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THE EXPERIENCES OF SCHOOL LEADERS
WHO PROMOTE ACHIEVEMENT AMONG STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

by

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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ABSTRACT

Stagnant outcomes for students with disabilities has resulted in an era where results-driven accountability is emerging as the driving force for special education leadership. Students who receive special education services significantly lag behind their non-disabled peers in their performance on required statewide, standardized assessments. The achievement gap between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers is significant and pervasive.

School leadership is central to school performance (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). Very few researchers have investigated that experience as it relates to high achievement for students with disabilities. Yet, policy in the field has shifted to emphasize outcomes for students with disabilities (Hehir, 2014). As such, it has become critical to examine the experience of those who have successfully helped their schools produce high levels of achievement among students with disabilities.

The purpose of the study was to document the lived experiences of school leaders who were helping their population of students with disabilities achieve high outcomes on state required testing. The researcher interviewed principals who had led their schools to achieve exemplary results with students with disabilities according to the AMO data maintained by the FLDOE. Results and discussion are included for each of the research questions along with implications of the findings, recommendations, and suggestions for future research.

This work is dedicated to my parents, Buck and Charlene,
who have always impressed upon me the world-changing importance of education.
I also dedicate this work to my wife, Kate, and to my children, Jacob and Caitlin,
who are a never ending source of support and inspiration.

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Background

Since the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (Gardner, 1983), there have been repeated cries for school reform and improvement. Educational scholars (Payne, 2001; Ravitch, 2001) and practitioners (Rhee, 2013), policy makers (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2008), politicians (MPC 13, 2013) and the public (Jones, 2012) have all claimed that public schools need reform to succeed in their mission to provide a high quality education to all students. Education reform has become a central component of the political platforms for both major U.S. parties. Schools are, if the rhetoric is to be believed, in a perpetual state of crisis. Even the staunchest supporters of traditional public schools concede that some of the neediest students are not getting the education to which they are entitled (Ravitch, 2013). All seem to agree that every school needs to provide an excellent education for every student. Fullan (2007) summarized this need before claiming, “An undeniable conclusion that the educational system and its partners have failed to produce citizens who can contribute to and benefit from a world that offers enormous opportunity and equally complex difficulty of finding your way in it” (p. 7).

It is important to note that schools may not be able to meet this need on their own; demographics, though not destiny, are significantly related to student success (Fruchter, Hester, Mokhtar, & Shahn, 2012; Jencks et al., 1972; Rouse & Fantuzzo, 2009)). Every school can, though, take steps to improve the educational experience and learning outcomes for all of its students. In terms of school-related factors, leadership is central to

a school's success and its ability to improve education for its students. School leadership has a significant impact on student achievement (Waters, Marzano, McNulty, 2003), though the impact varies based upon leadership practices (Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). The role of the principal, specifically, is critical to the effectiveness of the school (Institute for Educational Leadership, 2000). As Lynch (2012) observed, "students perform better in schools where the principal provides strong leadership" (p. 29).

Legislative and Policy Issues in School Reform

Although cries for reform have been made in regard to schools as a whole, there has also been much discussion of an achievement gap; in other words, even when schools are doing well for some students, other groups of students are being largely excluded from high levels of achievement. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act transformed the national education policy at the start of the 21st century by requiring states to report data on the performance of all students and all defined subgroups of students, holding states accountable for proficiency for all by the end of the 2013-2014 school year, and measuring whether schools made adequate yearly progress (AYP) toward that proficiency each year (Yell, Katsiyannis, & Shiner, 2006). Closing the achievement gap and ensuring proficiency for all students was a primary reason for passage of No Child Left Behind. Despite students with disabilities being one of the defined subgroups in NCLB, a significant achievement gap has persisted between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers since its passage (Harr-Robins et al., 2013). As a response to the historical poor performance of students with disabilities, the federal policy governing special education has shifted away from ensuring procedural compliance and towards

accountability systems based on improved educational results and the impact of special education services on outcomes for students with disabilities (Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services [OSERS], 2012). The desire to increase the quality of learning for students with disabilities has become the driving force for change in special education.

The cornerstone of special education in the United States is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act [IDEA] (2004), which was originally passed as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (PL 94-142). PL 94-142 has provided the foundation for special education services since it was adopted in 1975. This law was the legislative embodiment of court decisions in the landmark access to education cases *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Citizens (PARC) v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* and *Mills v. Board of Education* (Dickey, 2011; Goldberg, 1982). It codified the requirement for all students with disabilities to receive a Free Appropriate Public Education [FAPE] (Etscheidt & Curran, 2010).

Provision of FAPE is the central obligation under IDEA (Zirkel, 2008). Schools meet this obligation through the development and implementation of an Individual Family Service Plan (IFSP) or Individualized Education Program (IEP), both of which document the specialized instruction, related services, and supplementary aids and services that are to be provided. The prevailing standard for whether FAPE was provided to a student comes from a Supreme Court Decision, *Board of Education, Hendrick Hudson Central School District v. Rowley*. Under that decision, assuming that procedural safeguard requirements are met, FAPE has been provided when the IEP was “reasonably

calculated to enable the child to receive educational benefits. . . and the courts can require no more” (Board of Education vs. Rowley, 1982, 458 US 176, 204).

Three of IDEA’s six core principles--zero reject, FAPE, and least restrictive environment (LRE)--directly set the stage for special education occurring within inclusive environments. Zero reject entitles all students with disabilities to a free public education, regardless of the severity or nature of the disability. FAPE is only appropriately provided when students with disabilities are being educated in the LRE or when “the setting [is] most like that of their typical peers in which they can succeed when provided with the needed supports and services” (Friend, 2008, p. 13). There is a strong preference in IDEA for the LRE to be in the general education classroom where students with disabilities are afforded the opportunity to master the same educational standards as their general education peers (Chinn, 2004; Rozalski, Stewart, & Miller, 2010). In this regard, the IDEA dictates that

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

IEP teams can consider other placements only when it has been determined that a student cannot be adequately educated in lesser restrictive placements (Rozalski et al.,

2010). As a result, the majority (80%) of students with disabilities in the state of Florida are being educated entirely or partially within the regular education classroom (Robinson, 2012). Often within inclusive settings, rather than removing students with disabilities from the classroom to provide them with specially designed instruction, special education teachers provide those supports within the general education classroom alongside the general education teacher (Solis, Vaughn, Swanson, & McCulley, 2012). The push towards inclusive special education service delivery is recognition that “students with disabilities are part of, not separate from, the general education population” (Office of Special Education Programs [OSEP], 2012, p. 1) and is aligned with the federal policy mandate focused on increasing quality over procedural compliance.

Traditionally, local education agencies have been required to develop plans for students with disabilities that allowed for meaningful educational benefit per the *Rowley* standard. As the legislation governing special education has shifted towards raising outcomes for students with disabilities, so too should the substantive standards of FAPE be raised from that currently prevailing *Rowley* standard (Huefner, 2008; Yell, Katsiyannis & Hazelkorn, 2007). Though the *Rowley* standard will not be changed until the issue is brought before the Supreme Court, Zirkel (2008) argued that the most recent reauthorization of IDEA has set the groundwork for raising the substantive standard by including a requirement for the IEP committee to use peer-reviewed research in the planning and implementation of the IEP wherever practicable. Yell et al. (2007) summarize the changed intent of the IDEA as follows:

IDEA is no longer about merely providing access to education, nor is it just about affording students a basic floor of opportunity. The law now embraces research, progress monitoring, and accountability. The law demands improved results for students with disabilities. (p. 9)

In this regard, the IDEA noted, “Improving educational results for children with disabilities is an essential element of our national policy of ensuring equality of opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency for individuals with disabilities” (20 U.S.C. § 1400). Under the emergence of results-driven accountability mechanisms for special education, through executive action, as opposed to legislative (reauthorization of IDEA) or judicial (the Supreme Court revisiting the *Rowley* standard in a new case), the bar has been raised for local education agencies to ensure mastery of general standards for students with disabilities, as measured by improved outcomes on state required testing (OSEP, 2012; USDOE, 2014).

Educational Quality in Special Education

It has been recognized that it is possible for students with disabilities to achieve at high levels (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2013; Hehir & Katzman, 2012; Williams, 2003). However, despite some schools having found ways to provide effective instruction to students with disabilities within the least restrictive environment (e.g., Hehir & Katzman, 2012), as a whole, students with disabilities have not been as successful as their regular education peers (Harr-Robins et al., 2013; Smith, Robb, West, & Tyler, 2010). Additionally, students with disabilities have historically poor performance on mandated high-stakes testing (Katsiyannis, Zhang, Ryan, & Jones, 2007).

On a national scale, evidence of performance gaps in both reading and math skills for students with disabilities have continued to exist (Albus & Thurlow, 2013; Harr-Robins et al., 2013). Students with disabilities earn fewer high school credits, have a lower mean GPA in graded courses, and fail courses at a higher rate than their non-disabled peers (Newman et al., 2011). In the state of Florida, where this study occurred, fewer students with disabilities graduate and twice as many drop out of school as compared to their general education peers (Robinson, 2012). Academic outcomes for students with disabilities lag far behind those of their general education peers. Although nearly two-thirds of Florida's total student population demonstrated proficiency in math (68%) and reading (62%), (Florida Department of Education [FDOE], 2011) well less than half of students with disabilities demonstrated proficiency on the same math (40.74%) and reading (34.58%) exams (FDOE, 2011, Robinson, 2012). In both measures, there was nearly a 30% difference in proficiency rates between students with disabilities and their general education peers, somewhat better than the national average gap which was estimated to be around 40% (Albus & Thurlow, 2013). Despite an increased focus on the quality of education being provided for students with disabilities, much room for improvement remains (Kauffman, Mock, & Simpson, 2007; National Council on Disability, 2008; Hehir, 2005).

Statement of the Problem

The current focus of special education has changed from issues of access and compliance to issues of quality (Brownell, Sindelar, Kiely, & Danielson, 2010; OSEP, 2012; OSERS, 2012). Hehir (2009) discussed the fact that “policy has evolved over the

years to focus not just on expanding access to educational spaces but to improving educational outcomes of students with disabilities” (p. 7). In line with these changes, an increasing percentage of students with disabilities are being educated in regular class settings (McLeskey, Landers, Hoppey, & Williamson, 2011) where they are being taught alongside, and expected to perform as well as, their non-disabled peers.

Yet, despite these changes, achievement gaps persist (Albus & Thurlow, 2013). Within the state of Florida, students with disabilities have typically failed to demonstrate proficiency of state standards as measured by required statewide assessments. Across all assessments reported in the relevant data for 2010 through 2014, proficiency rates for students with disabilities range from 28% to 35% proficient statewide (FDOE, 2014). These data also show dramatic variation in the scores for students with disabilities. In each assessment, some schools have shown as little as 5% of students demonstrating proficiency and, in each assessment, again, some schools have shown universal proficiency. Given the amount of variation, it is apparent that some schools are succeeding remarkably compared to others in regard to educating students with disabilities. Less apparent, and the subject of considerable discussion is the entire dialogue surrounding school reform and the reasons behind one school’s success and another school’s failure.

The role of leadership is central to this discussion. An emphasis has been placed on the quality of school leadership in relation to ensuring educational outcomes for students (Harris & Lambert, 2003). Extraordinary leadership is the primary factor in

building and supporting successful schools (Hehir & Katzman, 2012). Harris and Lambert (2003) also declared leadership central to that task:

. . . leadership features predominantly as a means to generating and mobilizing change across systems and within schools. There is a general expectation and a strong consensus about the potential of school leaders to contribute to improved educational performance and achievement. The research findings from diverse countries draw very similar conclusions about the centrality of leadership in school improvement. Schools that are improving have leaders who make a significant and measurable contribution to the development of the school and the teachers. (p. 2)

Lynch (2012) seemingly confirmed this centrality, noting that “first-class leadership is essential to make a genuine, positive difference for all students” (p. 110). The leadership of a school, particularly the principal, is deterministic of that school’s level of success (Stephens, 2010). Within the context of results-driven accountability, pushing for change in special education, noting the importance of leadership in promoting positive results for student outcomes, and cognizant that some schools have achieved high levels of performance, it is prudent to examine the experience of the leaders who make that possible.

Significance of the Study

A call for the field of special education “to find new and better ways of supporting students with a full range of disabilities in inclusive classrooms” (Giangreco, 2010, pp. 9-10) is one example of the policy shifts currently underway at the Office of

Special Education Programs. Given the efforts to refocus special education on quality, and being aware of the critical role school leadership holds in school improvement, it is prudent to examine the experience of school leaders where students with disabilities are performing at high levels.

Recognizing the importance of leadership, Hehir and Katzman (2012) highlighted some of the practices of effective inclusive schools in providing support for students with disabilities. The present study was focused on these practices, but from a slightly different perspective. In a recent work on principal preparation the authors call being able to “vividly illustrate what such leadership looks like. . . a pressing concern that has grown in importance as researchers, policymakers, and practitioners have increasingly recognized the role of school leaders in developing high-performing schools and closing the achievement gap” (Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, LaPointe, & Orr, 2010, p. 4). Therefore, whereas Hehir and Katzman (2012) were concerned with the leadership that led to effective inclusive practice and schools that were models for inclusive practice for all students, the current study was concerned with leadership that leads to extraordinary outcomes for students with disabilities.

Especially in light of evidence that achievement gaps for students with disabilities have been stagnant for the past several years (Albus & Thurlow, 2013) and despite policy shifts designed to decrease those gaps, one wonders how some schools have built high performing systems. In recognition of that concern and aligned with Fullan’s (2011) argument “that most good ideas come from first examining good practices of others, especially practices that are getting results in difficult circumstances” (p. 5), this study

sought to clearly understand and document the experience of school administrators who are getting results in the difficult circumstances where many other administrators have not yet been able to do so. Fullan (2011) continued his argument for effective change leadership being grounded in the best practices occurring in the present, arguing that those leaders “don’t start with imagining the future. They walk into the future through examining their own and others’ best practices, looking for insights they had hitherto not noticed” (p. 11). In conducting the present study, the researcher sought to provide some of that insight for educators and educational leaders working on behalf of students with disabilities—to identify “new and better ways” that might be found in the experiences of these leaders.

Purpose of Study

Stagnant outcomes for students with disabilities has resulted in an era where results-driven accountability has emerged as the driving force for special education leadership. As such, it has become critical to examine the experience of those who have successfully helped their schools produce high levels of achievement among students with disabilities. The purpose of the present study was to document the lived experiences of school leaders who have shown their population of students with disabilities that achieving high outcomes on required state tests is indeed possible.

Research Questions

This study sought to answer the following three research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of principals in schools where students with disabilities achieve proficiency at a high level on state required testing?
2. To what do these principals attribute success of their students with disabilities on required statewide testing?
3. What strategies, if any, do these principals report using to create learning environments where students with disabilities achieve proficiency at a high level on state required testing?

Research Design

This study utilized a phenomenological design. The theory behind utilizing a phenomenological approach is that it “advocates the study of direct experience, taken at face value” (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007, p. 22). In this instance, that direct experience belongs to school administrators who have led their schools to high proficiency rates for students with disabilities.

Participants for this study were selected using publicly accessible annual measurable objectives (AMO) data from the Florida Department of Education (FDOE, 2014), which reports proficiency rates for schools and districts across the state, as well as for the state as a whole. Additional data were used from the Continuous Improvement Management System (CIMS) to ensure that all studied schools shared a similar demographic make-up.

This design was chosen for this study, as it seeks to “determine what the experience meant for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). Qualitative research entails immersion in the everyday life of the setting chosen for the study, values and seeks to discover participants’ perspectives on their worlds, views inquiry as an interactive process between the researcher and the participants, is both descriptive and analytic, and relies on people’s words and observable behavior as the primary data. (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 4)

Data were collected for this study through semi-structured interviews. Preliminary interview questions were developed and reviewed using a Delphi method. Following revision, the interview protocol was provided to the principals prior to interviews which were recorded and transcribed. Principals were given the opportunity to review the transcripts and note any discrepancies or provide any clarifications.

Definitions of Terms

In order to ensure that all readers have an appropriate familiarity with the terms utilized, it is important to define a few key terms that are used in this dissertation.

Following are those definitions:

Composite proficiency score. An overall score for tests. When used for a single test, it is “determined by adding the scores on subtests. . . .” (Ravitch, 2007, p. 54). In this study, composite proficiency scores were calculated by adding school proficiency rates for all available assessments.

Achievement. “Accomplishment; the mastery of a skill or of knowledge as a consequence of the individual’s effort, training, and practice” (Ravitch, 2007, p. 9).

Achievement gaps.

. . . persistent differences in achievement among different groups of students as indicated by scores on standardized tests, grades, levels of educational attainment, graduation rates, and other data; also known as the test-score gap. . . . Many researchers believe that a significant part of the gap may be attributed to poverty, high mobility rates, and low expectations. Narrowing or closing this gap is one of the rationales for standards-based reform which aims to ensure that additional attention is paid to low-performing students and that expectations are similar for all students. (Ravitch, 2007, pp. 9-10)

Adequate yearly progress (AYP).

An individual state’s measure of yearly progress toward achieving state academic standards, as described in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation.

Adequate yearly progress is the minimum level of improvement that states, school districts, and schools must achieve each year, as negotiated with the U.S.

Department of Education. (Ravitch, 2007, p 12)

Annual measurable objective (AMO).

A measurement used to determine compliance with the federal No Child Left Behind Act. The law requires states to develop annual measurable objectives that will determine whether a school, a district, or the state as a whole is making adequate yearly progress. . . . (Ravitch, 2007, p. 20)

Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

The most recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA). . . . The reauthorized law sets high standards and contains policies that will help prepare all students for success in college and future careers. It prioritizes excellence and equity and recognizes the importance of supporting great educators in our nation’s schools. (USDOE, 2016, p. 6)

Evidence based practices.

A practice whose success has been demonstrated through sound evaluation or true experimental research--that is, the studies are based on random selection of participants and on random assignment of participants to different programs; are longitudinal (lasting at least three years); and result in long-term positive effects that are replicable. (Ravitch, 2007, p. 90)

Free appropriate public education (FAPE).

Special education and related services provided to students with special needs at no cost to their parents. The federal courts and the U.S. Congress made FAPE a legal requirement for school districts and other public agencies after a long history in which many children with disabilities were not admitted to public schools and did not have equal opportunities for a free public education. (Ravitch, 2007, p. 99)

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

A law that guarantees children with exceptional needs a free appropriate public education and requires that each student’s education be determined on an individual basis and designed to meet his or her unique needs in the least

restrictive environment possible. Originally enacted by the U.S. Congress in 1975, IDEA also establishes procedural rights for parents and children. (Ravitch, 2007, p. 120)

Least restrictive environment (LRE).

A term with legal force that is part of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. LRE refers to a setting where students with disabilities can be educated alongside their peers without disabilities to the maximum extent possible.

(Ravitch, 2007, p. 133).

No Child Left Behind (NCLB):

The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which was originally passed in 1965 as part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society program. NCLB was passed in fall 2001 and signed into law in early 2002. It represents a significant change in the federal government's role in public schools throughout the United States, particularly in terms of assessment, accountability, and teacher quality. The law requires states to annually test all students from grades 3 to 8 in reading and mathematics (and in science in 2007–2008) and to disaggregate their scores by race, disability, and other factors. (Ravitch, 2007, pp. 155-156)

Results driven accountability (RDA):

. . . a major shift in the way it oversees the effectiveness of states' special education programs. Until now, the Department's primary focus was to determine whether states were meeting procedural requirements such as timelines

for evaluations, due process hearings and transitioning children into preschool services. While these compliance indicators remain important to children and families, under the new framework known as Results-Driven Accountability (RDA), the Department will also include educational results and outcomes for students with disabilities in making each state's annual determination under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). . . .[RDA uses] multiple outcome measures that include students with disabilities' participation in state assessments, proficiency gaps between students with disabilities and all students, as well as performance in reading and math on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) to produce a more comprehensive and thorough picture of the performance of children with disabilities in each state. (OSERS, 2012, para. 1-4)

Students with disabilities.

a child (i) with mental retardation, hearing impairments (including deafness), speech or language impairments, visual impairments (including blindness), serious emotional disturbance (referred to in this title as 'emotional disturbance'), orthopedic impairments, autism, traumatic brain injury, other health impairments, or specific learning disabilities; and (ii) who, by reason thereof, needs special education and related services. (20 USC 1401)

Limitations

The information provided by the participants presents the greatest possible limitation. Although participants were selected based on purposive sampling, the

possibility exists that the participants from the sites chosen were not the best-suited options to inform the research questions. Also, because data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews, there exists the possibility of limitations associated with that method of data collection. Patton (2002) describes the limitations of interview data as including

possibly distorted responses due to personal bias, anger, anxiety, politics and simple lack of awareness since interviews can be greatly affected by the emotional state of the interviewee at the time of the interview. Interview data are also subject to recall error, reactivity of the interviewee to the interviewer, and self-serving responses. (p. 306)

The possibility of researcher bias also exists. In line with order to ensure awareness of potential biases, the researcher completed a bracketing exercise prior to conducting the research.

Another limitation of this study, by its design, was the lack of opportunities to generalize it to other areas. This study was meant to explore, in depth, the school leadership factors that contribute to a high level of performance by students with disabilities; therefore, the nature of the study precluded generalizability.

Assumptions

For the purposes of this research, the researcher made the following assumptions:

1. The selection of participants allowed the researcher to study the phenomenon of interest in-depth and receive multiple perspectives which helped inform the research questions.

2. The principal's leadership of the school is intricately related to the performance of students with disabilities at that school.
3. The researcher would be granted access to participants in order to conduct needed data collection.
4. Participants in the study would honestly and candidly share information reflective of their views, beliefs, and opinions.

CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

Related literature and research were reviewed to summarize and synthesize areas of literature relevant to the scope of this study. In this chapter, the researcher first framed the achievement gap and the rise in accountability as the context for the present study. Next, the foundations that led to the current state of special education were reviewed, focusing on legal mandates for students with disabilities and increased inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education classroom as a means for improving educational outcomes. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the role school leadership plays in improving outcomes for students, particularly for students in special education.

The Achievement Gap

Dating to the mid-20th century, discussions of educational policy within the United States have been framed around differences in student performance among disparate groups of students. Though the language was not used, the seminal Coleman Report, published in 1966, documented and described the achievement gap. Coleman wrote that “the average minority pupil scores distinctly lower on these [standard achievement] tests at every level than the average white pupil” (p. 21). In this report, Coleman described the gap in skills between white and black students of the time ranging between 1.6 and 3.3 years. Having long been noted as an issue in the educational

literature (e.g., Gerard and Miller, 1975), achievement gaps are frequently referenced, though they remain under examined (Thurlow, Wu, Lazarus, & Ysseldyke, 2016).

The gap has worsened since the 1980s, possibly due to the inequitable funding structures within the U.S. education system (Darling-Hammond, 2010). Darling-Hammond (2010) noted that urban schools typically spend far less per pupil despite “the added instructional costs that are concentrated in segregated [urban] high poverty schools” which are due, in part, to the need for “more extensive special education services” (p. 21). Rothstein (2004) discussed the achievement gap as symptomatic of differences in social class, particularly when schools are asked, in isolation or near isolation, to solve the problem. He noted that

low-income and race themselves don't influence academic achievement, but the collection of characteristics that define social class differences inevitably influences that achievement. . . as a result, no matter how competent the teacher, the academic achievement of lower-class children will, on average, almost inevitably be less than that of middle-class children (Rothstein, 2004, p. 2).

Others have pointed to a correlation between high poverty and low achievement (Hehir, 2005), and noted that “poverty is a powerful and persistent obstacle to learning” (Reville, 2004, p. 596). Grant (2009) alluded to both the racial and poverty achievement gaps when he noted the historical barriers erected “to separate black from white, rich from poor, with devastating consequences for children on the wrong side of the wall” (p. 2). He also discussed the relative impact of poverty on academic achievement:

Studies frequently refer to “poor blacks” or “low-income minorities.” Such usage is understandable: blacks and minorities are disproportionately poor. But class or income trumps race as a determinant of academic achievement. When black and white students of similar income and parental education are compared, most of the racial difference disappears. . . . The real difference in school behavior [is] family income. (Grant, 2009, p. 166)

A similar argument could be made for urban students. Anyon (1997) wrote of “the dismal state of schooling in most of our central cities” (p. 9) and noted that “so many decades [of reform] have seen so little improvement in city education” (p. 12). Given the existence of income and race and ethnicity achievement gaps previously discussed, the struggles of urban schools may be, in part, due to the large number of minority students and students in poverty in those schools. The student bodies in many schools in urban settings are overwhelmingly comprised of black students, to the point that the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University has labeled them “apartheid schools” (Kozol, 2005, p. 19) and wrote of being able to be in such schools for years without seeing a white face. To highlight the paucity of white students in the segregated inner-city schools, Kozol (2005) wrote of one student who is “‘pretty sure’ that the school was not segregated because, in one of the other classrooms on the same floor, there were two white children” (Kozol, 2005, p. 24). Therefore, if income and racial achievement gaps exist, an urban achievement gap is nearly predetermined. Kozol (2005) explained that a “segregated inner-city school is ‘almost six times as likely’ to be a school of concentrated poverty as is a school that has an overwhelmingly white population” (p. 20). With such high

poverty rates and segregation in urban schools, logic dictates that there must also then be issues of student achievement in those schools.

Traditionally, the achievement gap is discussed in terms of race or ethnicity. However, differences in student achievement are also frequently noted in terms of income levels (e.g., Reardon, 2011). Though it is commonly held that students with disabilities achieve at lower levels, on average, on state assessments than do those without disabilities, appearing somewhat less in the literature is discussion of that achievement gap for students with disabilities (e.g., Eckes & Swando, 2009). It is that gap with which the current study was primarily concerned.

The persistence of the achievement gap has long been documented and is potentially related to the strong connections between diversity, poverty, and disability. Minority students have been disproportionately represented in special education. There has been a tremendous amount of research into the overrepresentation of minority students in special education, yet the problem persists (Skiba et al., 2008) establishing a clear relationship between racial and ethnic diversity and disability. In addition, there is a strong relationship between poverty and disability, with clear paths both from poverty to disability and from disability to poverty (Elwan, 1999). Elwan, in his review of the literature on disability and poverty, found that “the links between poverty and disability go two ways—not only does disability add to the risk of poverty, but conditions of poverty add to the risk of disability” (p. 34). Palmer (2011) observed that the relationship between poverty and disability existed regardless of the manner in which poverty was defined; and Skiba et al. (2008) noted that “deep and persistent poverty consistently

predicts more deleterious effects” (p. 272). As discussed by Lawrence as early as 2006, children from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds have a much greater likelihood of being reared under deep, persistent poverty, and this may be somehow related to the problems of disproportionality within special education.

The connection between students from poverty, students from diverse backgrounds, and students with disabilities, presents a formidable challenge for school leaders, teachers, and stakeholders interested in improving outcomes for students and closing the achievement gap. “Narrowing and ultimately closing achievement gaps will continue to be a major challenge for urban school districts and schools; however, we know how this work is done” (Payzant, 2011, p. 156). Javius (2016) discussed some of the ways to complete this work. Key in his approach was to center the solution on improving teacher efficacy rather than focusing myopically on student achievement. Among the areas he discussed in this vein was the need to change educators’ mindsets to believe that achievement is possible for all students, and that they are able to make that happen; changing principal behavior to focus solely on those actions which directly improve teacher efficacy; and teacher efficacy, which involves teachers’ mind-set, instructional planning, and instructional delivery. Regarding mind-set, much of Javius’s discussion centered on expectations. In Hattie’s (2008) meta-synthesis of factors that impact student achievement, he identified the expectations that teachers hold as within the “zone of desired effects” (p. 19) and as a “powerful moderator of the [teacher’s] success” (p. 34). He discussed expectations: “What matters...[is] teachers having expectations that *all* students can progress, that achievement for *all* is changeable (and

not fixed), and that progress for *all* is understood and articulated” (p. 35). Payzant outlined the following methods by which to close achievement gaps:

- Acknowledge that achievement gaps exist and affirm our commitment to closing them.
- Establish and maintain high standards and expectations across the board.
- Take a whole-school approach to closing the gap.
- Support principals in leading the work.
- Engage families and the community.
- Use a variety of assessments to measure student progress and improve the quality of instruction.
- Equip teachers with a variety of instructional strategies to address the broad range of student learning styles and needs.
- Change belief systems by demonstrating evidence of success.
- Foster a school climate that is positive, safe, and nurturing.
- Identify students at greatest risk of failure and provide them with additional instruction time.
- Make classroom learning culturally relevant.
- Recruit, hire, and retain diverse teams of teachers and administrators.
- Secure and allocate appropriate resources for schools and classrooms based on the needs of students. (pgs. 151-155)

Many of the recent policy shifts in education, including increased accountability and data-based decision making, support Payzant’s methods.

Increased Accountability

Hanushek and Raymond (2005) have identified test-based accountability as the foundation of education policy in the United States, particularly since the passage of NCLB. Increased accountability in education for states, school districts, and schools has been a defining principle of NCLB (USDOE, 2002). Hehir (2005) also noted the “significantly greater accountability” in both NCLB and the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (p. 112). Figlio and Loeb (2011) defined school accountability as “the process of evaluating school performance on the basis of student performance measures” (p. 384). States are required to use testing in reading, mathematics, and science to determine measures of student performance (Figlio and Loeb, 2011). According to Wiliam (2010), requiring this testing is the “heart of NCLB” (p. 110) which is based on the idea that “differences between students in terms of their educational outcomes, as measured by the tests, should be largely, if not wholly, attributable to differences in the quality of education provided by schools” (p. 110).

The proliferation of high-stakes testing was extended under the current presidential administration’s Race to the Top (RTTT) initiative. Under this initiative, monies were awarded to states that developed innovative plans for educational reform that included data on student growth as a “significant factor” (USDOE, 2009, p. 9) in the teacher evaluation system. In addition to linking student test scores to teacher evaluations, RTTT encouraged states to increase the number of charter schools and adopt the Common Core State Standards (CCSS). The CCSS were developed jointly by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the National Governor’s

Association (NGA). The CCSS were meant to increase the expectations placed on students and the rigor with which teachers delivered instruction (NGA/CCSSO, 2010). A recent analysis of the changes current state standards face in implementing the CCSS indicates that the new standards have increased emphasis on higher-order thinking skills but do not represent greater focus (Porter, McMaken, Hwang, and Yang, 2011).

Much controversy surrounding the testing changes brought about by NCLB and RTTT exists, and researchers have argued that these policies have had deleterious effects on the nation's school-children (e.g., Darling-Hammond, 2007 Stobart, 2008). However, if nothing else, NCLB and RTTT highlighted the discrepancies that exist in student outcomes based on AYP subgroup and, therefore, made it abundantly evident that not all students in the United States were receiving the same quality education or accruing the same benefit from that education.

Many attempts have been made to improve the quality of instruction and outcomes for students with disabilities. Perhaps none has gained more traction than Universal Design for Learning (UDL), which was codified as part of the most recent reauthorizations of IDEA and ESEA. UDL is a method that allows for the reduction of barriers that have traditionally prevented diverse learners from successfully accessing instruction (Meyer, Rose, & Gordon, 2014). To do this, UDL theory promotes instructional opportunities that allow for multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression (Meyer et al., 2014). Hehir (2010) described UDL as “the bridge between special education and general education: a concern that all learners get a

high-quality education” (p. 7). It is such an education that is the goal of results-driven accountability, which is discussed in the next section.

Legal Foundations of Special Education and the Move to Results Driven Accountability

For “students with disabilities, the quest for access has been riddled with denials and, hence, with litigation and legislation designed to remedy barriers to access” (Shealey, Lue, Brooks, and McCray, 2005, p. 115). The current system of service provision for students with disabilities has been the direct result of several court cases and subsequent legislation written in line with the decisions in those cases. Overall, the trend in service provision has pushed ever closer to full inclusion of students with disabilities in the regular education classroom (McLeskey et al., 2011). It took “tireless efforts of parents and advocacy groups in the courts and legislatures of this country” to help special education progress to a point where access to a quality education for persons with disabilities is ensured (Yell, 1998, p. 53). Not all of the legal action that has benefitted persons with disabilities was pursued on behalf of persons with disabilities; much of the legal action driven by the civil rights movement has provided ancillary benefit to persons with disabilities (Gallagher, 2006). The fight for improvement in special education exists within the larger social justice framework that has supported the civil rights movement (Dickey, 2011). The parallels between the movements are strong enough that some have referred to persons with disabilities as “the other minority” (Osborne, 1988, p. 3).

Landmark court decisions that have made a major impact on the right to education for persons with disabilities include *Brown v. Board of Education*, *PARC v.*

Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, and *Mills v. Board of Education*. Legislative actions that have helped spur increased access to and quality of education for students with disabilities include Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (later reauthorized as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act).

Through the early 1950s, enshrined in United States law and policy was the notion that “separate but equal” provided a viable alternative to integration. The separate but equal doctrine was established in a Supreme Court case dealing with public transportation (*Plessy v. Ferguson*), but was applied to separate schooling facilities. In *Brown v. Board of Education*, the Supreme Court took up the issue of whether the separate but equal doctrine established in the *Plessy* case was constitutional under the 14th Amendment equal protection clauses as it regarded separate schooling facilities. The Supreme Court, in a unanimous decision, ordered integration of schools, noting that “segregated public schools are not ‘equal’ and cannot be made ‘equal,’ and that [in such a system] they are deprived of the equal protection of the laws” (*Brown v. Board of Education*, 1954, para. 3). The *Brown* decision was a watershed moment in the movement for equal access in schools. Beyond its obvious implications for students of color, it also laid the foundation for the current inclusion of students with disabilities. For this reason, Guernsey and Klare (1993) declared *Brown* as the beginning of “the modern legal history of education for children with disabilities” (p. 2).

With the support of the *Brown* decision to back their arguments, the Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children filed suit in federal court in 1971, alleging that the

Commonwealth of Pennsylvania had failed to provide public education for a group of children with mental retardation in violation of state statute and the Equal Protection clause of the 14th Amendment. The plaintiff's case argued that children with mental retardation could benefit from educational services, that education was not only academics, that the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania could not provide its children with a free public education, but deny that education to students with mental retardation, and that earlier access to education could result in greater predicted learning. The resulting case, *PARC v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (334 F. Supp. 1257), was settled in a consent decree in which the commonwealth agreed to provide a public education to students with mental retardation. In their remedy to this situation, the court held that students with mental retardation should be educated in programs most like programs for their non-disabled peers (Chinn, 2004; Levine & Wexler, 1981; Yell, 1998; Zettel & Ballard, 1982). Weiner and Hume (1987) declared *PARC* as the moment in the fight for educating students with disabilities that "lightning struck" (p. 27).

The *PARC* case was closely followed by the similar and equally important case of *Mills v. Board of Education* (Guernsey & Klare, 1993). In this case, a group of parents alleged that Washington, D.C. had denied or excluded their children with various disabilities from public education without due process of law in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment. The court decided in favor of the plaintiffs and ordered the board of education to provide a publicly supported education for all children, including those with disabilities (Yell, 1998). Further, the court mandated that the district provide due process safeguards, including "the right to a hearing, with representation, a record

and an impartial hearing officer; the right to appeal; the right to have access to records; and the requirement of written notice at all stages of the process” (Yell, 1998, p. 60).

Noting the importance of the courts in ensuring access to education for students with disabilities, Scheerenberger (1987) also observed that courts prior to the 1970s had historically “consistently upheld the authority of the local school board to exclude [students with disabilities]” (p. 156). When the courts started deciding on behalf of students with disabilities, Congress also began codifying access to education.

After access to education was well-established within the courts (even if not well-established in practice), major cases dealing with special education shifted from issues of access to issues of quality. This shift was seen prominently in the case of *Board of Education v. Rowley*, which dealt with an issue of access, but then turned to an issue of quality. Specifically, this case established a two-fold test to determine the acceptability of the school district’s actions in regard to the requirement for a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) for all students with disabilities as had been required by P.L. 94-142 (the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, or EAHCA). It asked first whether the state had complied with the procedures required in the law (that is, did they provide the student with FAPE?) and then, if so, if the student’s IEP was developed in a manner intended to enable the student to achieve meaningful educational benefit. This case is important for the development of special education policy as it heralded a shift from merely issues of access to education for students with disabilities to ensuring that that access allowed students to receive a quality education.

As the first law enacted in the United States to protect individuals with disabilities from discrimination, the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 affected special education through ensuring the civil rights of persons with disabilities (Yell, 1998). This law was not limited to children. Rather, in Section 504, it prohibited discrimination against individuals with disabilities by any organization that receives federal funding (Friend, 2008). Section 504 of the law states that

No otherwise qualified individual with a disability in the United States. . . shall, solely by reason of her or his disability, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance. (29 USC Sec. 794)

Section 504 ensures that discrimination does not occur based on disability by requiring any agency which receives federal funds to provide individualized accommodations that allow the individual with a disability to receive services comparable to that which those without disabilities receive (Yell, 1998). Given the broad definition of disability within the law as “impairments that significantly limit one of more major life activity” (Friend, 2008, p. 15), Section 504 can provide support for individuals with disabilities who may not be eligible under other laws. There is no federal funding provided for implementation of Section 504.

Section 504 formed the basis for the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), which was enacted 13 years later in 1990 (Aron & Loprest, 2012). ADA is “the most comprehensive legislation for individuals with disabilities” (Yell, 1998, p. 63). Like Section 504 before it, ADA adopted a broad definition of disability, but applied

protections to both the public and private sectors (Friend, 2008). The rights granted to individuals with disabilities to full and equal protection under the law through Section 504 and extended through ADA have served as a cornerstone for the conceptual understanding of special education (Bateman, 2007).

The cornerstone to special education in the United States is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act[IDEA] (2004) which was originally passed as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (PL 94-142). PL 94-142 has provided the base for special education services since it was adopted in 1975. This law was the legislative embodiment of court decisions in the PARC and Mills cases (Dickey, 2011; Goldberg, 1982) and codified the requirement for all students with disabilities to receive a free appropriate public education. Since its initial enactment, PL 94-142 was amended in 1986, 1990, 1997, and 2004. The 1990 reauthorization saw a change in nomenclature to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), a name which has largely held through subsequent reauthorizations.

IDEA is built upon six core principles. These core principles are zero reject, free appropriate public education, least restrictive environment, nondiscriminatory evaluation, parent and family rights to confidentiality, and procedural safeguards (Friend, 2008). Zero reject entitles all students with disabilities to a free public education, regardless of their disability's nature or severity. Under IDEA, a free appropriate public education (FAPE) must be provided to all students with disabilities through the development of an individualized education program (IEP) which documents the specialized instruction, related services, and supplementary aids and services that are to be provided. FAPE is

only appropriate, and therefore only being provided, when students with disabilities are being educated in the least restrictive environment, that is, “the setting most like that of their typical peers in which they can succeed when provided with the needed supports and services” (Friend, 2008, p. 13). IEP committees should consider the regular class setting as the appropriate placement and move to more restrictive settings only as required by student need in order to be educationally successful (FDOE, 2000). This expectation for IEP committees stems from IDEA’s preference for the least restrictive environment to be in the general education classroom where students with disabilities are allowed to work towards mastery of general education standards and demonstrate that mastery through the same assessments taken by regular education students (Rozalski et al., 2010). IDEA also has required unbiased assessments for special education decision-making, assurance of confidentiality of student information, and compliance with clear procedures which ensure that due process rights are followed (Friend, 2008).

Arguably, the most impacting legislation on education has been the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001, which mandated a new era of high standards, accountability, and quality in the nation’s classrooms. Smith (2008) noted that,

as it applies to teacher quality, NCLB has two key objectives, the first is to ensure that every teacher is highly qualified in the subjects they teach and the second is to reduce the barriers to becoming a teacher by ‘retooling’ traditional teacher education programmes and opening up alternative routes into the profession. (p. 611)

The legislative intent was to ensure that every child has access to quality teachers, with the underlying assumption that highly qualified teachers will have a positive impact on student learning.

Under NCLB, teachers must prove that they are highly qualified by holding a bachelor's (or higher) degree, a full certification from the state in which they teach, and mastery of content knowledge in the subjects they teach (Drame & Pugach, 2010). It was left to the states to develop means for teachers to show mastery of content knowledge through testing or a high, objective, uniform state standard of evaluation (HOUSSE) process.

IDEA 2004 brought much of the same mentality of NCLB into the field of special education (Smith et al., 2010). It was aligned with the six main principles of NCLB (Dickey, 2011). It required that IEP teams consider implementing services based on peer-reviewed research and that staff working with students with disabilities implement evidence based practices. Much of this law agrees with the educational benefit component of the Rowley test. In reauthorizing this law, Congress recognized that failing as a result of poor quality general education services is not the same as needing special education services. As a result of this, Response to Intervention (RTI) became the norm for determining eligibility for special education services. This requires that students fail to show progress under high-quality, scientifically-based instruction through increasing tiers of support. This is a clear manifestation of the ideal from various court cases (most notably, Rowley) that educational services should be provided with the intention of meaningful educational benefit. The current legislation governing special

education policy emphasizes access to the general education curriculum as a precursor to that meaning, preferably, wherever practicable, through mastery of the same educational standards by students with disabilities as their regular education peers.

In sum, IDEA holds students with disabilities “to the same high standards to which other children are held” (Manna, 2008, p. 16). Meeting that expectation has become the guiding mechanism by which accountability in special education functions. The Department of Education updated accountability systems in response to the persistent under achievement of students with disabilities and to the dominant accountability mechanism within special education being ensuring compliance (OSERS, 2012). However, as a new policy approach, there is a paucity of scholarly work related to results driven accountability.

Role and Experience of Leadership in Student Performance

Student achievement is the core function of the principalship (Boscardin 2004). Waters, Marzano, and McNulty (2004) described leadership as having a significant positive effect on student performance. Nidus and Sadler (2011) indicated that principals are the primary factor in school improvement. Therefore, with the increasing need for student outcomes comes a need for school leadership that promotes high levels of student performance. Distributed models of leadership and those promoting shared leadership among school staff have been associated with higher student outcomes and increased academic capacity of schools (Heck & Hallinger, 2009). Primary among the many roles that principals fulfill within the school is oversight of students’ academic performance (Lynch, 2012). A principal’s instructional leadership has been identified as

a critical component of successful schools (Day, Gu, & Sammons, 2016). Honig (2012) discussed this role in terms of instructional leadership, which she characterized as being able to “improve classroom instruction” (p. 734). She later described the role of “the principalship as primarily focused on leading instructional improvement in their school” (Rainey & Honig, 2015, p. 11). Thurlow, Quenemoen, and Lazarus (2012) also discussed this importance, noting the priority that principals must place on increasing academic outcomes for all students. Cosner (2014) discussed the importance of principals being able to coach teacher teams through “collaborative use of data” (p. 692) as a critical factor in improving schools.

Principals are capable of building the environment that can increase academic outcomes and student learning. In fact, some have argued that teachers will not be able to meet the needs of their diverse population of students without the support of administrators (Thousand, Villa, & Nevin, 2006). Leadership related factors, particularly “instructional leadership, shared leadership, and trust in the principal...have the potential to increase student learning” (Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010, p. 51). This assertion was supported by an earlier a meta-analysis looking at the impact of principals on student achievement. In it, Cotton (2003) synthesized several decades’ worth of research, describing the principal characteristics and practices that were found to correlate with higher student achievement. She noted that “scores of students show that student achievement is strongly affected by the leadership of school principals” (p. 62). She concluded with a question:

Can the importance of the principal's role in fostering student achievement be overstated? The principal does not affect student performance single-handedly, of course, or even directly. Yet the evidence clearly shows that, working with others. . . principals do have a profound and positive influence on student learning. (p. 74)

Cruzeiro and Morgan (2006) similarly noted that effective principals set parameters that allow for collaboration among professionals and between professionals and parents. DuFour (2004) discussed the need for collaboration to occur in ways that impact classroom events. Friend, Cook, Hurley-Chamberlain and Shamberger (2010) also discussed the importance of collaboration in meeting the needs of learners, specifically noting that "through collaboration, professionals can create innovative options within a single system of education that is more responsive to the diversity of today's learners" (p. 23). Collaborative, contextually relevant leadership within a school that works to continuously build capacity for academic improvement is an important component of comprehensive school improvement efforts (Hallinger & Heck, 2010). Increasingly, the expectation for high levels of achievement has extended to students with disabilities. The principal is "a critical member of the special education team" (LeNeveu, 2014, p. 28). Principals are increasingly responsible for the "equitable educational attainment" (Crockett, 2012, p. 62) of students with disabilities. With increased expectations, it has become increasingly important to examine the role of leadership in student performance specific to students in special education. As it relates to school leadership in special education, Crockett (2007) noted that one of the key questions

administrators wrestle with pertains to “how. . . leadership tasks and functions [are] accomplished to support successful learning for all students, especially those who have disabilities” (p. 140). Thurlow et al. (2012) addressed that issue by arguing that improved student achievement occurs when school leaders ensure that students with disabilities are challenged to reach standards based on the expectation that it is possible for them to master standards.

It is critical that special education administrators are instructional leaders (Bays & Crockett, 2007). General education and special education leaders need to collaboratively problem solve how to meet accountability measures regarding student outcomes (Lashley & Boscardin, 2003). Without the proper knowledge and skills related to special education, a principal can harm students with disabilities. (Davidson & Algozzine, 2002).

The Need for the Current Research

An elevated substantive requirement for FAPE for students with disabilities is appropriate given the changes in the U.S. federal education laws (Huefner, 2008; Zirkel, 2008). With the move towards results-driven accountability (OSERS, 2012), FAPE has become a school improvement issue. Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, and Ahlgrim-Delzell (2006) reminded the field that “more research is needed to demonstrate the effect of principals. . . on the achievement of special education students” (p. 62). Angelides and Ainscow (2000) argued, “If improvement is our business, schools will have to find ways of understanding themselves better in terms of those factors that shape their working practices” (p. 146). Billingsley, McLeskey, and Crockett (2014) noted that “Although

principals are expected to provide inclusive leadership, there is minimal research on how principals approach leadership as they work to improve educational opportunities for students with disabilities” (p. 8). This study was a response to their challenges to better understand current leadership practice in order to improve outcomes for students with disabilities.

CHAPTER 3 METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter contains a description of the research methodology that was used in conducting this study. It includes information on the purpose of the study, the research design and questions, discussion of the trustworthiness features of the research, and procedures and methods for data collection and analysis. It is important to note that these methods were designed and selected to ensure the trustworthiness of the research to the greatest extent possible. The goal was to hold as firmly as possible to the methods throughout the study, but to maintain the flexibility essential to the exploratory nature of qualitative research.

Purpose of the Study

The phenomenon of the achievement gap has been well-documented. In regard to students with disabilities, its prevalence has remained largely static, with the national achievement gap, the gap between proficiency rates for students with disabilities versus their regular education counterparts, at approximately 40 percentage points (Albus & Thurlow, 2013). Within Florida, that gap is only marginally better, hovering in the mid-twenties (FDOE, 2014; Robinson, 2012). Where growth in outcomes for students with disabilities has been seen, the gains can be largely attributed to growth in students with disabilities from middle- and upper- income homes (Hehir & Katzman, 2012). These stagnant outcomes for students with disabilities have resulted in an era where results-driven accountability is emerging as the driving force for special education leadership.

As such, it is critical to examine the experiences of those who have successfully helped their schools produce high levels of achievement among students with disabilities. The purpose of the study was to document the experiences of school leaders who have helped their population of students with disabilities achieve high outcomes on state required testing.

Overall Approach and Rationale

Quantitative and qualitative approaches to research represent two distinct cultures, each with its own values, beliefs and norms. The selection of the best approach to use for a study should be based on how closely aligned the research goals are to the cultural beliefs of each tradition (Goertz & Mahoney, 2012). Qualitative research approaches are exploratory and designed to help the researcher bring understanding to a complex human problem (Creswell, 2009). Yin (2011) explained that qualitative research uses multiple sources of evidence which are gathered under real-world conditions without controlling for contextual elements in an effort to represent the study participants' views and perspectives in order to make meaning of their lives and explain human social behavior. In other words "qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them" (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). Berg (2001) noted that:

Qualitative research properly seeks answers to questions by examining various social settings and the individuals who inhabit these settings. Qualitative researchers, then, are most interested in how humans arrange themselves and their

settings and how inhabitants of these settings make sense of their surroundings through symbols, rituals, social structures, social roles and so forth. (p. 6)

Generally, qualitative approaches are deemed appropriate for studies that seek to both “captur[e] involved people’s perspectives and [add] to our understanding of discourses that shape social life in schools. . . .” (Brantlinger, Jiminez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005, p. 202). This study was concerned with the subjects’ lived experiences and the meanings that they attached to those experiences. As such, a qualitative approach to this study was chosen.

Specific Research Design

It was important in this study to choose particular strategies that allowed an in-depth examination of the lived experiences of those who have helped a school provide a high quality education for students with disabilities (as measured by their performance on state-mandated testing) in order to answer the research questions. Broadly, “Phenomenology is a theoretical point of view that advocates the study of direct experience taken at face value. . . .” (Cohen et al., 2007, p. 22). To do so “requires methodologically, carefully, and thoroughly capturing and describing how people experience some phenomenon--how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others” (Patton, 2002, p. 104).

Leading schools in a manner that results in high levels of achievement for students with disabilities is a pressing concern within the national discourse on education. Despite the emerging national emphasis on outcomes for students with disabilities, schools with high levels of proficient students with disabilities on required statewide

testing have been limited. It is an infrequent, but increasingly important, phenomenon. Recognizing that “the aim [of phenomenological research] is to determine what an experience means for the persons who have had the experience and are able to provide a comprehensive description of it” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13), such an approach was ideally suited to the purpose of the present study. Conducting this study from a phenomenological approach allows the opportunity to explore the individual experiences of people who have led schools to those outcomes in order to derive its essence.

Research Questions

1. What are the lived experiences of principals in schools where students with disabilities achieve proficiency at a high level on state required testing?
2. To what do these principals attribute success of their students with disabilities on required statewide testing?
3. What strategies, if any, do these principals report using to create learning environments where students with disabilities achieve proficiency at a high level on state required testing?

Selection Criteria

Schools used for this study were selected using performance results publicly available from the Florida Department of Education in its published data on Annual Measurable Objectives (AMO) for Schools, Districts, and the State (FDOE, 2014). The AMO data included information on proficiency rates for schools across the state (the percentage of students at the school who earned a satisfactory score on the required

assessment). This information is provided for all students overall and disaggregated by demographic groups. The data include information on statewide assessments for reading and mathematics during each school year from 2010-2011 through 2013-2014 (four academic years), and for writing during both the 2012-2013 and 2013-2014 school years. Those data were used to develop composite proficiency scores for each subject area (reading, mathematics, and writing) and overall across subjects for both the total student population of each school and for all students with disabilities at each school (FDOE, 2014). The composite proficiency score for students with disabilities was subtracted only from the composite proficiency score for all students to calculate an achievement gap composite score. With a total of 10 test administrations reported in the AMO data, the total possible overall composite score was 1,000 points (FDOE, 2014).

Additional data from the Continuous Improvement Management System (CIMS) was used to limit selected potential study sites to ensure that all studied schools shared a similar demographic student characteristics. Because the goal of this research was to explore the experience of leaders in schools where students with disabilities were performing at a higher than expected level despite the demographic data suggesting that should not be the case, the data were analyzed to find schools where the following criteria were met:

1. At least 95% of students were assessed on statewide assessments for reading and mathematics.
2. School was a Title 1 school.
3. School was not a charter school.

4. The school was a majority-minority school (that is, the minority rate is greater than 50%).
5. The overall composite score at the school for proficiency on statewide exams for students with disabilities subgroup exceeded the overall composite score for the state for all students for proficiency on statewide examinations; that is, the average student with a disability at the school performed better on required statewide assessments than did the average student in the state.
6. The achievement gap composite was below the statewide average achievement gap composite and, therefore, represented a smaller achievement gap at the school than the average achievement gap in the state.
7. The current principal had led the school for at least two school years.

Participants

Study participants were identified based on the presence of an administrator at a school that met specific criteria. These criteria were established to ensure that the phenomenon of interest could be appropriately studied through the selected participants. The following section describes the steps that were taken to ensure appropriate participant selection.

Once schools were selected, the principal at each selected school was asked to participate in the study. In order for a school to be selected as a study setting, the principal needed to be willing to participate in an in-depth interview. Additional, triangulating data was sought through a teacher survey provided to each school.

Procedures

Prior to beginning data collection, the appropriate documentation was submitted to the University of Central Florida's Institutional Review Board (IRB) for their approval to conduct the study (Appendix A). Following IRB's approval for the study, permission was also secured through the appropriate procedures in the participating school district. Consent was sought from the principal at each selected research site and each study participant was provided with an explanation of the research (Appendix B). Given the importance of researcher reflexivity to the credibility of qualitative studies (Tracy, 2013), and in line with Creswell's (2007) recommendations for phenomenological analysis, I also completed a bracketing exercise to explore potential biases which could impact the study. Data collection for this study took place during the 2015-2016 school year.

Development of Research Protocols and Collection of Data

Multiple sources of data collection were used as a form of triangulation to increase the credibility of the study. Interviews were conducted with the principals as the primary means of informing the research questions. Triangulating data was sought through a survey completed by special education and general education teachers at each participating school site.

Preliminary interview questions (Appendix C) were developed, largely as an adaptation of the work of Aladjem et al. (2010) and Darling-Hammond et al. (2010). A preliminary survey instrument was developed grounded in the literature related to effective principal practices (Appendix D). Permission was granted to adapt the survey and is contained in Appendix E. An additional survey question was added to the survey

to gather information about the themes that emerged from principals in the interviews.

Both protocols are included in the appendices.

The preliminary protocols were reviewed with six experts in the fields of special education and educational leadership using the Delphi method. This Delphi group reviewed the questions to determine their validity in regard to the purpose of the research. Six experts in the fields of special education and educational leadership were selected to participate in the validation process. In the initial round of review, participants were asked to provide feedback and recommendations in regard to the proposed questions, were able to offer comments and suggested revisions to the questions, and propose new questions if they believed that the existing questions did not fully address the research questions. Based on that feedback, the researcher revised the protocols and sought a second round of review. In the second round of review, participants were asked to validate each question from the interview protocols and the survey instrument as a whole. If a majority of participants deemed a question invalid for the purposes of the research study, it was revised based on their feedback, and participants were asked to revalidate the question. Validation rounds and revisions continued until all questions were deemed valid by at least four participants.

Each principal was interviewed once. The 60- to 90-minute interviews followed a semi-structured format to allow for areas of interest to be explored. Sample questions were provided to the principal prior to the interviews. Provision of these sample items ensured that the principal was able to reflect and be prepared to provide in-depth responses to questions of interest. The interviews were conducted in a semi-structured

format using the validated interview protocol as a guide for the interview. The preliminary protocol can be found in Appendix C. All interview questions in the protocol were used in the interviews, unless the researcher believed that the content of a question had been covered in discussion of other questions. Probing questions were asked as deemed warranted by the researcher.

With participants' permission, all interviews were recorded to allow the interviews to be accurately transcribed. Following the completion of each interview, it was transcribed into a word processing program. Principals were given the opportunity to review the transcriptions for accuracy. All interview data were kept and reported confidentially using pseudonyms for both schools and individual participants. Additionally, a teacher survey, focused on describing the leadership capacity of the school principal, was provided to teachers from each school who were asked to participate in the surveys.

Storage and Security of the Data

All data collected were organized and maintained digitally to ensure continued ease of access throughout the research study. Data were primarily stored on a computer accessible only to the researcher. .

Although digital copies of all data were maintained and used for data analysis, hard copies of data collected were maintained in a locked file cabinet. They were retained solely for the purpose of transparency and accountability in regard to the integrity of the data.

The data analysis process was facilitated through the use of computer software designed for the purpose of assisting in analyzing qualitative study data (i.e., Computer Assisted/Aided Qualitative Data Analysis, or CAQDAS). The software chosen for this process creates a redundant copy of all imported data within a single, encrypted project file which provides an additional fail-safe to ensure the integrity of the original data throughout the project.

All data were read during the compilation. This initial reading allowed me to gain a strong overall sense of the data which was helpful in subsequent analysis stages.

Data Explication

The purpose of analyzing data in qualitative studies is to allow findings to emerge from the data (Patton, 2014). This “involves reducing the volume of raw information, sifting trivia from significant data, identifying significant patterns, distinguishing signal from noise, and constructing a framework for communicating the essence of what the data reveal” (Patton, 2014, p. 630).

There is not a single, accepted approach for analyzing qualitative data, as each unique study requires its own unique analysis (Creswell, 2012). Qualitative research, after all, presents “the opportunity. . . and the freedom not to be encumbered by some fixed methodology” (Yin, 2011). However, the lack of a rigid, fixed methodology does not mean a lack of guidelines. Most qualitative research follows an inductive, iterative process where data collection and analysis occurs simultaneously with well established guidelines that can help frame the researcher’s thought processes as the analysis emerges (Creswell, 2012). Yin (2011) divided qualitative data analysis into two distinct sections

comprised of five separate stages: first, compiling, disassembling, and reassembling the data; then interpreting the findings and drawing conclusions. In his view,

the first analytic phase, compiling data into a formal database, calls for the careful and methodic organizing of the original data. The second phase, disassembling the data in the database, can involve a formal coding procedure but does not need to. The third phase, reassembling, is less mechanical and benefits from a researcher's insightfulness in seeing emerging patterns. (Yin, 2011, p. 176)

The final two stages provide the opportunity "to put your findings into order, to create the right words and concepts, and to tell the world the significance of your research" (Yin, 2011, p. 205).

In phenomenological studies, data analysis methods, more appropriately referred to as explication (Groenewald, 2004), have been well established, particularly through Moustakas's (1994) work (Creswell, 2007). Creswell (2007) argued that the following represents the most practical and useful approach to investigating the meaning found in phenomenological data:

- To the greatest extent possible, the researcher sets aside personal experiences with the phenomenon of interest, which allows him or her to focus on the experience of study participants with the phenomenon (epoche).
- The researcher combs the data to create a list of discrete and unique significant statements, and assumes that each of these statements is of equal value (horizontalization).

- The researcher categorizes the significant statements into thematic groups (meaning units).
- In separate statements for each interview, the researcher describes the “what” (textural description) and “how” (structural description) of the experience the participant had with the phenomenon.
- Utilizing the textural and structural descriptions, the researcher develops a composite description that represents the “essence” of the experience for the participants.

Epoche

Prior to beginning explication of the data, the researcher engaged in a bracketing exercise in order to set aside presuppositions about the phenomenon being studied. This step is critical to the explication of the data as “phenomenology is a project of sober reflection on the lived experience of human existence--sober, in the sense that reflecting on experience must be thoughtful, and as much as possible, free from theoretical, prejudicial and suppositional intoxications” (van Manen, 2007, p. 12). This process may be difficult for researchers, and achieving a state where bias and presupposition has been completely set aside is unlikely (Creswell, 2007). However, epoche allows the researcher to approach explication from a “naïve perspective from which fuller, richer, more authentic descriptions may be rendered” (Blodgett-McDeavitt, 1997, p. 2).

Disassembling the Data

In discussing disassembly of the data, Yin (2011) noted that this process is known in the literature by a variety of other names, most commonly either fracturing or reducing. The goal of this data disassembly portion of analysis is to begin the process that will allow patterns to emerge during reassembly, which will then allow for interpretations and conclusions. In this study, disassembly consisted of horizontalization of the data, where all data were read through multiple times and analyzed for significant comments.

Reassembling the Data

Reassembling the data is the process of using the data that have been analyzed and categorized by similarities to find patterns within the data. It is a process of considering the data under a multitude of arrangements in order to begin forming assertions that address the research questions. For this study, in line with Creswell's (2007) recommendation, reassembling the data involved analyzing the horizontalized data to categorize significant statements into thematic groups.

Interpreting and Drawing Conclusions From the Data.

The goal for interpreting the data in this study was to document the themes that began to emerge as part of the reassembly process and explain them with sufficient descriptors in order to shed light on the research questions. Descriptions have been provided for readers with enough detail so that they can easily visualize the context of the study (Creswell, 2012). The stage of data interpretation is meant to be broad in scale and interpret the data from the study as a whole, rather than being narrowly focused on

interpreting specific data (Yin, 2011). Yin (2011) wrote that “the goal is to develop a comprehensive interpretation, still encompassing specific data, but whose main themes will become the basis for understanding your entire study” (p. 207).

In this study, interpreting and drawing conclusions from the data involved developing “a composite description of the phenomenon incorporating both the textural and structural descriptions. This passage is the ‘essence’ of the experience. . . that tells the reader ‘what’ the participants experienced with the phenomenon and ‘how’ they experienced it (i.e., the context)” (Creswell, 2007, p. 159). Assertions were developed to answer each research question based on the explicitation process. The assertions have been supported with thick description from the data and findings from the surveys.

Credibility of the Study

Ensuring that the design, implementation, and findings of a study stand up to rigorous academic scrutiny is a concern that looms over any research project. This section is included to address how I have designed this research project to meet those demands for high scholarly standards and have worked to ensure the trustworthiness of my data and overall credibility of the study.

In line with Cho and Trent’s (2006) recommendation to “make overt the validity approaches incorporated and why” (p. 334), this section details the explicit choices I have made to enhance the trustworthiness of the data to be collected and the overall credibility of the study. Yin (2009) discussed the act of building credibility into a research study as comprised of three objectives a researcher should strive to achieve: transparency, methodic-ness, and adherence to evidence. These objectives can be achieved when a

researcher develops and documents research procedures that allow findings to emerge that are free from bias and explicitly based on evidence (Yin, 2009). Brantlinger et al. (2005) summarized these explicit validity techniques (which they call credibility measures) for qualitative research in special education.

This study's design took into account many of the credibility measures as delineated in Brantlinger et al.'s (2005) work. Specifically, it made use of data triangulation, disconfirming evidence, researcher reflexivity, member checks, collaborative work, peer debriefing, and thick, detailed description. This study was designed and revised under advisement of a committee of qualified researchers, and approved by the committee prior to its inception. Additionally, prior to collecting data, the study was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board and the applicable school district(s). Other researchers were also involved in the study through peer debriefing. Members of my doctoral cohort were asked to review the components of the study to provide critical feedback. This peer debriefing began in the initial stages of the study's design and continued throughout the process. Every effort was made to provide thick, detailed description in the summary of results and findings. One of the goals of peer debriefing was to ensure an appropriate level of evidence was used to support findings.

First level member checks occurred for all interviews. Following transcription of interviews, I asked all interviewees to review the accuracy of their responses. No contradicting information was noted.

Additionally, as themes emerged, all collected data were re-examined, seeking evidence of data discrepant to those themes. This process was iterative throughout the data analysis.

Finally, epoche is central to the data explication process in phenomenology. Prior to beginning the data explication process, I completed a bracketing exercise which permitted the examination of knowledge, assumptions, beliefs, and values I brought to this study. Although it may not have been possible to completely set aside presuppositions, the bracketing process allowed me to examine any potential biases in the hopes of achieving a state of epoche.

Limitations

The information provided by the participants presented the greatest possible limitation. The possibility exists that the participants from the sites chosen were not the best-suited options to inform the research questions. Also, because data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews, there existed the possibility of limitations associated with that method of data collection. Yin (2009) argued that when data collection is completed through interviews, the “data will be limited to your interactions with a set of participants and their *self-reported* behavior, beliefs, and perceptions” (p. 132). Patton (2002) described the limitations of interview data as including possibly distorted responses due to personal bias, anger, anxiety, politics and simple lack of awareness since interviews can be greatly affected by the emotional state of the interviewee at the time of the interview. Interview data are

also subject to recall error, reactivity of the interviewee to the interviewer, and self-serving responses. (p. 306)

The possibility of researcher bias also exists. In line with order to ensure awareness of potential biases, the researcher completed a bracketing exercise prior to conducting the research.

Assumptions

For the purposes of this research, the researcher assumes:

1. The selection of participants allowed the researcher to study the phenomenon of interest in-depth and receive multiple perspectives which helped inform the research questions.
2. The principal's leadership of the school is intricately related to the performance of students with disabilities at that school.
3. The researcher was granted access to participants in order to conduct needed data collection.
4. Participants in the study honestly and candidly shared information reflective of their views, beliefs, and opinions.

CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative, phenomenological study was to document the experiences of school leaders who have helped their population of students with disabilities achieve high outcomes on state required testing. This chapter presents the findings of this study.

Prior to discussing the results of the data analysis for this study, researcher epoche and background information related to the participating schools and principals are presented.

Research Questions

This study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of principals in schools where students with disabilities achieve proficiency at a high level on state required testing?
2. To what do these principals attribute success of their students with disabilities on required statewide testing?
3. What strategies, if any, do these principals report using to create learning environments where students with disabilities achieve proficiency at a high level on state required testing?

Method

Descriptive statistics derived from Annual Measurable Outcome data collected by the Florida Department of Education was used to determine participants' meeting

eligibility criteria for inclusion in this study. The initial goal for the study was to limit the potential participants to one large Florida county. However, in reviewing the data, it became apparent that there were very few schools across the entire state where students with disabilities performed at this level.

There were 3,569 schools across 76 districts listed within the AMO data. When charter schools and non-title one schools were removed, 1,624 schools across 71 districts remained. A total of 84 schools were unable to assess a high enough percentage of students to be included in the study, resulting in 1,540 schools remaining. Including only majority-minority schools resulted in 1,147 schools across 51 districts. When the achievement gap for students with disabilities was factored in, 709 of the remaining schools across 45 districts showed a gap that was smaller than the state average. Proficiency rates on state required testing for the remaining schools were then analyzed.

This analysis revealed a total of 11 schools in three districts across the state that met all eligibility criteria. Of those 11 schools, eight were clustered in one very large, urban district. It was within that district that the research was focused. Of the eight schools within that district, four principals ultimately consented to participate in the study. One of those principals later chose not to participate. Thus, three principals, representing three school communities, were interviewed for this study. Information about those principals and schools is shared in Tables 1 and 2.

Epoche

Epoche is a process that allows researchers to become aware of their own biases in order to minimize the impact of researcher presuppositions on study findings.

Moustakas (1994) clarified that epoche allows the researcher to “refrain from judgment, to abstain from or stay away from the everyday, ordinary way of perceiving things” (p. 33). This process recognizes that researchers are not able to remove their experiences from their analytic lens; however, it is important that the thoughts, opinions, principles, and beliefs that arise from those experiences are recognized as part of the analysis process. For the current study, epoche began with a journaling process by which the researcher attempted to delineate those items as they related to the research topic.

For this researcher, leadership in special education represents a passion, a purpose, and almost an obsession. High outcomes for students with disabilities has been the driving goal for nearly my entire career. As an exception student education (ESE) teacher for seven years, I sought to make that a reality for my students on a daily basis. As a Resource Compliance Specialist for two years, I worked to support that reality for the students with disabilities at my schools. Currently, as a District Compliance Program Specialist, in a district where closing the achievement gap for students with disabilities is a primary goal of the superintendent, a significant portion of my daily work revolves around this topic. It is important to note also that I am currently raising a child with a specific learning disability who attends public schools. My personal investment in the topic area could result in a strong desire to find meaning where there is none, or to overemphasize the importance of the results found.

Due to that investment, I am deeply interested in policy, practices, and strategies that can be employed to increase outcomes for students with disabilities. My experiences, particularly within compliance for exceptional student education, has

provided me with the opportunity to work with parents, students, and school- and district-level administrators in a variety of situations. These opportunities provided me with communication and rapport building skills that were critical for completion of the data collection process for this study.

Participant (Principal and School) Information

This section contains information about the principals who participated in the study. Table 1 contains personal and professional demographic information about each of the three principals. Table 2 contains demographic information about the principals' schools.

Table 1

Participating Principal Demographics

Principal	Experience (in Years)	Certifications	Highest Education	Gender	Race	Ethnicity
1	6	Elementary Education, Educational Leadership, School Principal, ESOL Endorsement	Doctorate in Education	Male	Black	Non- Hispanic
2	6-7	Elementary Education, Educational Leadership, School Principal, ESOL Endorsement	Education Specialist	Female	White	Hispanic
3	3	Educational Media Specialist, Specific Learning Disabilities, Educational Leadership, ESOL Endorsement	Education Specialist	Female	White	Hispanic

Table 2

Demographics of Participating Schools

School	Title 1	Percentage Tested	Free/Reduced Lunch Rate	Minority Percentage
1	Yes	100%	86%	99%
2	Yes	100%	90%	97%
3	Yes	99%	97%	99%

Participant 1(P1) and School 1 (S1)

The first interview conducted for this study took place in December 2015.

Principal 1 is an African American male who has been principal at the school (S1) for six years. P1 has multiple graduate degrees in education, with the highest being an earned doctorate in educational leadership. He considers himself a seasoned veteran as a principal, but continues to seek his own professional growth. Before becoming an administrator, P1 was an elementary and ESOL teacher. He holds professional educator certifications in Elementary Education (Grades 1-6), Educational Leadership (All Levels), and School Principal (All Levels). He also has earned an endorsement for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL).

His school provides ESE support within general education settings and in self-contained settings, as required by students' IEPs. P1 noted that there are 18 self-contained classrooms at his school. There is a student population of 550. S1 tested 100% of its students in both reading and mathematics, has an 86% free/reduced lunch rate, and a 99% minority rate. The school as a whole, and the students with disabilities subgroup,

performed better than the state average for all students using a composite score in the required statewide reading, writing, and mathematics assessments.

P1 has a dynamic personality, bright smile, and warm manner, evidenced both in our interview and through observing him interact with the school community prior to our interview. Rapport for the interview was quickly established and the interview lasted 76 minutes.

Participant 2 (P2) and School 2 (S2)

The second interview for this study took place in December 2015. Principal 2 (P2) is a Hispanic female who has been principal at the school (S2) for six or seven years. P2 noted with uncertainty that the years “all blend together.” P2 has multiple graduate degrees in education, with the highest being an earned Education Specialist (Ed.S.) degree in Educational Leadership. Before becoming an administrator, P2 was an elementary and ESOL teacher. She holds professional educator certifications in Elementary Education (Grades 1-6), Educational Leadership (All Levels), and School Principal (All Levels). She also has earned an endorsement for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL).

Her school provides special education support in an ESE Pre-K setting, as well as within general education and self-contained K-5 settings, as required by the students’ IEPs. The school has a student population of between 500 and 600 students. S2 tested 100% of its students in both reading and mathematics, has a 90% free/reduced lunch rate, and a 97% minority rate. The school as a whole, and the students with disabilities

subgroup, performed better than the state average for all students using a composite score in the required statewide reading, writing, and mathematics assessments.

Though clearly busy on the day of the interview, P2 was warm, welcoming, and enthusiastic about sharing her school's story. Rapport was easily established, and the interview lasted 36 minutes.

Participant 3 (P3) and School 3 (S3)

The third interview for this study took place in January 2016. Principal 3 (P3) is a Hispanic female who is currently in her third year as principal at the school (S3). P3 has multiple graduate degrees in education, with the highest degree being an earned Education Specialist (Ed.S.) in Educational Leadership. She expressed interest in pursuing a doctorate in the field, indicating a desire to continue growing her professional knowledge. Before becoming an administrator, P3 was a special education teacher, curriculum support specialist, and reading coach. She holds professional educator certifications in Educational Leadership (All Levels), Educational Media Specialist (Prekindergarten – Grade 12), and Specific Learning Disabilities (Grades K-12). She also has earned an endorsement for English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL).

Her school provides ESE support within general education settings and in self-contained settings, as required by the students' IEPs. P3 noted that there are 13 self-contained classrooms at her school. There is a student population of between 300 and 350 students. S2 tested 99% of its students in both reading and mathematics, has a 97% free/reduced lunch rate, and a 99% minority rate. The school as a whole, and the students

with disabilities subgroup, performed better than the state average for all students using a composite score in the required statewide reading, writing, and mathematics assessments.

P3 was friendly and welcoming, quick to smile, and clearly passionate about her students. Rapport was established quickly, and the interview lasted 55 minutes.

Analysis of Principal Interview Data

Data Analysis for Research Question 1

What are the lived experiences of principals in schools where students with disabilities achieve proficiency at a high level on state required testing?

The lived experience of these principals was tied strongly into their own backgrounds and formed the lens through which their leadership practice was focused. Much of the lived experience of these principals revolved around creating a strong team that was capable of promoting student achievement. This strong team included school staff and external connections from which the principals sought support when needed. Despite strong teams, their lived experience is not without its challenges. Also critical to these principals' lived experience was the process of building and leveraging relationships within the school community. Principals were not isolated leaders but part of a network where all stakeholders did their part to support achievement for all students.

Leadership Perspective Formed by Background

Each of the principals involved in this study indicated that their background involved working with populations of students that have been traditionally underserved. Although the specifics of their involvement with these populations differ, each referenced that background was important in their becoming a principal that drives them to work

toward achievement for students with disabilities. This sentiment was expressed perhaps best by P3, who indicated that her being principal “at this particular school was because of the large number of ESE children, and my background knowledge and my experience with special education.”

Both P1 and P2 discussed their strong background with English Language Learners as a formative component of their leadership background. P1 discussed his time in an elementary school which was “a high poverty level school, predominately ESOL” and noted the importance of his master’s degree in urban education in preparing him to work effectively with populations of students with diverse needs. P2 commented on her “strong background in bilingual education” as a significant factor framing her leadership approach. She also noted that she has personal experience as a parent of a child with a learning disability.

P1 seemed to also draw heavily upon his background as a member of the community as critical to his work for the school. As a resident of the community from which the student population is drawn, he noted that

it’s like I’m part of them. . . . I live in the community. I see them at the grocery store. I see them at the barber shop. They see my kids. My kids go to school here. My last one goes here. My other one has already finished here. It’s kind of like, this is your home.

Interestingly, though all participants emphasized the importance of their background, only P3 had a professional background specifically related to students with disabilities. In her view, her time as an LD teacher was critical to forming her belief that

students with disabilities can achieve at a high level. In regard to her experience, she noted:

I think it's the expectation. And I was an LD teacher. Just because they have a learning disability does not mean that they cannot [achieve high levels of proficiency]. They have a regular IQ. We just need to teach them strategies to compensate for their areas of weaknesses.

For different reasons, formed by their own unique backgrounds, each principal in this study demonstrated a clear passion and commitment to improving outcomes for the students in their charge.

Passionately Supporting Growth

For these principals, working in education was not just a career. It was a passion and a calling. Their passion manifests in a clear commitment to student learning. P3 noted that passion “for seeing learning growth or learning performance” was the primary reason she is an administrator. Her expectation “is that every child here has to learn. I don't care how profound they may be.” P1, who is also a pastor in the same community as the school, equated his passion for leadership and learning with his pastoral calling: “I'd joke and say it's like pastoring one church in two locations. I pastor my church and I pastor this church [the school].” Their level of passion for promoting learning compels them to continue pushing their schools forward.

The participants in this study were not satisfied with the status quo, even though there are indicators of strong performance upon which they could rest. No matter how strong some areas of the school may be, the principals involved in this study recognized

that there are areas where improvement can occur. P2 summarized this mentality aptly while discussing her analysis of science assessment scores with teachers. She noted that the school “went up significantly to 78%. But I don’t want to be 78. I want to be 98. So who’s getting those 80s [a score showing proficiency]? Why are you getting 80s? Why am I not, too?” Her leadership emphasizes achievement for all students, analyzing when growth is not occurring as needed, and planning to ensure it does.

In order to ensure that growth occurs, there was no role that was off limits for these principals. They are in the classrooms, offices, and common areas analyzing data, planning interventions, and coaching instruction. P3 noted that a typical day starts in the cafeteria because, “I like to greet the kids, [where] we set the tone for the day.”

However, later that day, she is likely to be analyzing data with teachers for RTI, in common planning, or conducting focused walkthroughs with her leadership team. P2 described it as her job to be in classrooms. She indicated that if she is in her office, “I’m not doing my job, because if you’re [in the classroom], you’re immediately looking-- what’s working, what’s not working.”

Not only is their presence felt throughout the school, their support is provided anywhere it is needed. P1 exemplified this with an example of how he would support a struggling student:

I see a kid who’s not where you are, and they’re lost. I’ll pull that kid right [away]. I may have 102 other things to do, but this kid needs help right now and you [the teacher] can’t stop what you’re doing to meet their needs so--and I may pull that kid and work with them.

P2 and P3 confirmed that similar scenarios play out in their schools. In P2's view of leadership, "You don't only have to be in the classrooms, you have to be in the groups of the intervention." P3 is "very involved in the sense of [going] into the classrooms. . . [if] they're doing DI [Differentiated Instruction], I'll sit with a group and help them out. It's hands on."

Though each of the principals did note the importance of being in classrooms where the learning is occurring, they also realized that a significant portion of their job is supporting their staff. This support may come in the form of instructional coaching or simply emotional encouragement. Towards the former, the interviews were replete with examples of the principals coaching their leadership teams and teachers through common planning, analyzing assessment data, and facilitating professional development. A typical example was shared by P1:

I send out a sheet to the teachers, it's a data chat sheet. And then ask them: who are your top scores? Who are your lower scores? What are the benchmarks your class scored the highest in? What are the benchmarks your class scored the lowest in? Then, how are you grouping your kids differently based on the data? And we bring them in one by one. We create a schedule. One by one they come in. It's me, my assistant principal, my program specialist for special education, my two reading coaches, and the math coach. We sit, and you talk to us.

Towards the latter, P2 shared a story about an enthusiastic second year general education teacher overwhelmed by her inclusion classes. This principal's compassion for her staff came through as she concluded that the appropriate leadership action in that situation is

“to give them a lot of love and support for them to feel, “Okay, I’m doing it, I’m making a difference.” For these principals, supporting their teams was an essential component of being a successful leader.

We’re All in This Together

It was important to the principals in this study that their staff knew they were supported. Staff are able to come to these principals with concerns or when they need assistance. One of P1’s first tasks as a principal was developing that trust that comes from knowing support will be available when needed. He noted, “It was building a trust with the staff and getting them to see that. . . “This is not an ‘I’m going to get you’ type principal. I’m here to provide you support. How can I help you? That’s what I’m here to do.”

However, support flows both ways in these schools: the principals supported their teams, but the teams also supported the schools’ abilities to foster high achievement. Support also came from other leaders within the principals’ professional networks. Looking beyond leadership, there is also the strong mentality that the schools belong to the community. The principals welcomed and sought the involvement of parents and other community stakeholders.

Leadership in these schools was clearly distributed among a team of professionals. Though the principals recognized that they are ultimately responsible for ensuring outcomes, the hard work of making that happen falls on a variety of staff members. The teams in place in these schools share a vision that promotes achievement for all students. P1 discussed his team as “hav[ing] the same passion for it [as he does].

They have the same passion for the kids. And so, when you have someone who has a like passion, you're an inseparable team, you work well together." He further noted that his "leadership team as a whole is vitally important in making things function. . . . I say to them sometimes, 'This place could work without me because y'all make it happen.' They honestly make it happen. They do what needs to be done." P3 also noted that "Everybody in your team has to have that same vision. . . . and when we do--when our scores go up, great job."

All three of the principals recognized that there are times when working in a demanding position such as theirs requires the support of others. Each recognized the importance of developing relationships with colleagues as a means to assist them in their role of supporting teachers and students. In explaining where she draws support outside her team, P2 stated: "It's very important to network, to have a good. . . group of principals, and I always try to look for the ones that have more experience than I do." Similarly, though comfortable with his skills as a principal, P1 indicated he still finds himself in situations where he draws upon the experience of other principals:

I do have other principals who are friends and colleagues who if I have questions I can go to. . . I've made sure I've created myself a network so if I have certain things that I do not know, I'll just call up [other principals] and say, "Hey, y'all had this issue before, what do you do?" And they can give me the answers.

P3 discussed developing networks in terms of a more formal learning experience with other principals, where the principals would meet monthly in a different school within the district, to discuss school performance. About this experience, she shared:

One month we focused on classroom and the learning environment. Another month we focused on planning. So we would look at the plans and how they were. Another month was delivery of plans. So every month we looked at something different and we went to different schools. It's great when you go out to different schools, you're like, "Oh wow, I love how they're doing this. I could bring that in here, and maybe give it a turn."

In terms of developing a school community that promoted high achievement for all students, including those with disabilities, the analysis also revealed that community stakeholders, including parents, played a critical role for these principals. Whether it was cooking classes for parents and students to attend together outside of school hours, beautifying the campus to make parents and students feel welcome, allowing parents to come in for unscheduled meetings whenever needed, or holding sessions to teach parents how to help their students with homework, the principals at these schools actively promote an environment and staff, students, and parents are cared for and belong. The following story shared by P1 explains the impact this approach has on parents:

The dad says to me--he starts crying. I'm like, "Okay [chuckles]." I'm thinking, "What I'd done did this grown man is crying?" And he's crying, so I just like, "What's up? What's going on?" And he starts crying. He says, "Because I've never been to a school where the teachers care. These people really care about my kids. Every school they've been to the teachers don't care whether they do stuff."

P3 summarized this theme the most succinctly: “It’s about a team. We’re all in this together.”

Data Analysis for Research Question 2

To what do these principals attribute success of their students with disabilities on required statewide testing?

Data analysis for the second research question in this study revealed that the principals in these schools attribute their success to holding and supporting high expectations for all. They approach leadership from an integrated approach and are directly involved in classrooms.

Holding and Supporting High Expectations

For these principals, success happens because there is no other choice. No one is exempt from high expectations. Expectations for teaching and learning are the same for all students. It is expected that, like all other students at the school, students with disabilities will perform to high levels. Equally, expectations for planning and instructional delivery are the same for all students. It was very clear in the interviews that everyone in the school is held to high expectations.

P1 notes that expecting high achievement for all students is “not only a paradigm shift for the student, it’s a paradigm shift for the teacher. The teacher has to think differently, to teach differently.” In discussing high expectations, it was clear that the principal’s expectations centered on the teachers. P2 articulated this straightforwardly: “You have to have high expectations and the teachers have to know it.” Regardless of

the functioning level of the students they teach, these principals expected that all students be taught to regular standards. P1 discussed how the staff at his school pushes “our students who are self-contained into an inclusion model. So, we'll start them. . . and then as it goes we see, okay that subject [is going well], let's try it now with two subjects. We kind of keep going like that until we get them fully back included in the regular class.”

Regarding expectations for students with disabilities, P1 noted that they are not different. In discussing why that was the case, he noted, “Just because they’re on FAA [Alternate Assessment] today doesn’t mean they’re going to FAA tomorrow.” Therefore, he ensures that teachers in those settings “teach as close to the standard curriculum as possible.” In line with this, he noted that all students, even in self-contained classrooms, must be able to access the general curriculum. Similarly, P3 discussed the importance of all teachers, including those for special education students in self-contained classrooms (who are frequently taught to modified standards known as Access Points), embracing school wide initiatives. Specifically, she discussed common planning, curriculum pacing, and instructional methodology. P3 noted that the ESE teacher was “in common planning, and they do the exact questions.” Additionally, in regard to curriculum pacing, she noted that pacing for special education classes “coincides with the same time that their classmates are taking reading. And they’re usually in the same story, or the same chapter. . . resource teachers plan with our general [education] teachers.” Additionally, she discussed implementing the gradual release of responsibility model as an instructional expectation within self-contained classes because “they could definitely do it.”

Ultimately, those high expectations are carried through to the students. P1 explained this clearly, noting about his elementary age students

These kids are taking annotated notes. I'm like, I was doing that in college and high school not in elementary. Now, they read with pencil in hand. Are you serious? So as they're reading, they're taking side notes to answer the question at the end of the week. That's college, this is--and so that's a great challenge because the kids are not accustomed to thinking that way.

He further elaborated:

My second graders now they do interactive journals which is a third grade skill. They do annotated notes because my reading coach is making sure although they're second graders we're treating them like they're third graders. When they get to third grade, the skill is already there.

When asked if that same rigor carried over to students with disabilities, P3 was clear: "It's the expectation. . . . They have a regular IQ." She was adamant that "Every child here has to learn. . . .every child has to be taught." She elaborated that "I do not believe in a special [education] class being a babysitting job, or it's just watch videos, or keep them busy, no. We have to have instruction and meaningful instruction." P2 was equally straightforward: "I don't take a no--I have high expectations, and I hold [the students] to that. Realistic, but high." She compared the work students in special education complete to the work general education students complete, indicating that the work "look[s] very similar to a regular [education] child. We're doing the same thing."

Integrated Approach to Leadership

Each of the principals involved in this study advocated an integrated approach to leading their schools. That is, students were not divided and planned for based on their demographics. Although achievement for students with disabilities was important to these principals, they did not consider it separately from the achievement of all students within the school. Their leadership was not specific to students with disabilities. It was not focused on ESE but was focused on what works for all students. Students with disabilities were considered students first. It is important to note that this mindset was not used to remove the supports that those students might need but to ensure that they were a full part of the school community.

Primary in the ways this leadership style plays out in these schools was in the principal's approach towards teachers. Regardless of whether it was a special education teacher or a general education teacher, P3 noted that, "I treat the teachers just the same way. . . . [based on student data,] where is it that we need to move the kids? So no, I do not treat them any differently." She emphasized that special education "teachers are held accountable the same way my regular teachers are."

This approach to leadership was also seen in the approach the principals took toward students with disabilities. They indicated that students with disabilities were fully involved in the culture and academic life of the school. P3 discussed this involvement in reference to school outside of the classroom: "My special [education] kids are treated just like my general [education] kids. They participate in my assemblies. They eat in the cafeteria with my kids. They get [PBS coupons]." However, she also discussed it in

terms of what it means for instruction. As with assemblies, social interactions, and behavior programs, “Every single child in this school receives intervention, regardless if you’re high, mid, or low functioning.” These interventions are based on student need as identified in formative assessments.

After noting that “IEP goals must be met,” P1 also clarified that working toward IEP goals did not absolve students from also working toward grade level standards. P2 talked about the individual planning for students with disabilities that occurs in IEP committees almost as analogous to the planning process that occurs for every student at the school: “Of course, we analyze the data specifically for every child, and they have their IEPs and so forth, but I think. . . if you have a good plan in place, it’s going to work for all of them.” Equally, P3 discussed the importance of individual planning for students through the DI process that includes students with disabilities rather than making planning for their instruction a separate process. She discussed addressing IEP goals “in DI time, because they [students with disabilities] do DI. And that’s when we address their goals, during DI time. We work on their needs during that time.”

Overall, across their approach to leadership, it was clear that these principals did not have a distinct set of leadership lenses from which they viewed their students with disabilities. P2 clarified this approach this way: “To me, a kid is a kid. I don’t have a different approach. . . good teaching is good teaching, good planning is good planning, and once you have that, it goes. It flows.” This sentiment could easily be modified. Good leadership is good leadership.

Involved in Classrooms

All of the principals involved in this study very clearly saw their job centering on the interactions occurring in the classrooms. P2 was unable to conceive of a successful principalship without time spent in classrooms. She noted that “I don’t know how anyone else does it without being out there [in classrooms]. When I’m here [in my office], I feel I’m not doing my job, because if you’re there [in classrooms], you’re immediately looking--what’s working, what’s not working with solving problems, issues.” P1 corroborated this view on the importance of being in classrooms to remain an effective principal. He described other principals who are not often involved in classrooms as “aloof to what’s going on. When they’re talking about, ‘Well, why these scores aren’t moving?’ They didn’t have no clue what the teachers are responsible to do.” P3 discussed often spending “morning[s] where the four of us [on the leadership team] go in, and we look at certain rooms, and. . . discuss what did we see. . . . We kind of tier our teachers, and then we talk about where we’re going to focus our support with them.”

That support includes direct work with students. It was important to each of these principals to remain directly involved in the instructional life of students. P2 described herself as a “very hands-on principal.” P3 also discussed the “hands on” nature of her leadership: “My teachers could tell you I’m very involved in the sense of we go into the classrooms. I talk with the kids. I’m in there, they’re doing DI [Differentiated Instruction], I’ll sit with a group and help them out.” She believes that her involvement in the classroom setting is motivating for students. When asked about how her leadership has promoted strong results for students with disabilities, she noted classroom

interactions, ensuring students know that school is a safe haven, and providing resources to support classrooms. She reported:

I think that's the bottom line to my leadership. I don't care. You could see my desk, my desk is missing all these handles. I don't care about none of that. I prefer using my money to hire intervention; it is to hire hourly people to give the support where we need it.

P1 also discussed his classroom involvement as a motivational factor for teachers and referenced it as his "leading by example." According to him, being involved in classrooms "helps my teachers to understand, because they say, 'Well, if the principal can do it, come on. If the principal can. . . .'" He shared an example of a strategy he has employed with students to discern that they have truly understood a concept:

I purposely raised my hand on the wrong answer to see what they were going to do. And the kids were like, "[You're] wrong. Where did you get that answer from?" "Well, how am I wrong? Prove to me I'm wrong. Don't tell me I'm wrong. Why am I wrong?" Because it's one thing for you to say you know the answer, but if you can explain to me why this is not the answer, then you really know the answer.

P2 also discussed the imperative of her working with students in intervention groups. She recognized the importance of being in classrooms as more than an observer, indicating "so you don't only have to be in the classrooms, you have to be in the groups of the intervention." P1 also described being directly involved in the instruction within

her school: “I’m going to go in the room and I’m going to help you do a small group if we have to.”

For these principals, success happens because they have been an active part of their students’ instructional lives. They are seen not as “aloof” leaders, staying in their office, but as “hands on” principals invested in the learning occurring in their schools. P2 put it simply: “I’m always out there, I try to be as much as I can in the classrooms.”

Data Analysis for Research Question 3:

What strategies, if any, do these principals report using to create learning environments where students with disabilities achieve proficiency at a high level on state required testing?

Collaboration

Each of the principals interviewed noted the importance of collaboration as a strategy for improving outcomes for students with disabilities. Although the specifics of collaboration varied from school to school, each principal indicated that its occurrence, in some form, was critical in the performance of their schools. P1 discussed collaboration as the “component that is helping us [achieve results for students with disabilities]--or hopefully will help us sustain [achievement]--is the fact that my teachers work collaboratively.”

Both P2 and P3 discussed the use of common planning as a form of structured opportunities for collaboration. P2 discussed the practice as being “very regimented” because there is “so much to cover that if we don’t work as a team, and if we don’t help

each other, it's not going to work.” P3 took a different, more flexible approach to common planning. She noted that her common planning groups were not static and “have to be fluid” based on student performance and need at the time.

The principals also discussed collaboration in terms of a supporting mechanism for teachers to accomplish their duties. In this vein, P3 discussed collaboration in terms of Response to Intervention (RTI). She noted that starting from the beginning of the year, teachers have support navigating the RTI process and removing the barriers that might otherwise prevent teachers from supporting students. Similarly, P2 discussed this collaborative support in terms of analyzing classroom data. She discussed the importance of having multiple stakeholders collaborate to determine the supports her students with disabilities need and monitor those supports for effectiveness: “I bring the entire team of every grade level. Every grade level, I have my ESOL teacher there, and I have my SPED teachers there. . . . We are constantly looking at data and making adjustments as needed.”

Planning for Outcomes

Equal to the need for collaboration, each principal also discussed how student success at their schools was intentional. Though the specifics of how their planning occurred differed by the context of their school environments, each of these principals built an environment at the schools in which planning for student outcomes was proactive. P1 discussed the effective use of resources in order to ensure needed supports were in place and the development of data systems that allowed teachers to adjust their instruction to meet student needs. P2 talked about the importance of data analysis and

ongoing professional development to keep teachers current in their practice. P3 discussed the logistics of school-wide differentiated instruction (DI) time in order to provide all students with the supports and remediation they need to master standards.

P1 talked about the effective use of resources and how critical it is for him to allocate his resources in a manner that is most advantageous for his school and students. He noted that he is “able to have--not provided by the district--somehow I’m able to schedule, I have a reading coach--two reading coaches, a math coach and a science person, because I just make people’s schedules and make it happen.” He discussed rearranging his teachers’ schedules to ensure he had an ESE teacher for reading and one for mathematics, and that they were not only to work with ESE students. In this arrangement,

The VE teacher doesn’t pull the kids out of the classroom, the resource teacher goes in the classroom. And so what the resource teacher does is pull those kids who are on their schedule to them at a table in the same classroom, but at the same time they pull some additional kids who may not be ESE but they’re low. So we hit both targets.

His emphasis was on adding additional instructional support wherever possible. In part of the interview, he discussed reallocation of his librarian position into a position with instructional duties. P1 characterized “what we’ve been doing” as “finding resources where there are none.”

For P1, part of effectively using his resources was ensuring that students have access to a wide variety of tools to help them succeed. He provided examples of this

effective use in the number of tutoring opportunities available at the school (during and after school), aftercare programs, and opportunities to be involved in clubs. He framed the need for this approach well in discussing changes he made to the breakfast program:

Our breakfast used to be over at, under the old principal, at 8:00. I extended breakfast to 8:30 because some of these kids, if I don't provide it, they're not going to get it. We have kids who come after that and we still got to call, "I know, I know, I know, I told you 8:30, but come on I need you to feed this child for me." You become the everything.

As a result, P1 noted, "We have a million things going on at this school."

P1 also discussed developing systems that allow teachers and the school's leadership to measure student progress and performance and make adjustments to the instruction as necessary. He uses a system called "growth monitoring" for his students in the bottom quartile and ensures "data chats" happen for all students. He described the system as follows:

Every three weeks those kids [in the bottom quartile] have to go on the computer to take the growth monitoring component. . . . That's one way we monitor those kids who we know--targeted kids. Then also, through our tutoring, we tutor our lowest 25%. The kids that didn't do well on the diagnostic, we chose those kids for tutoring. Every three weeks in tutoring they have an assessment that the teachers have to scan, give me a copy, so we know in the reports how those kids are doing, whether they're moving. Then we also have data chats. Every so many

weeks we have a data chat with the teachers. The teachers are required to have data chats with the students.

Similarly, P2 discussed the importance of ensuring the effective use of data to drive instruction. She noted that they “analyze the data specifically for every child.” Further, the use of common planning centered around that data analysis was emphasized as critical. She noted “I think planning, and now especially with a common core, is critical. Here at [my school] we have common planning that is very regimented.” As principal, she is also vested in using data with her teachers. She described reviewing data with her teachers:

I look at the scores and immediately, for example, in science, we used to be low, now we're, we went up significantly to 78%. But I, look; I don't want to be at 78. I want to be at 98. So who's getting those 80s? Why are you getting 80s? Why am I not, too? That kind of thing.

P2 recognized that it is important for teachers to have the skills needed to be effective. She promotes professional development for her teachers, “a lot of professional development, as much as I can. . . I take them. I believe in training. People have to be up to date. They cannot stay behind.” P3 also has provided her teachers with professional development, but has focused on ensuring that the time spent learning makes an impact in the classroom. She speaks of the “training that my coaches had and bringing it back [to the school]. Because they could go to training, but if we don't bring it back and show and help the teachers, that's one thing that differentiates.” She also talked about using her coaches to support teachers during Differentiated Instruction (DI) periods:

For example, my fourth grade teacher, because when we looked at their data, they were so low. My coach would go in there during those 30 minutes of DI. So then she does a group, the teacher does a group, and then that high functioning group could be doing independent on i-Ready.”

For P3, the guiding framework behind her push for school wide DI has been “Every child here has to learn. . . . Every child has to be taught.” As a school, P3 noted the presence of “infused intervention here for everyone.” Each student receives . . . daily intervention. When I was in extended school, I had to do intervention because the state mandated for an hour. When I got off that list, I continued that model for at least 30 minutes. So every single child in this school receives intervention, regardless if you’re high, mid, or low functioning, for 30 minutes.

Specifics for interventions are determined

when we do our common planning for DI. . . we look at the overall strand. . . .

This is the weakest strand. So I’m going to reteach this strand doing differentiated instruction. But how am I going to group the kids? It’s going to be based on their individual scores. So then, that forces that those groups have to be fluid. . . .

She continued by describing how the make-up of the intervention groups change based on analysis of student achievement on the formative assessments for each strand:

[Students] are grouped [for interventions] based on how they did. Now let’s say the next week we’re going to address the next lowest strand. But you may be on [last week’s] strand got a 66[%] versus on this [week’s] got a zero, so you’re

going to be with a different group of kids [for intervention] because you're almost mastering [this strand].

P3 reported that she asks questions of her teachers based on student assessment results: "Where do we need to work. . . and where is it that we need to move the kids?" Having those conversations consistently with her teachers has helped them "have a better understanding of. . . more effectively looking at the data." Teachers use that data to drive differentiated instruction and to assign additional tutoring. P3 discussed one example:

We have one child in fifth grade this year, [who has a learning disability]. She's already back all day in the regular ed class. The teachers have highlighted her for all the tutoring possible because they see that she could give it to us. For example, she'll come to morning tutoring for science. The math teacher goes, "I'm gonna take her a few extra times during the week. . . ."

The specifics of each principal's planning for student success differed based on their approach to leadership and the context of the school they led. However, each of these principals clearly articulated strategies they have used successfully to ensure that planning takes place to ensure each student's success.

Survey Data

This study's methods were designed to use interview data collected from the participating principals as the primary source for answering the research questions. However, it was also intended to use ancillary data gathered from surveys completed by regular education and special education teachers at each participating school. This

additional data was not intended to independently answer the research questions, but was to be used as confirmation of the findings that emerged from the principals' interviews.

Surveys were discussed with the principals, and they were all willing to allow their teachers to participate. A survey was created using Qualtrics, a web-based survey research platform. The link was shared via email with the principals, who forwarded it to their teachers. Follow up emails were sent and phone calls were made. Finally, a set of flyers were provided to each school asking teachers to participate in the survey.

Unfortunately, there were no survey responses. Accordingly, survey data were not available to use to confirm the findings previously reported in this chapter.

Summary

This study's purpose was to document the experiences of school leaders who were helping their population of students with disabilities achieve high outcomes on state required testing. The Florida Department of Education's Annual Measurable Outcome data and Continuous Improvement Management System (CIMS) data were used to determine schools where students with disabilities were performing at a higher than expected level. Of the 3,569 schools from across the state of Florida included within the AMO data, 11 schools in three districts met the criteria for inclusion. Three of those principals were interviewed for this study.

This chapter provided background information on the participating schools. The findings relative to the research questions from analysis of study data were reported, and themes that emerged for each research question were presented. Results revealed eight

themes in response to the research questions. In response to the first research question, which sought to describe the principals lived experiences, the themes included:

1. Leadership perspective formed by background;
2. Passionately supporting student growth;
3. We're all in this together.

In response to the second research question, which asked to what these principals attributed their success with students with disabilities, these themes emerged:

4. Holding and supporting high expectations;
5. Integrated approach to leadership;
6. Involved in classrooms.

The third research question sought to determine strategies that the principals used to create learning environments where students with disabilities could thrive. Themes that emerged for this question included:

7. Collaboration;
8. Planning for outcomes.

Chapter 5 contains a restatement of the problem and purpose of the study, and a synopsis of the research. Also presented are a summary of the findings, a discussion of the themes, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 5 SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

Introduction

The findings of the present study were presented in chapter 4. This chapter contains a restatement of the problem, significance, and purpose of the study followed by a discussion of the findings, implications of the findings, and suggestions for future research.

Statement of the Problem

The focus of special education has changed from issues of access and compliance to issues of quality (Brownell et al., 2010; OSEP, 2012; OSERS, 2012). In line with these changes, at the time of the present study, an increasing percentage of students with disabilities were being educated in the regular class setting where they were being taught alongside and expected to perform as well as their non-disabled peers (McLeskey et al., 2011).

Despite these changes, achievement gaps have persisted (Albus & Thurlow, 2013). Within the state of Florida, where this study was conducted, students with disabilities have typically failed to demonstrate proficiency of state standards as measured by required statewide assessments. Across all assessments reported in the relevant data for the past four years, proficiency rates for students with disabilities ranged from 28% to 35% proficient statewide (FDOE, 2014). These data also have shown dramatic variation in the scores for students with disabilities: in each assessment, some schools have shown as few as 5% of students demonstrating proficiency whereas some

schools have shown universal proficiency. Given the variation, it is apparent that some schools have succeeded remarkably compared to others in educating students with disabilities. Less apparent, and the subject of considerable discussion is the entire dialogue surrounding school reform, are the reasons behind one school's success and another school's failure.

The role of leadership is central to this discussion. An emphasis has been placed on the quality of school leadership in relation to ensuring educational outcomes for students (Harris & Lambert, 2003). Extraordinary leadership, according to Hehir and Katzman (2012), is the primary factor in building and supporting successful schools. Harris and Lambert (2003) also declared leadership central to that task:

. . . leadership features predominantly as a means to generating and mobilizing change across systems and within schools. There is a general expectation and a strong consensus about the potential of school leaders to contribute to improved educational performance and achievement. The research findings from diverse countries draw very similar conclusions about the centrality of leadership in school improvement. Schools that are improving have leaders who make a significant and measurable contribution to the development of the school and the teachers. (p. 2)

Lynch (2012) seemingly confirmed this centrality, noting that "First-class leadership is essential to make a genuine, positive difference for all students" (p. 110). The leadership of a school, particularly that of the principal, is deterministic of that school's level of success (Stephens, 2010). Within the context of results-driven accountability pushing for

change in special education, noting the importance of leadership in promoting positive results for student outcomes, and being cognizant of some schools having achieved high levels of performance, it was prudent to examine the experience of leaders who have made that possible.

Significance of the Study

A call for the field of special education “to find new and better ways of supporting students with a full range of disabilities in inclusive classrooms” (Giangreco, 2010, pp. 9-10) echoed the policy shifts underway at the Office of Special Education Programs at the beginning of the 21st century. Given the efforts underway to move special education to an institution focused on quality, and being aware of the critical role school leadership holds in school improvement, it is prudent to examine the experience of school leaders where students with disabilities are performing at high levels.

Recognizing the importance of leadership, Hehir and Katzman (2012) highlighted some of the practices of effective inclusive schools in providing support for students with disabilities. The current study was conducted to continue that work from a slightly different approach. In their recent study of principal preparation, Darling-Hammond et al. (2010) referred to the ability to “vividly illustrate what such leadership looks like. . . a pressing concern that has grown in importance as researchers, policymakers, and practitioners have increasingly recognized the role of school leaders in developing high-performing schools and closing the achievement gap” (p. 4). Therefore, where Hehir and Katzman (2012) were concerned with the leadership that led to effective inclusive practice and schools that were models for inclusive practice for all students, the current

study was concerned with leadership that has led to extraordinary outcomes for students with disabilities.

In light of evidence that achievement gaps for students with disabilities have been stagnant for the past several years (Albus & Thurlow, 2013), and despite policy shifts designed to decrease those gaps, one wonders how some schools have built high performing systems. In recognition of that concern and aligned with Fullan's (2011) argument "that most good ideas come from first examining good practices of others, especially practices that are getting results in difficult circumstances" (p. 5), the researcher in the present study sought to clearly understand and document the experience of school administrators who were getting results in the difficult circumstances where many other administrators have not yet been able to do so. Fullan (2011) continued his argument for effective change leadership being grounded in the best practices occurring in the present, arguing that those leaders "don't start with imagining the future. They walk into the future through examining their own and others' best practices, looking for insights they had hitherto not noticed" (p. 11). Completing this study will provide some of that insight for educators and educational leaders working on behalf of students with disabilities as to "new and better ways" that might be found in the experiences of these leaders.

Purpose of Study

Stagnant outcomes for students with disabilities has resulted in an era where results-driven accountability is emerging as the driving force for special education leadership. As such, it has become critical to examine the experience of those who have

successfully helped their schools produce high levels of achievement among students with disabilities. The purpose of the study was to document the lived experiences of school leaders who are helping their population of students with disabilities achieve high outcomes on state required testing.

Research Questions

This study explored the following research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of principals in schools where students with disabilities achieve proficiency at a high level on state required testing?
2. To what do these principals attribute success of their students with disabilities on required statewide testing?
3. What strategies, if any, do these principals report using to create learning environments where students with disabilities achieve proficiency at a high level on state required testing?

Summary of Findings

To address the research questions, the researcher used data from the Florida Department of Education's Annual Measurable Outcome Data and Continuous Improvement Management System (CIMS) to determine schools where students with disabilities were performing at a higher than expected level. Principals from three such schools were interviewed for this study. Results revealed eight themes in response to the research questions. In response to the first research question, which sought to describe the principals' lived experiences, the themes included:

1. Leadership perspective formed by background: each of the principals included in this study had a background working with traditionally underserved students.
2. Passionately supporting student growth: each of the principals involved in this study showed a clear commitment to student learning and growth, for all of their students.
3. “We’re all in this together” was a quote from one of the principals that seemed to exemplify their collective approach to leadership. Their schools provided a supportive environment where all involved are free to work toward meeting high expectations.

In response to the second research question, which asked the principals to what they attributed their success with students with disabilities, three themes emerged:

1. Holding and supporting high expectations: No one involved with these schools was exempt from meeting high expectations. All teachers and students at the schools were expected to perform at high levels.
2. Integrated approach to leadership: As there were no distinctions made in expectation levels based on a student’s demography, so, too, there were no distinctions made in the principals’ approach to their schools’ leadership based on student demography.
3. Involved in classrooms: For these principals, the school centered on the learning within the classroom. Accordingly, each of these principals believed

it to be imperative to be in classrooms, guiding and improving instruction.

The principals also took a direct role in student instruction when needed.

The third research question sought to determine strategies that the principals used to create learning environments where students with disabilities could thrive. Themes that emerged for this question included:

1. Collaboration: Although the specifics of collaboration varied from school to school, all principals indicated that its occurrence, in some form, was critical in the performance of their school.
2. Planning for outcomes: each of these principals built an environment at the schools in which planning for student outcomes was proactive.

Discussion of Findings

Research Question 1

What are the lived experiences of principals in schools where students with disabilities achieve proficiency at a high level on state required testing?

Findings suggested that the lived experience of the principals interviewed for this research was deeply tied to their background working with traditionally underserved populations. The essence of such a principalship centers on bringing together a team of similarly passionate people who all work together to support the achievement of all students. This finding directly aligns with Boscardin's (2004) view that student achievement is at the core of the principalship.

Though the backgrounds of the principals in this study were significantly varied, all led these principals to a place where student diversity mattered to them. Their experiences helped make them keenly aware of the extended needs of students who do not fit into the “typical” box. This background did not make the principals set aside high expectations for diverse learners or approach their education from a different mindset. However, it did make them passionate about supporting student growth for all learners. These principals, while rare, were not unique in supporting all students. As Hehir & Katzman (2012) determined, some schools have found ways to provide effective instruction to all students. It seemed, in interviewing these principals, that student learning was a given. As much as heat happens because that is the nature of fire, learning growth happens because that is the nature of education in these schools. As might be expected given the selection procedures for study participants, student learning growth and outcomes were paramount for these principals. This finding is aligned with the previous work of numerous researchers: Lynch (2012), who argued for the importance of principal oversight of student academic achievement; Waters et al. (2004), who explored the positive impact leadership has on student performance; and Thurlow et al. (2012), who discussed the principal’s priority as increasing student outcomes.

It is also important to note the distributed approach to the leadership of the principals in this study. The perception of stronger distributed leadership has been associated with stronger academic capacity of schools (Heck & Hallinger, 2009). Shared ownership of responsibility for ensuring outcomes was evident in each school. This shared ownership was identified as one of the key leadership practices relating to

improved learning in schools (Louis et al., 2010). As those authors observed, “When principals and teachers share leadership, teachers’ working relationships are stronger and student achievement is higher” (Louis et al., 2010, p. 37). The responsibility for the performance of students with disabilities was not relegated to the school’s ESE department and was not left to fall on an ESE teacher. That responsibility also fell on the shoulders of the leadership of the school and the students themselves. The strong sense that the principals held of community and shared responsibility seemed to help teachers feel supported to push high expectations for the students in their care. The principals in this study defined their experience as drawing heavily on their background to support their school community, as the entire school community worked together to support student achievement.

Research Question 2

To what do these principals attribute success of their students with disabilities on required statewide testing?

The principals in this study attributed their students’ successes to holding high expectations for staff and students alike, supporting those expectations directly in the classrooms, and approaching the responsibilities of leadership from an integrated approach. That the principals held high expectations for the school population was not surprising. Previous researchers have written of the positive relationship between expectations and achievement (e.g., Hattie, 2008; Javius, 2016; Payzant, 2011; Thurlow et al., 2012). The extent to which the principals reported working with support staff and students to reach high expectations was somewhat more surprising. In my experience, it

is not common to see principals directly engage in instruction and instructional leadership within the classroom setting. Therefore, it was interesting to note that these principals all believed that their work directly in the classrooms of their schools was a critical component to their schools' successes. Instructional leadership, particularly from the principal, has been identified as a critical component of successful schools (Day et al., 2016; Robinson et al., 2008). Robinson et al. (2008) discussed the type of leadership "that is most strongly associated with positive student outcomes is that of promoting and participating in teacher learning and development" (p. 667). This leadership (i.e., being in the classrooms improving classroom instruction) exemplifies Honig's (2012) definition of instructional leadership.

Also interesting was the lack of differentiation between the expectations held for regular education students and students with disabilities. In an area where a persistent achievement gap has systematically lowered expectations for students with disabilities, it was refreshing to discuss achievement with principals who believed in the possibility of students with disabilities achieving at a comparable level to their non-disabled peers. Such an environment aligns with Payzant's (2011) recommendation to close the achievement gap by approaching achievement from a whole-school approach. This non-differentiation in expectations was representative of the interviewed principals' approach to leadership.

The principals in this study did not view leadership for special education as a distinct process from leadership for their school as a whole. Rather, they sought to lead in ways that supported all students from the outset. Such an approach is analogous to the

instructional principals enmeshed in Universal Design for Learning (see, for example, Meyer et al., 2014), where the instructional needs for all students are addressed in the curriculum development and instructional planning processes. It is also analogous to a discussion on changes within the educational field within the context of the complexities of co-teaching (Friend et al., 2010). In that discussion, the authors noted:

The profound transition currently occurring in education, that is, the blurring of traditional boundaries that separated students who experience significant difficulty in learning from their peers and the recognition that two systems—general education and special education—may not work in the best interests of maximizing student achievement and other outcomes. (p. 23)

With the blurring of instructional boundaries between general education and special education, and the proactive planning for the “variability of learners” (Meyer et al., 2014, p. 29) prior to instruction, it stands to reason that, so too, would an approach distinguishing leadership for special education from leadership for general education would wither.

However, perhaps because so much of my professional life has been focused on specializing in leadership for special education, it was jarring to have a finding that said, at least in terms of the metrics set by this study, that successful principals in special education did not focus specifically on leadership for special education. These findings would suggest that there is simply a leader at the school, not a “special education leader.” On its face, this finding would seem to contradict LeNeveu’s (2014) who found principals to be a critical part of the special education team.

This finding would also seemingly give cause to reconsider the accuracy of Crockett's (2007) key questions for administrators as to how they support successful learning for students with disabilities. It is important to note, however, that in an environment where high achievement is far from the norm for students with disabilities, the questions that Crockett posed continue to be critical. It appears that, at least in the case of the present study's participants, distinctions between general and special education played a minimal role in the principal's leadership. Yet, until wide scale solutions to ensure high achievement for students with disabilities are found, Crockett's question remains germane. Indeed, this study set out to answer this exact question.

Additionally, I have deliberated as to whether to consider the findings in this study as evidence that there was no "special education leader" at the school versus there was no "general education leader" at the school. To clarify, it seems that leadership decisions impacting every student at these schools have been made with the individual care and consideration typically reserved for the planning for special education students. This integrated approach to leadership found in the study does not dismiss or minimize the needs of students with disabilities; it elevates the needs of all students to that level. In light of that, as LeNeveu (2014) found, I would confirm the importance of the principal in planning for outcomes for students with disabilities. I would also extend it, however, and clarify that there is nothing separate about the leadership process relative to outcomes for students with disabilities than there is relative to outcomes for all students.

Research Question 3

What strategies, if any, do these principals report using to create learning environments where students with disabilities achieve proficiency at a high level on state required testing?

The principals and schools in the present study intentionally planned for student outcomes and utilized collaborative practices to ensure those outcomes were reached. Collaborative planning “has not occurred spontaneously or naturally within most schools” (Thousand et al., 2006, p. 246). It is the result of a concerted, supportive effort to ensure that it occurs. By creating environments where intentional planning for student outcomes was expected, and in being part of those planning processes, the principals were taking direct responsibility for students’ academic performance. Javius (2016) discussed that “instructional planning is key. . . . Efficacious teachers of all students. . . know the importance of planning” (p. 39). Adoption of professional learning communities (PLCs), when implemented correctly as described by DuFour (2004), provides a means by which to ensure that planning for outcomes occurs. Under that model, as in the principals’ mindsets in the current study, learning is a non-negotiable. The initial assumption is that all students will learn and achieve at high levels. Whether they used that name or not, the principals in this study all worked through a similar process with their staff to ensure that appropriate proactive planning took place for all of the students at their school. In so doing, they were fulfilling one of the primary roles Lynch (2012) delineated for effective principals: instructional leadership for all students.

Being a school principal means being called to simultaneously respond to many conflicting priorities. Other than school safety, none is more important than instructional leadership. In that view, I tend to agree with P2, who was unable to conceive of a successful principalship without being in the classroom. The vast majority of principals' efforts during the school day should be aimed at directly working to improve the quality of instruction happening in every classroom on their campuses. It is hard to conceive of a high achieving school where a principal's day would be spent differently.

Another emergent theme associated with this research question was the importance of collaboration in achieving high outcomes. This finding was supported by Hallinger and Heck (2010) who asserted that "collaborative leadership, as opposed to leadership from the principal alone, may offer a path towards more sustainable school improvement" (p. 107). Friend et al. (2010) discussed collaboration as a long-time core practice within special education. DuFour (2004) discussed the importance of collaborative practice, noting that there is "compelling evidence indicating that working collaboratively represents best practice" (p. 3). He also stressed the importance of collaborative practice which impacts the instruction within the classroom, implying that schools with collaborative cultures still fail to act collaboratively in ways that improve student learning. Such was not the case with the principals in the present study. The interviewed principals recognized and encouraged collaborative practices within their schools that improved teachers' instruction and students' learning. Each interviewee spent considerable time focused on the process of collaboration as it related to ensuring student outcomes. These findings were consistent with Cotton's (2003) and Cruzeiro and

Morgan's (2006) discussions on the importance of principals establishing collaborative practice within their schools.

This finding was further supported by Cosner (2014), who viewed school leaders as responsible for building capacity in their teachers to engage collaboratively with data. Cosner's argument juxtaposes both of the strategies identified by the principals. In much of the discussion regarding planning for outcomes, the principals discussed the importance of collaborative planning. Cosner discussed the need for strategies to work in concert. Much of what I have termed an "integrated approach to leadership" can be seen in the other findings within this study. In an integrated approach, the findings in this study can reinforce and build upon one another. This interconnectedness points to the complex nature of school leadership. It is a difficult process to distill leadership practices and experiences into discrete categories. However, given the importance of the work of principals, attempting to draw meaning from their experiences is well worth the effort.

At the outset of this study, I drew a clear distinction between the activities and events to which principals may attribute the success of their students with disabilities and the strategies they reported using to promote that success. In my view, it seemed plausible that the principals would report successes resulting from causes entirely separate from strategies they employed. It also seemed likely that the principals would point to specific strategies they had employed that resulted in the success of students with disabilities. This resulted in my framing two separate research questions to explore each area independently. However, in the analysis of the data, it became apparent that there was, in actuality, much overlap between the two questions.

Implications of Findings

A critical implication from the findings of this study is found simply in the existence of schools where students with disabilities achieve at high levels. There was indication, in the present study, that wide-scale high achievement for students with disabilities is possible. A review of AMO data for this study, however, indicated that schools where such achievement occurs are exceedingly rare, particularly when those schools are Title I schools. Despite the small number of schools across the state that were eligible for participation in this study, their existence confirmed the possibility of high achievement for students with disabilities. However, the findings in this study also confirmed that much work remains to be done in ensuring positive outcomes for every student with a disability in every school.

The principals in this study very clearly articulated their belief that all students must be challenged to achieve high standards. It seemed that they believed that if students are never exposed to high standards, they will never achieve them. The data suggested the importance of students accessing their education from within the regular class setting wherever possible. Accordingly, school districts should continue to develop appropriate supports for students with disabilities that allow them to effectively receive their education largely or entirely within the regular class setting where they are exposed to the same standards as their nondisabled peers. It is important that this is not read as a call to move students with disabilities from highly supportive settings to lesser restrictive settings *without support*. I am an ardent supporter of including students with even the most severe disabilities in the regular education setting; however, it must be within a

framework that can meet their needs according to the supports determined necessary by a viable IEP committee.

School districts are asked to fully implement the requirements of IDEA without the full funding necessary to do so. Given that constraint, districts have found it necessary to be creative in developing the means by which students with disabilities can be successful. Within the state of Florida, limited resources have given rise to a collaborative teaching method known as support facilitation which shares many features with co-teaching. However, support facilitation does not require the special education teacher to be in the classroom alongside the general education teacher full-time. Therefore, at times, general education teachers are charged with meeting the needs of students with disabilities without the direct involvement of a special education teacher. The principals in this study did not allow such a circumstance to change the expectations for teachers to ensure the learning of students with disabilities. These principals expected all teachers to teach students with disabilities effectively. This approach was successful in these schools with the support of these principals. However, in my experience, general education teachers often do not have the knowledge needed to successfully meet the needs of students with disabilities. If such a model is to persevere and students with disabilities are to increasingly access their education from within a regular class setting, teachers will need the skills to ensure their learning in this setting.

Therefore, teacher preparation programs must effectively prepare educators to help these students be successful in those settings. Special educators must continue to be prepared to implement evidence-based practices for students with disabilities within the

regular class setting. Additionally, there is a critical need for general education teachers to be able to meet the needs of students with disabilities within their classrooms. Special education is asking more of general education than it ever has before. With the blurring of the lines between the programs (Friend et al., 2010), the only way sustainable, large scale success for students with disabilities will ever be found is if all of the professionals called to work with them have the skills necessary to do so.

It is also critical that the recent legislative and policy pushes we have seen towards improving outcomes for students with disabilities continue. I am not a proponent of the punitive measures currently used when required metrics are not met and take issue with many of the heavy handed reform approaches currently popular within education (e. g., evaluations based on learning growth, loss of funds, closing of schools, firing of teachers). However, politicians and policy makers are correct to set high expectations for our schools. We have seen that, in the right supportive circumstances, achieving high expectations is possible. Therefore, if the evidence indicates that high achievement is a possibility, but the data shows it to be a rare occurrence, the field has a moral obligation to find ways to replicate existing successful programs for all students with disabilities. The discussion must not focus on whether it is necessary to do this, but on how to support success for students with disabilities.

The findings of this research are significant in the amount of ownership these principals had with regard to outcomes for all students, including those with disabilities. From the starting point of high expectations for all, to intentionally planning for positive outcomes, to working hand in hand with the school community to ensure those outcomes

happen, these principals demonstrated that, against all odds, the difficult work of student achievement is feasible through the work of a strong team. Other leaders, other schools, other teams must unite together to join these principals by leading their own schools to high levels of achievement.

Recommendations for Practice

In light of the findings in this study, there are several recommendations for educators and educational leaders that could lead to improved levels of performance for students and educators alike.

1. Avoid lowered expectations for students with disabilities. Lowered expectations rob them of their potential to achieve grade level expectations. Demography alone would have told the principals in this study to expect less of their students, especially their students with disabilities. It would be easy for these schools to accept mediocrity, and, in the minds of many, high percentages of failing students would have been understandable. The findings in this study suggest that those situations did not manifest in part due to high expectations. In holding high expectations, these principals set the stage upon which grade level proficiency is the norm. All educators and educational leadership should do the same.
2. Promote the increase of personalized learning for all students and (universal design for learning (UDL) as an instructional approach. If leadership approaches promoting success for students with disabilities are doing so through integrated approaches and planning for the support of all students, so

too must the instruction within classrooms be personalized to meet individual learning needs. UDL provides a framework by which the variability of learner needs can be met, but educators will need to continue to develop instructional mechanisms capable of supporting all students based on their individual needs.

3. Provide continued, meaningful professional development for instructional leaders, including teachers, related to improving outcomes for all students.

The inclusion of students with disabilities as a full part of the school communities described in this study meant that many of these students received most or all of their instruction within general education classrooms. General education teachers need the skills to successfully promote outcomes for students with disabilities. As P2 noted, these skills come from “a lot of professional development.” The field does a disservice to general education teachers and to students with disabilities when students are placed in classrooms where teachers do not have the skills required to meet their needs.

4. Intentionally plan for each student, possibly through professional learning communities (PLCs). It is clear that the principals included in this study cultivated environments in their schools where all students were supported. That can only occur in other schools through proactively planning for that success. Many schools have found some measure of success utilizing PLCs as a framework for this planning process. However, readers are cautioned to fully explore the expectations of PLCs and ensure that they are implemented

as intended. In my experience, it is relatively easy for other types of meetings to be erroneously labeled as PLCs, giving rise to two major concerns. First, it causes school personnel to think they are doing the necessary planning when, in reality, the work is left undone. Additionally, because the work is left undone, administrators, teachers, and students do not see the results they were hoping for. This, then, leads to the conclusion that PLCs are not an appropriate vehicle by which to drive school improvement. Regardless of the means by which it occurs, schools must take measures to ensure that a viable path to success is individually planned for each student.

Suggestions for Future Research

As the importance of outcomes for students with disabilities continues to increase, so too will the need for further research in this area. Some suggestions to guide subsequent research in this area include:

1. Further exploration on the impact of leadership on outcomes in special education, particularly from additional viewpoints such as teachers, students, parents, and community stakeholders. The findings of this study, though significant in the exploration of the experience of principals at the center of the leadership in these schools, did not address that experience from other viewpoints. Further research could address this shortcoming.
2. Delineating a clear definition of high performing in regard to students with disabilities, particularly for those on modified standards. If the future of special education rests on accountability mechanisms related to student

performance, it is imperative that scholars in the field are involved in developing clear metrics by which successes can be measured.

3. Development of leadership preparation programs at the university level and professional development programs within districts that emphasize the importance of instructional mechanisms capable of supporting all students based on their individual needs. With the continued push towards inclusion and implementation of Multi-Tiered Systems of Support that match personalized supports to student needs outside of the special education process, leadership from an integrated approach will become increasingly important. Leadership preparation programs and professional development programs will be the sources where future leaders master the skills for the needed instructional leadership.

APPENDIX A
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL



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

Approval of Exempt Human Research

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

To: **Eric Wells**

Date: **April 23, 2015**

Dear Researcher:

On 04/23/2015, the IRB approved the following activity as human participant research that is exempt from regulation:

Type of Review: Exempt Determination
Project Title: The Experience of School Leaders who Promote Achievement
among Students with Disabilities
Investigator: Eric Wells
IRB Number: SBE-15-11223
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](#).

On behalf of Sophia Dziegielewska, Ph.D., L.C.S.W., UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Joanne Muratori".

Signature applied by Joanne Muratori on 04/23/2015 10:20:40 AM EDT

IRB manager

APPENDIX B
EXPLANATION OF RESEARCH



EXPLANATION OF RESEARCH

Title of Project: The Experience of School Leaders who Promote Achievement among Students with Disabilities

Principal Investigator: Eric Wells

Other Investigators: None

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Suzanne Martin

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

- This study will examine the leadership experiences at schools where students with disabilities demonstrate an abnormally high level of proficiency on state required testing. The purpose of the study is to document the leadership experience of the principal in these schools, the strategies used by the principal to bring about high levels of proficiency, and determine to what the principal attributes the students' success.
- If you choose to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate in one 60 to 90 minute interview with the researcher at a mutually agreed upon location that is convenient to you (principals), or to complete a short (estimated 5-10 minute) survey (teachers).
- It is anticipated that participation in the study will be limited to no more than one 60 to 90 minute interview session, or the time taken to complete the survey.

You must be 18 years of age or older 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: Eric Wells, Doctoral Candidate, College of Education and Human Performance, at 407-584-7770 or by email at wells.eric@knights.ucf.edu or Dr. Suzanne M. Martin, Faculty Supervisor, Department of Child, Family, and Community Sciences, at 407-823-4260 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
PRELIMINARY INTERVIEW PROTOCOL FOR PRINCIPAL INTERVIEWS

These questions will be provided as the preliminary interview protocols to the expert focus group for their review. The researcher will consider the feedback from expert focus group members and make revisions to the questions as deemed appropriate given their input. The initial interview questions were developed by the researcher based on the literature, taken from the work of Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, LaPointe, and Orr (2010), with permission, or taken from the work of Aladjem et al. (2010), which is in the public domain and freely reproducible.

Orienting Information for Participants

I am conducting research on the leadership in schools where students with disabilities demonstrate high levels of achievement. This interview is an opportunity for you to provide input on different aspects of the school's leadership and efforts taken to bolster achievement for students with disabilities. The information you provide will help me examine the role that your leadership plays in establishing or maintaining a high performing school.

The interview should take about 60 – 90 minutes. If you need to stop me at any point, we can postpone the interview and finish it at another time.

I have some questions set for you, but I also want to include any information you think is important. Neither you nor the school will be identified in any discussion or reporting of the interview data. Any responses you provide that are reported will be reported with a pseudonym.

Do you have any questions for me before we begin?

Principal Initial Interview Questions

1. Tell me a little about yourself. (Aladjem et al., 2010)

[Probe: When did you come to the school? What is your educational background?

How many years have you been a principal? At this school? Do you have prior experience or training working with low-performing schools or students?]

2. What factor(s) motivated/led you to get your administrative credential? (Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, LaPointe, and Orr, 2010)

(Prompt: greater salary? more decision-making authority? opportunity to leave the classroom?)

3. How did you learn or are you learning how to be a principal? (Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, LaPointe, and Orr, 2010)
4. How would you describe a typical day for you as principal at this school? (Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, LaPointe, and Orr, 2010)
5. What kinds of support have you sought and/or received in your role as principal? (Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, LaPointe, and Orr, 2010)

(Possible prompts: family, friends, colleagues; instructional leader, district principal professional development, informals, reading, study groups, visitations, video-taping, coaching or mentor principal, other networks?)
6. What has been your greatest professional development experience as principal? Why was it valuable? (Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, LaPointe, and Orr, 2010)
7. What are your particular skills and knowledge strengths? Weaknesses? (Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, LaPointe, and Orr, 2010)
8. What did you see as the school's strengths and needs when you started working here? What do you see as the school's current strengths and needs? (Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, LaPointe, and Orr, 2010)
9. What are your goals for the school? (Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, LaPointe, and Orr, 2010)

[Probe: nature of goals for student learning and achievement, teacher development and practice, parental or community involvement, development of school community]
10. How would you describe your strategy for pursuing these goals? (Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, LaPointe, and Orr, 2010)

[Probe: look for examples with respect to...

- Teacher hiring, evaluation, and development
- Curriculum development
- Development of assessments and uses of assessment data regarding student performance
- Community-building strategies
- Governance/decision-making approaches
- Developing (distributed) school leadership
- Other?

11. What successes would you point to in terms of your work thus far? (Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, LaPointe, and Orr, 2010)

(Try to get data on student achievement trends as well as other indicators of school improvement, e.g., reduced turnover of staff, improvements in school climate, etc.)

12. What challenges do you see ahead? How are you trying to approach these? (Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, LaPointe, and Orr, 2010)

13. What major efforts has your school engaged in over the last several years? Are they comprehensive (e.g., do they integrate instruction, assessment, and professional development)? Why were these selected? (Aladjem et. al, 2010)

[Probes: Which of the school improvement efforts had the most significant effects on student achievement? Who or what was responsible for this effort? Probe for the existence of a research base and source of information about that base.]

- 14.** What programs or policies currently exist designed to ensure sustained achievement?
(Aladjem et. al, 2010)
- 15.** What have you experienced in terms of your role in driving student achievement for students with disabilities? (Researcher)
- 16.** What impact has your work had on academic outcomes for students with disabilities?
How? (Researcher)
- 17.** Outside of your role and impact, what other factors have influenced the high academic achievement for students with disabilities at this school? (Researcher)
- 18.** Have any changes been made in the overall approach to student achievement since you arrived? If so, on what basis were they made? To what extent did school-based data influence these changes? What has been the reaction of staff? of parents? of the central office? How frequently have changes been made? (Aladjem et. al, 2010)
- 19.** Are the actions to improve student achievement monitored? If so, how? (Aladjem et. al, 2010)

[Probes: What data were used? Would you describe the actions as an intervention and/or instructional change?]
- 20.** How do you support staff? (Aladjem et. al, 2010)

[Probe for use of external assisters, staff development opportunities, schedule changes to facilitate grade-level and content sharing.]
- 21.** Describe the formative and summative assessment system for student achievement at your school. How do you use data from these assessments? To what extent do measureable goals exist? (Aladjem et. al, 2010)

[Probes: How/where did you learn to use these data? Have there been any changes in the assessment system in the past 5 years? How does the school review these data in relation to implementation?]

22. What have you experienced in regards to leading the school to achieve high levels of proficiency for all students, but particularly for students with disabilities?

(Researcher)

23. Outside of your role and impact, what other factors have influenced the high academic achievement for students with disabilities at this school? (Researcher)

24. What contexts have influenced your experience of fostering high academic achievement for students with disabilities? (Researcher)

25. Is there anything else about your school, students, or leadership that you didn't get to share today that you would like to share now? (Researcher)

Principal Follow-Up Interview Closing Comments

Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. It was a pleasure to meet with you and talk about the leadership you've exerted as principal here. As you go home and think about today's discussion, or at any time, if there is anything further you would like to talk to me about in regards to our interview, please feel free to let me know and we can schedule a follow-up time to talk.

APPENDIX D
INITIAL SURVEY INSTRUMENT

Initial Survey Questions

Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, and Hopkins (2006) synopsised the leadership practices demonstrated by successful school leaders. They also indicate several personal traits that are frequently exhibited by school leaders.

- 1) To what extent would you agree that your principal demonstrates the following characteristics through his/her leadership actions on behalf of your school?

Characteristic	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree
<i>Building Vision and Setting Directions</i>					
Builds a shared vision for the school	1	2	3	4	5
Fosters the acceptance of group goals	1	2	3	4	5
Demonstrates high-performance expectations	1	2	3	4	5
<i>Understanding and developing people</i>					
Providing individualized support and consideration	1	2	3	4	5
Fostering intellectual stimulation	1	2	3	4	5
Modeling appropriate values and behaviors	1	2	3	4	5
<i>Redesigning the organization</i>					
Building collaborative cultures	1	2	3	4	5
Restructuring and reculturing the organization	1	2	3	4	5
Building productive relations with parents and the community	1	2	3	4	5
Connecting the school to its wider environment	1	2	3	4	5
<i>Managing teaching and learning program</i>					
Staffing the teaching program	1	2	3	4	5
Providing teaching support	1	2	3	4	5
Monitoring school activity	1	2	3	4	5
Buffering staff against distractions from their work	1	2	3	4	5

- 2) Drawing upon the research of several other teams, Clifford, Behrstock-Sherratt, and Feters (2012) report “that the following principal practices are associated with student achievement and high-performing schools” (p. 8). Read each of the practices that follow and indicate how much like your principal each statement is.

Principal Practices	Very much unlike him/her	Unlike him/her	Neutral	Like him/her	Very much like him/her
Creating and sustaining an ambitious, commonly accepted vision and mission for organizational performance	1	2	3	4	5
Engaging deeply with teachers and data on issues of student performance and instructional services quality	1	2	3	4	5
Efficiently managing resources, such as human capital, time, and funding	1	2	3	4	5
Creating physically, emotionally, and cognitively safe learning environments for students and staff	1	2	3	4	5
Developing strong and respectful relationships with parents, communities, and businesses to mutually support children’s education	1	2	3	4	5
Acting in a professional and ethical manner.	1	2	3	4	5

APPENDIX E
PERMISSION TO USE SURVEY INSTRUMENTS

1/11/2015

Gmail - Permission to use survey instruments?



Eric Wells <wells.eric@gmail.com>

Permission to use survey instruments?

Linda Darling-Hammond <lindadh@windows.stanford.edu>

Mon, Jan 5, 2015 at 2:13 PM

To: Eric Wells <wells.eric@knights.ucf.edu>, Linda Darling-Hammond <lindadh@windows.stanford.edu>

Dear Eric,

Thank you for your interest and dedication to education. Your request to utilize some of the protocols from *Preparing Principals for a Changing World* for your dissertation is greatly appreciated. It is Dr. Darling-Hammond's policy is to always grant permission to utilize her survey instruments so please feel free to do so. Please be assured that she will also be notified accordingly. Just let me know if you have any additional questions.

Thanks so much,

Maude Engström

Administrative Associate to Linda Darling-Hammond, Ed.D.

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From: wells.eric@gmail.com [mailto:wells.eric@gmail.com] **On Behalf Of** Eric Wells

Sent: Tuesday, December 23, 2014 10:33 AM

To: Linda Darling-Hammond

Subject: Permission to use survey instruments?

[Quoted text hidden]

<https://mail.google.com/mail/u/0/?ui=2&ik=2a19245e41&view=pt&search=inbox&msg=14abb641554dc3b7&siml=14abb641554dc3b7>

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