a lot more employees because you have so many paraprofessionals. For instance, with us, we have five units. And each of those units have two paraprofessionals, and a teacher. So five times three is fifteen employees within just that department. And so we have a lot of tenured teachers, so I'd say, you've got to find the right fit when it comes to personalities. And when it comes to the complexity of the child; you want to have those who are better with those children. And then if you have more high functioning kids, it's constant, almost like a chess piece. Even throughout the year I move people around, because personalities, and often times the teachers start to mimic the students and vice versa. They start behaving like the kids. And so there's been times that I've actually had to mediate between people worked in a particular unit. (Participant 7, personal communication, April 11, 2019)

Participant 5 also shared her experience with placing students with the best teachers and paraprofessionals to meet the needs of the student, instead of honoring the request of the adults on what they want to do. She stated, "I ensure that we have chosen the best teacher to be in

those classes, the best paraprofessionals" (Participant 5, personal communication, March 21, 2019). Later, she also explained how the teacher assignments work, both the classroom and the courses that they teach have an impact on their effectiveness in meeting student needs. She explained:

> I think I've held some of the paraprofessionals to a higher standard than they have in the past…so, I believe that they're working a little harder. We have also moved it that teachers don't have five preps, they only have three and so that's where that movement from teacher to teacher comes in. And we've added a behavior support person, um, for our, um, students who do not qualify for the intensive unit, but definitely need extra support and that's an instructional position. (Participant 5, personal communication, March 21, 2019)

Theme One, Subtheme Four: Teacher and Paraprofessional Training

The preparation of the adults in the school to serve students with intellectual disabilities in both academic instruction to vocational and independent skills instruction was a concern shared by several participants. The preparation of teachers who have the skills and certification to teach students with intellectual disabilities was discussed by Participant 4. During the interview, when speaking about the adults that serve his students with intellectual disabilities in his school, he appeared concerned and his once jovial expression turned down, physically presenting his concern. He then said "Finding someone going forward to be in that [self-contained] classroom, that can meet those needs, that has all the certifications that are required to teach all those subjects and be certified in ESE is gonna be a real, big time challenge" (Participant 4, personal communication, March 8, 2019). Later, Participant 4 explained how

changes in certifications set by the FLDOE (e.g., requiring all teachers to have dual certification in ESE and their content area) could eliminate several teachers on his campus.

Both Participant 5 and Participant 4 highlighted professional development and training of teachers and paraprofessionals as one of their responsibilities. Participant 5 shared that her concern over the training of paraprofessionals can be traced back to their salary offers. She stated:

> …Other challenges include being able to maintain our teachers and paraprofessionals who work together as a team. You know, our paraprofessionals are paid so little that, sometimes they'll find a job somewhere else after we've trained them. And so I believe that they deserve more pay and I think that's a challenge when we start interviewing and see what pool we have to pick from. Sometimes, its people who, you know, couldn't find the $15 an hour job they wanted so they take our $12 an hour job. It's not that they're stellar at what they do. (Participant 5, personal communication, March 21, 2019)

Participant 4 shared a similar concern with professional training of teachers when he said "…even with those access points, if [teachers] don't understand the curriculum, and teachers are trained only to a certain point, they still need more training on how to deal with the students" (Participant 4, personal communication, March 8, 2019).

Theme Two: Inclusion

The inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities in general education classes was a theme shared by several participants. Participants shared their belief that students with intellectual disabilities should have the option to be included in general education classes if they are able to be successful. Participant 3 shared her experience with providing an inclusive school

experience in her school by the use of a class called Peers as Partners in Learning. She explained

this class as a peer support, push-in service that students who have passed an application and

interview process push-in to inclusive and self-contained classrooms to provide additional

supports to students with disabilities. Supports provided by students include redirection, help

with organization, help with academic content, and help with task completions (Participant 3,

personal communication, March 7, 2019).

Participant 2 shared his belief about inclusion when he shared:

… I can't even really say we have anybody that's fully [contained] because even they will

go out to a regular elective with regular students so, even our kids that are um, are self-

contained kids push out to standard regular electives. So, I don't have any kid that is in

one classroom all day long with no other exposure. (Participant 2, personal

communication, February 5, 2019)

Participant 1 shared similar experiences when she stated that her belief for all students, including

those with intellectual disabilities, is centered around universal design for learning (UDL). She

believes that a culture of UDL, tailored to meet the needs of individual students in the general

education classroom will have positive effects on all students, and they will have "a better

chance in the world" (Participant 1, personal communication, February 5, 2019.)

Participants in this study also viewed inclusion as incorporating students with intellectual

disabilities into the normal day-to-day functions of the school. Participant 4 shared his belief as:

I mean, I think that that's, it sounds simplistic but I think for, for the InD kids, I think

being on a regular high school campus is the greatest thing for them. Because they come

here every day and they're, they're normal kids. As much as possible. Um, and so being

surrounded by the normal high school environment, um, I think is positive in every way,

shape and form. (Participant 4, personal communication, March 8, 2019)

Participant 5 also shared that she believed one benefit for students with intellectual disabilities

from being included in their high school was that "it gives them an opportunity to build

relationships with their non-disabled peers" (Participant 5, personal communication, March 21,

2019). Finally, Participant 6 shared her belief in inclusion as: "I think its best when a student can

participate in a regular high school, when they're able to. I believe that allows students to

appreciate differences and, um, tolerate each other and accept differences" (Participant 6,

personal communication, March 27, 2019).

Theme Two, Subtheme One: Differentiation

Differentiation of instruction for students with intellectual disabilities was one of the

most discussed themes across all participants. Differentiation of instruction for students with

intellectual disabilities was noted by Participant 7 as a goal. This goal would "allow students

with varying disabilities to have flexibility in their educational experience to meet their

individual goals, and not necessarily what is mandated by various requirements" (Participant 7,

personal communication, April 11, 2019). This similar feeling was expressed by Participant 1 as

she passionately expressed how her goal of education would be a deep understanding of the

needs of her students with intellectual disabilities by all teachers that would lead to the full

inclusion of all students being served on a modified curriculum into general education classes

(Participant 1, personal communication, February 5, 2019).

In a similar expression of beliefs, Participant 2 shared that his belief that a near perfect

education for students with intellectual disabilities would be for them to be educated by content

experts, with ESE supports provided by an ESE teacher. This differentiation of instruction would occur within the academic classroom to provide the most comprehensive academic instruction possible (Participant 2, personal communication, February 5, 2019). This model of instruction was almost identical to that of Participant 3 who stated:

> ... I would have those students in Gen Ed classes with ESE supports within those classrooms. You know, our ESE students going into our biology classroom and working with them on labs. Or, going into our math classrooms and working with manipulatives in small groups in algebra…they still have those math standards and they can be going in there and working, with some of our algebra teachers. (Participant 3, personal communication, March 7, 2019)

Theme Two, Subtheme Two: Access to General Education

Recurring statements from participants that students with intellectual disabilities should have the same educational experience as their non-disabled peers were evident. Participant 4 shared his belief on education for his students with intellectual disabilities simply when he said, "I think...I would tell you that it's not wholly different than what it would look for any kid" (Participant 4, personal communication, March 8, 2019). While most participants shared that they believed that all students should receive equal educational experiences, all agreed there were challenges to meet these goals. When asked, Participant 4 stated:

> We still need to do a better job individualizing educational paths for students. Even with going to access points, even with having kids in an ID unit, there are still a giant gap with students in classes, uh, in terms of differentiation in what they can and can't do specifically related to standards in how we're teaching students. So you have some kids in

the ID unit who need access points with who they're appropriate for, and some students

who still struggle with understanding those social things. Um, and so, um, we need to

figure out better ways to meet the needs of all of our students. And like I said, it's no

different than differentiation in a classroom for a regular kid. It's just, are we meeting

their needs? Um, are we getting that kid individually what they need? Um, some of that

has to do with the standards and some of that has to do with looking at what is

educationally appropriate for everybody. (Participant 4, personal communication, March

8, 2019)

Participant 3 also believed that her students should have access to general education classrooms

with the proper support. She believed that "... ESE paras and ESE teachers could push-in with,

um, our ESE students into those Gen Ed classrooms to help that Gen Ed teacher offer the

support" (Participant 3, personal communication, March 7, 2019). While this belief was shared

among participants, Participant 1 already had a plan in place for her students. She explained that

if her students with intellectual disabilities were becoming strong academically, she pushed them

out to general education classes, with support (Participant 1, personal communication, February

5, 2019).

Theme Three, Subtheme Three: Time Spent with Nondisabled Peers

During the semi-structured interview, participants were asked what they believed the role

of education was for students with intellectual disabilities. Participants shared that the role of

education for students with intellectual disabilities was the same for all other students.

Participant 4 shared his belief:

…For the most part they come here for the same reason any other kid comes here, I think that's very important. I think, um, it's a positive for them to come here; we have some kids who eat with other InD kids from lunch, due to their schedule… I think the high school environment is just that for them. I think it's important for them to be here on campus every day and have as much interaction with general education kids as possible. And we try to do that whenever we possibly can. I mean, I think that that's, it sounds simplistic but I think for, for the InD kids, I think being on a regular high school campus is the greatest thing for them. Because they come here every day and they're, they're normal kids. As much as possible. Um, and so being surrounded the normal high school environment, um, I think is positive in every way, shape and form. (Participant 4, personal communication, March 8, 2019)

Participant 5 also shared her experiences on her campus with students with intellectual disabilities working with their classmates:

…Kids will have, um, holiday parties for our students [with intellectual disabilities] and it really is a really good relationship. They see 'em at lunch, they see 'em at their Best Buddies functions. And so that I believe it is probably one of the, um, best things that is saw when I came to this particular high school. I hadn't seen that before, but we really do a great job with that. (Participant 5, personal communication, March 21, 2019)

Finally, Participant 6 shared her experiences:

And, um, that- that's a good, um, opportunity for the Gen-Ed population and the special population to interact. I think it's, um, one of our draws in multiple areas, whether it be academics or athletics or, um, you know, serving special needs or niches that students have, is that there is something here for them. We have a great mix of kids, and I believe

that allows students to appreciate differences and, um, tolerate each other and accept

differences. I think that's an important component of society. (Participant 6, personal

communication, March 27, 2019)

Theme Three: Meeting Student Needs

Meeting student needs is obviously a concern for the participants who have been

entrusted by parents and caregivers with the safety and security of their children. Participant 4

explained that this is accomplished in the same way it is for every other student. He said:

Um, and so, we need to figure out better ways to meet the needs of all of our students.

And like I said, it's no different than differentiation in a classroom for a regular kid. It's

just, are we meeting their needs? Um, are we getting that kid individually what they

need? Um, some of that has to do with the standards and some of that has to do with

looking at what is educationally appropriate for everybody. (Participant 4, personal

communication, March 8, 2019)

Participant 4 later explained how the ability to express their own needs looks different for a

student with an intellectual disability than other students. He explained:

We have some kids who are basically non-verbal, and they don't communicate at all. And

so, that is frustrating for the teacher and for the student. Even though there's five kids in

that class, you still have one kid who has dramatically different needs and you have

another kid who, if you were to talk to him in the street, or, or meet him without context,

you would not know that they had an intellectual disability. (Participant 4, personal

communication, March 8, 2019)

When discussing the needs of students to meet their educational and transition goals, Participant 5 shared her experience in meeting the needs of students, despite challenges when she said "We had a student who has Down syndrome and diabetes, and has to be monitored. So, we made sure we had somebody that is well trained that takes her off campus, instead of just saying, she can't go, she's a health risk" (Participant 5, personal communication, March 21, 2019).

Participant 3 outlined her experiences meeting the needs of her students with intellectual disabilities. She shared her belief in the teamwork approach to make sure all student needs are met. She said:

> So my main goal is to ensure the safety of our kids. That they are in classrooms which are in ratios; that we have enough, you know, support in there. And that our students are being served correctly, in the correct classrooms. But all of that comes with, you know, the supports we have in place to help with that, with like our staffing specialists, our behavior specialists. And then, um, our teachers themselves are, are trained to do all of that as well. (Participant 3, personal communication, March 7, 2019.

Theme Three, Subtheme One: Advocacy

When asked what role they, as an assistant principal over the ESE department play in the education of students with disabilities, Participant 4 shared that he believed that his primary role was to be an advocate for his students. He said: "I think my primary role is first and foremost to be an advocate for students, um, and then also to be an advocate for teachers." He also shared his belief on the importance of being an advocate when he said:

> Specifically for those kids they need a strong advocate. Um, and, and I don't mean that other people aren't advocating for them, but they need someone who understands what

can and can't be done in terms of in the classroom, their rights, their, um, what the

teachers and parents responsibilities and rights are and so that's what I've been really

working on learning more about this year. (Participant 4, personal communication, March

8, 2019)

When asked about what advocacy means, Participant 2 shared:

I think it's important for me to be an advocate for them. Sometimes that means having

discussions with parents about what their actual needs are, and what we can and can't

give them. Sometimes parents don't understand that, but you have to keep in mind that

everyone involved in the situation, including parents and teachers, has the same end in

mind. I think it's important to be a team in terms of trying to provide services for these

kids and at the end of the day, when you're dealing with all the stakeholders wanting

what's best for kids doesn't necessarily mean knowing what's best for kids. And so, it's

important that everyone provide their input and at the end of the day, we have to come up

with the best plan for kids. And sometimes that means not everyone gets what they want,

but, that, we have to focus on what's most important and that's the kid and their actual

needs. (Participant 2, personal communication, February 5, 2019)

Theme Three, Subtheme Two: IEP Implementation

Participants in this study shared a common experience of monitoring and overseeing the

implementation of IEP services. That process looked different for students with different needs

such as ensuring that the correct staff was in place to provide services, providing the

accommodations for students, and to ensuring that the school is in compliance. As Participant 7

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said best: "You have to know that IEP, to a 'T'" (Participant 7, personal communication, April 11, 2019).

<u>Theme Three, Subtheme Three: Providing Services</u>

Proactively addressing service needs was one goal that Participant 5 shared. She wanted develop goals to address the individual needs of the students, and then devise a plan to meet those goals. She shared: "We spent one Sunday together almost dreaming about in an ideal world, what would our self-contained classes look like next year, and then went through that just to see what we can, um, provide for them next year" (Participant 5, personal communication, March 21, 2019).

Participant 3 shared that services for students vary within her school. She articulated her desire to provide services to students that would improve their educational outcomes, but also their life after high school. She explained some services being provided as "So the services that we offer, I think are the same across any high school. They have therapy services. I know that they are receiving counseling services and psychological services" (Participant 3, personal communication, March 7, 2019).

Theme Four: Compliance

Participants described their role in compliance as 'staying out of trouble'. When asked what role they have as the leader over the ESE department, Participant 5 said, "To keep us out of trouble with ESE students." Later, she explained:

I think a lot of them (administrators) are afraid of the risk having ESE students on your

campus, legally, medically, um, all of that. And so I think my principal's main focus is

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you know, keep the kids safe and, and stay out of trouble. (Participant 5, personal

communication, March 21, 2019)

Participant 2 shared his experience with ESE compliance as "In the ESE world we have a lot of,

you know, heavy cases that come along, a lot of potentially legal issues and so, I keep her (his

principal) abreast on the major things that come up" (Participant 2, personal communication,

2019).

Participant 7 shared that his staffing specialist helps him with compliance and navigating

through federal, state, and local laws and policies. He shared:

And so she's what keeps me out of trouble. I literally go to her. What are your thoughts?

Ultimately, I'll make the decision. When it comes to certain things, I'll make the decision.

But she's the one that keeps me out of trouble. So to me, she's vital. And she's also the

one with the connections, so if she doesn't have the answer she knows the people

downtown. Also, district support I can always call, people from the district-district if I

need it-need it. But I have not had to do that. I just go to her. And she will call her

contacts, to find out whether or not we can do it. (Participant 7, personal communication,

April 11, 2019)

Theme Four, Subtheme One: District Expectations

District oversight into the units serving students with intellectual disabilities was a

common experience amongst participants. While some participants felt that they had to protect

themselves from the district staff and administration, others felt that the district personnel were a

support. Participant 6 shared, "I would say, we do get a lot of support from our District staff,

making sure that, the needs of our students are met in the high school." Later, she also shared

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that when she needs support for issues beyond what she feels her school staff can provide, she

reaches out to the district staff. She said:

> I would say working with school leadership, our ESE liaisons, with the Behavior
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> Specialist within the District staff. They help make sure that we have, all the necessary,
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> ah, things in place for addressing the needs of our kids. Whether that be scheduling,
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> whether that be hiring appropriate staff, um, whether that be holding a manifestation
>
> determination meeting because, um, a student has had a disciplinary issue and, um, the
>
> classroom needs to be addressed. (Participant 6, personal communication, March 27,
>
> 2019)

Theme Four, Subtheme Two: Federal and State Law

Federal and state laws and their implications were identified as an experience that the

assistant principals shared in their role as a leader in their school. Most often, when discussing

the state and federal laws, participants felt concerned about their ability to ensure compliance to

these laws. Common reactions when addressing compliance to federal and state laws was more

of a nervous laugh than it was an explanation of their role in this. Participant 3 shared her

concern that "they were following all of the legalities of everything that encompasses ESE" with

all of the points that they have to consider (Participant 3, personal communication, March 7,

2019).

Participant 1 who has extensive experience with ESE law had a different experience with

federal and state law compliance and she shared:

> Um, basically…a lot of people just don't know about special education. And because they
>
> don't know about special education law, they almost leave the ESE administrator to do as

they please and, hopefully, they don't get them in situations. (Participant 1, personal

communication, February 5, 2019)

Theme Four, Subtheme Three: IEP Compliance

Participant 3 shared that maintaining IEP compliance was a new role for her. She shared

that her department had grown over the past several years and she worried about maintaining

compliance for all of her students. She said:

There are so many students on, on different levels and coming from different

backgrounds that there's so much to learn as far as, um, correctly placing those students

in classrooms. Like what's the criteria for putting a student in this ASD room compared

to the InD room? Eh, it's the simple things like that, that I'm still learning on a personal

level, as far as all the legal aspects of our ESE services. (Participant 3, personal

communication, March 7, 2019)

Research Question Two

The second research question addressed in this study was "What are the beliefs of school-

based leaders providing students with intellectual disabilities opportunities to learn vocational

and independent living skills during the school day?"

Theme Five: Lack of Leadership Preparation

One of the most common emerging themes was the lack of leadership preparation the

participants felt they had prior to their appointment as the leader over their ESE department. In

this study, participants were asked specifically how many years they have served as the direct

supervisor over the ESE department. Responses from participants ranged from one to six years, with an average of three years' experience serving an ESE department (see Table 5).

Table 5

Years of Experience as the Administrator for ESE

Participant	Years of Experience
Tara	5
Robert	3
Shannon	1
Steven	1
Marissa	5
Gail	1
Denis	6

Many of the participants shared that they felt that they had little experience. Participant 4 shared "So, this is my first year being over ESE, I've had to learn a lot this year about ESE and specifically the things that come along with having InD units, so that's been a learning curve for me" (Participant 4, personal communication, March 8, 2019). Participant 3 also shared,

This is a new role for me. I have zero ESE experience so when I was asked to take on the ESE Department, although I was excited because that was one area that I had no idea about and I was looking forward to growing in, but there's a lot to learn… This has been my absolute biggest learning curve. (Participant 3, personal communication, March 7, 2019)

Participant 6 expressed her lack of confidence to make changes to the ESE department due to her lack of experience. When asked if she has made any changes to the department since her

appointment, she said, "I don't have enough time supervising the ESE Department" and she defers decisions for students with intellectual disabilities to her subordinate, the ESE liaison or behavior specialist (Participant 6, personal communication, March 27, 2019).

Theme Five, Subtheme One: Staffing Specialist as Expert

Participants identified the staffing specialist (also known as a compliance specialist, or placement specialist) as one of their most used resources as they make decisions and monitor their ESE departments. Participant 4 describes the role of the staffing specialist when he said:

> ...a placement specialist is, is basically the person who is in charge of making sure that the students have their IEPs written and showing that students are actually where they're supposed to be in class, that their schedule is correct, those sorts of things. (Participant 4, personal communication, March 8, 2019)

When asked who his or her support was as they serve their students with intellectual disabilities, Participant 5 said, "My staffing coordinator has really, like, played a large role. She steps up to the plate, she's like, if there could be an assistant to the AP in ESE world, I think relying on a staffing coordinator, um, is, is good" (Participant 5, personal communication, March 21, 2019). Participant 7 also shared this experience, he stated:

> Okay, as an administrator, it is, imperative that you have a great staffing specialist. And to have great, you know obviously the department head and also great support staff that works with the ESE department. That-that team is vital to your success as an administrator. (Participant 7, personal communication, April 11, 2019)

Further, Participant 3 shared that while her staffing specialist was her greatest support, other participants utilized their team as quasi-leaders. Participant 6 explained that her compliance

specialist was the experienced person on the team and capable of making decisions that impact the team.

Theme Five, Subtheme Two: ESE Liaison/District Staff as Expert

District staff provided support to schools in a variety of ways. Participant 2 described his personal experience:

> Um, within the ESE department…, we have another administrator who specifically works with um, intellectual disabilities program so, if we have more specific questions about curriculum or something um, then that would be who I'd turn to as well…this district provides a number of resources for us in the ESE department, we have a district staffing coordinator who I rely on heavily for information and um, compliance mostly um, but I would say the ESE administrator for our school, our area, is a wealth of knowledge and when I have questions that I feel are beyond my scope then she's my next one that I reach out to for her expertise. (Participant 2, personal communication, February 5, 2019)

The participants also experienced the transfer of decisions and authority to others. Participant 6 shared her experience when discussing the opportunities for her students to participate in vocational courses:

> So that has kind of changed and [deciding which students participate in vocational education is] no longer a school-based position. Um, but I do know that our district still supports those types of activities. I just don't have any, you know, details on the specifics of it…there are opportunities that the district provides. I just have less knowledge about those. (Participant 6, personal communication, March 27, 2019)

Participant 2 also shared his similar experience when asked about his students receiving vocational opportunities: "I can't tell you too much about it actually, I'm not over it, it's actually a district program. We have district job coaches that come and pick up. The teacher oversees the schools" (Participant 2, personal communication February 5, 2019).

<u>Theme Five, Subtheme Three: Teachers as Expert</u>

Participant 2 expressed that he relies on teachers to provide their expertise for decision-making when he said:

I rely on my teachers who are experts in the area as well, um, I have an incredible team um, in the ESE department um, all with a lot of years' experience, we have people that um, lie, cheat and steal to try and get in this area to come to our ESE program. (Participant 2, personal communication, February 5, 2019)

Participant 6 also articulated how she relies on her teachers for their expertise when she said:

... and, ah, they work directly with students and families, making sure, um, that students are scheduled appropriately, that their needs are being met in the classroom. Um, and they basically split up, um, the alphabet and, um, also have special areas that they handle, such as Care meetings, and school-wide support teams, um, things like that. (Participant 6, personal communication, February 5, 2019)

Of all participants, Participant 6 expressed the most dependency on her teachers and staff. When asked about her role in supporting the ESE department, she consistently spoke about her team and their expertise to make the best decisions for her students.

Theme Six: Preparing Students for Life after School

Preparing students for life after they leave the safety and security of the high school campus was the sixth theme. Participants felt a strong sense of responsibility to provide their students with intellectual disabilities the opportunity to lead an independent, fulfilled lives. Participants shared their experiences and beliefs in preparing their students to have the best possible life that they can imagine after they leave school.

Theme Six, Subtheme One: Academics

Participant 5 discussed her beliefs about the importance of teaching academic content when preparing students with intellectual disabilities for life after high school:

I don't know that I agree 100 percent with them learning algebra skills, however I do think there's a level of content that they do need access to. Um, I would rather it be that they are learning functional skills, so maybe not geometry, buy instead keeping a check book so I do think there's a level of math and content curriculum that they have to be exposed to. Um, I think they should be in a reading class until they're 22. Reading is an employability skill. So, um, not that I agree with all the content, but I definitely- They definitely have to have content as well. (Participant 5, personal communication, March 21, 2019)

Participant 2 shared a similar belief that "hopefully to make them more employable, to give them literacy that they need to be employable someday" (Participant 2, personal communication, February 5, 2019).

When Participant 3 spoke of the role that academics have for her students with intellectual disabilities, she believed that academics were of the utmost importance. She felt that,

while other learning opportunities were valuable, she said: "where in our day are we going to help them increase their learning gains, because they do still have to take that test (Florida Standards Alternative Assessment [FSAA]) at the end of the year." (Participant 3, personal communication, March 7, 2019)

Theme Six, Subtheme Two: Vocational Education

Almost all participants experienced providing opportunities for students with intellectual disabilities to practice skills that lead to employment and vocation. Participant 5 stated:

Um, we have a teacher and some students who are too young to go off campus, but it's a stepping stone to going off campus next year. So she, our teacher comes back from off campus with our older students and then takes her younger students for, um, their transition planning period and they work in our cafeteria. (Participant 5, personal communication, March 21, 2019)

Participant 4 shared:

Usually the kids coming in, they'll start by um, doing things outside of the kitchen so they'll, you know, clean tables and pick up trash and things like that as they gain more experience and we can trust them, they'll work back in the kitchen um, and um, matter of fact our kitchen manager who is here with us, said if they didn't have our kids back there they'd have to hire 2 or 3 more people. (Participant 2, personal communication, February 5, 2019)

Participant 1 explained her experience that not all students are ready for instruction outside of the school campus, but she still provides them other opportunities:

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Those 10%, sometimes I have to pull back and I have to do things on campus. If I don't

feel that they're going to be ready (socially or behaviorally) when it's time for them to go

to [off campus], I make them a TA, um, on campus so that they can start learning to work

with folks on that before and so each kid is basically assessed on their own individual

potential. (Participant 1, personal communication, February 5, 2019).

Participant 5 also explained her plan for students who do not have the opportunity to work off

campus:

Next year we are changing to have a class of ninth grade students and a class of transition

high school students so all of our students who've already spent four years and

unfortunately did not get accepted into transition high school or Bridges, we're gonna

have a class on campus for them with the hopes that they will then at least next year get

accepted into that. (Participant 5, personal communication, March 21, 2019)

Theme Six, Subtheme Three: Community Based Vocational Education

When students have reached a milestone (i.e., age, grade level, or proficiency level),

participants in this study spoke of different opportunities for their students to receive instruction

sites, outside of their school. Participant 4 shared:

So, what we do with our kids is, um, they go over to Publix and they basically work

there. Um, we have a job coach and, and another, um, another para that goes over there

with them, and we also have one who have his own individual para, they go over there

and then basically do everything over there and they, they do everything except prepare

food, basically. (Participant 4, personal communication, March 8, 2019)

Participant 1 shared her students' experiences:

So, the JET program, they go out to Publix, they go to Walgreens, they have a job coach.

Um, they call it CBVE over in «another county», um, but here, they called it JET. Um,

so, they- we have one- every quarter they go to a different spot. They go to Publix, they

go to Walgreens. And then, um, they'll learn to work with customers and stuff.

(Participant 1, personal communication, February 5, 2019)

Participant 5 had a similar experience with her students. She held a strong belief that all students

should have the opportunity to participate which led to a change in structure:

So we have 'em that they go Publix and they go, um- they also to go, um, Burlington Coat

Factory. And they are learning employment skills there. We have a teacher and a job

coach that goes with 'em. We, um- Until this year, just had a job coach, but what we

found is she couldn't take our hard to manage students who needed the experience, but

she couldn't take them as well, so we, um, paired a teacher to go off campus with them.

(Participant 5, personal communication, March 21, 2019)

Finally, Participant 7 shared his similar experience with his students:

Our kids go out to work, um work programs, three times a week. Once they turn 18.

Then they go to CBI. So CBI is a work program where they actually go to sites, some of

those sites include gas stations, s-Sunoco. Um it includes a restaurant, Publix, and the

mall. (Participant 7, personal communication, April 11, 2019)

Theme Six, Subtheme Four: Independent Skills Instruction

The most outspoken on their experience with providing students with intellectual

disabilities independent skills instruction was from Participant 3 who said:

So they are fully prepared whether they're here four years or up, you know, until they're

22. Um, they walk out of our school knowing how to survive and how to live their life

after high school with those basic skills. (Participant 3, personal communication, March

7, 2019)

Participant 7 also addressed learning independent skills when he said:

Okay, so the greatest victory is to make them as self-sufficient as they can. As-as their

disability allows them. In other words, there is nothing more successful, then when they

leave the pass program, which means when they leave when they're 21 years old, and

they transition to the work force. That's, then we know we've been successful.

(Participant 7, personal communication, April 11, 2019)

Participant 5 shared her belief on the importance of independent skills instruction:

I think that they should have access to everything they need to train them. [They should

have] space where they could run- run a store run a small business on, on campus and

learn independent living skills in a place that mimics an independent living skills little

apartment. (Participant 5, personal communication, March 21, 2019)

Theme Six, Subtheme Five: Social Skills Instruction

Participant 3 was the most outspoken related to social skills instruction. She explained

that on her campus, students have multiple opportunities for social skills instruction. She stated:

One of our ESE classes does coffee in the mornings and they, you know, deliver the mail

 to the teachers. So we have grown that program a little bit to include additional ESE

 classrooms so those students really get that, um, social aspect and, you know, you teach

 them how to say "Good morning" and, and talk to you know, to teachers and students

and everyone else. So they're really out in, our ... within our schools. So they really ...

they're interacting with kids and teachers and adults, and they're really learning, um,

those social skills. (Participant 3, personal communication, March 7, 2019)

Later, she explained why these skills were so necessary:

The social skills, the emotional skills, the learning, you know, traits, and how to advocate

for themselves because these are like lifelong ideas that they're going to have to know,

you know, forever to get through life. And so these are those things that are taught every

day to them, and that's why they come here. (Participant 3, personal communication,

March 7, 2019)

Summary

In this chapter, the researcher provided a thorough description of the findings of this

study. This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of assistant principals as they

lead the ESE departments within their respective high schools. Two research questions guided

the data collection for this study, and later the thematic analysis. Seven participants shared their

experiences through semi-structured interviews conducted with the researcher. Interview data

from these participants was transcribed verbatim and later coded using methods identified by

Colaizzi (1978). Thematic analysis of the interview data was condensed into six themes which

were further represented by the subthemes presented in this chapter. The use of participants'

quotes heavily in this chapter allows the researcher to accurately represent the lived experiences

from the participants themselves.

The first finding in this study was the role of supervising faculty and staff. Participants

shared their experiences in leading teachers and paraprofessionals as they educate students with

intellectual disabilities. Participants expressed concerns with limited resources, conflict amongst adults, and the training of their team to meet the needs of their students.

The second theme to emerge was the inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities into general education classes, as appropriate. Participants shared experiences in providing their students with differentiated instruction, access to the general education classes, and time spent with their non-disabled peers during the school day.

A third theme to emerge across participants was their role in meeting the needs of their students. Participants shared their belief that they were advocates for their students with intellectual disabilities as well as the primary person to ensure services afforded to their students were provided. Participants also expressed that they have the responsibility to ensure that the implementation of the students' IEP is done with fidelity.

The fourth theme to emerge from data was the participant's role in compliance to ESE laws and policies at their schools. Participants shared that they were responsible for not only federal and state laws as they relate to their ESE students, but also for compliance to the students' IEP to avoid litigation. In addition, district expectations on educating students with disabilities was experienced by participants as both a support and a governing body.

The fifth theme that emerged from this study was the lack of leadership preparation that participants felt as the lead their ESE departments. Most participants expressed some feeling of inexperience or inadequacy to effectively make decisions for this department. Because of this, participants shared their belief that their staffing or compliance specialist or the district had the expertise for their school. Additionally, teachers were viewed as the experts on the needs of their students with intellectual disabilities.

A sixth and final theme that emerged was the belief that participants felt that they had a duty to provide students with tools needed to prepare them for life after high school. This included providing students with intellectual disabilities access to vocational education both on the school campus and in the community. In addition, participants believed that their students needed instruction in independent and social skills instruction to allow them to lead their most independent life possible.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Introduction

The final chapter of this phenomenological study will address: (a) a summary of the findings; (b) interpretation of those findings; (c) implications of findings; (d) study limitations; and (e) recommendations for future research.

Summary of Findings

In this study, six themes of the phenomenon emerged to answer the two research questions. These themes were identified and presented with supporting data in Chapter Four, using rich description and words and phrases directly from research participants. The six themes included four themes supporting research question 1: (a) faculty and staff supervision; (b) inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities; (c) meeting student needs; and (d) compliance with students' IEPs. Two themes emerged supporting research question two: (a) lack of leadership preparation; and (b) preparing students for life after high school. In addition, 21 subthemes emerged within the six themes.

Review of Methodology

This study utilized a phenomenological research design (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994) to better understand the role of the high school administrator responsible for overseeing the ESE department at their respective school. Data collection consisted of a demographic survey and semi-structured interviews. Two research questions guided this study:

1. What are the lived experiences of school-based leaders providing students with intellectual disabilities opportunities to learn vocational and independent living skills during the school day?

2. What are the beliefs of school-based leaders providing students with intellectual disabilities opportunities to learn vocational and independent living skills during the school day?

<div align="center">Interpretation of Findings</div>

<div align="center">Research Question 1</div>

This section will present each of the six themes, supported by literature. The first four themes will answer the first research question.

Theme 1: Faculty and Staff Supervision

The role of a high school administrator is a complex and changing role. With ever increasing accountability to stakeholders such as parents, district administration, as well as local, state, and federal regulations, school leaders are faced with more obligations than in years past (Grubb & Flessa, 2006). In addition, the work of school leaders is changing from instructional leaders to those of compliance, public relations, and organizational development (Brauckmann & Schwarz, 2015).

Data from this study indicated that participants experienced a demanding, complex role, and great responsibilities. As evidenced by data provided by all participants, participants had responsibilities and provided leadership over many departments and organizational areas. Some participants were also supervising large departments such as English and Math that include high-stakes testing. Others were responsible for daily monitoring of attendance and/or supervision custodians that consume a large portion of their day. According to data from this study,

participants were experiencing large numbers of students who were eligible for ESE services and were struggling to keep up with the demands placed by both teachers and students.

Marshall and Hooley (2006) categorized the roles and responsibilities of the assistant principal as: (a) meeting with parents and students; (b) handling discipline and behavior; (c) developing the master schedule; and (d) counseling students. Participants in this study confirmed these categories but overwhelmingly placed a large emphasis on managing teachers and staff, mediating conflict amongst adults, and growing teachers and staff professionally to best serve their students.

Theme 2: Inclusion

Inclusion of students in general education classrooms benefits both students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers (Test, Bartholomew, & Bethune, 2015). Participants in this study confirmed this theme as many participants expressed their desire to provide inclusive experiences in their schools. Participants defined the construct "inclusion" as access to general education classes, participation in the school culture, and access to elective courses outside of their content-area classrooms.

Effective inclusion for students with intellectual disabilities is dependent on many factors such as school culture and adequate content area instruction for students (Carroll et al., 2011). When students with intellectual disabilities are given access to inclusive settings, research has shown that teachers will focus more on social skills than academic content (Cameron & Cook, 2013). This finding is consistent with the manner in which participants defined the construct of inclusion. Participants shared their experiences in providing their students with opportunities to socialize with other students, get out of their classroom, or participate in activities just like other

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students in their school. There was no emphasis on the inclusion to master the academic

standards of those courses.

Time spent with non-disabled peers was shared between several participants as a method

of inclusion at their school. In fact, there are a number of benefits for students who are able to

demonstrate skills through the modeling of social interaction with their non-disabled peers.

However, just placing students in inclusive settings will not lead to increased social interactions.

The structure around the interactions or activities must be in place for effective inclusion in

school culture (Carrington et al., 2016). Participants in this study shared their experiences with

allowing all students to interact during lunch time using peer-tutors, Best Buddy clubs, or other

structured activities.

Theme 3: Meeting Students' Needs

Data from this study indicated that participants shared similar feelings of responsibility to

meet their students' needs. Participants focused on ensuring that students had what they needed,

monitoring that services were being provided, and providing opportunities that would lead to

greater learning experiences. Participants shared their experiences with providing resources so

their students would be able to participate in learning activities, such as allocating additional

teachers or paraprofessionals to allow more students to participate in vocational coursework

outside of the school.

The role of the school leader has shifted from instructional leader to an agent of action, a

person who facilitates the implementation of processes (Benoliel & Schechter, 2017). This

confirms many of the experiences shared with participants as they described how they have had

to act as an advocate for their students with disabilities. Being an advocate for students is a

critical role for school leaders. In the absence of school leaders who are capable for advocating

for student needs, efforts for student goals will fail. The importance of the school leader to

advocate for their students is so important that if not done, the school leader should not be

afforded the opportunity to serve students (Bradley-Levine, 2016).

Theme 4: Compliance

A shared experience amongst all research participants was the emphasis on compliance

with special education law and policies. For most participants with little to no formal training or

experience in special education, they felt "suddenly thrust into situations in which they must be

the final arbiter on matters related to strange-sounding issues such as IEP, 504 decisions, due

process hearings, and IDEA compliance" (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003, p. 9). Participants

explained their fears surrounding compliance and not being prepared to make critical decisions.

Because of that, they often relegated these decisions to another member of their team, typically,

their staffing/compliance person and/or district liaison.

Laws and policies have been established to protect the educational rights of students with

disabilities. The ability of school leaders to maintain compliance of these educational services

for their students and communicate those services with students and parents has altered the focus

and attention of school leaders (Pazey & Cole, 2013). This is evident in data from this study

which supported the experiences of participants as cognizant of the implications of failure to

maintain compliance. Participants felt the pressure to stay out of legal trouble for fear of

repercussions from their supervisor.

Participant data included experiences with FAPE compliance. Participants shared their

interpretation of FAPE to include an educational experience for students until they "age-out" or

reach the age in which FAPE is no longer mandated. Participants shared experiences such as

allowing students to stay in school, or providing a transition program to allow students to gain

specialized vocational training. Participant concern for FAPE is justified. Zirkel (2013) found

that litigation for students with disabilities has increased significantly in K-12 education. The

majority of the litigation was around the failure of the school to provide FAPE to students with

disabilities. Outcomes of such litigation include compensatory education, tuition reimbursement,

and costly lawyer fees.

<center>Research Question 2</center>

The remaining two themes that emerged from the data answer research question number

two.

Theme 1: Lack of Leadership Preparation

At the beginning of this study, the researcher sought to understand the experiences of

assistant principals who supervise ESE departments in high schools. Literature suggested school

administrators often lacked sufficient knowledge of special education law, best practices, or how

to best serve their students (McHatton, Boyer, Shaunessy, & Terry, 2010). However, that

finding was not always supported by data in this study. Participants had a range of experiences,

knowledge of special education, and leadership preparation and development. Further, it was

noted that leaders with specific training in special education and those participants that had a

degree or certification in special education had far greater knowledge than the participants that

did not hold those same credentials. Also, the number of participants in this study with special

education knowledge appears to be higher than indicated by previous studies.

For participants who believed that they lacked the knowledge to supervise the ESE department or for those that believed that they lacked the experience to know if their schools' current practices were best practices, they often spoke of another member of the team as their default resource for ESE. Almost all participants spoke of their staffing specialist, compliance specialist, or district resources as the experts that influenced decisions or opportunities for students with disabilities.

The lack of knowledge and expertise of school leaders expressed by participants in this study aligns with results of previous studies that indicate a lack of training and preparation for school administrators in the field of special education (Bateman & Bateman, 2014). Further, research has found that more training is needed in the field of special education if school leaders are going to be prepared to enact changes that will lead to more opportunities for the students they serve (Hollingworth & Danzig, 2014). This lack of knowledge can be concerning when providing students with FAPE. If the school leader lacks knowledge of regulations and opportunities, that may affect the outcome of services that are provided for their students with disabilities.

Theme 2: Preparing Students for Life after High School

In the 1980's, outcomes for students being served under the federal law, IDEA, were being researched and documented for the first time. A finding from that study was that students with disabilities graduating out of the public school system were having trouble accessing postsecondary education, employment, and independent living opportunities (Sitlington, Newbert, & Clark, 2010). This finding was expected as services for students with intellectual disabilities were not provided prior to that time. In an article published by the Office of Special

Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS), Will (1983) first spoke of employment as an outcome of education for students with disabilities. In this publication, she provided a framework for students transitioning from school to employment through targeted services, training, and ongoing monitoring.

Participants in the current study affirmed the need for direct instruction in vocational skills, independent living, self-advocacy, and social skills instruction. Overwhelmingly participants shared a common belief that students should receive specific instruction in these domains, even if the participants were not directly responsible for its implementation. The opportunities provided to students with intellectual disabilities to learn these critical skills varied amongst schools and school districts, but participants all shared the same belief that they have a role in preparing their students for life after high school.

Participants stated that instruction in vocational skills was provided both on-site (i.e., at the students' home school) and off-site (i.e., community partners and other work locations). Students with intellectual disabilities who receive instruction in vocational skills during high school have a better chance of obtaining secured employment after high school, greater likelihood of participating in postsecondary education, an increase in social bonding with others, and a higher chance of living independently (Wagner, 1991; Wehmeyer & Bolding, 2001). Participants shared the opportunities that were available for their younger students to stay on campus and learn job skills in the school cafeteria, participate in mail delivery, run a coffee business, and help to clean up the campus. Older students or students with higher skills had the opportunities to learn skills off campus at various work sites. Provision of these opportunities are supported by research. Students have specific skill instruction, or skill instruction in specific

work activities they have higher rates of employment after graduation (Theobald, Goldhaber, Gratz, & Holden, 2017).

<div align="center">Study Limitations</div>

Limitations are inherent in all research studies. Limitations are elements which the researcher has little, to no control over (Creswell, 2003). One limitation in this study is the inherent human nature to maintain social desirability. The comments that participants make during an interview can be based on what they believe is socially desired, rather than what is their true experience or belief is (Fowler, 2008). While no participants expressed the need or desire to answer in any way other than completely truthful, the possibility exists. Such misleading responses would result in inaccurate data collection and data analysis. Another study limitation is that this researcher once served as a new assistant principal over an ESE department. Despite precautions taken to avoid bias and remain objective, the chance of bias is feasible.

A final study limitation is ability of participants to differentiate between all students with disabilities and their students with intellectual disabilities. The phenomenon studied was the experiences and beliefs of assistant principals and while participants shared data to this construct, the admitted lack of expertise in intellectual disabilities by research participants, at times led to generalization of data to include all students with disabilities.

<div align="center">Implications of Findings</div>

The insights provided by research participants in this study have potential implications for practice and policy, which will be discussed in this section. The researcher in this study provides the following recommendations and implications for the field.

Findings from this study indicate that school leaders feel unprepared to serve the ESE departments at their respective high schools. Participants who had coursework or undergraduate

degrees focused on special education experienced a greater sense of autonomy and confidence in making decisions that affected the ESE department and their students. Explicit instruction in educating students with disabilities, especially for students with intellectual disabilities, is needed and wanted by novice school leaders. This finding highlights the need for further professional development for assistant principals responsible for instruction of students with intellectuals with disabilities (McHatton, Boyer, Shaunessy, & Terry, 2010; Voltz & Collins, 2010).

Participants spoke repeatedly of using district and/or school resources to help make decisions. This suggests that school districts should provide support and mentoring for newly appointed assistant principals who lead their ESE department. While the researcher is aware that some school districts have these practices in place, participants in the four counties interviewed lacked this resource. Specific training on special education law, IEP procedures, and district resources for students with disabilities should be provided.

A formal induction or mentoring program for newly appointed school leaders may have positive impacts on the effectiveness of these leaders. In particular, induction and mentoring programs accomplish three major tasks: (1) provide instructional support by keeping the new administrator focused on learning issues, (2) provide support by helping new leaders to set priorities, and (3) provide emotional support by listening and being present, especially during stressful events. (Howley, Chadwick, & Howlee, 2002).

Recommendations for Future Research

As noted previously, the role of the special education leader is complex and demanding. These leaders are responsible for decisions that affect state funding, federal and state

compliance, as well as district expectations. The results of this study confirmed and supported

the need to support assistant principals who serve students with intellectual disabilities in three

ways: (1) improved leadership preparation, (2) creation of induction programs for new leaders,

and, (3) improved district support systems. Through the deliberate preparation of new school

leaders, critical content such as compliance regulations, special education law, and curriculum

and instruction for students with intellectual disabilities should be provided for these leaders.

With proper preparation, school leaders will gain a deeper understanding of their role in meeting

students' IEP goals, providing opportunities for students to gain employment and vocational

trainings, and provide opportunities for social and independent skills instruction.

From the descriptions provided in interviews within this phenomenological study, the

researcher recognizes the need for additional studies that explore the impact of induction

programs provided by school districts that educate newly appointed school leaders about the

policies and practices of ESE. Further, more research is needed on induction programs that

address the gap in knowledge from leaders with little to no ESE coursework or experience to

allow these leaders to have the knowledge and confidence to serve this department.

Conclusion

Over the past 30 years improvements in identifying and serving students with disabilities

have contributed to the number of students being served by special education nearly doubling

(Pazey & Cole, 2013). In this phenomenological study, the researcher sought to understand the

lived experiences of assistant principals who served students with disabilities, particularly

students with intellectual disabilities in Florida high schools. In addition, the researcher explored

the assistant principals' beliefs on vocational education for students with intellectual disabilities.

The results of this study indicate that assistant principals serving students with intellectual

disabilities experienced four major phenomena: (1) a sense of urgency to meet their students' needs, (2) a complex role in managing the adults within the ESE department, (3) a need to provide an inclusive school, and (4) a heavy emphasis on maintaining compliance with ESE law. In addition, assistant principals in this study felt that while they lacked expertise in ESE, they put in place their own resources to meet the needs of their students. Finally, participants shared the belief that all students have the right to a full education, and it was their responsibility to provide opportunities for their students to receive the instruction needed to allow them to live a full and successful life.

APPENDIX A: IRB DETERMINATION

University of Central Florida Institutional Review Board
Office of Research & Commercialization
12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501
Orlando, Florida 32826-3246
Telephone: 407-823-2901 or 407-882-2276
www.research.ucf.edu/compliance/irb.html

Determination of Exempt Human Research

From: **UCF Institutional Review Board #1**
         FWA00000351, IRB00001138

To: **Erin Vacchio**

Date: **December 10, 2018**

Dear Researcher:

On 12/10/2018, the IRB reviewed the following activity as human participant research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review:	Exempt Determination
Project Title:	A qualitative inquiry on the role of the special education school administrator.
Investigator:	Erin Vacchio
IRB Number:	SBE-18-14604
Funding Agency:	
Grant Title:	
Research ID:	N/A

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB. When you have completed your research, please submit a Study Closure request in iRIS so that IRB records will be accurate.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the Investigator Manual.

This letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Jessica Jacques on 12/10/2018 09:16:27 AM EST

Designated Reviewer

APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT

EXPLANATION OF RESEARCH

Title of Project: A qualitative inquiry on the role of the special education school administrator.

Principal Investigator: Erin Vacchio, Doctoral Candidate
Faculty Supervisor: Suzanne Martin, Ph.D.

You are being invited to take part in a research study. Whether you take part is up to you.

- This research projects seeks to answer the following questions:

    o   What are the lived experiences of school based leaders providing students with intellectual

        disabilities opportunities to learn vocational and independent living skills during the school day?

    o   What are the beliefs of school based leaders providing students with intellectual disabilities

        opportunities to learn vocational and independent living skills during the school day?

- Participate in an interview and answer a few demographic questions. The study will take place in a setting

    of your choosing or via Adobe Connect (or through other similar videoconferencing software).

- The expected duration of the interviews will be one hour and will take place during the 2018-2019 school

    year.

- A follow-up interview will take place as part of the member-checking process in qualitative data analysis.

    This follow-up interview will be conducted to clarify participant's responses and elicit further response if

    needed. This follow up interview will take approximately 10-30 minutes.

- Audio recording will occur via recording device or via Adobe Connect (or similar videoconferencing

    software) for each session. No students will be recorded and all sessions will be password protected. If

    sharing permissions are granted, only transcripts of audio recordings will be shared as needed, in segments

    and not the actual recordings. If you do not want to be recorded during your interview, the researcher will

    turn off the recording system. All recordings not signed for use in publications or future professional

    development will be destroyed one year after the conclusion of the study.

- Any tapes that the researcher would like to share will only be used with your written expressed permission, and no school or student names or information will be a part of any recording that is shared.

You must be 18 years of age or older, have certification in Educational Leadership, hold the role of Assistant Principal at a High School, have served a minimum of three years teaching in the classroom, and be the direct supervisor for the Exceptional Student Education department at your school site to take part in this research study.

Study contact for questions about the study or to report a problem: If you have questions, concerns, or complaints, please contact Erin Vacchio, Doctoral Candidate at 407-XXX-XXXX or by email erin.vacchio@knights.ucf.edu or Dr. Suzanne Martin, Faculty Supervisor at 407-XXX-XXXX or by email at Suzanne.martin@ucf.edu.

IRB contact about your rights in the study or to report a complaint: Research at the University of Central Florida involving human participants is carried out under the oversight of the Institutional Review Board (UCF IRB). This research has been reviewed and approved by the IRB. For information about the rights of people who take part in research, please contact: Institutional Review Board, University of Central Florida, Office of Research & Commercialization, 12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501, Orlando, FL 32826-3246 or by telephone at (407) 823-2901.

APPENDIX C: BRACKETING INTERVIEW

Erin: Okay.

Sara: All right.

Sara: So let's start, um, with just some background. Erin, can you please explain your education background?

Erin: So I first became a teacher in 2009 and I taught biology to high school students in 10th and 11th grade. Um, and then I switched schools, but then I was a dean at East River High School in Orlando and, um, after one year I was promoted to an assistant principal of instruction at the same school.

Sara: Awesome.

Sara: What about your current education background or current position?

Erin: So right now I am a senior administrator in student services for a large urban district in Orlando and my role is to support high school student service departments and guidance departments to ensure that students are not only appropriately scheduled in the courses that will meet their postsecondary goals, um, but also to make sure that the school has the right curriculum opportunities for students in their school. So not just a one-size-fits-all but help schools with all of their resources to meet students' postsecondary goals.

Sara: Okay, great.

Sara: What led you into education? Kinda ho- what was your path towards teaching?

Erin: So that was a little bit of a discovery period for myself. I started off after high school I wanted to be a physician's assistant. I was an EMT when I was 18, I worked on an ambulance while I was in high school and I really loved medicine and so I naturally just wanted to keep going with that. And in high school I got by fine with just showing up, taking tests and going home and being done. And then I learned very quickly that in college when you take biology 101, chemistry 101 and human anatomy, you have to study. So that was, um, I didn't really have those skillsets to know how to study and how to manage a caseload like that.

Erin: So, um, I didn't do as well as I knew I had to, um, for admission into the physician assistant program, so I just kind of went on like a little discovery and I really, honestly loved tutoring in my like little small group session. So I had thought to myself, like maybe I really like this whole education thing? I can see myself being a teacher.

Erin: So I switched majors at my same school and started doing health education and then life kinda happened and I had to take a little hiatus from school, went into work. And then I was working as a dialysis technician in the hospital taking care of people in kidney failure, and, um, my husband was a nurse and I said I have to finish school and we talked about what the best path would be and he kinda said, "You know, finish up your education degree."

Erin: And it wasn't a hard decision for me, I really did enjoy it. So that's when I went back to school, got my bachelor's in science education with an emphasis on biology, and then I got my master's degree in ed leadership and then now.

Sara: Wonderful.

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Sara: So describe your professional experience.

Erin: So like I said, I was a science teacher, um, and then I- when I first started as an

             AP, my very first appointment was assistant principal of instruction, which means

             that I was responsible for the school's master schedule, the state reporting fields,

             um, FTE funding. I was also overseeing the, um, exceptional student education

             department and the science department to help instruction and state compliance

             with our ESE department.

Sara: Wow.

Sara: Describe your education on exceptional student education.

Erin: Okay, so that I will say is probably minimal. So in my bachelor's program I had to

             take one course on teaching exceptional children and it was an overview of what

             is ESE, what is an IEP, what are accommodations and basically what do you need

             to know as a teacher. And that was one course.

Erin: And then in my master's program, I truly don't know that I received specific

             coursework on ESE, but there were, um, components of it embedded within the

             program, so, for example, in my finance class we learned about different, um, FT-

             um, FEFP numbers, so we learned how we got increased funding due to the

             students' matrix, but there wasn't any specific coursework.

Erin: But I will say that like professional development-wise, after I became an assistant

             principal, the school district where I work, they have a, um, preparing new

             principals program where you have to earn your certification to become a school

             principal. And so through that program there was another one additional course

             on ESE and pretty much the basics again of different exceptionalities, what are

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accommodations, what is state compliance, what are things that we should be
monitoring as a school leader.

Sara: Got it.

Sara: So did you have any courses on how to, um- or best practices to serve exceptional
          students?

Erin: Um, before I was appointed, no. Like I- I walked in and when I became a- when I
          was appointed an AP, my principal gave me my assignments and I saw that it was
          over ESE and I have some personal, um, love of ESE. I have, you know, family
          members, my cousin has Down syndrome, I have younger brother and sister, they
          both suffer from learning disabilities and both had IEPs in high school. So I knew
          about that personally and I had a passion for it but I wasn't prepared, I don't feel,
          to lead it. Um, so I trusted my staffing specialist, who is regarded in our district as
          a very effective staffing specialist, and then I had to read a lot and I had to ask a
          lot of questions. I had to learn a lot. And I- very quickly I had to catch myself up
          to speed.

Erin: Um, and I- hopefully I'm proud to say I'm still learning because I want to learn
          more. So still learning how to serve students with exceptional needs.

Sara: Got it.

Sara: Describe your current research on the academic requirements for students with
          intellectual disabilities.

Erin: Okay.

Erin: So in my current, um- with- with my current research, I have been focusing on the benefits of students with disabilities - especially students with intellectual disabilities - and their education on vocational independent skills.

Erin: So what I have found is that despite, um, I don't remember the exact number but I wanna say it's about 60% of families and students who want to have vocational education, only about 20% of them receive it. And the uh, the expectancy of people with intellectual disabilities living on their own is higher now than ever.

Erin: We have a [inaudible 00:07:17] now, you know, that we're highlighting as a society and I think our culture in the United States is changing where we're more inclusive of people with intellectual disabilities and recognizing that they have potential to lead a- as appropriate of an independent life as possible for them. But I don't know that our schools have caught up to that yet.

Sara: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Erin: I don't know that we can see all the opportunities that exist, um, and utilize what we already have in our schools to meet those vocational needs of our students.

Sara: Okay.

Sara: So where is your current research on all of this?

Erin: So I have been just trying to learn as much as I can about different vocational programs that they have. Um, I've also been very, very blessed to work with some amazing teachers who are experts in vocational education, independent skills. Um, and I worked with a teacher in my last school where they create businesses and completely run by students with intellectual disabilities.

Erin: And so that has led me to dig deeper into what are opportunities and what is most

         appropriate. Not just what would look nice or what would sound cool, but what

         actually helps young people with intellectual disabilities.

Sara: Got it.

Sara: Okay, earlier you mentioned that after, um, you began as the API at the high

         school you had professional development on ESE.

Erin: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Sara: Um, specifically students with intellectual disabilities. Can you describe some of

         that professional development?

Erin: Sure. So I may have misspoke. It wasn't that that course wasn't specifically on

         students with intellectual disabilities, it was just an overview of exceptionalities.

Sara: Okay.

Erin: So it was a face-to-face meeting. It lasted about three hours. And it was given by

         different ESE leaders in our district and they talked about compliance, monitoring

         teachers, and, um, different pathways for students with disabilities.

Sara: Okay.

Erin: And then afterwards there was an online component where we had to go through

         different modules and look at, um, what I later learned were kinda more like CEC

         standards and figure out ways that we can help lead our schools to meet those

         needs.

Sara: Okay. So have you ever had, um, professional development or training

         specifically on students with intellectual disabilities?

Erin: No.

Sara: Okay.

Sara: Describe your own personal experience as a high school administrator overseeing the ESE department.

Erin: Um, so like I said very quickly I had to adapt. On my first month of being an assistant principal and supposedly the expert in our school on ESE, I was faced with a state complaint. A parent was upset that her daughter had not mastered the standards for Algebra I and so she failed the course, or she- she didn't fail the course, she failed the EOC. That's associated through, um, our state, it's a mandated course.

Erin: So she failed the EOC and now she was in the next year of her math progression and she did not have an A, and so the mom wanted to - and rightfully so - she pointed out that not only did we not meet the needs of her daughter, as evidenced by her failing the EOC, we were not providing as much support for her in her next math class.

Erin: So mom wanted to have a one-on-one tutor and support around her dance schedule, um, because the tutoring we had provided at our district- and- or at our particular school wouldn't meet her dance schedule. So she was fighting to have her daughter have a one-on-one tutor at her time.

Erin: So I did not know what I could or couldn't say. I didn't know I, um, was new enough to say like, "well, we don't have that." 'cause if it's a need that, you know, we have to provide it. But I really didn't know what I was supposed to do. So I looked around the table with three lawyers, um, ESE personnel from our district, our school staffing specialist, the parents, the child, our ESE teachers, and they all

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turned and looked at me and like, "so what is this school's plan to meet the needs of this student?"

Erin: And so I was terrified. I was like, I do not want to get in trouble. I do not want to have a bad reputation. I don't know what to do. So ultimately I decided to change the schedule, um, for one of our ESE teachers so that he would be with that student during her class period and work with her and I also let the parents know it would be a small group pull-out.

Erin: Um, so that's how I kind of learned on the fly. My principal wasn't happy because we shouldn't be pulling resources for one student, especially when she didn't demonstrate true need, but I also didn't want this school to be sued for compulsory education, so- or, um, you know, paying for her tutor outside of school. So I- like, that was my first experience of being an ESE administrator.

Sara: You were thrown right in?

Erin: Right in.

Sara: Goodness.

Sara: Any other experiences that come to mind or kind of your overall experience as the administrator over an entire ESE department in high school?

Erin: Yeah.

Erin: So, um, at the school that I worked at for, um, six years, our ESE- our self-contained access students, grew from about eight students to 26 during my time there. Um, and we were also open an intensive behavior unit for students with autism with intensive behaviors while I was there, so I had to oversee that as well.

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Erin: I will say that I grew in my confidence over that time to lead that department. I

               developed a deeper understanding of what was needed and what, um, was best

               practice. I still think I have a lot to learn, um, for different exceptionalities. But

               overall just to lead it, I felt like I grew a lot as an administrator. But I also felt I

               did those kids a disservice in the beginning just like, you know, you're a brand

               new teacher and you're like, "I feel so bad for my first class." But, you know, you

               gain your confidence and you gain understanding. That's how I felt about my first

               group of kids that I supported.

Erin: 'Cause had I know that we should create a business on our campus and had I

               known that they should be doing a mail service and a laundry service and going

               off campus, had I known about CBI trips, I would have done all that my first year.

               But it took me two years to learn about all those things.

Sara: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Sara: Okay, thanks.

Sara: What are your beliefs on students receiving vocational or independent skills?

Erin: Well I think it is their right to receive those skills. I think it is the right of the- the

               young person to lead the most independent life as possible for them. I don't

               believe that every person with an intellectual disability is going to be able to live

               on their own, pay their own bills, cook for themselves, take care of themselves,

               and drive to the cleaners. But they may be able to do some parts of that and it's

               our duty as a school to give them those opportunities to learn those.

Sara: All right. Agreed.

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Sara: Um, what do you think are the roles and responsibilities of the ESE administrator versus the staffing specialist?

Erin: So I struggled with this a little bit when I first started. Um, well I wouldn't say I struggled. I- I had a hard time defining that line because I trusted my staffing specialist so much I actually talked her into be- going into ed leadership herself because she is such a leader and she's so knowledgeable and is recognized as a district leader.

Erin: Um, but they also are not an administrator. And so they should not have to make those decisions that will ultimately impact the school without- I feel like that's the role of the administrator. I feel like they are the content experts. I don't think that the expertise of the administrator has to be that of or more than the staffing specialist. But they should also be supported.

Erin: So when my staffing specialist would come to me and say, "you know, I think it's time we opened up another classroom, uh, for students on access points." Then it's the administrator's role to kind of make that happen. Like they shouldn't have to go and do that. But I also trusted that she knew, like, we're getting too big for this one classroom, it's time to hire another teacher. And then when it was time to hire another teacher, I think that that role, like yes, the administrator should be the one to conduct those background checks and the interview questions, but the staffing specialist should be part of it because they have that expertise in whether or not their answers are in line to current research and current best practice.

Sara: Yeah.

Sara: Okay.

Sara: Ideally, what would vocational and independent skills instruction look like?

Erin: For students with intellectual disabilities?

Sara: Yes.

Erin: Um, so in a- in my dream world it would be embedded in everything that they do. So, um, if they were enrolled in Algebra IA in the high school, that those standards would be met by banking in the classroom. If they were enrolled in, um, transition planning, it would be to- how to get on a bus, how to read a bus timeline, how to pay for things on a bus, and then how to go to work. And then we would do CBI trips. So I think that we would have independent vocational skills embedded in all of their coursework.

Erin: You know, as a general education teacher, when I was teaching about primary and secondary succession, it's like how things grow, I didn't just read to them. I would take them outside and show them when we dig up a hole and things grow back. And so I put real life application into that.

Erin: Well those cases are of the same thing. They should have real life application embedded within their coursework from the time they start high school until the time that they are ready to leave.

Sara: Why do you believe this may not be occurring on high school campuses?

Erin: Um, well I don't know that it- what is or is not occurring right now on high school campuses, but if it's not, I would first, um, think budgeting and fi- you know, the school's budget may have an impact on it. The knowledge of the teachers and the staffing specialist and the administrator. I think that, um, the workload of the ESE teachers has an impact. Um, you have to be ready to shift responsibilities in order

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to meet the needs of kids and, you know, if you take away from one to give to another, what do you do for that other group that you took away from?

Erin: So sometimes, you know, personnel limits what you can do. Um, and perhaps the needs of kids and whether or not you have students who are ready to go take a CBI trip or ready to learn about, um, some of those vocational skills. It may take a while to get them there.

Sara: Do you have any bias that should be expressed as you conduct your study?

Erin: I do.

Erin: I think that my personal experience with my brother and sister, um, is very different than what my cousin received. So my brother did not read until he was in 10th grade because his learning disability was, um, I guess in my opinion, of me being a whole two years older than him, but like wasn't really addressed until he got a- a dynamic teacher. And in New York where I went to school, they still did like self-contained lear- uh, VE classes.

Erin: So he was in with one teacher for all his core classes and she was determined to make him learn and he learned. So- but then on contrary, my cousin who had- who has Down syndrome, his whole life he had a one-on-one [para 00:19:13], and the same one-on-one para from fifth grade till he aged out at 22. But my aunt came from very, um, an educated standpoint. They have a lot more financial means than my parents did. Um, my family- my parents were not educated in college, so they didn't know what they didn't know and they didn't know what to say, they didn't know what to ask for, whereas my aunt did.

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Erin: So I have biases that I feel that if you have parents who are like that squeaky

           wheel, your kids will get more. And for the kids who don't have those parents,

           like that's when the administrator should be a squeaky wheel for them and stand

           up to their principals or their school district and say, "this is what our kids

           deserve."

Erin: So I do have some biases that some kids get more than others depending on

           parents and I also think that I feel whether or not this is true or not that

           administrators aren't prepared in college or by their employer to lead the

           exceptional student education department right off the bat. You know, I just think

           of myself and I know just my experience, but walking into a state complaint with

           that table full of people, like I should have had support there. But I was supposed

           to be the expert at that. So those are my biases.

Sara: What kind of trainings would you like to see for those administrators before they

           take on that role?

Erin: So I think our district could probably do a little bit more. Um, I think all school

           districts in Florida could do more in order to train administrators. They have taken

           a huge step in requiring, um, professional development hours to be part of the

           teacher certifi- recertification. And so that is huge that the state of Florida has

           done.

Erin: But I think school districts in Florida can also help to train their newly appointed

           administrators, and even if you don't directly supervise that department, chances

           are you supervise a department that has ESE students in those classrooms and

how can you help teachers meet the accommodations as outlined on [IAPs 00:21:07] if you don't know yourself how do you manage that in a classroom?

Sara: What do you expect to find in this study and why?

Erin: I really don't know. I think about that some times and I was really careful to, um, think about my own biases when I was writing questions up, um, because I- I really don't know what to expect. I think either I'm gonna have, um, participants say that they are certified in ESE and they're ready to go and they've never had problems and they do great things on their school.

Erin: I hope that's what I find, that I was wrong all along. Um, but I also think I may find that there are administrators who, kinda like me, are still trying to learn or their staffing specialist takes care of ESE and they don't really do that.

Sara: Hmm.

Sara: Do you have any final comments that would be helpful, um, for us to know before you begin your research?

Erin: Nah, I mean, I think that's- I think you- you covered it with your questions. I just hope that whatever I find can later on build to that research to help kids in the end.

Sara: Wonderful. Thank you.

Erin: Thank you.

APPENDIX D: ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL DEMOGRAPHIC SURVEY

Assistant Principal Demographic Survey

Instructions: Please answer the following questions

1. In what areas are you certified? _____

_____

2. Do you have a degree in Educational Leadership (or its' equivalent) from an accredited

   University?

   ☐ Yes

   ☐ No

3. Where did you earn your educational leadership degree? _____

4. What is your highest level of education? _____

5. What degree did you earn as an undergrad? _____

6. How many years of experience did you have as a classroom teacher? _____

7. Identify ALL courses taught as a classroom teacher. _____

_____

8. How many years of experience do you have as an assistant principal? _____

9. How long have you been at your current school? _____

10. What is your age in years? _____

11. What is your race? _____

12. What is your gender? _____

Thank you!!

Thank you for participating in our survey. Your response is very important to us!

APPENDIX E: MEMBER CHECKING EMAIL AND DIRECTIONS

<Participant Name>,

Hello! I hope that this email finds you well. It has been a little while since we last met to conduct an interview for my dissertation. During this time, I have continued to work on different aspects of my dissertation and data collection.

One critical component of this study is the ability for you to review the transcripts of your interview and make comments on those that speak to the accuracy and completeness of your responses. To help in this process, I have attached to this email a copy of the transcript from the interview. I ask that you please review the transcript and if needed, please make any comments that you wish using track changes. Track changes allow me to identify your comments at the exact point in the transcript. After your review, you may find that no suggestions, edits, comments, additions, etc. are warranted and if so, I ask that you respond as such just to ensure that you have received this email and had the opportunity to review your transcript.

I appreciate your support and time that you are investing into this, your insight is extremely valuable.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me via email or phone. My information is included below. Thank you again so very much and have a wonderful day!

Erin Vacchio

Doctoral Candidate
University of Central Florida
Erin.vacchio@knights.ucf.edu
407-XXX-XXXX

APPENDIX F: ORGANIZING THEMES

Organizing Units of Relevant Meaning from Step Four of Colaizzi's Seven-Step Process

Academic Focus
Academic Focused
Academics are Prioritized
Adult Needs
Advocacy
Autonomy
Behavior
Behavior Specialist Role in
ESE Behavior
CBVE For Upperclassmen
CBVE Opportunities
CBVE Opportunities through
District
Changes to IEP
Collaboration
Communication
Complex Work
Compliance
Customer Service
CVBE Opportunities
Differentiation
Discipline
Discipline is Time Consuming
District Oversight on ESE
District Provided Resources
ESE Liaison as Expert
Established Supports
Established Systems
Expectations of FAPE
Experience in Mental Health
Experience with Diverse
Groups
Experience with ESE
Facilities are limiting
Formal Training in ESE
Funding is limited
Goal for Employment
Goal is Postsecondary Success
Goal of Independent Living
Growth Mentality
Helping others
High Expectations

Importance of Graduation
Importance of School Grade
In School Vocational
Education
Inclusion
Increasing Population of SWD
Independent Living Skills
Instruction
Independent Skills Instruction
Instruction is a Priority
Lack of Content Experts in
ESE
Lack of ESE Expertise
Lack of Expectations
Lack of Facilities
Lack Of Knowledge
Lack of Leadership
Knowledge of ESE
Lack of Leadership
Knowledge
Lack of Leadership
Knowledge in ESE
Lack of Quality Teachers
Large ESE Population
Large ESE Team
Leaders has many
responsibilities
Leaders with Many
Responsibilities
Least Restrictive Environment
Legal Compliance
Legal Concerns
Liaisons are the ESE Experts
Litigation Concerns
Love of Education
Master Scheduling
Meet The Needs Of Students
Motivation
Need for Vocational
Education
Needs of Students are Priority
No experience on InD

Parents and Students need to be More Responsible for Education
Participation in Activities
Participation in General Education
Peer Support
Placement Specialist is Expert
Prepared for Role
Proactive Planning
Promoting Dismissal
Providing Needed Services
Recognized lack of Leadership in ESE
Removing Services
Resources
Resources for Students
Responsibilities outside ESE
Reviewing Practices
Safety Concerns
School Based Decision Making
School Based Vocational Education
School has Strong Program
School is a Safe Place
Services to SWD
Social Skills Education
Social Skills Instruction

Staffing Specialist is Expert
Staffing Specialist is Legal Expert
Student Benefits being in School
Student Needs Met
Student Placement
Student's Need more Responsibility
Students Receive Needed Services
Subject Area Content embedded in Independent Skills
Teacher Training
Teachers as ESE Expert
Teamwork
Time Limitations
Transfer of Leadership Skills
Transition Planning and Services
Transportation Concerns
Utilization of Staff/Faculty
Utilizing Faculty and Staff to Meet Student Needs
Utilizing Team to Meet Students
Vocational Education

Exhausted Description of Phenomena

Academics	Leadership Expectations
Advocacy	Leadership is Complex
Autonomy	Leadership Preparation
Behavior Management	Least Restrictive Environment
CBVE Opportunities	Legal Compliance
Collaboration	Legal Concerns
Communication	Love of Profession
Customer Service	Master Scheduling
Differentiation of Needs	Meeting Student Needs
Discipline Needs	Motivation
District Goals	Needs of Adults over students
District Oversight	Postsecondary Goals for Students
District Oversight of CBVE	Promoting Dismissal
District Provided Resources	Staffing Specialist as Expert
Education is Family Responsibility	Student Engagement
ESE Liaison as ESE Expert	Student Placement
Expectations of FAPE	Student Safety
Growing Student Population	Supporting Student Needs
Helping others	Systems of Supporting Students
IEP Maintenance	Teacher Preparation
Inclusion	Teacher Training
Increasing Population	Teachers as Experts
Lack of Leadership Preparation	Teamwork
Limiting Resources	Vocational Education

Identifying Emergent Themes and Subthemes

Emergent Theme	Subtheme
Compliance	District Expectations
	Federal and State Law
	IEP Compliance
Faculty/Staff Supervision	Leadership is a Complex Role
	Limiting Resources
	Teacher and Paraprofessional Placement
	Teacher Training
Inclusion	Differentiation
	Access to General Education
	Time Spent with Nondisabled Peers
Lack of Leadership Preparation	Staffing Specialist as Expert
	ESE Liaison/District as Expert
	Teachers as Expert
Meeting Student Needs	Advocacy
	IEP Implementation
	Providing Services
Preparing Students for Life After School	Academics
	Vocational Education
	Community Based Vocational Education
	Independent Skills Instruction
	Social Skills Instruction

APPENDIX G: EMAIL AND DIRECTIONS TO PEER DEBRIEFER

Hello <Peer-Debriefer>,

Thank you so much again for agreeing to help me in this critical stage of my dissertation study. In this study, I have employed several qualitative methods to ensure both reliability and validity. As you know, one of these methods is the use of a peer-debriefer. This study has a total of 7 participant interviews. Attached to this email are several documents to help you complete the peer-debriefing:

1. The original transcript of each interview. These are identified by Participant number.
2. A copy of my interview questions.
3. An excerpt of my data analysis procedures from my dissertation.
4. An Excel file of my analysis of the original transcript:
    1. Column A- verbatim statements of significance
    2. Column B- my interpretation of what those statements mean
    3. Column C- Clusters of the meanings identified
    4. Column D- Identified emerging themes describing the phenomenon

What has already been completed by me:

1. A copy of verbatim transcripts have been included. These transcripts include highlighted phrases and statements of significance.
2. All highlighted phrases and statements have been added to Column A of the enclosed spreadsheet.
3. All significant phrases have been given a meaning, and that is added to Column B.
4. Meanings have been clustered and organized into relevant meanings into Column C.
5. Overarching and emerging themes are assigned to each of the clusters in Column D.

Your role and next steps:

1. Read the transcript for the participant to gain a sense of the interview.
2. Read Column A and Column B in the Excel document. Do you agree that the meaning is based on the significant statement?
3. Next, look at Column C. Do you agree with the assigned meaning?
4. Next, look at Column D. Do you agree that the theme assigned is in line with the previous data?
5. Now, document in Column E whether you agree/disagree. If you disagree, please make a note on why, and what you might have put instead.
6. Repeat this process for the remaining participants.

Please don't hesitate to contact me if you have any questions at all.

I appreciate you so much!
Erin

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