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The role of principal leadership in special education: a Delphi study

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THE ROLE OF PRINCIPAL LEADERSHIP IN SPECIAL EDUCATION: A DELPHI STUDY

By

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this manuscript to my loving family. Dave, Matthew, and Allan, thank you for the many years of support and encouragement as I have continued by professional journey.

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I would like to thank Dr. Michelle Kowalsky for her endless hours of support, guidance, and encouragement. I would also like to thank Dr. Joann Manning and Dr. Barbara Williams for their time, expertise, and dedication to the art of school leadership.

Abstract

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Changes in the New Jersey principal evaluation system coupled with the demands of leading programs for students with disabilities has resulted in the need for school principals to understand and apply leadership skills that will result in successful achievement for all students. The purpose of this qualitative Delphi study was to explore the behaviors, characteristics, skills, and knowledge elementary school principals identify as essential for leading and supporting successful special education programs in public elementary school settings. Twenty-six elementary school principals with a record of success in leading special education programs provided expert insights through three rounds of data collection and feedback. Major findings from this study include personal characteristics and leadership behaviors that reflect social justice leadership and have resulted in successful, inclusive learning environments for all students. These principals have addressed the challenges of leading diverse student populations by creating a culture of collaboration and acceptance throughout their school community through effective professional development, instructional leadership, and communication with all stakeholders. The findings from this study have implications for the practices of current school leaders, and may be used to inform future research related to preparing aspiring principals for the challenges of leading special education programs in public elementary schools.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and changes in the New Jersey Department of Education principal evaluation system have resulted in an increased focus on the effectiveness of school leaders and the principal's accountability for the achievement of all students, including students who are receiving special education services. Through a qualitative Delphi method, this study explored the behaviors, characteristics, skills, and knowledge elementary school principals identified as necessary to provide appropriate support and leadership for special education programs in general education settings to assure successful outcomes for all students.

Statement of the Problem

School principals are responsible for assuring that every student receives an effective, appropriate education. As the school leader, principals must be able to support students and classroom teachers to assure that all students are demonstrating achievement, including students with special needs. Thus there is a growing need to understand the characteristics and competencies of school principals who lead successful special education programs.

Context

In 1972 the Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Citizens (PARC) won a landmark Supreme Court decision against the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania regarding students with disabilities and their right to a free and appropriate public education. Three years later federal law was established to protect the rights of all students. Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, mandated that all public

school systems educate students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment. This law was amended and reissued several times over the last twenty-five years and is now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Under the law, school districts must provide a free and appropriate education that addresses students' individual needs. The law provides provisions for students and parents to assure that the rights of the student are protected, including providing mechanisms to assess and evaluate the effectiveness of the child's program. The law provides guidelines for school districts to assure that programs and services are comprehensive and includes requirements for accountability (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). As the population of special education students in public schools has become more diverse, school leaders have the responsibility to assure that programs and services are identified, implemented, and monitored for each identified student. School principals are responsible for assuring that programs are properly implemented, appropriate instructional practices are followed, and that all teachers and support staff are following Individual Education Plans for all identified students with special needs.

The school principal's responsibilities related to special education have become more encompassing as the number of students receiving services has increased. Over the last decade, school administrators have seen a rise in the number of students classified for special education services in public school settings. For example, in 2000, the National Center for Educational Statistics reported that 94,000 students with autism were receiving services in public schools. By 2008 that number increased to 336,000 students (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2010). Currently public schools across the country are serving over 6.5 million students with special needs. In July, 2002, the President's

Commission on Excellence in Special Education (PCESE) issued what is considered a landmark report regarding the education of students with disabilities (Berdine, 2003). The report includes recommendations that are intended to assure that students identified as in need of special education services are provided with early intervention, data-driven programs, and appropriate progress monitoring.

Compelling Interest

Beginning with the 2014-2015 school year, documented student growth percentiles will account for fifty percent (50%) of the annual evaluation of principals working in multi-grade level schools (New Jersey Department of Education, 2012). The new evaluation system is intended to identify principals who are excelling in their performance and those who need improvement. The New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) evaluation system includes performance expectations that define what principals are expected to know and what they should be doing to support student academic growth. Prior to the changes in school accountability and evaluation systems, there were few consequences for school principals leading schools that did not meet adequate yearly progress indicators for all students (Styron & Styron, 2011). The current changes in accountability and evaluation of school leaders require principals to be responsible for student growth and require principals to be rated in terms of their effectiveness.

The changes in how school leaders are evaluated and the increase in the number of students receiving special education services has resulted in the need for principals to have the knowledge and skills to effectively lead programs that will result in student success. Many school leaders lack adequate training and experience to effectively support

special education programs in general education settings (Cooner, Tochterman, & Garrison-Wade, 2005). Due to these factors, school leaders have varying degrees of confidence in their ability to provide appropriate support to students with special needs, their teachers, and their families (DiPaola & Walter-Thomas, 2003). Most educational administration certification programs do not include requirements for understanding and serving diverse student populations, especially students with special needs. Teachers in both special education and general education classrooms often do not receive adequate support related to instruction and behavioral interventions for students with special needs (DiPaola & Walter-Thomas, 2003). Research related to educational leadership emphasizes the need for school principals to be strong instructional leaders who have the capacity and expertise to provide support and professional development for teachers to ensure that appropriate instructional practices are reflected in all classroom instruction (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2008). Therefore there is a need to identify and understand how effective principals address the needs and concerns of their special education populations so that school leaders can apply strategies and practices that will result in success for all students.

<div align="center">**Purpose**</div>

The purpose of the study was to identify the behaviors, characteristics, skills, and knowledge of elementary principals who support successful special education programs. Principals who have developed skills, knowledge, and behaviors to support special education programs can provide insight and practical knowledge that can be shared with current and aspiring school leaders who are facing the same challenges. The recent changes in the principal evaluation process in New Jersey have created a need for public

school principals to understand and apply best practices to ensure successful outcomes for all students.

Research Questions

This study addressed the following questions:

1. What personal qualities and characteristics do elementary school principals identify as essential for leading successful special education programs?

2. What specific knowledge and experience do elementary school principals identify as beneficial for understanding and supporting the needs of teachers and students in special education programs?

3. What challenges do elementary school principals face related to leading special education programs in general education settings?

4. What strategies do elementary school principals employ to respond to these challenges?

5. What specific instructional leadership skills do elementary school principals feel are essential for leading special education programs?

Study Design

The purpose of this study was to explore the principal's behaviors, characteristics, skills, and knowledge that lead to success in supporting special education programs. For this reason, a Delphi study method was selected utilizing the expertise of experienced practitioners. The study explored the factors successful principals identify as having the greatest influence on programs for special education students and the principal's ability to lead these programs.

Delphi studies are qualitative inquiries that explore the experiences, perceptions, and expertise of stakeholders who are familiar with the study problem and can provide insight into best practices to address the problem (Okoli & Pawlowski, 2004). This study is a qualitative exploratory model that utilized a series of open-ended questions, participant feedback, and interviews with those who have expertise in the content and context of the research study problem; in this case, principals who lead special education programs in public elementary school settings in New Jersey. Within a Delphi study, these participants are identified as a panel of experts. Through multiple iterations of data collection, the responses from each expert were categorized and reduced until there was consensus in the findings. The Delphi study served as a mechanism for using this collective knowledge to develop recommendations for current and future school leaders (Amos & Pearse, 2008).

Linstone and Turner (2002) identify three characteristics of Delphi studies that were part of the framework for this study. The first is the anonymity of all panelists. This allows each participant to have the opportunity to provide his/her personal views without the influence of others (Dalkey, 1969; Okoli & Pawlowski, 2004). The second component of a Delphi study is the structured flow of information. This was accomplished through multiple iterations of surveys and interviews. The third component is controlled feedback through the sharing of response data with all panelists, including questions that solicit feedback. The participants' responses were shared through a second round survey and follow-up phone interviews from a sampling of participating panelists to discuss the results of the round one and round two surveys.

Significance of the Study

Elementary school principals are faced with a number of challenges including more diverse student populations, an increase in the number of students receiving special education services in public school settings, and revised principal evaluation systems. The evaluation of New Jersey school principals includes cumulative progress indicators for student achievement and accounts for fifty percent of the school principal's effectiveness rating.

This study will provide current and aspiring elementary school principals with recommendations from expert practitioners who have a record of leading successful special education programs. Focusing on elementary principals is essential since these principals are often the lone administrator in the school with no shared administrative responsibility or accountability for student progress. The principals in this study provided insight into the behaviors and strategies they employ to support the students, teachers, and families to ensure that all students have successful outcomes.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this study was based on the theories of social justice and school leadership. This includes social justice concepts and leadership behaviors that promote the creation and facilitation of inclusive school environments for all students. The New Jersey Professional Standards for School Leaders (2014) includes the requirement for principals to promote the success of all learners by creating a shared vision of an inclusive community and responding to the needs of a diverse population. Embedded in the standards are requirements for school leaders to be able to clearly communicate a vision for their school and to facilitate the cultivation of a community that

recognizes, supports, and encourages student achievement in a safe, secure, and positive learning environment. These inclusive practices and the principal's ability to communicate a vision of shared responsibility are essential leadership qualities that are embedded in both social justice and leadership theory.

The role of principal as leader continues to change in light of new mandates related to student progress and school success. These changes impact both teachers and school leaders as their effectiveness, according to the DOE standards, is correlated with student assessment results including standardized testing, student growth objectives, and student growth percentiles. Principals must understand how teachers are reacting to the increased scrutiny, how to lead teachers during a time of significant change, and how to reflect on their own instructional leadership practices that will support teachers in the classroom resulting in improved student achievement.

Limitations of the Study

The study focused on the experiences and responses of elementary school principals working in public school settings. Generalization of the findings beyond public elementary school settings may be limited. The participants were anonymous and therefore there were some limitations in providing a context for their responses. Some specific experiences and examples shared by the participants had to be omitted when shared with the panelist for feedback to assure the anonymity of the principal, school, students, and/or staff members. Additional limitations inherent in Delphi study designs will be further discussed in chapter 3.

Definition of Terms

Principal. The principal is the school administrator directly responsible for the leadership and management of the school.

Special education. Special education refers to the programs and services provided to students who are identified as having a disability and require accommodations and modifications to their instructional program.

Special education programs. Special education programs identified in this study include all instructional programs provided by certified special education teachers in self-contained special classes, pullout replacement settings (resource rooms), or in-class resource programs (special education teachers working in general education classrooms with a general education co-teacher).

Students with special needs. Students with special needs refers to any student who has been evaluated and identified as in need of special education services and who has a formal Individual Education Plan (IEP).

Overview of Chapters

This chapter provided an introduction to the study problem, a context for understanding the problem, and a brief description of the study design. The following chapters will provide a detailed account of the study and the findings. Chapter 2 provides a summary of the literature related to school leaderships and special education. The chapter includes a review of the literature that was used to establish a theoretical framework for the study. Chapter 3 includes a detailed account of the Delphi study design and the methods used complete this study. Chapter 4 provides a summary of the findings

from three rounds of data collection and analysis and chapter 5 includes a discussion of the findings, conclusions, and recommendations for further study.

Closing Summary

Principals who lead special education programs require a variety of competencies, experiences, and skills in order to influence the achievement of students with special needs. The demands for rigor and accountability for student learning for a diverse student population requires school leaders to update their understandings of their roles in supporting students, teachers, and families regardless of the principal's specific past experience, knowledge, or expertise in special education. The findings from this study will provide school leaders with insight regarding leadership practices that will serve to promote successful special education programs and improved achievement for all students.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

In order to have a framework for understanding the complex role of the school principal, the following literature review focuses on the changing landscape of school leadership, including the legal responsibilities and accountability for student achievement. Research studies related to special education, leadership qualities, and instructional leadership reveal the necessary skills and knowledge school leaders must possess to be effective. Additionally the literature review provides a theoretical framework for understanding social justice paradigms that are reflected in the beliefs and practices of effective leaders.

The Principal

The position of school principal began in the United States during the mid-nineteenth century. The role of the school principal was primarily to be responsible for assuring the management of the school and to create a bridge between the teachers in the classroom and the district level administration (Rousmaniere, 2007). This tradition of principal as school manager continued in the United States until the 1970s when studies began to emerge regarding the importance of the school principal's role as the instructional leader having responsibility and influence over student achievement (Keller, 1998; Spiro, 2013). Over the last forty years, critical issues facing school principals include accountability for school performance and changing demographics of school populations (Egnor, 2003; Styron & Styron, 2011). The changing role of school principals and the increased responsibility for student performance has created a need for

principals to understand how they can best serve their school communities resulting in improved achievement for all students.

Law and Policy

The primary responsibility of school principals is to assure that every student is provided with an appropriate education. For students with special needs, federal, state, and district statutes and policies require that every student is receiving instruction in the least restrictive environment and that all school personnel are in strict compliance with all the requirements of the law. Smith, Robb, West, and Tyler (2010) note that recent government surveys indicate a shortage of qualified special education teachers and concerns that general education teachers are underprepared to address the needs of students with disabilities. For this reason, school principals must have the capacity to train, support, and monitor classroom instructional practices to assure the appropriate application of prescribed accommodations, and to monitor the progress of all students.

Principals are responsible for assuring that statutory requirements are being met and the legal requirements mandated under IDEA are strictly followed. Failure to comply with mandated requirements for students with disabilities can result in loss of federal funding and potential litigation. Weber (2009) cites court cases initiated by parents against school districts that failed to address specific student needs, failed to follow Individual Education Plan accommodations, or failed to provide a least restrictive environment. Therefore it is essential for every teacher and administrator to understand special education, special education law, and all statutory requirements for students with disabilities. This is no longer the sole responsibility of special education teachers and special education administrators (Pazey & Cole, 2012).

Leadership

Principals need to have a comprehensive understanding of the needs of students, teachers, and parents in order to fully support successful outcomes for students. This includes understanding the law, district policies, keeping up with trends and research, and assuming responsibility for all learners (Patterson, Marshall, & Bowling, 2000; Smith, Robb, West, & Tyler 2010; Spiro, J.D. 2013). Successful principal leadership in a time of increased accountability requires school leaders to develop practices that serve to support teachers and promote student growth. Mintzberg (1983) established that effective authority is not always a result of an administrator's position. Principals must find balance between managerial practices that assure policies and procedures are followed, and the transformational practices which result in significant impact on the culture, climate, and learning environment in the school. A leader must establish and maintain clear organizational structures to support the needs of students and teachers while creating a collaborative leadership environment where the principal is an integral part of the success of each student. The vision and values of the school should be reflected in everyday practices (Schlechty, 2003).

In a Wallace Foundation study conducted over six years and published in 2010, researchers sought to identify the key school related factors that contribute to successful student learning. School leadership was the second most important factor related to student success; effective classroom instruction ranked first. The researchers found a number of common practices successful principals employed to lead successful programs. These include establishing a vision that all students can be successful, creating a positive learning environment, supporting teachers as leaders, focusing on improved

instructional practices, and developing strategic plans based on student achievement data, needs assessments, and collaboration with stakeholders (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2010).

As the instructional leader, school principals must be able to support classroom teachers so that all students are receiving appropriate instruction and support to assure success. Principal support is a key variable in assuring that teachers are appropriately differentiating instruction for students with special needs and have appropriate supports for addressing problematic behaviors (DiPaola & Walter-Thomas, 2003). Principals can encourage improved instructional practices by providing effective professional development experiences for teachers and by promoting teacher leadership (Glickman, 2002).

Assuring that effective practices are appropriately implemented requires communication between the principal and teacher. Principals must develop the ability to recognize the needs and feelings of teachers and use that knowledge when making decisions and providing support. Leaders must create harmony by connecting with others and modeling behaviors that reflect friendly, respectful relationships (Begley, 2006; Goleman, Boyatizis, & McKee 2002).

Leadership for Special Education

Over the last decade, school administrators have seen a rise in the number of students classified for special education services in public school settings. Heward (2003) summarized the sociopolitical perspective of this phenomenon into several broad areas. The first is the association of the need to support diverse student populations as an outgrowth of the civil rights movement. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

served to mandate an end to segregated placements for students with disabilities. The act

assures that all students, despite their disabilities, have the right to equal access to

educational and support services. By fully integrating students with disabilities, non-

disabled students and adults have a better understanding and empathy for people with

disabilities (Heward, 2003). Lashley (2007) explored the impact of federal and state

regulations related to accountability for student learning. The study indicated that

principals were often underprepared to meet the changing demands of assuring effective

special education programs.

Research related to special education programs, principal leadership, and teacher

and principal accountability provide insight into the need for principals and teachers to

work collaboratively to assure successful special education programs. Key leadership

behaviors that support successful programs include believing that all students can learn

and that every student must feel that they are a part of the whole school community.

School leaders must encourage their teachers to believe that they are responsible for the

learning of every child and they must build the teachers' capacity to teach a wide range of

students (Goor, Schwenn, & Boyer 1997; Patterson, Marshall, & Bowling, 2000).

Donaldson, Marnik, and Ackerman (2009) support the contention that the principal plays

a key role in establishing a culture that supports these beliefs. These are communicated

through purposeful dialogue and the inclusion of all stakeholders so that everyone who is

responsible for student outcomes has a voice.

Student populations in elementary schools are diverse and often include students

with special needs who exhibit challenging behaviors (Greene, 2008). In order for school

leaders to provide appropriate support, they must understand the experiences and

perceptions of teachers who work with these students in general education classroom settings. A study of elementary classroom teachers found that seventy-five percent of the teachers believed their ability to teach effectively was compromised because of disruptive students (Guardino & Fullerton, 2010). Understanding this phenomenon from the teachers' perspectives will enable school leaders to address the broader concerns of how these experiences influence the teacher's social, emotional, and instructional relationships with their students.

Theoretical Framework

School principals are accountable for creating a school environment where all stakeholders recognize their role in assuring successful outcomes for all students. Place. Ballenger, Wasonga, Piveral, and Edmonds (2010) emphasize that the principal must "create a vision of equity of excellence" and "equal outcomes for all students" (p. 541). This can be accomplished when school leaders establish and maintain a social justice mindset that is reflected in their leadership practices.

Social Justice

Theoharis (2007) supports the contention that school leaders must recognize their responsibility for all populations of students and must view these responsibilities through a social justice lens. He defines social justice leadership in terms of the principal's role as an advocate for all students including those who have been marginalized as a result of their race, gender, class, disability, or sexual orientation. He emphasizes that school leaders must remain vigilant in recognizing the unique needs of these populations of students and must assure that an inclusive environment is established and maintained. Siebers (2008) expands on this definition by identifying what he termed disability theory;

a social justice lens through which educators and social scientists view individuals with disabilities. He contends that school leaders should address the issues, needs, and concerns of students with disabilities in the same way that other minority groups are served.

Social justice leaders exhibit characteristics that reflect moral values, justice, respect, care, and equity (Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy 2005; Theoharis, 2007). Principals who apply the concepts of social justice theory are aware of the impact of race, class, gender, sexual orientation, and disability may have on the school environment and on student learning. Some of the common characteristics of social justice leaders include placing value on diversity and understanding how diversity enhances the culture of the school community. Social justice leaders create and sustain programs that limit segregation and promote full inclusion. Social justice leaders facilitate dialogue and training to assure that teachers set high expectations for all learners. They provide professional development opportunities for staff members to assure that teachers have the knowledge, skills, and strategies to meet the needs of the students and that they have the resources to promote positive learning experiences. (Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005; Kose, 2009; Theoharis, 2007).

School leaders face a number of challenges in promoting and maintaining a social justice framework in their schools. Principals may lack adequate training related to social justice theory and the challenges of meeting the needs of diverse student populations, including serving students with disabilities. The goal of social justice is to raise the expectations for all learners and to provide appropriate instruction, assessment, and progress monitoring to ensure that these expectations are met. Without adequate training,

school leaders may lack the necessary skills and resources to support their teachers.

(Marshall, 2008; McKenzie, Hernandez, Fierro, Capper, Dantley, & Scheurick 2004).

Parker and Shapiro (1992) suggest that principals must engage all stakeholders in open

dialogue regarding social justice, diversity, and inclusion. Preparing school principals to

lead these discussions presents a challenge when their experience and professional

training have provided limited exposure to addressing the needs of marginalized student

populations.

Summary

Research related to achieving positive outcomes for all students focuses on the

principal's role in influencing the culture of the school and the leadership practices

principals employ to support students and teachers. The role of school leaders has shifted

to include accountability for the progress of every student, including those with special

needs. Social justice theory provides an additional framework for understanding how the

beliefs and behaviors of effective leaders include focusing on the needs of all students

regardless of their disability. Principals who are underprepared to assume these

leadership responsibilities may benefit from the expertise of experienced practitioners

who are leading successful programs.

Chapter 3

Methodology

This chapter provides a narrative explanation of the study design and implementation including the Delphi study procedures and the chronology of research steps. Okoli and Pawlowski (2004) recommend using the Delphi study method when there is a need to explore complex issues and relationships within organizations. This study investigated the behaviors, characteristics, skills, and knowledge of elementary principals who lead special education programs. The study design allowed for the gathering of responses from multiple participants with similar expertise.

The process of data collection and analysis was conducted in stages with each stage followed by member checking to assure that the information provided by the participants was correctly interpreted and confirmed by other expert practitioners. The process was methodical and collaborative, allowing each participant to review and respond to the contributions of others participating in the study. This method was practical because it allowed for a wide range of detailed participation by those who are considered to be experts in the topic being explored. The data collection was rich because multiple iterations of data collection are performed, including member checking, feedback, and follow-up.

For the purpose of this study, the Delphi method was an efficient means of gathering data from those who have expertise in school leadership and are considered by their peers to be experts in leading special education programs. The Delphi method allowed the principals to work side-by-side to gain consensus related to a shared problem despite their diverse geographic locations and isolation from others who perform similar

roles (Ziglio, 1996).The information, perceptions, and experiences of each participant

were gathered through a structured, methodical communication process (Linstone &

Turoff, 2002). By maintaining the anonymity of the panelists, each participant responded

to the collaborative ideas of all panelists based on their own perspective without

influence from or conformity with the other participants (Rowe and Wright, 1999; Hsu &

Stanford, 2007).

Delphi studies typically include four phases. For this study, the first phase was an

exploration of the subject or problem. Delphi study panelists were identified and

participated in an initial interview or open-ended survey used to gather the views of each

participating stakeholder. These expert responses were linked to the research questions.

In phase two, the interview and survey responses were coded and categorized until

consensus regarding best practices was reached. Phase three included follow up member

checking with a sampling of participants to review and confirm the findings. The final

phase consisted of summarizing the findings based on the consensus of the panelists'

responses.

Participant Selection

Criteria

McKenna (1994) and Dalkey (1969) refer to the Delphi participants as a panel of

experts. For this reason, criterion sampling was used to identify informed practitioners who

were able to provide detailed responses based on their experience and expertise working

with and leading successful special education programs in public elementary schools.

Successful programs were defined in two ways. First, successful special education programs

were defined as those resulting in three consecutive years of improved academic

performance for special education students; schools where the same cohort of students performed successfully in third, fourth, and fifth grades on either the New Jersey Assessment of Skills and Knowledge (NJSASK), or the Alternate Proficiency Assessment (APA). The second means of identifying and defining successful programs was to identify schools where students with special needs were able to receive all appropriate academic, behavioral, and social supports in the same school throughout their elementary school experience. This included, but was not limited to, schools where students with special needs receive services in special classes, replacement pullout, and/or in-class resource programs. The student populations included students with a wide variety of special needs including students with autism, behavioral disabilities, learning disabilities, or multiple disabilities.

Patton (2002) supports the use of criterion sampling when there is a need to assure that the participants can provide rich information and detailed understandings of the problem and context. The selected participants had a minimum of four years of experience in their current elementary school placement. They were directly responsible for leading the special education programs in their schools, including responsibility for the direct supervision of special education teachers, monitoring of student progress, collaboration with the child study team, and facilitating professional development for all teachers and paraprofessionals working with the special education students.

Linstone and Turoff (2002) suggest that the panel consist of stakeholders, experts, and facilitators. In this study, the elementary principals were considered critical stakeholders because the evaluation of their leadership effectiveness under the revised New Jersey educator evaluation system includes performance goals and indicators related to student achievement. In addition to being stakeholders, each participant was an experienced school

leader. For this study, the panel of experts included twenty-six elementary principals from eight New Jersey school districts. The participants had direct knowledge of and experience with successful special education programs, a willingness to participate in a series of surveys and interviews, and time to participate.

Assembling the Panel of Experts

Jones and Twiss (1978) suggest "the principal investigators of a Delphi study should identify and select the most appropriate individuals through a nomination process" (as cited in Hsu & Stanford, 2007, p.3). As the primary researcher, I began identifying potential participants through my first-hand knowledge of the principals who have expertise and experience related to the leadership of elementary schools with successful special education programs. Ten principals were contacted by email and were invited to participate in the study. Eight of the ten agreed to participate.

Additional participants were identified through professional contacts including two school superintendents and a Rowan University Educational Leadership cohort colleague. These individuals were contacted via email and were asked to identify elementary principals who met the participant criteria. One superintendent offered the names of three individuals who were then sent an email invitation to participate. One of the three principals responded and agreed to participate. A colleague from the Rowan University Educational Leadership hybrid cohort identified two principals. These principals were contacted by email and both agreed to participate. In total eleven participants were initially invited to participate based on my personal knowledge of their expertise or the nomination from a colleague.

The initial eleven participant interviews were conducted in July and August 2013. During each telephone interview, the participants were asked to nominate other principals who met the study criteria. These participants served as people brokers; identifying other elementary principals who they considered to be experts in supporting special education programs. Through the initial eleven participants, six additional principals were identified and agreed to participate.

In order to identify and invite additional participants, a search of public records was conducted to identify high performing schools with similar special education populations. The New Jersey Department of Education recently released school and district peer groupings. These school peer groupings have been developed based on overall enrollment, special education populations, socio-economic status, and ethnic group diversity. The study did not include principals identified through public record from schools with fewer than forty special education students because data regarding student performance is not disaggregated for special education populations in schools with fewer than forty special education students. Sixty schools were identified and additional information regarding the school principals was garnered from the school district websites. Email invitations were sent to sixty elementary school principals throughout New Jersey introducing the study, citing the participant criteria, and requesting participation. Nine additional principals responded to the email invitation, met the criteria of experience leading successful special education programs, and agreed to participate.

Communication Process

Delphi studies may be conducted using a face-to-face discussion model or a remote access model (Day & Bobeva, 2005). A remote access model was used for all three rounds of this study. During July, August, and September 2013, all twenty-six participants responded to the same six interview questions. Seventeen participants responded by telephone interviews and nine participants opted to respond by providing an electronic narrative that was submitted by email. The second round of data collection was conducted utilizing an online survey conducted through a password protected Google Survey. A link to the second survey was sent via email utilizing the secure Rowan University email system. The final round of data collection was a member check with six participants agreeing to participate in a follow-up telephone interview. Informed consent forms, surveys, and summary transcripts were emailed to participants utilizing a password protected secure server.

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Data Collection

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Round One

Round one data collection was conducted through telephone interviews and narrative surveys. The interviews began with a series of questions for the purpose of collecting biographical information including the participant's years of service as a teacher and as a principal, degrees held, experience with special education populations, experience as an administrator, undergraduate and graduate coursework, and professional development related to special education. Experience was defined by the types of positions held within educational settings and any direct or indirect responsibilities the principals had for special education programs. Demographic information was collected regarding the size of the total student population, percentage of students receiving special

education services, types of special education programs, and the types of disabilities identified as the rationale for students receiving these services; for example autism, learning disabilities, or multiply disabled.

Rubin and Rubin (2012) describe three types of interview questions in their protocol model. These include main questions, follow-up questions, and probes. Main questions were posed for the purpose of allowing the participants to respond to key concepts related to the research questions. Pilot questions were tested with the first two participants during telephone interviews to determine if the requested responses were aligned with the research questions. No changes were made to the interview questions in round one. All twenty-six participants responded to the following six open ended questions:

1. What personal qualities or characteristics do you feel are essential for principals who lead successful special education programs?

2. What specific knowledge and/or experience do you feel were beneficial to understanding and supporting the needs of teachers and students in special education programs?

3. What are the challenges you have experienced in leading special education programs in general education settings?

4. What strategies did you employ to respond to these challenges?

5. What specific instructional leadership skills do you feel are essential for leading special education programs?

6. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences?

Follow-up questions were used to clarify the participants' responses or to solicit specific examples related to their responses. For example when participants shared that they utilized professional development to address challenges (question 3) or as part of their role as instructional leader (question 5), they were asked what specific types of professional development opportunities they provided.

The interviews were conducted in July, August, and September 2013. Two interviews were conducted in person and fifteen were conducted on the telephone. These interviews were recorded on an audio recording device. Following the completion of the interviews, a summary transcript was emailed to each participant for the purpose of member checking. McLellan, MacQueen, and Neidig (2003) support the use of summary transcriptions when key passages, words, or sentences are all that is needed to align the responses with the research questions. The transcripts were organized as bulleted responses to each question. The transcripts included any probes or sub-questions that were posed during the interview for the purpose of clarifying or expanding on a participant's answer. The participants were asked to email their changes, corrections, or clarifications. Other than suggested grammatical error edits, the participants provided no changes or additions to their answers. Nine participants opted to answer the six questions in a narrative, written format rather than a telephone interview. Their written responses were emailed back. One participant who returned a written response was contacted by telephone to provide more details to her responses.

Coding Round One

Following the first round of data collection, all written and transcribed responses were reviewed in order to get a sense of the whole. The first round of data analysis

consisted of repeated readings of the summary transcripts and narrative responses. *In vivo* coding procedures were initiated using a tentative set of coding categories for each question (Saldano, 2009).

The coding categories were used to sort key words and phrases from each transcript. As each transcript was read, words and phrases that were aligned with the coding categories were highlighted. Each transcript was read a minimum of three times. A data collection table was developed listing each highlighted key word or phrase. For example, in response to the question, "What personal qualities or characteristics do you feel are essential for principals who lead successful special education program?" twenty-three words and phrases were identified that aligned with one of the preliminary coding categories for that question. As each transcript was read, similar responses were recorded using a tally mark. Skulmoski, Hartman, and Krahn (2009) suggest that the initial coding should include the use of the participant's own words. For this reason, the data collection table included specific words and phrases used by the participants that could be used later to provide examples or quotes to support the findings and conclusions.

Following repeated readings of the transcripts, the responses were counted and ranked from most to least frequent. Additional structural coding procedures were used to identify themes within responses. The purpose of structural coding was to reduce the data and to combine similar responses. The specific coded items that were combined at this phase will be further discussed in the findings in chapter 4. The most frequent responses to each question were presented to all of the participants for discussion and feedback in round two.

Round Two Data Collection

The second round of data collection was conducted using an electronic survey utilizing a password protected Google Survey. Okoli and Pawlowski (2004) state that the second round serves to consolidate and validate the responses from round one. In order to consolidate and validate the responses from round one, questions one through five from the first round were presented along with the most frequent responses grouped into thematic categories and organized according to the research questions. Questions one, two, and three included five response choices, and questions four and five included six response choices. The participants were asked to review the most frequent responses from round one and to select the three responses they believed were most important for supporting successful special education programs in elementary schools. They were not asked to rank order their responses. The survey included narrative boxes where the participants explained their selections. This open-ended format provided an opportunity for the participants to add a response that they felt may have been omitted during the first round of data reduction.

Round Two Data Analysis

The round two survey resulted in two types of data for review and analysis. The first form of data was a response count calculated on the Google survey. This data was presented numerically (the number of times the item was selected). The second form of data from this round was the narrative explanations the participants provided for each question. As in round one, these narrative responses were coded by *in vivo* and structural coding procedures. Key words and phrases used in response to the questions were compared to those recorded in round one. This round of data collection resulted in a

reduced, collaborative pool of responses that was aligned with the responses from round one. No new themes emerged. The results of round two data collection and analysis will be further discussed in chapter 4.

Round Three

Delphi studies include triangulation of data to improve rigor (Ali, 2005; Dalkey, 1969; Okoli & Pawlowsky, 2004). For this reason, follow-up interviews were conducted with six participants following the second round of data collection and analysis. The findings from the first two rounds were shared with each third round participant. They were asked to respond to the following questions:

- Do you agree with the collaborative responses of the participants?

- Is there anything that you disagree with?

- Do you feel that any information has been omitted that is important for of successful leadership of special education programs?

The round three participants agreed with the collaborative responses from rounds one and two. Their responses and feedback will be further discussed in chapter 4.

Validity, Credibility and Trustworthiness

Member checking is an integral part of the Delphi method. Validity was addressed through prolonged engagement with the panelists. Participants were asked to read and provide feedback following each round. The participants received initial interpretation and summation of panelist responses from the first round through the response choices included on the round two survey. Each participant had the opportunity to clarify, revise, or refute the responses through narrative responses on the round two survey and during the round three interviews. Coded data was analyzed to determine

patterns related to characteristics, competencies, interactions, and behaviors of the participants. During data collection and analysis, all evidence was maintained in both narrative and coded formats. A research journal was maintained to record all procedures, data collection, decision-making, reflections, and comments following each round.

Triangulation provided rich data sources for comparison. Through a triangulation matrix, all three data sources were analyzed and interpreted. Linking them to broader issues from the reviewed literature, theoretical frameworks, and my own beliefs and assertions contextualized the findings. Data from all three rounds was reviewed and considered before final conclusions were drawn (Yin, 2009).

Ethical Considerations

The primary concern in Delphi study research is maintaining the confidentiality of the participants (Dalkey, 1969; Okoli & Pawlowski, 2004). This was essential for all participants, especially those principals who work in the same district. Participants were cautioned not to use identifying information that may unintentionally disclose confidential information related to a specific student or staff member. The round two survey and round three follow-up interviews used to review the results did not include any responses or information that would intentionally or unintentionally disclose information that would identify the study participant, his/her school or district, or any students, staff, or families from the school or community.

Timeline

The identification of potential participants began in June 2013. Initial interviews were conducted during July, August, and September 2013. Interview transcriptions and round one data analysis were completed in October and early November 2013. The

request for participants to complete the round two survey was sent in late November

2013. A second request for participation in the round two survey was sent in December

2013. Data analysis for round two was completed by January 2014 and follow up

interviews were conducted in January. Analysis and interpretation of all data sources

were conducted in February and March, and a summary of the findings was completed in

April 2014.

Limitations

This methodology has several limitations, including the selection of participants as

experts. Dalkey (1969) explained that within the field of experts on the panel, there will be

varying degrees of expertise and experience. It is difficult to utilize all of the residual

knowledge of each expert and some ideas or opinions may have been lost as each round of

questioning resulted in the reduction of data.

The participants had access to the aggregated responses of other participants during

each round of data collection. As they reviewed and responded to other expert answers,

there was a possibility that consensus of opinion may have been hindered by nondisclosure

of the participants. Because the participants did not know where the other responses are

coming from, they did not have access to the context, perceptions, and experiences of their

fellow participants (Ali, 2005). This is an important limitation to the Delphi method that

would not be a consideration for other types of data collection methods such as a focus

group where participants can speak directly to each other and can ask direct clarifying

questions.

The study focused on the specific behaviors and competencies of the principal. The

study did not address questions related to the teachers' behaviors and competencies or the

influence of peer/collegial support on the teachers' ability to work with students with special needs. The study did not address questions related to the influence of school climate, population diversity, or socio-economics as factors in the principal's ability to lead special education programs. These limitations can be addressed in future studies.

Researcher bias was considered throughout this research study. As a researcher who has served as a special education teacher and who is currently serving as an elementary school principal, I was mindful of the biases I have developed based on my experience and expertise. This was addressed in several ways. First I avoided engaging in conversation during the initial interviews. Since many of the responses mirrored by own experiences, I was careful to only ask additional probing questions or asked the participants to share some specific examples rather than sharing my own experiences. This prevented any response on my part that might affirm or refute what the participant was sharing. Researcher bias was also considered when analyzing and interpreting the data. This was addressed through member checking during rounds two and three to assure that my interpretation of the data was aligned with the intent and interpretation of the participants.

Chapter 4

Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore the characteristics and behaviors elementary school principals identify as essential for supporting and maintaining successful special education programs in elementary school settings. Utilizing a Delphi research model, elementary school principals were asked to respond to questions about their experiences, actions, and beliefs related to addressing the needs of special education students in public school settings. The findings for this study are described in this chapter as follows: 1) the questions and responses utilized in round one, 2) the findings and processes used in the development of the round two survey, and 3) the consensus of responses from each round organized by themes.

Sources of Data

The participants in this study included twenty-six public elementary school principals from eight New Jersey school districts who participated in round one and two of the study. Six participants were included in the third round. The length of service principals have been in their current placements ranged from four to eleven years with the average being 7.25 years. The school populations ranged from 250 to 900 students with an average population of 464 students. Each school provides services for students with disabilities through a variety of special education programs including self-contained special classes and pull out replacement instructional classes (resource room programs). Ten of the individual schools also provide services through in-class resource programs. The principals were all currently presiding over these special education programs at the time of the study.

Delphi Round One

The focus of the first round of data collection was to explore the participants'

experiences and views without influence from the responses of others in the study

(Linstone & Turruff, 2002). Fifteen principals were contacted by telephone and two were

interviewed in person. Each interview was recorded utilizing an audio recording device.

The interviews were thirty to forty-five minutes long. Nine principals responded to the

open-ended questions electronically by completing a narrative survey and emailing the

responses back or entering the responses on Google Survey. In all, twenty-six

elementary school principals from eight New Jersey school districts responded to the

same six open ended questions:

1. What personal qualities or characteristics do you feel are essential for
   principals who lead successful special education programs?

2. What specific knowledge and/or experience do you feel are beneficial to
   understanding and supporting the needs of teachers and students in special
   education programs?

3. What are the challenges you have experienced in leading special education
   programs in general education settings?

4. What strategies did you employ to respond to these challenges?

5. What specific instructional leadership skills do you feel are essential for
   leading special education programs?

6. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences?

Summary transcripts of each telephone interview were sent to the participants for

review and member checking (Seidman, 2006). The transcripts were organized as

bulleted responses to each question. The transcripts included any probes or sub-questions that were posed during the interview for the purpose of clarifying or expanding on a participant's answer. The participants emailed their changes, corrections, or clarifications to the researcher. Other than suggested grammatical error edits, the participants provided no changes or additions to their answers. Next, written narrative responses were reviewed to determine if the participants' responses were clear.

The interview transcripts and narrative survey responses were then segmented using *in vivo* coding procedures (Saldaña, 2009). A tentative set of coding categories was developed for each question. These included *behaviors*, descriptions (adjectives), feelings, and opinions. Table 1 includes the initial categories used during the coding of the round one transcripts.

Table 1

Preliminary Coding Categories

Question	Coding Category
What personal qualities or characteristics do you feel are essential for principals who lead successful special education programs?	Behaviors/actions Descriptive words (adjectives) Feelings
What specific knowledge and/or experience do you feel were beneficial to understanding and supporting the needs of teachers and students in special education programs?	Behaviors/actions Knowledge Experiences People
What are the challenges you have experienced in leading special education programs in general education settings?	People Behaviors Responsibilities
What strategies did you employ to respond to these challenges?	Behaviors/actions People

Table 1 Continued

Question	Coding Category
What specific instructional leadership skills do you feel are essential for leading special education programs?	Behaviors/actions Knowledge Experiences People
Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences	Behaviors/actions Knowledge Experiences People Feelings

Coding and Analysis

As the researcher read the transcripts, words and phrases associated with each coding category were highlighted. For example, in response to question one, principals used words such as compassionate and empathetic. These words were highlighted and marked as descriptive. After repeated readings, the highlighted words and phrases were recorded on a data collection table. When a participant responded with an identical or synonymous word or phrase, that response was recorded on the table as a tally mark. When a participant's responses could not be tallied under an existing theme, the response was recorded as a separate item.

Structural coding was utilized to reduce the narrative data while maintaining the theme of the response. Items that were coded and presented as one response for the second round of data collection will be described in the findings for each question. For example the phrase "being a good communicator" was identified as a personal characteristic essential for successful leadership of special education programs. In subsequent transcripts, identical or synonymous phrases such as "good communication

skills" or "being able to communicate with teachers and parents" were tallied under the theme of "being a good communicator". The responses were presented for consideration in round two as "Principals must have effective communication skills."

The transcripts included numerous specific experiences shared by the participants as examples to explain their responses. The participants' own words were recorded on the data table as "participant comments" as a means of reducing the amount of narrative text. Participant's experiences or behaviors were recorded as a verbatim quote when they provided an example to explain their response.

Response Rates

A total of 107 different response details were recorded for the six questions during the round one interviews. Every participant responded to each question. Question one, *"What personal qualities or characteristics do you feel are essential for principals who lead successful special education programs"* resulted in twenty-three distinct key words or phrases within a total of eighty-four responses. Question two, *"Please identify specific knowledge and/or experience that you feel are beneficial to understanding and supporting the needs of teachers and students in special education programs"* resulted in seventeen distinct key words or phrases within a total of seventy-two responses. Question three, *"What are the challenges you have experienced in leading special education programs in general education settings?"* resulted in twenty-one distinct key words or phrases within a total of seventy-two responses. Question four," *What strategies did you employ to respond to these challenges*?" resulted in seventeen distinct key words or phrases within a total of sixty-four responses. Question five, *"What specific instructional leadership skills do you feel are essential for leading special education programs?"*

resulted in eighteen distinct key words or phrases within a total of sixty responses. Question six provided an opportunity for participants to add any additional comments and eight additional distinct key words or phrases were noted. These were added to existing response counts during the round one data analysis.

Initial Data Analysis and Reduction

Round one data collection resulted in 107 different responses to the six questions. All of the responses were analyzed to determine if they should be included for the participants' consideration in round two. The responses with the highest frequency were moved to the second round survey. The participant response data tables were analyzed using structural coding methods to identify themes in individual responses that would result in combining the words or phrases into one item to be considered in round two. These structurally coded responses will be described for each question.

Question One

Table 2 represents the coded responses to the question, "What personal qualities or characteristics do you feel are essential for principals who lead successful special education programs?" Column one represents the participants' responses and column two indicates how many times (frequency) the identical or synonymous keywords or phrases were made by any of the twenty-six principals.

Table 2

Essential Qualities and Characteristics

Response	Frequency
Compassion and empathy	15
Understanding of the needs of special education students	13

Table 2 Continued

Response	Frequency
Be a teacher first, teacher mindset, understand through a teacher lens	9
Good communicator	7
Ability to build trust with parents, students, teachers	7
Good listener	5
Belief in mainstreaming/inclusion	3
Commitment to your own professional development	3
Enjoy being with students	2
High expectations for all learners	2
Creative	2
Flexible	1
Open minded	1
Good judgment	1
Attentive to the needs of others	1
Be a leader	1
Persistence	1
Good interpersonal skills	1
Strong organizational skills	1
Be a role model	1
Love for the teaching profession	1
Tactful	1
Interested and involved	1

For Question One, "*What personal qualities or characteristics do you feel are essential for principals who lead successful special education programs?"* having *compassion and empathy* was the most frequent response (n=15). This was noted in the context of empathy towards students, parents, and teachers. One principal expressed this as the need to have "heart and hands". *Understanding the needs of special education students* was expressed by thirteen participants (*n*=13). Being *a good communicator* had a frequency rate of seven (*n*=7). The *ability to build trust with parents, students, and teachers* had a frequency of seven (*n*=7). *Being a good listener* had a frequency of five (*n*=5).

Data reduction. For the purpose of the identifying items for the second round survey, *being a good listener* was considered under the theme of *effective communication skills* and therefore was not listed as a separate response choice on the second survey. Three phrases, *being a teacher first (teacher mindset, using a "teacher's lens)*, *love for the teaching profession*, and *enjoying being with students* were considered as one theme and was presented on the round two survey as "*Principals must have a mindset of being a teacher first*".

Round two items. The following responses to question one were identified as the most frequent and were presented to the participants for consideration in the second round:

- Principals must understand the needs of students with disabilities.

- Principals must display compassion and empathy.

- Principals must have the ability to building trusting relationships with students, parents and staff.

- Principals must have effect communication skills.

- Principals must maintain the mindset of being a "teacher first.

Question Two

Table 3 represents the coded responses to the question, "What specific knowledge and/or experience do you feel are beneficial to understanding and supporting the needs of teachers and students in special education programs?"

Table 3

Specific Knowledge and Experience

Response	Frequency
Knowledge of types of disabilities	16
Classroom teaching experience with exposure to students with special needs	10
Knowledge gained through working with a variety of students (different disabilities, different types of programs)	8
Knowledge of laws and codes	7
Knowledge of learning styles	5
Knowledge gained from collaborating with Child Study Team	5
Network of people	4
Experienced/knowledge gained from colleagues	4
Ability to find resources (people to ask)	3
Knowledge of standards and curriculum	3
Observing classroom teachers	2
Formal training not as essential as experience	1

Table 3 Continued

Response	Frequency
Background in remediation (reading, writing, mathematics)	1
Experience balancing all the responsibilities (plant management, schedules, personnel)	1
Understanding responsibilities	1
Understanding the full spectrum of students' needs (home, school, personal, medical)	1

For question two, *"What specific knowledge and/or experience do you feel were beneficial to understanding and supporting the needs of teachers and students in special education programs"* resulted in seventeen key words or phrases. Having *knowledge of types of disabilities* had a frequency of sixteen (*n*=16) followed by *having classroom teaching experience with some exposure to student with disabilities* (*n*=10). *Knowledge of the law* had a response rate of seven (*n*=7). The *need to stay informed about changes in special education law* was also stated in response to question six.

Data reduction. *Knowledge gained from collaborating with the Child Study Team* (n=5), *having a network of people* (n=5), and *ability to find resources including "people to ask"* (n=3) were combined as one theme and presented for consideration as "*Principals must develop a professional network of people and resources.*" Also included in the second survey for consideration was *applying the experience gained from working with colleagues (n=5)*. This was intended to differentiate between having an ongoing network of "go to" people for support and collaboration, and learning from these

collaborations for the purpose of eventually having the skills to apply this knowledge to novel situations without the need to reach out to other people.

Knowledge gained from working with a variety of students (n=8) was considered to have the same theme as *experience teaching a variety of students* and *knowledge of types of disabilities*. Principals who had experience as special education teachers were asked how that experience helped them as a principal. One noted that this helped him to have a good understanding of the nature of different disabilities but he did not feel that this was essential for a principal to successfully lead a special education program. All of the participating principals had some exposure to students with disabilities as teachers even if these students were not specifically assigned to their class.

Round two items. The following responses to question two were identified as the most frequent and were presented to the participants for consideration in the second round:

- Principals must be able to apply knowledge gained from their colleagues, other administrators and/or other practitioners.

- Principals must develop a professional network of people and resources.

- Principals must be knowledgeable about special education laws and codes.

- Principal must have teaching experience that has included some exposure to working with diverse student populations including but not limited to students with disabilities.

- Principals must be knowledgeable about the learning modalities and the nature of specific disabilities.

Question Three

Table 4 represents the responses to the question, "What are the challenges you have experienced in leading special education programs in general education settings?"

Table 4

Challenges of Leading Special Education Programs

Response	Frequency
Building an understanding that all teachers are responsible for all learners	11
Time (to meet with teachers, to be in the classrooms)	10
Supporting students with behavioral challenges (BD, Autistic), supporting their teachers	6
Establishing and supporting effective co-teaching models (In-class resource, inclusion classes)	6
Schedules	5
Keeping up with changes in special education (inclusion models, collaborative teaching models)	4
Teacher training (understanding students with disabilities, how to differentiate the curriculum)	3
Helping teachers understand modifications and accommodations	3
Students accepting other students	3
Parents accepting special education students in the same class with their "typically developing" child	3
Satisfying the needs of others (students, teachers, parents)	2

Table 4 Continued

Response	Frequency
Inadequate RTI programs (Response to Intervention)	2
Meeting students' needs while meeting performance standards (NJASK)	2
Student motivation	2
Parents accepting that their child has special needs	2
Varying levels of experience and expertise amongst the staff	2
Hiring and maintaining qualified staff (teachers and paraprofessionals)	2
Helping related arts teachers who only see the students once a week	1
Lack of adequate professional development	1
Placement challenges	1
Lack of funding and resources	1

Additional clarification was needed prior to analyzing the responses to this question. One participant who emailed a narrative response was contacted by phone as a follow-up before the round one data was coded and analyzed. The call was intended to ask the participant to provide more details to her response to question three. In her written response to this question, she noted "poor implementation of co-teaching models" as a challenge. It was unclear whom she was identifying as being responsible for implementing the program. After being asked for more details, she clarified that she has

experienced poor implementation of co-teaching when the selection of partner teachers was not facilitated by her; for example, teachers who were friends who wanted to work together, but did not have a good instructional partnership. She also clarified that the implementation of the co-teaching model can be challenging when the Child Study Team recommends this program model for a student who are not able to fully participate in an inclusion classroom due to behavior or academic instructional level. She further clarified that her role as the building principal was to recognize and address this challenge by carefully selecting co-teaching partners, closely monitoring student progress in these programs, and working collaboratively with the Child Study Team to assure the needs of the students were being met. This response provided additional clarification for question four, "What strategies did you employ to respond to these challenges?"

Question three, "*What are the challenges you have experienced leading special education programs in general education settings*" resulted in twenty-one key words or phrases. The most frequent was *building an understanding that all teachers are responsible of all learners* (n=11). Another challenge identified for the second survey was *establishing and supporting effective co-teaching models* (n=6). Three principals gave specific examples of co-teaching partnerships that did not work effectively. They attributed this to two factors – the teachers did not have a choice in being part of an inclusion partnerships and inadequate training related to co-teaching. Principals who shared positive co-teaching models expressed that finding the right teachers and ongoing professional development were essential for success. Since in-class resource/co-teaching models are becoming more prevalent, this response was posed to the participants for consideration and comment in round two.

Data reduction. Principals having *inadequate time to meet and collaborate with*

staff (n=10) and *challenges with schedules* (n=5) were combined as one theme and

presented for consideration in the second survey as a *challenge of scheduling to meet the*

needs of all stakeholders. Providing support for students with behavioral difficulties and

supporting teachers who work with these students had a frequency rate of six (n=6).

Although the number of specific responses indicating difficult behaviors as a challenge

for principals was six, the issue of student behavior was noted as a variable impacting

placement decisions (n=1), the culture of *acceptance by parents* (n=3) and *acceptance by*

other students (n=3), and *keeping up with changes in special education* (n=4) as more

students with Autism and behavioral disabilities are receiving services in more inclusive

settings. Principals noted that related arts teachers (music, art, physical education) have

difficulty when working with special education students for two reasons; limited time

with the students (usually 40 minutes a week) and a lack of adequate training to meet the

students' needs. These challenges were presented for consideration in the second survey

as *monitoring and supporting students and teachers in classrooms with students who*

have challenging behaviors.

  Creating a culture of acceptance was a theme based on responses about *parents*

accepting students in the same class as their "typically developing" child (n=3) and

students accepting other students (n=3). The challenge of accessibility of trained

personnel and resources to meet the needs of students with disabilities was also a theme

established by structural coding of several responses; *hiring and maintaining qualified*

staff (n=2), *varying levels of teacher experience and expertise (n=2)*, and *lack of*

professional development (n=1).

Round two items. The following coded responses to question three were identified as the most frequent and were presented to the participants for consideration in the second round:

- The challenge of monitoring and supporting teachers and students in classrooms with students who have challenging behaviors.

- The challenge of creating schedule that meet the needs/requirements of all stakeholders.

- The challenge of establishing a culture with teachers and staff that they are all responsible for every student's success.

- The challenge of establishing and facilitating in-class resource co-teaching partnerships.

- The challenge of creating a culture of acceptance with students and parents of non-disabled students.

- The challenge of the accessibility of personnel and resources to meet the diverse needs of students with disabilities.

Question Four

Table 5 represents the responses to the question, *"What strategies did you employ to respond to these challenges?"*

Table 5

Strategies to Address Challenges

Responses	Frequency
Professional development	12
Build a culture of inclusion for all students (through student programs)	10

Table 5 Continued

Response	Frequency
Spend time with teachers to provide support and recommendations	8
Observe students and teachers in the classroom	5
Be visible and accessible	4
Utilizing the Child Study Team for training and support	4
Make careful teacher-student placement decisions	3
Create programs to help students understand tolerance, diversity	3
Build a rapport with the staff	2
Work with the Child Study Team to come up with creative program options	2
Review and explain IEPs	2
Spend time with parents, build trusting relationships	2
Help teachers to understand data collection and progress monitoring	2
Mainstreaming to allow students as much exposure to the curriculum in a typical setting	1
Setting expectations for support staff (paraprofessionals)	1
Set high expectations for all students	1
Develop appropriate behavior plans	1

Question four resulted in seventeen key words and phrases in response to "*What strategies did you employ to respond to these challenges?"* Professional development

had the highest response frequency (n=12) followed by *building a culture of inclusion through school-wide programs* (n=10). *Spending time in the classrooms* had eight responses (n=8).

Data reduction: Collaboration with the Child Study Team was presented for consideration based on structural coding of *utilizing the CST for training* (n=4), *working with the CST to establish student programs* (n=2), and *working with the CST to develop behavior plans* (n=1). *Observing students and teachers in the classroom* (n=5) and *being visible and accessible* (n=4) were coded and combined as *spending time in the classrooms observing and providing feedback*. C*reating programs related to diversity* (n=3) was combined with the *building a culture of inclusion* as one item.

Round two items. The following responses to question four were identified as the most frequent and were presented to the participants for consideration in the second round:

- Principals must make time for teachers to have collaborative conversations with other teachers and support service staff.

- Principals must spend time in the classrooms and provide feedback.

- Principals must work collaboratively with the child study team.

- Principals must facilitate school-wide programs to promote tolerance and understanding.

- Principals must spend time with parents and families to build rapport and establish relationships.

Question Five

Table 6 represents the responses to the question, "What specific instructional leadership skills do you feel are essential for leading special education programs?"

Table 6

Instructional leadership Skills

Responses	Frequency
Observe teachers/classrooms and provide feedback	12
Lead professional development/professional discussions	10
Master teachers mentoring new teachers	8
Utilize the expertise of teachers to provide peer professional development	7
Monitor progress through data analysis	6
Review lesson plans	5
Must be knowledgeable about effective pedagogy	4
Collaborate with the Child Study Team	4
Schedule time for teacher collaboration	4
Know the curriculum and monitor changes in the curriculum	4
Understand how to differentiate instruction	3
Identify and build instructional programs based on student needs (using data driven practices)	3
Keep up to date on research (best practices)	3
Create effective teaching teams	2
Collaborate with support staff (OT, PT, speech)	2

Table 6 Continued

Response	Frequency
Assure that supervisors and CST members all take on a role as instructional leaders	1
Acknowledge the value of paraprofessional staff	1
Encourage reflective practice	1

Participants responded to the Question Five, "*What specific instructional leadership skills or practices do you feel are essential for supporting special education programs?*" The most frequent response was *observing teachers and providing feedback* (n=12).

Data reduction. *Master teachers mentoring new teachers* (n=8) and *utilizing the expertise of teachers to provide peer professional development* (n=7) were combined and presented as *utilizing master teachers to provide peer professional development.* *Monitoring student progress through data analysis* (n=6) and *utilizing data driven decision making when determining student programs* (n=3) were combined and presented for consideration as *leading and providing data analysis to assist teachers in understanding the needs of the students. Scheduling time for collaboration with teachers* (n=4) and the *Child Study Team* (n=4) were also combined as *providing time for collaboration.*

The final response for consideration related to instructional leadership was *principals must continue their own professional development*. This theme of personal professional development was the result of coding several responses; *principals must*

keep up to date on research, principals must know the curriculum, and *must be*

knowledgeable of effective pedagogy.

Round two items. The following responses to question five were identified as the

most frequent and were presented to the participants for consideration in the second

round:

- Principals must utilize master teachers to provide professional development.

- Principals must provide time for teacher to collaborate.

- Principals must provide extensive data analysis to assist teachers in

  understanding the needs of their students.

- Principals must conduct classroom walkthrough and observations followed by

  meaningful feedback.

- Principals must continue their own professional development.

Question Six

At the end of each interview, the participants were asked, "Is there anything else

you would like to share about your experiences? Table 7 represents the additional

statements made by participants in response to this question.

Table 7

Additional Principal Comments

Responses	Frequency
Principals must be student-centered in their decision making	2
Changes in the law require principals to stay informed	1
Principals must invest in their own professional development	1

Table 7 Continued

Response	Frequency
Need to work with parents, students, staff to break down barriers	1
ICR model requires principals to foster collaboration	1
The role of the principal is to help others	1
The principal needs to give novice teachers time to develop and build their confidence	1
Be visible and involved	1

The results of question six, *"Is there anything else you would like to share?"* did not result in any unique phrases or themes. Therefore these responses were considered in analyzing the responses of questions one through five.

Delphi Round Two

Based on the frequency of each response from round one, a second survey was developed utilizing Google Survey. The link to the survey was sent to each participant through an email. The participants were asked to review all of the responses listed in the survey and to consider the three responses they felt were the most essential for supporting successful special education programs. Each participant was again asked to provide a narrative explanation for their selections and any feedback regarding the item choices. Selections were tallied using the Google Survey summary tool.

The narrative responses to each question resulted in additional data that was coded using *in vivo* and structural coding methods in the same manner that these methods were applied in round one. The coded responses from round two were compared to the

coded data from round one. No new themes emerged and the narrative responses served to affirm the findings from round one.

Round Two Responses

The following tables include the response choices and response rates for each of the round two questions. Table 8 presents the response rates to the selection of personal qualities and characteristics principals identified as essential for leading special education programs.

Table 8

Essential Qualities and Characteristics

Response Choices	Number of Responses
Principals must understand the needs of students with disabilities	24
Principals must display compassion and empathy.	16
Principals must have the ability to build trusting relationships with students, parents and staff.	14
Principals must have effect communication skills.	10
Principals must maintain the mindset of being a "teacher first."	8

In addition to the survey selections noted in Table 8, the participants included narrative explanations to support their selections. Participants noted that understanding the needs of students with disabilities is essential for making program decisions for individual students, working with the families, and guiding the teachers. On participant

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noted that every principal must be able to "add to the conversation" in a meaningful way when making decisions or assessing the effectiveness of programs and services. This was noted as important for both individual students and for the special education program in general.

Table 9 represents the response rates to the specific knowledge and experience principals identified as beneficial for understanding and supporting the needs of teachers and students in special education programs.

Table 9

Specific Knowledge and Experience

Response Choices	Number of Responses
Principals should be able to apply knowledge gained from their colleagues, other administrators and/or other practitioners.	24
Principals should develop a professional network of people and resources.	14
Principals should be knowledgeable about special education laws and codes.	12
Principals should have teaching experience that includes exposure to working with diverse student populations including but not limited to students with disabilities.	12
Principals should be knowledgeable about the learning modalities and the nature of specific disabilities.	10

The narrative responses included in the survey resulted in similar findings from round one. The participants again emphasized the need to build a network of professionals who are knowledgeable about specific disabilities and special education.

The theme of understanding and implementing the legal requirements for special education was noted by four participants in the narrative; one specifically noting that principals must "ask questions of those who have knowledge and expertise" in order to assure that all aspects of special education programs and services are appropriately implemented and monitored.

Table 10 represents the response rates to the challenges principals face in leading special education programs.

Table 10

Challenges of Leading Special Education Programs

Response Choices	Number of Responses
The challenge of monitoring and supporting teachers and students in classrooms with students who have challenging behaviors.	20
The challenge of creating schedules that meet the needs/requirements for all stakeholders.	16
The challenge of establishing a culture with teachers and staff that they are all responsible for every student's success.	16
The challenge of establishing and facilitating in-class resource co-teaching partnerships.	10
The challenge of creating a culture of acceptance with students and parents of non-disabled students.	4
The challenge of the accessibility of personnel and resources to meet the diverse needs of students with disabilities.	4

Principals noted that the difficulties they face in meeting the needs of students with behavioral challenges is due to inadequate training for staff and limited resources to address the behaviors. This includes limited time with the child study team, limited access to individuals with expertise in behavior management (behavior specialists), and limited options for placing students in appropriate classes. One participant noted that the principal is often responsible for addressing the problematic behaviors while providing support for the teachers in an effort to "calm the situation" and address the needs of the child.

Table 11 represents the response rates to the strategies principals employ to address the challenges of leading special education programs.

Table 11

Strategies to Address Challenges

Response Choices Percentage	Number of Responses
Principals must make time for teachers to have collaborative conversations with other teachers and support staff.	20
Principals must spend time in the classrooms and provide feedback.	18
Principals must work collaboratively with the child study team.	18
Principals must provide consistent, meaningful professional development.	14
Principals must facilitate school-wide programs to promote tolerance and understanding.	10
Principals must spend time with parents and families to build rapport and relationships	4

The narrative responses included in the survey reflect the responses noted in round one. Principals are responsible for providing support by creating schedules that allow time for collaboration, they must provide quality professional development, and "use the expertise of professionals in the building" to provide support for teachers and paraprofessionals. Principals must be "visible and available" to the students, staff, and parents.

Table 12 represents the response rates to the instructional leadership skills principals identified as essential for leading and supporting special education programs.

Table 12

Instructional Leadership Skills

Response Choices	Number of Responses
Principals must utilize master teachers to provide professional development.	14
Principals must provide time for teachers to collaborate.	14
Principals must provide extensive data analysis to assist teachers in understanding the needs of their students.	10
Principals must provide professional development related to progress monitoring and instructional practices.	8
Principals must conduct classroom walkthroughs and observations followed by meaningful feedback.	8
Principals must continue their own professional development.	8

The narrative responses reflected the responses noted in round one. The participants emphasized the need for the principal to provide extensive, ongoing professional development utilizing a variety of available resources. This includes using "master teachers" as coaches and providing time for teachers to meet and collaborate. Two participants noted that the principal must provide extensive data analysis to help make informed instructional decisions and they must train their teachers to be able to "analyze data to inform instruction".

Delphi Round Three

The final Delphi round included follow-up phone calls to six participating principals for the purpose of reviewing the findings and soliciting additional feedback. All agreed with the importance of each response. These principals were also asked if the findings changed their thinking about their own responses. Two noted that the responses of the other participating principals served as an affirmation of their own experiences. One principal noted that instructional leadership (question five) must be viewed through the lens of her responsibility and behavior; utilizing master teachers to provide professional development and support for colleagues was important however that is more of a reflection on her management of personnel than her own behavior as a leader of instructional practices. She emphasized that she has a responsibility to share her own expertise and to actively seek opportunities to improve her skills so that the information can be "turn keyed" to her staff.

In round three, no new themes emerged and the participants agreed with the responses of the other participants. Consensus was reached for each of the five questions and the findings were consistent in each round.

Summary of Findings

The purpose of conducting the first two rounds of data collection was to achieve consensus to the responses to the five interview questions. During round one, participants provided narrative responses to the interview questions without prior knowledge of the responses from the other participants. In round two, the participants were provided with the most frequent responses to each interview question. The purpose was to allow each participant to reflect on the response provided by other expert practitioners and to provide additional narrative feedback related to the round one findings.

The following summary of the findings includes the consensus of responses to the first five questions posed during each round of data collection. The responses to question six are embedded in the responses to the first five questions unless otherwise noted. The findings are based on two rounds of responses to the following questions:

1. What personal qualities or characteristics do you feel are essential for principals who lead successful special education programs?

2. Please identify specific knowledge and/or experience that you feel were beneficial to understanding and supporting the needs of teachers and students in special education programs?

3. What are the challenges you have experienced in leading special education programs in general education settings?

4. What strategies did you employ to respond to these challenges?

5. What specific leadership skills do you feel are essential for leading special education programs?

Question One

Understanding Individual Needs

The participants identified having an understanding of the needs of students with disabilities as the most important personal characteristic/behavior followed by the need to be compassionate, understanding and empathetic towards the social, emotional, and academic needs of the students. One participant noted, "We must care deeply about each child regardless of how he/she is presented at the schoolhouse door." This theme of compassion and empathy was echoed in the responses of eight other principals who felt that this personal quality must be central to their decision making to ensure that students are provided with the academic, social, and emotional support they need. Principals and teachers must use both "heart and hands" when addressing the needs of students.

One participant noted that, although a principal does not need to be an expert regarding specific disabilities, he/she needs to be able to "add to the conversation in a meaningful way". Principals must be student-centered or student focused in their decision making process. Since the principal greatly influences the allocation of resources, it is imperative that he/she provides for the diverse needs of students receiving special education services. One participant stated, "I do believe that principals must support the teacher, but the mindset should be on children first."

Relationship Building

Principals must be engaged in building trusting relationships with all stakeholders including students, parents, teachers, and the community at large. One participant noted that building trusting relationships with the students, parents, and staff members is essential when there are difficult decisions to be made regarding programs, services, and

placements. These relationships extend to include child study team members, support staff, and other educators who can provide expertise and support. Principals emphasized the trust is an essential component to building and maintaining these relationships. One noted that our actions as principals serve as models for the school community. They must create opportunities for parents to share their experiences; to "tell their own story."

Communication Skills

The effective leader needs to develop a crystal clear vision and be able to communicate that vision through words and actions. The participants used the words "effective communication" in all three phases of data collection. Sending a consistent message, setting clear expectations, and backing up words with actions were most frequently noted as essential for building credibility and trust. Adding to the need to communicate with students, staff and parents, the principal must establish open, consistent communication with members of the child study team and special services personnel. This relationship is critical when the needs of individual students must be addressed or when changes to the special education program will directly impact the school.

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Question Two

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The participating principals had a variety of teaching experiences with varying exposure to students with disabilities. None of the participants recalled having any specific training related to special education other than the required coursework in school law, which included laws and statutes related to special education. One participant noted that coursework related to understanding diversity was included in her masters program;

however the framework for this course included all types of diversity, not just individuals with disabilities.

Gaining Experience and Expertise

Principals identified that most of the knowledge and expertise they employ when making decisions, leading conversations, or addressing the needs of individual students were gained through their own experience as teachers and/or principals. Consultation and collaboration with experienced colleagues, and having the ability to apply that knowledge, was identified as the most important means of gaining the necessary experience to successfully lead special education programs. During the interviews and subsequent survey, principals spoke about the need to rely on expert practitioners, including members of the child study team and those who provide supplemental services such as behavior consultants, occupational therapists, speech therapists, and physical therapists. One participant noted that the volume of information needed to lead a school requires principals to establish a network of "go to" people who have experience and expertise to help when a decision needs to be made. Another responded that her ability to have meaningful dialogue regarding the special education programs and addressing the needs of individual students is becoming easier with time. "The more exposure I have to different types of situations, the more confident I feel in my ability to lead the discussion."

Legal Responsibilities and Accountability

Principals are responsible for assuring that the requirements for special education and the accurate implementation of Individual Education Plans. Knowledge of special education law enables the principal to determine if all aspects of a student's established

program are being followed. Another essential element is understanding and adhering to timelines for evaluations and annual reviews. Master schedules must reflect the prescribed number of minutes of instructional time. The principal is responsible for assuring that all aspects of the special education program, including the actions of the teachers and support staff, are in compliance with the laws and policies related to special education.

Improving Professional Practice

Principals need to be responsible for their own ongoing professional development. This includes staying apprised about changes in the law and research-based practices to serve specific populations of students. More than half of the participating principals noted that their professional expertise was gained by experience and driven by the populations assigned to their schools. Most notably principals identified students with behavioral challenges and children with autism as the populations that had the greatest influence on the type of professional development they needed in order to serve the school population.

Question Three

In round one of data collection, participants noted twenty-two challenges related to special education. One participant emphasized that as our school populations become more diverse and more students are being served in public school settings, the challenges principals face continuously change.

Classroom Management and Student Behavior

Monitoring and supporting students with disruptive behaviors was the most frequently noted challenge related specifically to the students. "Disruptive" behavior was described in various ways including physical aggression, verbal outbursts, maladaptive,

or any behavior that interfered with the overall learning environment. Inadequate training and resources for the teachers add to the challenge of addressing the students' needs. The need to respond to crisis situations such as behavioral outbursts, frequently interfere with the principal's ability to balance his/her time often leading to an inability to address the needs of the greater school community.

Schedules and Mainstreaming

Principals addressed the challenge of scheduling in all rounds of data collection. In particular the need to have prescribed timeframes for instructional periods often leads to the special education schedule driving the school master schedule. The availability of teachers, support staff, and specialist such as occupational and physical therapists also impacts the scheduling of class time for special education students. Establishing common planning time for teacher collaboration and consultation adds to the challenge.

Principals expressed a preference for mainstreaming but like to have the option of creating small group opportunities in areas such as art and computer literacy classes that would allow teachers the opportunity to provide more individualized instruction. This type of alternative scheduling model requires additional instructional periods for existing staff or the need to add additional teachers to the schedule. Convincing district personnel that more manpower is needed to support existing or proposed programs was a source of frustration noted by two participants in both round two and round three.

Establishing a Culture of Shared Responsibility

Principals agreed that establishing a culture of shared responsibility for all learners is a challenge for school leaders. Principals must establish an understanding that every teacher is responsible for all learners, including students with special needs.

Teachers and support staff who lack experience or expertise with students with special needs are often frustrated. Responses during round two and round three conversations noted that in most cases it is not an issue that teachers do not have empathy or concern for these students; they feel unprepared to address their needs. Teachers need support and professional development in order to build an understanding for the needs of specific students, in particular students with behavioral challenges. Infrequent opportunities to collaborate with support personnel such as behavioral consultants or child study team members was noted as an added challenge for teachers and principals who are addressing the needs of disruptive or aggressive students.

Principals note that changing the culture of the school takes time but will ultimately serve to create a positive environment for the entire population. Establishing a culture of shared responsibility and community also involves the responses of the other students and parents of non-disabled students.

<div align="center">**Question Four**</div>

Overcoming Challenges

The participating principals shared seventeen ways that the challenges of leading special education programs are addressed in their schools. The findings reflect strategies and interventions that were not dependent on additional financial or personnel commitments from the school district.

Time and Attention

Principals identified time to consult, converse, problem solve with teachers, support staff and child study team as the most important mechanism for overcoming the challenges they face with special education. Principals noted that the shared expertise and

experience of teachers and principals enables them to work together plan, problem solve, and establish strategies to support the success of students with special needs throughout the school environment.

The principal must be visible and accessible throughout the school day. Teachers need to know that support is available when needed. Being present in the classroom, lunchroom, and at recess affirms the belief that everyone, including the principal, is responsible for the success of every child. Providing feedback and offering assistance affirms the principal's commitment to supporting staff members who may be struggling to meet the demands of a challenging student.

Working with the Child Study Team

Principals noted that collaboration with the Child Study Team members was essential for addressing the challenges of meeting the needs of students and supporting teachers. Schools where members of the Team were routinely present expressed that the ability to address student concerns, such as behavioral outbursts, creates an environment where the teachers feel supported. One principal described her daily collaboration with the school social worker (a CST member) as interacting with "a true partner." The social worker is able to observe the students every day, provide feedback to the teachers, and "trouble shoot" with teachers, parents, and the principal.

Feedback and Dialogue

In order for special education teachers to offer the appropriate instruction for their students' diverse needs, ongoing professional development is critical. Special education teachers and support staff must work as a cohesive unit to support optimal classroom instruction. The principal must have positive, frequent dialogue with all stakeholders and

as one principal stated, "professional development must be routinely embedded in faculty meetings, Professional Learning Communities, and teacher observation conferences."

Building an Inclusive Community

Acceptance, tolerance, and understanding are keys to creating a culture of inclusion throughout the school. Some specific strategies and activities include classroom lessons related to understanding disabilities, guest speakers leading school-wide assemblies, and cross-curricular activities related to diversity and disabilities. During the first round of interviews, three principals gave specific examples of students who led discussions with their peers regarding their own disabilities; specifically Tourette Syndrome, Autism, and Asperger Syndrome. Every participating principal shared some form of character education or teaching tolerance instruction as a framework for providing information and facilitating dialogue with students.

Question Five

Principals are responsible for assuring the success of all learners. In order for students to have successful outcomes, each teacher must have the skills, knowledge, and resources to meet the needs of their students. Principals identified their role as the instructional leader in terms of sharing their own knowledge and experience and facilitating collaboration and support from other experts or master teachers.

Enhancing Instructional Practices

Professional development was identified as a key component for supporting a successful special education program. The findings reflect the principals' belief that this can be accomplished in several ways. This includes the principal providing direct instruction to all teachers and support staff related to specifics such as instructional

strategies, differentiated instruction, and behavior management. Allowing teachers to have time to collaborate was noted as essential for ongoing growth for the staff. The principal is responsible for developing a schedule that includes collaborative planning periods or additional release time to share ideas and discuss instruction. One participant explained her approach to professional development as a shared responsibility of all educators. "I believe all educators must be lifelong learners. Another participant emphasized that professional development allows teachers to "gain confidence" in their ability to reach all types of learners.

Utilizing the collective expertise of the teachers was discussed in all three rounds of data collection. In particular, allowing "master teachers" to mentor and provide professional development was noted as key to successful teacher support. Some principals expressed that using master teachers was important because the principal cannot possibly be an "expert in all areas". The principal is responsible for identifying teachers who have specific areas of expertise and then providing time for these master teachers to meet with their colleagues. Although there was disagreement with one principal who did not feel this reflected her role as an "instructional leader", the consensus was that this strategy of peer-to-peer training was effective.

Data Driven Instructional Practices

Principals noted that data related to student performance provides a "springboard" for discussing student progress. The principal is responsible for modeling and instructing teachers regarding data analysis and data driven instructional practices. One principal felt too often principals review data in isolation and then provide a "prescription" for the teachers, including resources, strategies, and learning goals. She pointed out that her

teachers have developed better instructional skill because she insists that they review and analyze the data for their students on their own. The teachers then take more ownership of the responsibility to identify a student's strengths and weaknesses.

Classroom Walkthroughs and Observations

Principals have an opportunity on a daily basis to support instruction. This can be accomplished by making frequent visits to classrooms. Observing teachers in action allows the principal to note teaching strengths and provide feedback regarding areas that the teacher may need additional support to improve their professional practices. Teachers benefit from active dialogue with the principal. One principal referred to her role as being a coach and mentor. Listening to the needs of the teachers and then coaching them through solutions is a "powerful" means of supporting the teachers' professional development. Since the principal may not have specific experience or expertise in special education, teachers need opportunities to observe and collaborate with other special education professionals. Again the principal must take an active role in providing time for this to happen.

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Limitations

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This study focused on elementary school principals working in suburban New Jersey school districts. The study did not include inner-city principals who may have additional challenges related to social, economic, or environmental issues. Additional variables that may impact the success of special education students include teacher competency, parental involvement, and district resources. These variables were not included in the study.

Chapter 5

Discussion, Recommendations and Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to identify the behaviors, values, skills, and knowledge of elementary principals who lead successful special education programs in public schools. The aim was to assemble the collective knowledge and experience of successful practitioners and to identify the strategies and actions they employ to lead programs that result in academic, social, and behavioral progress for students identified with special needs.

Summary of Procedures

A Delphi study design provided a framework for including twenty-six elementary school principals working in eight different school districts and allowing these principals to share and come to consensus in response to five questions. The first round of data collection resulted in narrative responses to the research questions. This was followed by data analysis and the development of a survey for the second round of data collection. During the second round, the participants were provided with the most frequent responses to the questions and were asked to select what they believed to be the most important responses. They provided additional narrative reflections regarding their answer choices. Round three provided an opportunity for six members of the study to share their thoughts regarding the results of the study.

The principals identified what they believed to be the most important skills, strategies, and behaviors that enable them to lead special education programs in their schools. This includes their personal characteristics, knowledge, and experience. The study also explored the challenges these principals face in leading special education programs and the strategies they use to overcome these challenges. The principals shared

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what they believe to be the most successful strategies for supporting the academic progress of their students and what they believed was their role as the instructional leader for their schools. The results include the consensus of responses to the following questions.

1. What personal qualities or characteristics do you feel are essential for principals who lead successful special education programs?

2. What specific knowledge and/or experience do you feel were beneficial to understanding and supporting the needs of teachers and students in special education programs?

3. What are the challenges you have experienced in leading special education programs in general education settings?

4. What strategies did you employ to respond to these challenges?

5. What specific instructional leadership skills do you feel are essential for leading special education programs?

Consensus was achieved through sharing the most frequent responses from the first round of principal interviews and then posing these responses to the participants again in round two for the purpose of soliciting feedback and achieving agreement. The third round served as a member check to review the consensus of responses and the conclusions drawn regarding the beliefs, skills, knowledge, and experience of this group of successful elementary principals.

Summary of Results

The participants chosen for this study shared their perceptions, experiences, and strategies for supporting and leading special education programs in their elementary

schools. Through three rounds of data collection and analysis, a consensus was reached in response to the five research questions.

Question One: Personal Qualities and Characteristics

The participating principals identified having compassion and empathy as the most important personal characteristics for supporting students with special needs. Principals provided examples of their personal practices that reflect this compassion including spending time with the students and parents having discussions about their school experiences, concerns, and needs. For example, one principal shared his perception that "every student has a story" and every parent needs to know that "you value their perspective and experience". Another principal noted that his responsibility as the school leader is to be a role model for the school community by demonstrating respect and assuring that every student is treated as a child first, not defined by their disability.

The participating principals agreed that having a deep understanding of the needs of special education students is important for assuring that each student is provided with the appropriate support to be successful. This was noted as a personal characteristic in the context that in order to meet the needs of each student, the principal must make the effort to understand how the students' disabilities impact their academic, physical, social, and emotional growth. They accomplish this by engaging in conversations with parents, teachers, and Chile Study Team members. The principal is responsible for assuring that programs and services are aligned with the needs of the students and that the programs are appropriately implemented.

The principals agreed that building relationships with all stakeholders, including students, teachers, parents, and the school community is essential for leading a successful program. Having strong communication skills was identified as essential for building these relationships. As one participant stated, "students, parents, and teachers need to feel comfortable asking for help or the things they need." The principal must facilitate open dialogue that will enable these discussions to take place. In one follow-up interview in round three, the principal emphasized the importance of building these relationships in order to establish trust. This is particularly important when decisions need to be made regarding placements, programs, or services for a student. The parents and teachers need the assurance that the principal is facilitating these decisions and "acting in the best interest of the child."

Question Two: Knowledge and Experience

Principals identified that the knowledge gained from other skilled practitioners has provided them with the knowledge they need to lead successful programs. There was agreement that graduate principal preparation programs provided little or no coursework related to special education. Therefore it was essential to establish a network of people, including members of the child study team, teachers, and other administrators, to reach out to for support and guidance.

Knowledge of special education law was noted as essential for school principals. Although most of the participants noted that school law was part of their formal principal training programs, they have a responsibility to stay apprised of changes in the law and they must be knowledgeable regarding the implementation and monitoring of student programs to assure full compliance.

The participating principals agreed that it is their responsibility to continue to improve their own professional practices through ongoing professional development experiences. Topics for professional development specifically related to special education include inclusion programs or co-teaching models, student assessment, behavior management, and workshops related to specific disabilities such as Autism. The principals shared that by extending their professional knowledge they are better able to lead professional development for their teachers and staff.

Question Three: Challenges

The participating principals discussed a variety of challenges they face related to leading special education programs. Working with students who exhibit challenging behaviors and supporting their teachers was the most frequent challenge noted. This includes providing for both the needs of the identified student and the other children in the classroom. One principal shared her experience regarding a group of students who were new to her school. The children were in a class for students with Autism and were having some difficulty in mainstreamed activities. The principal noted that typical mainstream activities included attending art and music classes with grade level peer classes. The teachers were finding it increasingly more difficult to manage the behaviors while trying to provide instruction. The principal explained that she needed to provide support for the teachers and to acknowledge the challenges they were facing. Another principal noted situations where the parents of the non-disabled students complained about having students with disruptive behaviors in a general education inclusion class.

The principals identified the challenges of scheduling to assure full compliance with prescribed programs as well as offering opportunities for inclusion or mainstreamed

instructional and social activities. Creating master schedules for all grade levels and content areas was noted as particularly challenging for principals who have to include schedules for supplemental services such as physical or occupational therapy. Because the programs for special education have specific minutes for instructional time, principals noted challenges in assuring that schedules accurately reflect the required time and that they have adequate personnel available to cover the schedule.

Principals identified building a culture of shared responsibility as another challenge that required leadership, modeling, professional development, and ongoing student, teacher, and family support. One principal stated that she has had to directly address teachers who are reluctant to take responsibility for students who may be mainstreamed in their classes either with a paraprofessional or a special education teacher. She said, "I cringe when I hear teachers refer to a student as Mrs. Jones' student" when that teacher was referring to a student who was mainstreamed with her class for math.

Question Four: Strategies to Address Challenges

Principals use a variety of strategies to overcome the challenges of creating and supporting successful programs. The most frequent approach is to engage in frequent, meaningful conversations with teachers and support staff. This includes the need to be present in classrooms, observing students and teachers, and them providing feedback. Collaboration with the Child Study Team was identified as important for supporting the teachers and students, and providing appropriate, ongoing professional development for all teachers. They identified the need to develop a culture of shared responsibility for all learners as a challenge that required understanding and commitment from the entire

school community. This is accomplished through embedding topics of diversity across the curriculum or through a structured character education program. Some schools hold disability awareness days and invite students and parents to attend.

Question Five: Instructional Leadership

The principals recognized their role as the instructional leader in their school. The most frequent means of supporting their students and teachers is through a variety of professional development strategies. This includes utilizing the expertise and experience of master teachers to provide support to their colleagues. Providing time for teachers to meet and collaborate was also deemed as an important component of instructional leadership. The principal is also responsible for providing meaningful student data analysis to assist the teachers in understanding the needs of the students and then providing the professional development, resources, and support the teachers need to develop and implement appropriate instructional programs for the students.

Interpretation

The results of the study were conceptualized through the framework of social justice and leadership theories. The following interpretations compare the findings from this study to those found in the literature.

Social Justice

The participating principals were able to come to consensus on the personal characteristics and behaviors they believe are essential for supporting students, teachers, and families. The findings indicate that principals who are able to sustain and support special education programs in public elementary schools reflect practices that are aligned with a social justice mindset. This includes demonstrating compassion and empathy for

the students and their families. Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee (2002) refer to this as having social awareness; empathy, understanding, and showing a sincere interest in the concerns and perspectives of others. The participating principals achieve this through open communication, establishing relationships with all stakeholders, and modeling these behaviors for their staff.

The study participants offered examples of their own professional practices that reflect the behaviors Theoharis (2007) identifies as those of social justice leaders. These include placing value on diversity and supporting cultural respect, creating opportunities for inclusion, strengthening teaching by providing ongoing professional development, and demanding high standards for all learners. The principals in this study facilitate school-wide character education and diversity programs for their students to introduce topics about diversity, equality, respect, and understanding. They have established programs for inclusion including co-teaching models, in which special education and general education teachers share instructional responsibilities and provide a collaborative teaching program to serve all students in the same classroom.

Social justice thinking requires school leaders to facilitate discussions related to setting high expectations for all learners and then providing the support and training teachers need in order to assure that these expectations are met (Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005; Kose, 2009). In order for these programs to be successful, the principals provide extensive professional development for their teachers and support staff. The focus of their professional development includes data analysis for the purpose of identify the needs of each learner, methods for instruction, and strategies to address challenging behaviors. They include topics that enable teachers to understand the diverse needs of the

students and the nature of their disabilities. The principals in this study shared a variety of resources they use to establish and maintain professional development programs including peer mentoring and collaboration. They arrange for master teachers to share their expertise with other teachers and facilitate opportunities for expert practitioners such as behavior consultants, Child Study Team members, or content area supervisors to provide workshops.

Principals must establish a culture of shared responsibility for the success of every student while communicating clear expectations for teachers and support staff (Osterman & Kottkamp, 2004). The principals shared experiences related to overcoming the challenges of creating a culture in their schools where all members of the faculty are responsible for the success of every student. The principals identified having strong communication skills as essential for leading their schools. Clearly articulating expectations, listening to the needs and concerns of all stakeholders, and demonstrating empathy, support, and understanding were all identified as behaviors these principals employ to assure that the needs of their students are being addressed.

Leadership

The findings in this study include key leadership behaviors that previous research studies have indicated are necessary for success. Principals must establish values and beliefs for their students, teachers, and families and then serve as an advocate and facilitator to assure that these values and beliefs result in success for all students (Donaldson, Marnik & Ackerman, 2009; Goor, Schwenn, & Boyer, 1997; McKenzie &Hernandez, 2008). The participants shared their beliefs that the principal establishes a culture of acceptance in their schools. They shared examples of school-wide programs

that reflect the values and beliefs of an inclusive community including providing daily opportunities for students with special needs to be fully integrated inside and outside the classroom with their grade level peers. For example two principals shared specific examples of how they assure that peer groups are established during lunch and recess. They create an understanding with the students that every child needs to feel included; if someone asks to join in activity, the answer is always yes.

Leadership studies indicate that strong interpersonal skills, the ability to communicate, and the willingness to show warmth and compassion are key characteristics of effective leaders (Chemers 2000; Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1999). Chemers (2000) identified the two most prevalent characteristics of successful leaders as consideration behavior including warmth, concern and open communication, and initiation of structure, being direct, setting goals, and providing feedback. The findings in this study revealed that the principals employ strategies that enable them to build trust and openly communicate while advocating for the programs and resources they feel are necessary for student success. They work collaboratively with teachers and the Child Study Team to review data and set goals for student achievement. They interact frequently with the teachers both in and out of the classroom for the purpose of discussion and feedback.

Principal Training

Previous studies contend that principal training programs provide inadequate preparation for working with diverse student populations (Cambron-McCabe & McCarthy, 2005; Lashley, 2007; Marshall, 2004; McKenzie & Hernandez, 2008; Parker & Shapiro, 1992). The participants in this study affirmed that their ability to lead

successful programs for students with disabilities is a result of their own experience and

relationships with other school leaders rather than formal training. None of the

participating principals recalled any specific coursework related to special education with

the exception of school law requirements. The experience gained by working in the field

was the primary source of knowledge for addressing the needs of special education

students. One principal used the analogy that going from a teacher in classroom to a

building level administrator was "like being able to ride a bicycle and then being asked to

hop on a Harley and drive". She acknowledged how difficult it was in the first few years

as a school administrator to be able to address the wide variety of situations and

circumstances that impact students and teachers.

The principals identified several ways for school leaders to develop the

knowledge and skills necessary to lead successful special education programs. These

included relying on other experienced principals to provide guidance and support. They

have developed relationships with expert practitioners including members of their child

study teams, speech therapists, and behavior consultants.

The findings in this study support prior research related to a leader as a learner

(Barth, 1997; Fawcett, 2004; Mullen, Harris, Pryor, &Browne-Ferrign, 2008). The

principals shared their belief that they are responsible for their own professional

development. They actively seek opportunities to improve their professional practices

through workshops, networking, and discussions with other practitioners. The

participating principals included the need for ongoing professional development in their

responses to three of the questions; their own professional practices, meeting the

challenges of special education, and the role of instructional leadership. Barth (2006)

emphasized the need for school leaders to serve as role models for taking responsibility for their own professional learning. By setting expectations, modeling collegiality, recognizing the teachers' efforts, and supporting initiative, school leaders can promote positive, effective professional learning that will result in improved classroom practices (Horne &Warren-Little, 2010; Mangin & Stoelinga, 2010).

Support for Teachers

The study results identified support for students with significant disruptive or maladaptive behaviors as a challenge for principals. This includes addressing the needs of the student, his/her peers, and the teachers. Teachers rely on administrative support when the behavior of an individual student interferes with the learning of other students (Greene, 2008; Jull 2010; Lane, 2004; Zaretsky, Moreau, & Faircloth, 2008). A study of elementary classroom teachers found that seventy-five percent of the teachers believed their ability to teach effectively was compromised because of disruptive students (Guardino & Fullerton, 2010). In order for school leaders to provide appropriate support, they must understand the experiences and perceptions of teachers who work with disruptive students in general education classroom settings. According to the responses of the principals in this study, they must address these concerns by being present in the classroom, providing feedback and support to the teachers. They also identified the need to provide time for teachers to collaborate with each other and with support staff such as the school psychologist, social workers, and behavior consultants. The principal is responsible for creating this support network and assuring that the teachers have the skills and resources they need to address the students' behaviors so they (the students) can have a successful school experience.

<center>**Implications for Practitioners**</center>

School leaders are responsible for influencing school culture, supporting student learning, and facilitating the continued improvement of teachers' professional practices. The implications for this study include the need to support the professional growth of novice administrators through changes in the principal preparation programs and principal mentoring. Further implications include changes that current principals can make to improve the success of their special education programs. This includes setting expectations, creating a culture of inclusion, and supporting the professional growth of their teachers.

Principal Preparation Programs

The principals in this study expressed that their principal preparation programs did not include any coursework related to special education or working with diverse student populations. As the demands on school principals increase, including the implications that evidence of student growth will have on principal evaluations, novice principals will need to be better prepared to address the needs of all students in their schools. Principal preparation programs at colleges and universities, as well as programs such as NJ EXCEL, should consider providing coursework or research requirements related to special education. In order for school leaders to provide adequate support for the students and the teachers, they need to have an understanding of specific disabilities, the potential needs of these student populations, and research based practices that support the success of these students.

Principal mentoring is a requirement for novice school leaders in New Jersey. This is another option for providing training and support in the area of special education;

pairing novice principals with other school leaders who have experience with diverse student populations. The challenges noted by the principals in this study include scheduling, supporting teachers, and establishing inclusive practices. Novice principals can collaborate with experienced principals to discuss strategies for addressing these challenges. In order for this to happen, principals and mentors must have time to meet. School districts can accommodate this by providing release time for novice principals to conduct site visits to other schools.

Current School Leaders

Principals who are already leading public elementary schools can benefit from reflecting on their own practices and how their leadership may be impacting the success of their special education students. The behaviors of the principals in this study reflect the practices of those with a social justice mindset. Current school leaders must serve as facilitators, role models, and advocates for all of their students. Principals who do not have the experience or expertise to recognize and support the needs of students with disabilities should be encouraged to collaborate with other principals, child study team members, and teachers with special education experience. As shared by one of the study participants, "we cannot lead our teachers and students in a direction that we are not willing or able to go ourselves."

The principals in this study expressed the need to constantly seek opportunities to improve their own professional practices. This includes becoming knowledgeable about specific disabilities, attending workshops and trainings, and spending time observing skilled teachers in the classroom. By cultivating their own pool of knowledge, these

principals are able to address the needs of students and teachers by providing specific

skills and strategies to support student success.

Cultivating Inclusive School Environments

Establishing a culture of shared responsibility and creating an inclusive school

environment requires school leaders to clearly communicate expectations and then

facilitate opportunities for teachers, students, and families to develop understanding and

acceptance of individual differences. The principals in this study have accomplished this

in several ways. Principals have used their character education lessons and activities

throughout the curriculum to introduce and discuss diversity. This includes providing

opportunities for students to learn from other students. Several principals facilitated

discussions where a child with Tourette Syndrome or Asperger Syndrome shared their

experiences and challenges with their classmates. Creating a culture of inclusion is not

without challenges. Students with limited communication skills, physical limitations, or

atypical behaviors may find it difficult to fully participate in all aspects of the school day.

The principal must assess the barriers that impede full inclusion and utilize whatever

resources are necessary to address these barriers.

Professional Learning Communities

Principals must identify the professional development needs of their teachers and

they must facilitate opportunities for teachers to improve their professional practices.

This includes the teacher's ability to support academic growth, differentiate instruction to

meet the needs of diverse learners, and address the behavioral challenges that may

interfere with a student's success in the classroom. Principals can provide direct support

for the teachers by assisting with analyzing student data, observing classroom instruction, and offering feedback and resources to improve instructional practices.

Teacher professional development can be accomplished through collegial or peer support. The role of the principal is to assure that teachers have time to collaborate. This includes providing time for teachers to view master teachers in the classroom followed by time for discussion related to best practices. Teachers who need strategies for addressing student behaviors that interfere with success need time with expert practitioners including school counselors, child study team members, or behavior consultants. The principal is responsible for facilitating these collaborations. Once these collaborations are taking place, the principal must assure that resources are available so that the recommendations and strategies can be implemented.

Future Use of Research Findings

As a current school leader, I will utilize the findings from this study to inform my own professional practices, This includes providing professional development opportunities for current teachers to assist them in understanding the needs of special education students and addressing the challenges they face in supporting academic, social, and emotional progress for all learners. Additional professional development will be conducted through established professional learning communities with colleagues within my current school district.

In particular, the findings from this study may provide a framework for novice school principals who are facing the challenges of supporting diverse student populations and creating inclusive school environments while addressing the increased rigor and expectations under the new principal evaluation system. The findings indicate that

principal preparation programs do not provide adequate training related to working with diverse student populations including addressing the complex needs of students in special education programs. The insights and recommendations of the study participants can be used to develop a framework for a principal leadership curriculum for aspiring school leaders.

Recommendations for Research

The Delphi Method enabled this study to include the ideas of those who would not ordinarily have the opportunity to work collaboratively and share their experiences. The methodology enabled the participants to remain anonymous and therefore only respond to the written summary of ideas provided in the round two survey. This study could be extended to provide an opportunity for participants to volunteer to meet face-to-face to discuss the findings. This would enable the participants to share specific experiences and would enable the researcher to evaluate the effects of context.

The scope of this study was limited elementary principals in public schools. The findings represent the skills, behaviors, knowledge, and experience the principals identified as important for leading successful special education programs. An expanded study would include elementary teachers who work with special education students to identify the characteristics, skills, knowledge, and behaviors of principals that they believe influence the success of the special education programs. A comparative research design would determine the similarities and differences in the views of teachers and principals.

This study was limited to elementary school level principals. Further study may need to be conducted to include secondary school principals (middle school and high

school) to determine if the findings from this study can be generalized to all public school principals. Additionally principals who had a broader scope of special education programs in their schools identified more challenges related to scheduling and inclusion. Further study would need to be conducted to investigate correlations between the types of programs provided in the elementary school setting and the types of challenges the principals face.

Limitations

The study was focused on the beliefs and experiences of the elementary school principals and did not include teachers, students, or family members who may identify other variables leading to successful programs for children with special needs. The study was limited to principals in suburban elementary schools. School locations, economic resources, and other variables were not included in the study. Secondary level principals were not included. Therefore the findings may not be generalized for all school leaders or all school locations

The data collected in round one resulted in extensive narrative transcripts. In the process of data reduction, some content and context may have been lost. This is a common limitation of Delphi studies (Dalkey, 1969; Hasson, Keeney, & McKenna, 2000; Linstone & Turoff, 2002). The anonymity of the participants limits the sharing of specific experiences that may unintentionally identify students, teachers, schools, or principals. This further limits the researcher's ability to provide context.

Conclusion

The use of a Delphi Method was beneficial for identifying the experiences and perceptions of practitioners who would not otherwise have the opportunity to share and

provide feedback to each other. The individual interviews were conducted with the principals without the influence of the other participants. Each participant provided a context for understanding their role as the school leader including their school demographics, the types of programs they have in place for all students, including those with special needs, and the configuration of their faculty and support staff.

In the second round, the principals were able to reflect on and provide feedback related to the most frequent responses to the question posed in round one. Their individual contexts were not revealed, rather the shared perceptions, behaviors, and strategies they use to understand the needs of their students and staff, provide support, and leadership.

The conclusions of this study resulted in a better understanding of how principals influence and lead successful special education programs by creating an inclusive environment where all stakeholders are expected to have shared responsibility for all learners. The results also address how principals provide support for their students and teachers through school-wide programs and ongoing professional development. The practices shared by the principals in this study can be replicated in other schools so that all students can have a successful elementary school experience.

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Appendix A

Round One Interview Questions

The Role of Principal Leadership in Special Education: A Delphi Study

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this study. This interview should last no more than 30 minutes. I will be recording the interview and I will be taking notes during the interview. You will have the opportunity to review a summary transcript of this interview and can make any changes or revisions you feel are necessary. Your responses will never be reported in a way that can identify you. Do you have any questions regarding the procedure?

1. What personal qualities or characteristics do you feel are essential for principals who lead successful special education programs?

2. Please identify specific knowledge and/or experiences that you feel were beneficial to understanding and supporting the needs of teachers and students in special education programs?

3. What are the challenges you have experienced in leading special education programs in general education settings?

4. What strategies did you employ to respond to these challenges?

5. What specific leadership skills do you feel are essential for leading special education programs?

6. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experiences?

Round Two Survey

Principal Leadership in Special Education: Follow-up Survey

What personal qualities or characteristics do you feel are essential for principals who lead successful special education programs? *

Based on the initial interviews of elementary principals, the following responses were the most frequent. Please select the three responses that you feel are most important.

- o ☐ Principals must understand the needs of students with disabilities.
- o ☐ Principals must maintain the mindset of being a "teacher first".
- o ☐ Principals must display compassion and empathy..
- o ☐ Principals must have effective communication skills.
- o ☐ Principals must have the ability to build trusting relationships with students, parents, and staff.

In the text box, please explain your selections. *

What types of knowledge and/or experience do you feel are beneficial to understanding and supporting the needs of teachers and students in special education programs? *

Based on the initial interviews of elementary principals, the following responses were the most frequent. Please select the three responses that you feel are most important.

o   ☐ Principals must be knowledgeable about special education laws and codes.

o   ☐ Principals must develop a professional network of people and resources.

o   ☐ Principals should have teaching experience that has included exposure to working with diverse student populations including, but not limited to, students with disabilities.

o   ☐ Principals should be knowledgeable about the learning modalities and the nature of specific disabilities.

o   ☐ Principals should apply knowledge gained from their colleagues, other administrators, and/or other practitioners.

In the text box, please explain your selections. *

What are the challenges you have experienced leading special education programs in general education settings? *

Based on the initial interviews of elementary principals, the following responses were the most frequent. Please select the three responses that you feel are most important.

o   ☐ Creating schedules that meet the needs/requirements for all stakeholders.

o   ☐ Establishing a culture with teachers and staff that they are all responsible for every students success.

o   ☐ Establishing and facilitating in-class resource co-teaching partnerships.

o   ☐ Monitoring and supporting teachers and students in classrooms with student who have challenging behaviors.

o   ☐ Accessibility of personnel and resources to meet the diverse needs of students with disabilities.

o   ☐   Creating a culture of acceptance with students and parents of non-disabled students.

In the text box, please explain your selections. *

What strategies do you employ to meet the challenges of leading special education programs in general education settings? *

Based on the initial interviews of elementary principals, the following responses were the most frequent. Please select the three responses that you feel are most important.

o   ☐   Consistent, meaningful professional development for teachers and support staff.

o   ☐   Spending time in the classrooms observing and providing feedback.

o   ☐   Making time for teachers to have collaborative conversations with other teachers and support staff.

o   ☐   Establishing collaborative relationships with the child study team.

o   ☐   Establishing school-wide programs to promote tolerance and acceptance.

o   ☐   Spending time with parents/families to build a rapport and establish a trusting relationship.

In the text box, please explain your selections. *

What specific instructional leadership skills do you feel are essential for supporting special education programs? *

Based on the initial interviews of elementary principals, the following responses were the most frequent. Please select the three responses that you feel are most important.

o ☐ Providing extensive data analysis to assist teacher in understanding the needs of their students.

o ☐ Provide professional development related to progress monitoring and instructional practices.

o ☐ Utilizing master teachers to provide ongoing professional development.

o ☐ Classroom walk-throughs and observations followed by meaningful feedback.

o ☐ Principals must continue their own professional development as it relates to trends in curriculum, instruction, and assessment.

In the text box, please explain you selections. *

Please provide any additional comments related to leading special education programs. *

Appendix C

Informed Consent Form

Investigator: Martha J. Simon

Topic: The Role of Principal Leadership in Special Education: A Delphi Study

You are invited to participate in a research study that is being conducted by Martha J. Simon, who is a doctoral candidate at Rowan University. The purpose of this research is to identify the behaviors, values, skills, and knowledge of elementary principals who support successful special education programs in general education settings.

Approximately forty (40) subjects will be selected to participate in this study. All participants are identified as elementary school principals who lead successful special education programs in their schools. The study procedures will involve three rounds of data collection. The first round will consist of a telephone interview with Martha Simon. Interview questions will be provided in advance and the interview will last no more than forty (40) minutes. Following the first round interviews, each participant will receive a summary transcript of the interview and a survey. The survey will be used to further clarify the findings from the first round interviews and will be sent electronically to all participants. The final round of data collection will be follow-up telephone interviews used for the purpose of reviewing and requesting feedback from regarding the findings revealed in the interviews and surveys.

The benefits of taking part in this study include:

- The opportunity to contribute your expertise and knowledge that will influence the professional practices of other principals.
- The opportunity to participate with other expert practitioners to reflect on and respond to best practices related to leading special education programs.

While these are some of the possible benefits, it is possible that you may receive no direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Participation in this study will require the following:

- One (1) forty minute telephone interview.
- One (1) member check of the summary transcript from the interview.
- One (1) survey distributed and completed via email.
- One (1) thirty minute follow-up telephone interview (Optional).

This research is confidential. The research records will include demographic information about you including your title, years of experience, education, and certifications. This information will be stored in a manner that links your identifying information to your responses using a numeric code known only to Martha Simon. All research data and responses will be maintained in an external hard-drive that is password protected.

Based on the type of questions and possible impact of this study, there are no foreseeable risks to participation in this study.

Your participation is voluntary. You may choose not to participate, and you may withdraw at any time. You may choose not to answer any questions with which you are not comfortable.

If you have any questions about the study or study procedures, you may contact:

Martha J. Simon
1 Talmadge Drive
Monroe Township, New Jersey 08831
Cell : 732-710-7357
Work: 732-360-4499
Email: simonm26@students.rowan.edu

If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the Associate Provost for Research at:

Rowan University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects
Office of Research
201 Mullica Hill Road
Glassboro, New Jersey 08028-1701
Tel: 856-256-5150
Please sign below if you agree to participate in this research study:

Subject (Please Print): _____

Subject Signature: _____ Date: _____

Principal Investigator Signature: _____ Date: _____