BUILDING ADMINISTRATORS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR PREPAREDNESS AS LEADERS OF SPECIAL EDUCATION

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ABSTRACT

Principal preparation programs often lack the necessary content to provide preservice building administrators with the prerequisite knowledge about special education and students with disabilities (SWDs). Principals and vice principals play a pivotal role in shaping the educational environment, yet often find themselves feeling unprepared when it comes to addressing the needs of this diverse student population. Training in school-based administrative roles has yet to keep pace with the ever-expanding field of special education.

This phenomenological study investigated the impact of special education training or background on building administrators' ability to effectively lead inclusive schools for SWDs. It also examined the professional development (PD) administrators felt they needed to improve their leadership and support for SWDs. Through interviews with 26 principals and vice principals, this study investigated the impact of special education training on administrators' self-efficacy and their perceived need for professional growth in special education.

Findings indicated that there is an overwhelming lack of special education content in principal preparation programs, with almost all participants utilizing their experience to support SWDs and not their principal preparation courses. The participants with a background in special education viewed themselves as advocates, spent many hours during the week handling special education matters, and demonstrated a comprehensive understanding of the word "inclusion." In contrast, those without relied more heavily on the special education staff. Findings suggest that there is a need for more PD opportunities as well as more special education content for preservice administrators.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation with immense love to my two extraordinary children—my brilliant and compassionate daughter, Teigan, and my courageous and spirited son, Lincoln. To my daughter, Teigan, may you embrace your power, recognize your worth, and never apologize for taking up space in this world. To my son, Lincoln, your magnificent, unique way of seeing the world is your greatest strength. I will always, always fight for a world that doesn't just see you but celebrates every part that makes you the amazing person you are. And to both of you, please, learn as much as you can. It'll help you see the world clearer; it'll give you the tools to stand up for what you believe in, and it'll help you build a more socially just world. Let your education be something that empowers you and everyone you care about.

This work is also dedicated to the unwavering and resilient spirit of all marginalized groups of people—those whose voices have been silenced, whose battles have been dismissed, and who show us what real strength looks like by just living their lives. Your experiences are not insignificant, your struggles do not go unnoticed, and your fight illuminates the path for all of us. I stand with you, and together we can push for inclusion, equity, and justice to create a future where all people are seen, heard, belong, and are celebrated for their identities.

To my children and to all people who have ever felt like an outsider: we are a community and together we are powerful. Let our voices echo and our actions resound. Never stop fighting for yourselves and for each other; you are the change this world needs. The road may be long, but this movement is unstoppable.

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I first and foremost want to thank my incredible parents, Gina and Wayne, for instilling the value of education in me from an early age. They taught my brother and me that knowledge is a powerful tool for change. Their confidence in my potential drives my perseverance. This enduring belief in education was also passed down by my grandparents, Muna and Ayai. Though my beloved grandmother is no longer with us, her love continues to guide and inspire me daily. These four people raised me with love, discipline, and a deep appreciation for family and education. I am forever grateful for their sacrifices and dedication that shaped me into who I am today.

I am thankful for my brother, aunts, and cousins in their unwavering support through this journey. As a single mother, writing this dissertation would not have been possible without their patience and generosity. They stepped in constantly to spend time with my two amazing children and love them as their own. They help me provide an unshakable foundation of support for my children by surrounding them with people who believe in, cherish, and love them as fiercely as I do. You all remind me that it truly takes a village, and I am beyond blessed for who is a part of mine. La familia!

I would also like to express my gratitude to my cousins, Caitlin and Sianna, who have been my greatest supporters throughout this process. Not only did they endure my trauma dump sessions, but they somehow helped me untangle my scrambled thoughts and turn them into cohesive ideas. They helped me brainstorm, proofread, and provided brutally honest feedback in a way that only family can. The fact that they listened to me ramble about the same topic for years and still answered my calls is nothing short of heroic. I owe you both—big time.

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This achievement is not mine alone—it belongs to every single one of us.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Overview

Amidst the current social justice and educational reform milieu, school administrators face challenges when making decisions regarding the various aspects of special education in their buildings. Building administrators are expected to create an inclusive setting for all students, including those who require special education services. This responsibility requires a comprehensive understanding of special education laws, strategies to support diverse learners, and inclusive practices. However, training for school-based administrator positions has yet to keep up with the ever-growing field of education, especially regarding administrators' role in special education. Bai and Martin (2015) stated that "nowhere is the challenge of redefining the roles, strengthening the competence, and providing adequate support for leaders more crucial than in the area of special education" (p. 1229).

Bateman and Bateman (2014) claimed that almost no state requires preservice principals to receive special education training. This lack of training is a concern, as it may result in inadequate support for students who require special education services. A working knowledge of special education is also needed for building administrators to make intelligent decisions to support their students (Cline, 1981). While educational leaders can learn on the job and navigate through different problems from experience, many may feel underprepared and overwhelmed when they are implanted into the complex world of special education. This is critical because the role of building administrators in handling special education responsibilities is constantly being redefined and expanded. Consequently, the lack of training in this area has become increasingly noticeable. Without minimal knowledge or background in special education, building

administrators may struggle to make the most knowledgeable decisions for this under-represented and vulnerable group of students—students with disabilities (SWDs).

The pathways to administrative roles can significantly influence the preparation of administrators. Building administrators, including principals and vice/assistant principals, often begin their careers in different capacities, whether as instructional assistants, general education teachers, or teachers of specials (e.g., gym, music, etc.). However, when they finally reach their administrative role, they may not have been adequately prepared to manage the building or oversee the aspects of education that come with it. This is particularly true when working with SWDs. Consequently, building administrators must rely on prior experience or basic information received through university coursework, which may not adequately address special education needs.

Moreover, professional development (PD) opportunities play a crucial role in equipping administrators to address the diverse needs of SWDs. However, many principals are not trained to work with SWDs, nor do they have knowledge of special education programs or instruction (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Goor et al., 1997; Monteith, 2000). Regardless, the principal is responsible for ensuring that SWDs have their individualized needs met (Bateman & Bateman, 2014). This responsibility places significant pressure on administrators, as they can only ensure that all SWDs' needs are met when they understand all special education components, including (a) documentation and procedural requirements; (b) the purpose of special education; (c) the process of student identification and service implementation; (d) the impact of disorder and disability characteristics in education; and (e) laws governing special education services (Bateman et al., 2017; Lynch, 2012; Roberts & Guerra, 2017).

These expectations emphasize the undeniable need for adequate preparation and coursework dedicated to special education. Unfortunately, information about special education is typically provided through a single graduate-level course within their principal preparation courses (i.e., education leadership courses). Moreover, this quick mention of special education is usually buried in an education law course, further diminishing its relevance. Angelle and Bilton (2009) found that among the principals they surveyed, only 32% reported taking one course in special education, whereas 53% had none. This finding is troubling, given that one of the most significant responsibilities of building administrators is to oversee special education services for SWDs within their buildings. Consequently, this disparity highlights a critical gap in how building administrators are formally prepared to manage their schools, which could potentially impact the quality of support and resources provided to SWDs.

Additionally, there is a notable lack of data pinpointing the number of special education teachers transitioning to the role of principal or vice/assistant principal in the United States. This gap in information suggests insufficient representation of educators trained to work with and educate SWDs. Special educators who become administrators bring valuable experience working with SWDs, and can use that information to effectively manage schools that address the needs of all students. In contrast, building administrators who do not have a background in special education may have difficulty implementing inclusive settings and individualized supports for SWDs. This challenge is compounded by the numerous administrative roles and responsibilities for which they are held accountable daily.

Building administrators' work is challenging, and it is no surprise that principals spend a disproportional amount of time handling special education matters (Stevenson-Jacobson et al., 2006). Without certifications in special education or working with this population of students,

building administrators have no fundamental understanding of how much time and training it takes to give these students appropriate and individualized education. Stevenson-Jacobson et al. (2006) stated that because principals oversee special education in their buildings, they devote 36% to 58% of their time to special education tasks. Building administrators must partake in individualized education program (IEP) meetings, understand intervention and referral services procedures, and discipline SWDs, among numerous other special-education-related responsibilities. Therefore, they should receive more training than one course reviewing the basics of special education law. There is a need for additional training and preparation in all aspects of special education for building administrators.

Leibfried (1984) observed, “To be effective administrators, principals need to become sensitive to the realities of special education” (p. 110). Jacobs et al. (2004) agreed that “having a basic knowledge of special education appears to be fundamental” to building administrators’ abilities (p. 8). Building administrators require specialized training to effectively oversee special education and ensure SWDs receive the support they need to thrive. The limited research that has been conducted states that principal preparation programs do not provide building administrators with adequate training in special education content, including how to support SWDs and the teachers who provide them with services (Angelle & Bilton, 2009; McHatton et al., 2010). Researchers have argued that preservice administrators need more field experience and sufficient coursework related to special education (DiPaola et al., 2004; Katsiyannis et al., 1996). Principals must be knowledgeable and ready to respond to the challenges of working with SWDs. For example, one of these challenges is that special education is one of the most litigated areas in the field of education (Katsiyannis et al., 2016; Yell et al., 2003). This could be due to

insufficient knowledge of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and its amendments (Lock et al., 2004).

Every day, critical legal decisions are made that directly impact SWDs. These decisions include providing services and ensuring that students have equitable access to education by implementing IEPs and 504s, due process, providing a free appropriate public education (FAPE), and compliance issues (Wagner & Katsiyannis, 2010). Principals must find ways to make educated decisions regarding legal mandates (i.e., IDEA) and state and district policies (DeMatthews & Edwards, 2014). Mistakes can be made without the proper training or background in special education. This can negatively impact careers, withdrawal of funding, compensatory education, and legal damages (Katsiyannis, 1994). Such errors can profoundly impact vulnerable students, which can hinder their overall development and academic journey. With such a heavy burden of these responsibilities, building administrators should be prepared to make decisions based on understanding special education law, individual students' needs, what services and supports must be provided, and what is best for each child's academic future. These responsibilities highlight how crucial building administrators are in championing education and creating an inclusive environment for all students.

Principal's Role

Before the 1970s, the principal's primary focus was to be the student disciplinarian and to manage the school building (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). However, the role of principals has evolved significantly in recent years. Currently, there is much research on the effect of administrators on student performance, yet their workload has become extremely difficult and is continually expanding and demanding (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Garrison-Wade, 2005). Effective principals recognize their responsibility for educating all students, including

those with disabilities, and strive to support their academic achievements (Bateman & Bateman, 2014; DiPaola et al., 2004). Furthermore, mandates and educational laws that require compliance for the education of SWDs have radically revised the role of building administrators (Cline, 1981; Davidson & Algozzine, 2002; Eads et al., 1995). Notably, the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and IDEA brought the principal's role as an instructional leader to the "forefront" (Lynch, 2012).

IDEA of 2004 guarantees that each SWD receives an IEP, which serves as a legally binding, individually tailored educational plan designed to help that student achieve their educational goals. SWDs are educated based on their IEPs, and failure to adhere to them can lead to legal ramifications. Therefore, the decisions made by the IEP team must include building administrators, and administrators must participate to understand the individual needs of each student. The involvement of building administrators is crucial for the effective implementation of IEPs and to foster an environment in which SWDs' needs are adequately supported.

On top of their responsibilities as instructional leaders, building administrators are expected to manage building operations, budgeting, curriculum and instruction, teacher evaluations, district and statewide testing, and collaboration with stakeholders and the community. Additionally, they must develop activities for staff development (Thompson, 2015). Beyond these operational tasks, they are expected to be transformational, accessible, and inclusive leaders. Importantly, the principal is responsible for setting the tone and climate of the school building (Causton et al., 2013). Specifically, Leibfried (1984) stated that building administrators should be "keeping abreast of changes in the policies, recognizing the need for appropriate inservice, keeping open lines of communication among parents, teachers, and

community members, and, most importantly, demonstrating a positive attitude in support of a special education program" (p. 111).

Given this demanding range of responsibilities, a principal's job will never look the same two days in a row. One day, they may be involved in meetings about budgeting and working on building operations. The next day, they may find themselves handling the emotional or personal issues of parents, teachers, or students. The principal must navigate a complex role that combines leadership and management, impacting both the physical building and the community of learners within it. While special education is just one aspect of this multifaceted job, many leaders often feel unprepared for its challenges. Without an adequate education and training in special education, building administrators could risk failing to accommodate students' needs, inadvertently create barriers to their education, and put their buildings in jeopardy of noncompliance and unwanted litigation.

Special Education Legislation

The principal's role in the creation of inclusive school environments is vital and has been shaped by significant legislation. Prior to these education laws, schooling for SWDs was not mandatory; these students were often marginalized, institutionalized, or left uncared for in their homes. SWDs were considered invisible and not provided an equitable or inclusive education. These troubling matters began to change with the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* case in 1954 (hereinafter *Brown*), an important civil rights decision.

In this ruling, the Supreme Court determined that racial segregation with "separate but equal" standards in public education was unconstitutional. This decision was groundbreaking, as it established that segregation in education constituted a deprivation of a person's right to equal protection under the law (Williams et al., 2013, p. 143). This precedent paved the way for parents

and advocates to apply similar reasoning to the exclusion of children with disabilities from schools (Markelz & Bateman, 2021). Following this, parents of SWDs began to file lawsuits against school districts for discrimination in public education.

The significance of the *Brown* case cannot be overstated; it set the stage for future litigation and laws regarding special education and the rights of SWDs. As a result, this helped mandate equal opportunities for SWDs (Williams et al., 2013). After *Brown*, more than 40 cases were filed regarding SWDs who were not given access to FAPE (Zettel & Ballard, 1979). Consequently, the rulings from these cases helped establish FAPE for SWDs through the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (Williams et al., 2013).

Since the *Brown* ruling, numerous policies have emerged to support SWDs in public education. For example, IDEA (2004) mandates that SWDs receive not only special education services, but also the necessary supports to thrive in the educational environment. This legislation, initially enacted in 1997 and amended in 2004, ensures equal access to education for all students. Similarly, NCLB (2002) aimed to enhance the performance of minoritized groups of students, including SWDs, holding principals accountable for the annual progress of all students. As a result, building administrators must possess comprehensive knowledge of special education to effectively fulfill their roles as their buildings' special education leaders.

Principals as Special Education Leaders

Principals are often unprepared to meet the challenges of educating SWDs (McLaughlin & Kienas, 1989). Because of this, many take limited roles in special education. Building administrators assume less of an instructional leadership role in special education and become more involved in hiring personnel. McLaughlin and Kienas (1989) observed that building administrators limit their involvement in special education due to two factors: the presence of a

special education administrator within the building and their own limited knowledge of special education. This limited involvement can have a consequential impact on the success of SWDs.

This is not to say that building administrators should have a reduced role in special education. Rather, principals are essential for supporting SWDs and special education instruction (DeMatthews & Edwards, 2014; Jacobs et al., 2004). While most districts have a special education administrator, building administrators are the faces of their buildings. They are the administrators that parents see daily and are the most accessible. “All families expect the principal to know their children and to understand each child’s abilities and challenges” (Bateman & Bateman, 2014, p. 7). Overseeing special education and making decisions related to SWDs are tasks performed daily by building administrators. Therefore, they should be knowledgeable about the fundamentals and current issues in special education to run buildings that cater to and are inclusive of SWDs. To ensure that buildings create a supportive and inclusive atmosphere for SWDs, building administrators must stay updated on the latest research and best practices in special education and effectively implement these strategies within their school environment.

To effectively advocate for SWDs, principals must acquire the necessary knowledge about special education. Without this understanding, principals will have difficulty fulfilling their responsibilities. Assuming this responsibility would suggest that the building administrator has had extensive training in special education and the education of SWDs (Davis, 1980). However, it is concerning that principal preparation programs have not dedicated enough time to how to effectively educate this marginalized group of students (Davis, 1980). A more pressing issue is that many studies have reported that principals want to acquire a deeper knowledge of special education and creating inclusive school environments (Samuels, 2019).

In a study conducted by DeMatthews and Edwards (2014), many concerns emerged from examining what was provided in principal preparation courses, including outdated coursework, misalignments between theory and practice, faculty inexperience, and ineffective clinical experience. Particularly, these outdated programs focused on broad topics rather than concentrating on student populations, grade levels, or subgroups, such as special education. DeMatthews and Edwards concluded that principal preparation courses could and should take action to further develop their students to lead effectively in special education.

Monteith (2000) shed light on several critical findings in a report by Aspen (1992) to the 70th Annual Convention of the Council for Exceptional Children:

- More than 40% of principals had never had a course in special education.
- Over 85% of principals felt that special education training was necessary to be a successful and effective leader.
- Over 80% of principals had a strong interest in receiving special education training.

These findings indicate that building administrators were unfamiliar with and did not feel prepared to address the needs of SWDs. However, despite their lack of knowledge in special education, the principals were actively engaged and enthusiastic about furthering their understanding in this area. This eagerness to learn suggests a commitment to improving their ability to support SWDs, potentially indicating a positive impact on inclusive practices within their schools. Nevertheless, inadequate special education preparation for building administrators is detrimental, especially for SWDs (Lynch, 2012).

Taking everything into consideration, building administrators must understand special education and SWDs; fostering a supportive and inclusive educational environment is necessary. Every student deserves an opportunity to thrive. SWDs face different barriers in school than their

nondisabled peers, and it is the principal's job to ensure they feel as though they belong and all their needs are met. The percentage of public school SWDs continues to increase annually. For instance, Amado et al. (1990) stated that since 1976, the number of children receiving special education supports and services had grown annually by 21.2%. The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2024) cited that the number of students in the United States aged 3–21 receiving services under IDEA increased from 6.4 million in the 2010–2011 school year to 7.3 million in the 2021–2022 school year. From fall of 2022 to fall of 2023, the number of students eligible under IDEA increased by 3.4% to 7,892,433 (Arundel, 2025). Of these school-aged students, 95% were enrolled in a public school (NCES, 2024). Thus, having a solid knowledge base in special education will allow building administrators to address the unique needs of each student, provide each student with FAPE, create IEPs that promote academic and functional growth, and create an environment of inclusivity and belonging for SWDs.

Problem Statement

Building administrators play a significant role in creating inclusive environments that support SWDs and allow them to thrive. They are change agents capable of creating and maintaining a safe, nurturing, and inclusive environment (Garrison-Wade et al., 2007). Legally, building administrators must guarantee that SWDs are given full access to all the resources that their typically developing counterparts receive. Ultimately, for building administrators to be effective and help students succeed, they must provide an inclusive space and equitable education for all students in their buildings. By committing to this responsibility, building administrators can create an inclusive environment when they have acquired knowledge of the special education field and understand what is necessary for SWDs' success. This knowledge base is necessary for building administrators to do their jobs and provide FAPE to all SWDs.

Historically, principal preparation programs have neglected special education content, despite the critical role that building administrators play in the education of SWDs (C. D. Murphy, 2018; Pazey & Cole, 2013). Building leaders are provided with basic information about special education laws in their graduate courses; however, they lack coursework in working with SWDs or leading buildings that provide supports and services to these students. The limited information covered in a single course is insufficient to prepare leaders to handle special education responsibilities daily. Samuels (2018) stated that learning on the job is the main way that building administrators learn because of the insufficient information provided as a part of the coursework to become administrators. Administrators are left to discover on the job that there are gaps in their preparation to be the leaders of special education in their buildings (Cooner et al., 2005; Samuels, 2018). Principals can be overwhelmed by the "number, diversity, and severity of children labeled 'special education'" (Cooner et al., 2005, p. 19). Those who have previously worked with SWDs or received training or certification in special education tend to possess a better understanding of how to include and educate these students effectively.

In addition to the challenges that administrators face, SWDs have been marginalized in many indirect ways, including access to curricula, peers, and general education classrooms within public school settings (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014). Despite ongoing efforts to promote inclusivity and equal opportunities, SWDs continue to encounter significant educational barriers. Therefore, it is crucial to address these issues head-on and ensure that SWDs have the necessary resources and support to succeed in their education. This situation underscores the importance of PD for building administrators, as prior experience and ongoing training in special education can significantly enhance their ability to create inclusive environments that meet the

unique needs of SWDs. Through continued participation in PD, leaders can be equipped to better understand and respond to the diverse requirements of SWDs.

Research Questions

This dissertation posits a connection between building administrators' perceptions of their preparedness for leading and supporting SWDs and the training they receive in principal preparation courses or administrative PD. To explore this connection further, this study aimed to understand where building administrators acquired their knowledge base for special education to effectively lead inclusive buildings for SWDs. Additionally, it examined what information is still needed to effectively provide FAPE and services for SWDs. This study aimed to answer the following questions:

RQ1. What is the impact of special education training or background on the ability of building administrators to lead inclusive schools effectively for SWDs?

RQ1a. How do building administrators with special education training perceive their preparedness to lead inclusive schools for SWDs compared to those without such training?

RQ1b. How does special education training or background affect the self-reported efficacy of building administrators in leading inclusive schools for SWDs?

RQ2. What professional growth opportunities or training do building administrators feel they need to improve their leadership and better support SWDs?

Theoretical Framework: Social Justice and Inclusive Leadership

This study is framed within two theoretical leadership styles: social justice leadership and inclusive leadership. By examining these frameworks, this study aimed to explore if the level of training and background in special education among building administrators had an impact on

their ability or willingness to lead inclusive and supportive environments for SWDs. Equipping these leaders with the necessary knowledge and skills can create a more inclusive and supportive environment for all students. Moreover, the importance of incorporating social justice and inclusive leadership principles in education cannot be overstated. This is especially critical when considering the experiences of SWDs and the issue of ableism in education systems. By fostering a culture of equity and inclusivity, education leaders can help dismantle systems of oppression and create a more just and equitable society for all.

For context, SWDs may experience ableism during their education. Ableism refers to the deeply ingrained discrimination, stereotyping, and prejudice against individuals with disabilities. Recognizing and addressing this issue in education is essential to ensure that all students have equal opportunities to succeed. The Oregon Department of Education (n.d.) defined ableism as a systemic oppression that provides unjustified advantages to people who are not disabled and results in "(a) barriers that people with disabilities uniquely face when trying to navigate the world, and (b) unfair treatment and discrimination against people with disabilities" (para. 1). Ableism in education can lead to the marginalization of SWDs, which can create barriers that hinder their education.

By applying social justice principles, education leaders can create a more inclusive and equitable environment for all students, including those with disabilities. Social justice leaders seek to provide marginalized groups with equitable learning opportunities even under minimal learning conditions (Shaked, 2019). They aim to amplify the voices of marginalized groups, empower educators to advocate for them, and address systemic barriers that hinder their full participation and success in their education.

However, a significant concern remains: education leaders are largely underprepared to lead one of the most marginalized groups of students—SWDs. The lack of resources and understanding in education often hinders the ability of SWDs to access their education and worsens the marginalization of the group. Despite the right of SWDs to receive a free and appropriate education, they frequently face a range of barriers that can limit their full participation in the K-12 education system. This encompasses not only physical accessibility issues, but also a pervasive lack of understanding and awareness among administrators and educators regarding the challenges faced by SWDs daily. Reflecting on this, it becomes clear: "If the rights of socially marginalized populations are to be understood and accounted for, certainly educational leaders must be equipped with the knowledge and skills necessary to make informed choices concerning that population" (Christensen et al., 2013, p. 99).

Social Justice School Leadership

Social justice is grounded in the belief that different groups receive different treatment or discrimination based on their identities. One of the identities of SWDs is their disability. Many of these students receive services and spend some to all of their school day in special education classrooms. The concept of identity is particularly relevant to students who receive special education services, as their experiences and needs may differ from those of their nondisabled peers and they may require specialized support to succeed. Historically, special education has been characterized by systemic inequities and discrimination, which have created barriers to educational opportunities for SWDs and aggravated segregation from mainstream education. This inequitable access to appropriate education is not only discriminatory, but can also have detrimental effects on the educational outcomes of SWDs.

"Social justice supports a process built on respect, care, recognition and empathy" and works to disrupt systems that promote exclusionary practices and marginalization of different groups (Theoharis, 2007, p. 223). Bhugra (2016) wrote that social justice is

> aimed at promoting a society which is just and equitable, valuing diversity, providing equal opportunities to all its members, irrespective of their disability, ethnicities, gender, age, sexual orientation or religion, and ensuring fair allocation of resources and support for their human rights. (p. 336)

Both definitions indicate that social justice leaders promote equity and fairness by distributing resources and opportunities, dismantling systemic barriers, and providing a voice for people who have been marginalized, excluded, or considered irrelevant (Bhugra, 2016).

Disability is an integral aspect of the social justice movement, and SWDs are a group that social justice advocates must champion. However, there appears to be a disconnect between people with disabilities and the recent social justice initiative known as Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI). Despite the growing awareness of and efforts toward this social justice movement, SWDs are often left out of the conversation, highlighting the need for greater inclusivity in this movement. This gap stresses the importance of incorporating disability into the social justice dialogue.

As a social justice initiative, the DEI movement in public schools is fostering a new generation of social justice leaders. DEI is a framework that addresses systemic inequities by reflecting on who has power, who lacks power, and how power manifests itself within stakeholders (Hattery et al., 2022). DEI initiatives have been used to create inclusive environments that embrace diversity, ensure equity, and cultivate a sense of belonging for everyone. In this framework, diversity once referred to only racial and ethnic minorities.

However, as defined by Armstrong (2019), diversity includes race, culture, color, ethnicity, nationality, religion, socioeconomic status (SES), education, marital status, veteran status, language, age, gender, gender identity and expression, and dis/ability. The concept of equity requires that "we elevate specific people to hold as much space as others by providing more responsive support, or even simply more support, to them" (Hattery et al., 2022, p. 509). Equity acknowledges that underserved and underrepresented groups require fair treatment and opportunities (Armstrong, 2019). Furthermore, inclusion is a process of bringing traditionally excluded groups and/or individuals into different situations and processes to share power (Armstrong, 2019). Inclusion creates an environment where all people feel welcomed and supported and have a sense of belonging. Thus, DEI efforts seek to ensure that diverse groups are provided equitable access and opportunities, while breaking down barriers that hinder success.

While DEI initiatives in schools often address culture and race, they usually neglect that disability is a group identity that is also considered underrepresented and marginalized. Although these initiatives do not explicitly state that disability is not included or discussed under the umbrella term, the rarity of its recognition implies a prioritization of other identities. This prioritization can influence the marginalization and exclusion of individuals with disabilities from various aspects of society, including education.

Moreover, disability is not frequently viewed through the same lens as other identities. People with disabilities may be viewed through a lens of pity or a need for charity. Disability might also be viewed as a medical issue rather than a societal issue. Furthermore, the medical model of disability tends to focus on the individual's impairment as the primary issue, while overlooking the educational obstacles that impede their full involvement in the school environment. The need for a shift in perspective is crucial for building administrators to

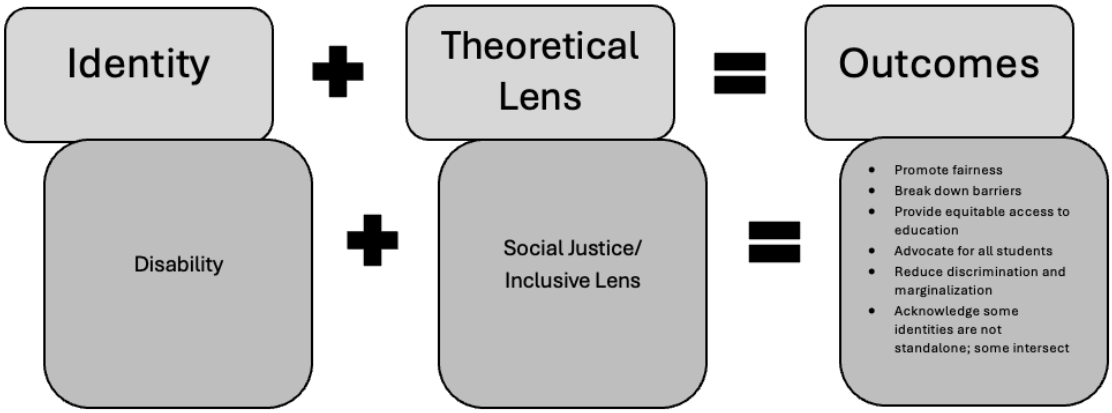
recognize, as it involves eliminating biases about SWDs and promoting inclusivity in the educational system. It becomes imperative to address these attitudes and foster a more inclusive environment for all students.

To counteract these biases and ensure that SWDs receive the supports and resources they need, it is crucial for building administrators to understand and establish the connection between social justice practices and their interactions with SWDs. Building on this, Theoharis (2007) stated that "social justice cannot be a reality in schools where students with disabilities are segregated or pulled out from the regular classroom" (p. 222). Thus, building leaders can be social justice leaders who advocate for SWDs when they challenge discrimination, foster an inclusive environment, and integrate disability into the DEI initiatives in their buildings.

Building administrators who take on the role of social justice leaders need to "recognize inequality, but must also have the necessary competencies to take actions in ways that replace preexisting structures of inequality with more equitable structures" (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014, p. 847). Building administrators grounded in social justice ideals act and work toward educational reform and equity. They must be equipped with the necessary skills, knowledge, and mindset to understand and account for marginalized groups of people (Christensen et al., 2013).

Figure 1

Theoretical Framework for Building Administrators' Perceptions of SWDs



Note. SWDs = students with disabilities.

Figure 1 depicts this theoretical framework, in which identity, in conjunction with the theoretical lens, creates specific outcomes. The identity associated with this framework for SWDs is disability. When building administrators use social justice and inclusive lenses or approaches to support SWDs, they can be fairer and reduce prejudice and discrimination within their buildings. Building administrators must put in the work to (a) dismantle discriminatory practices; (b) promote diversity, equity, and inclusion for all individuals, regardless of their abilities; and (c) challenge and prevent ableism. By prioritizing these efforts, building administrators can develop their understanding of how to be effective and inclusive social justice leaders.

Theoharis (2007) defined social justice leadership as follows:

> These principals make issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States central to

> their advocacy, leadership practice, and vision. This definition centers on addressing and eliminating marginalization in schools. Thus, inclusive schooling practices for students with disabilities, English language learners (ELLs), and other students traditionally segregated in schools are also necessitated by this definition. (p. 223)

To contextualize the importance of these principles, consider the landmark *Brown* case, which paved the way for SWDs to gain access to public education and fight for their rightful places. This case serves as a foundation for today's social justice leaders, who continue to advocate for equity and justice in education. It is imperative that SWDs are not segregated from their nondisabled peers and receive the FAPE to which they are entitled.

Inclusive School Leadership

In addition to social justice, the concept of inclusive leadership is of paramount importance in supporting SWDs. Meeting the needs of all students can be a complex and challenging task; however, it allows students to feel heard, respected, and like they are part of the school community. Inclusive leadership emphasizes all people's involvement, engagement, and inclusion (Northouse, 2022). This leadership style seeks to include SWDs in all schools and classrooms (Ryan, 2007). Inclusive leaders recognize the magnitude of providing access and resources to marginalized groups of people and using their positions to give students what they need. Principals are change agents in their buildings and must practice social justice leadership to bring about reform, acceptance, equity, and inclusion.

Much of the literature on inclusive leadership and inclusion recognizes the importance of celebrating people's backgrounds, ethnicities, and other groups to which they belong. While there are many definitions for different groups of people, it is crucial to note that there is no single definition for inclusion. For this research, inclusion was not defined solely as

mainstreaming in the classroom, but rather as a feeling of belonging and equitable opportunities for SWDs. Ultimately, inclusion is the belief that all students participate, regardless of their disabilities or other identities. Inclusion also makes people feel like they belong, are supported, and are celebrated. The definition of inclusion used in this study was also outlined by DeMatthews and Mawhinney (2014):

> All students deserve access to the general education classroom and to obtain all the same benefits granted to nondisabled students. Principals who choose to segregate students cannot promote inclusion and do not reflect values of social justice. School leaders are responsible for establishing a school culture that rejects segregation and inequitable treatment. Their daily work must reflect this responsibility. (p. 851)

Viewing leadership through an inclusive lens connects building administrators' feelings of preparedness when leading buildings and ensures that SWDs feel a sense of belonging. If administrators believe that special education students differ from general education students, it may lead to exclusionary practices rooted in personal biases or lack of experience in working with this vulnerable group. Without the foundational knowledge of special education, there is a genuine possibility of not providing students with a FAPE or equitable access to everything the public school offers.

Significance of this Study

This study addressed the need for special education content and information about SWDs built into principal preparation programs and PD throughout the school year. Specifically, when building administrators adopt a social justice and inclusive leadership approach, it encourages a shift toward more inclusive and responsive approaches prioritizing all learners' diverse needs and experiences. By highlighting the increasing number of SWDs in school settings and the lack of

special education information provided preservice and/or during principalship, this study can contribute to the ever-changing field of education. The responsibilities of building administrators in special education have increased, yet there are no courses within principal preparation programs that specifically relate to special education or SWDs. Therefore, shining a light on the lack of information can encourage creating more courses dedicated to SWDs and special education, adding PD opportunities for building administrators, and finding inclusive and just approaches to prioritizing the education of all learners. With the lack of information on special education provided to preservice administrators, building an ever-growing knowledge base for these administrators is essential. Ultimately, leaving school leaders undertrained in working with and leading this underserved population is not fair or just and does not foster inclusiveness or promote equity within the school.

The Researcher's Positionality

My position as a White-presenting, Hispanic, straight woman with a middle-class background shaped my perspectives and interactions in education. In particular, my outward appearance as White shields me from racial discrimination but allows me to challenge biases and provide a voice for others. My Catholic upbringing instilled a moral responsibility, fostering my drive to be an empathetic and inclusive leader. Being a woman enables me to effectively develop the soft skills needed to advocate for equity, respect, and inclusion without a fear of being labeled "soft." Being nondisabled provides me with privileges that I take for granted, including the ability to perform daily tasks without needing assistance or adaptive technologies. This realization motivates me to advocate passionately for SWDs, ensuring they have equitable access to resources and education. My experiences thus far have influenced how I work with and understand the diverse needs of all students. Awareness of these identities significantly impacted

and influenced my work in special education. Recognizing the privileges associated with my identities, I am committed to using my platform to uplift and empower marginalized voices while actively challenging and dismantling systems of oppression in all forms. I constantly analyze and challenge my biases to create a space where all students are celebrated, respected, and valued.

My choice of research topic was influenced by my experience working in education. I have worked alongside building administrators as a special education teacher, coordinator of autism, and special education supervisor. Through this work, I have observed building administrators who lack training in special education and noted certain trends in how they handle special education tasks and whom they lean on for questions about special education. There is a noticeable difference between how leaders interact with SWDs when they have a certification or background in special education and how they do when they do not. I have also observed that there is no formal training offered to building administrators about special education topics at the beginning of the year or on days designated for PD. My experiences have shaped my perspective on the significance of offering special education instruction to both preservice and seasoned building administrators.

To further deepen my understanding of this topic, my personal journey has played a critical role as well. My son was diagnosed with autism in March 2024. This experience helped me develop a deeper understanding of the needs and struggles of SWDs, allowing me to be more empathetic in my interactions with them and with everyone else involved in their education. Understanding the challenges and barriers faced daily by SWDs has taught me the importance of patience, empathy, emotional intelligence, and providing support. My empathy guides me to advocate and create a culture of celebrating differences while making all individuals feel a sense

of belonging. By incorporating empathy into my interactions with SWDs, staff, parents, and administrators. I am fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment for all members of the academic community.

The Researcher's District

It is important to note that I work in an urban school district in New Jersey. In the 2021–2022 school year, the district enrolled almost 25,000 students in grades K-12. Of those students, nearly 4,000 received special education services. The district's makeup is 69% Hispanic, 20% African American, 6% Asian, and 5% White. The district population is primarily low socioeconomic status (SES). This highlights the importance of considering how race and other factors related to diverse backgrounds intersect with the delivery of special education services. In this case, factors that intersect with race include SES and disability.

With such a high diversity rate, it would be remiss not to mention the intersectional nature of disability, SES, and race. This intersectionality is particularly pronounced in this urban school district. In contexts where socioeconomic disparities intersect with racial demographics, the challenges and complexities of addressing special educational needs increase. Due to the compounding nature of these factors, it is crucial to consider the unique experiences of students from underrepresented backgrounds and the barriers they face in order to meet their educational needs.

Research has consistently shown that students from racial minority backgrounds, particularly those in low-income urban communities, are disproportionately represented in special education programs (Skiba et al., 2008). Various factors can influence this disproportionality, including biases in assessment or by school staff, lack of access to resources, and systemic inequities in the education system. Skiba et al. (2008) stated that "the

disproportionate representation of minority students is among the most critical and enduring problems in the field of special education" (p. 264).

In this district, where the median household income is about $33,000 and nearly 30% of residents live below the poverty line, socioeconomic factors compound the intersection between race and special education. Students from lower-SES backgrounds often face additional barriers in accessing appropriate education and special education services. To effectively tackle the convergence of disability, SES, and race in educational environments, school administrators must identify and confront systemic disparities head-on. Recognizing the intricate interplay between these components is crucial. This comprehensive approach is essential to address the unique challenges faced by students in multiple marginalized groups and to ensure their voices and needs are not overlooked. By acknowledging and addressing their intersections, administrators can be social justice leaders and create a more inclusive and equitable learning environment.

Organization of the Study

Chapter 1 provides insight into the research and background information on how building administrators affect all students' success, including SWDs. It also sheds light on the framework of social justice and inclusive leadership in relation to SWDs. Chapter 2 includes an analysis of the literature on the history of special education, principal preparation, the lack of special education content, principals' preparedness when working with SWDs, and the benefits of understanding special education as a building administrator. Chapter 3 concentrates on the methodology and how data was collected. Chapter 4 presents an analysis of the data and conclusions from the collected data. Chapter 5 summarizes the findings and implications for future studies.

Summary

This chapter briefly examined research on building administrators' roles and responsibilities regarding special education. It observed that principal preparatory training often includes only one course, if any, dedicated to special education law and case laws. There is no information on working with the population of SWDs or the components and factors of special education. It also spoke to the lack of PD about special education throughout principalship. Finally, Chapter 1 discussed the questions that guided this study and how they connect to social justice, inclusion, and a sense of belonging.

Definition of Key Terms

The following terms were used throughout the research.

Ableism: Discrimination against those with cognitive or physical disabilities. This discrimination affects how individuals access the materials, curricula, or other supports needed to succeed in the school setting.

Building administrator: An individual who has been or is currently employed as a principal or vice/assistant principal in a public school.

Free and appropriate public education (FAPE): Special education services provided to SWDs at no cost to parents. Services are outlined in the IEP, following IDEA.

Inclusive education: An effort to ensure that SWDs attend school with their nondisabled peers while providing them with the support and individualized education they deserve. Students with and without disabilities learn and participate in the same classroom with different levels of accommodations and modifications. It emphasizes that education is neither separate nor divided into general education and special education. All students receive equitable access and participate in their success.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA): This federal law mandates FAPE for SWDs. It also ensures that these students are provided with specialized education and related services and are placed in the least restrictive environment.

Individualized education program (IEP): This program was created to protect the rights of SWDs under IDEA. An IEP is created based on a student's needs for specialized and individualized instruction. It is then reviewed and revised annually. The IEP includes academic goals, objectives, and related services that support students' academic growth.

Principal preparation program: Any college or university program that results in certification, endorsement, or licensure, making a graduate student eligible to acquire a position as a building administrator (principal or vice/assistant principal).

Special education: Purposeful intervention and instruction for SWDs to eliminate barriers based on their disability.

Students with disabilities (SWDs): School-aged children with physical or cognitive impairments that limit one or more major life activities. These disabilities can include intellectual disabilities, hearing impairments (including deafness), speech or language impairments, visual impairments (including blindness), emotional disturbances, orthopedic impairments, autism, traumatic brain injuries, other health impairments, specific learning disabilities, deaf-blindness, and multiple disabilities. In this study, I have used person-first language, which places the person before the disability. However, some people may choose to use identity-first language. It is important to note that the use of person-first or identity-first varies among individuals. If unsure, ask the person which they prefer.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

There have not always been structures to support SWDs in schools (Zettel & Ballard, 1979), but there have always been students requiring special education supports and services. Both invisible and visible disabilities have been used to prevent people from receiving the education they deserved. Historically, society's understanding of disability was more ignorant and limited (Markelz & Bateman, 2021). Society was also critical of the families of children with disabilities, so, families would hide their children with disabilities at home or institutionalize them (Spaulding & Pratt, 2015). Through continuous fighting and advocacy, people with disabilities were given access to FAPE alongside their nondisabled counterparts.

Considering these historical challenges, school building administrators must keep their knowledge current regarding special education. Graduate programs geared toward principal preparation may contain only one or two courses that delve into special education laws. Moreover, administrators do not receive PD on special education topics because they are not considered a priority on their lengthy list of responsibilities. According to NCES (2024), students during the 2021–2022 school year who received special education and/or related services under IDEA comprised nearly 15% of the public school population. These statistics amplify the necessity for administrators to receive effective instruction to work in special education.

This chapter is divided into five sections. The first section reviews the importance and benefits of building administrators' knowledge base in special education. The second section provides a historical overview of special education legislation leading to the education of SWDs in public schools. The third section focuses on the need for more special education content in

principal preparation programs. The fourth section examines building administrators' perception of preparedness in special education. The last section discusses building administrators' attitudes toward working in special education.

Benefits of Special Education Knowledge for the Building Administrator

Just as doctors need to learn about the different parts of the body, a building administrator needs to be aware of all the parts of a school building. They can be called upon at any time to help with a classroom situation and take on responsibilities they consider outside their wheelhouse. Being the instructional leader of the entire building means they should engage in discussions and education on supporting, working with, and leading SWDs. The leader must verify that "all students including those with special educational needs, receive appropriate instruction and related services" (Frick et al., 2013, p. 210).

School-based administrators play a vital role in creating a nurturing and inclusive environment for SWDs to learn and thrive in schools (Billingsley et al., 2018). By understanding special education programs and the characteristics of different disabilities, as well as the legislation and services provided to SWDs, building administrators can help their special education programs to flourish and their students to succeed. Building administrators with a background in special education possess the experience and knowledge necessary to improve special education programs and the outcomes of SWDs (DeMatthews & Edwards, 2014). Therefore, a comprehensive grasp of special education topics, policies, and laws is necessary to ensure that building administrators make sound decisions, enabling all SWDs to receive the education and supports they deserve (Bateman & Bateman, 2014; Garrison-Wade, 2005).

However, the role of the principal extends beyond simply understanding the law. Building administrators make on-site decisions in special education related to budgeting, staffing,

discipline, and resource sharing. These decisions significantly affect the special education services provided within their buildings (Sun & Xin, 2019). They must exhibit the skills, knowledge, and outlook that enable them to provide leadership for the special education population and programs. Additionally, building administrators can support SWDs when they "understand the legal and technical aspects of special education, evaluate and support [special education] staff, provide needed supports, services, and adaptations to children with disabilities" (Thompson, 2015, p. 139).

DeMatthews and Edwards (2014) stated that specific expertise can create influential and effective leaders, who should be able to do the following:

> (a) to revise budgets and master schedules; (b) to ensure special education teachers and general education teachers have time to meet, plan, and teach together; (c) to provide appropriate resources and training so all teachers are able to differentiate instruction; (d) to monitor the quality of IEPs, progress reports, and other assessments; and (e) to manage special education teachers' time to ensure their work is legally in compliance. (p. 44)

Historically, district office administrators have managed special education training, staffing, testing, and financing (Patterson et al., 2000). However, someone on site must handle special education challenges, which typically falls on the shoulders of the building administrators. They must "manage intricacies ranging from allocating classroom space, responding to parent concerns, and hiring and assigning special education assistants" (Patterson et al., 2000, p. 10). The responsibilities of building administrators have expanded significantly in recent years to include more responsibilities related to special education (Jacobs et al., 2004). Because of these expanding responsibilities, building administrators must be well versed and experienced in implementing special education programs and services. When building administrators are

experienced and knowledgeable about special education, they can make appropriate site-based decisions. When the building administrator is the one who supports and fights for their SWDs, they will provide the necessary leadership and services:

> Decide how to include the special education students in the state testing, knowing that the decision will affect the students' progress and the district's overall performance. Someone must handle the arguments from individual parents and advocates over whether inclusion will help or hurt children with specific disabilities. Someone must support and motivate the communication, training, and collaboration as teachers adjust to new LRE work arrangements. Someone must be careful to make sure low achievers are not given a special education label and maneuvered out of state testing as a way to raise scores or that the behaviorally-emotionally handicapped (BEH) label is not automatically placed on minority children. (Patterson et al., 2000, p. 10)

Building administrators are vital to ensuring that the rights of SWDs are protected and that they receive a quality education (Wagner & Katsiyannis, 2010). To effectively perform in this role, building administrators require extensive training to meet all students' educational needs; the same amount of time spent on training for general education programs should be allocated toward special education. As Garrison-Wade (2005) asserted, principals typically have "the appropriate training and experience to facilitate instruction in regular education but few have the background and experience in special education" (p. 237). This training would make principals more capable of supporting SWDs.

However, the challenges of managing special education do not end there. Pazey and Cole (2013) stated that special education is the area where building administrators face litigation most often. "Special education may be the most litigated educational law issue school leaders face"

(Strader, 2007, p. 178). Liability falls on building administrators when they do not meet legal requirements around special education and education of SWDs; the risk of legal liability further supports the need for more training in special education (Pazey & Cole, 2013). “Content related to special education and special education law has been a long-neglected area within university-based administrator preparation programs” (Pazey & Cole, 2013, p. 243). Undoubtedly, a tremendous benefit of a background in special education is the ability to comply with laws and policies. Therefore, it is beneficial for building administrators to be well versed in special education content. This enables them to assist all SWDs while effectively comprehending and navigating special education laws.

Special education law and related legislation are the areas of educational practice embedded in principal preparation programs. Integrating special education policies and practices is paramount to training future school leaders, along with learning about disabilities and how to educate these students individually. Thus, examining how these legal frameworks inform the curriculum and pedagogy of principal preparation programs illuminates the interconnectedness between legal mandates and effective educational leadership.

History of Special Education Law, Litigation, and Reauthorizations

Children and adults with disabilities have fundamental human rights; however, these were not guaranteed before litigation and legislation (Bicehouse & Faieta, 2017). Historically, before the 1900s, children with disabilities were treated with fear and superstition in the United States (Frost & Kersten, 2011). These societal feelings and misunderstandings would result in “infanticide, shunning, attributions of witchcraft, and divine punishment” of children with disabilities (Bartlett et al., 2007, p. 5). It was also commonplace to exclude children from education because of their disabilities.

Fortunately, the landscape began to shift in the 1960s. Before this time, the number of children with disabilities in U.S. public classrooms was almost nonexistent. Between the 1960s and the early 1970s, no state served all SWDs (Martin et al., 1996). Frost and Kersten (2011) stated that during this time in the United States, almost one million children were excluded from public schools because of their needs. The students were only granted access to education if they passed specific behavioral and physical entrance exams (Zettel & Ballard, 1979). Many districts excluded children "who were blind, deaf, 'feebleminded,' or seriously emotionally disturbed on the grounds that there were no educational programs to meet their needs" (Zettel & Ballard, 1979, p. 6). With all these unfair and exclusionary practices in the classroom, parents and advocates looked to the courts for change.

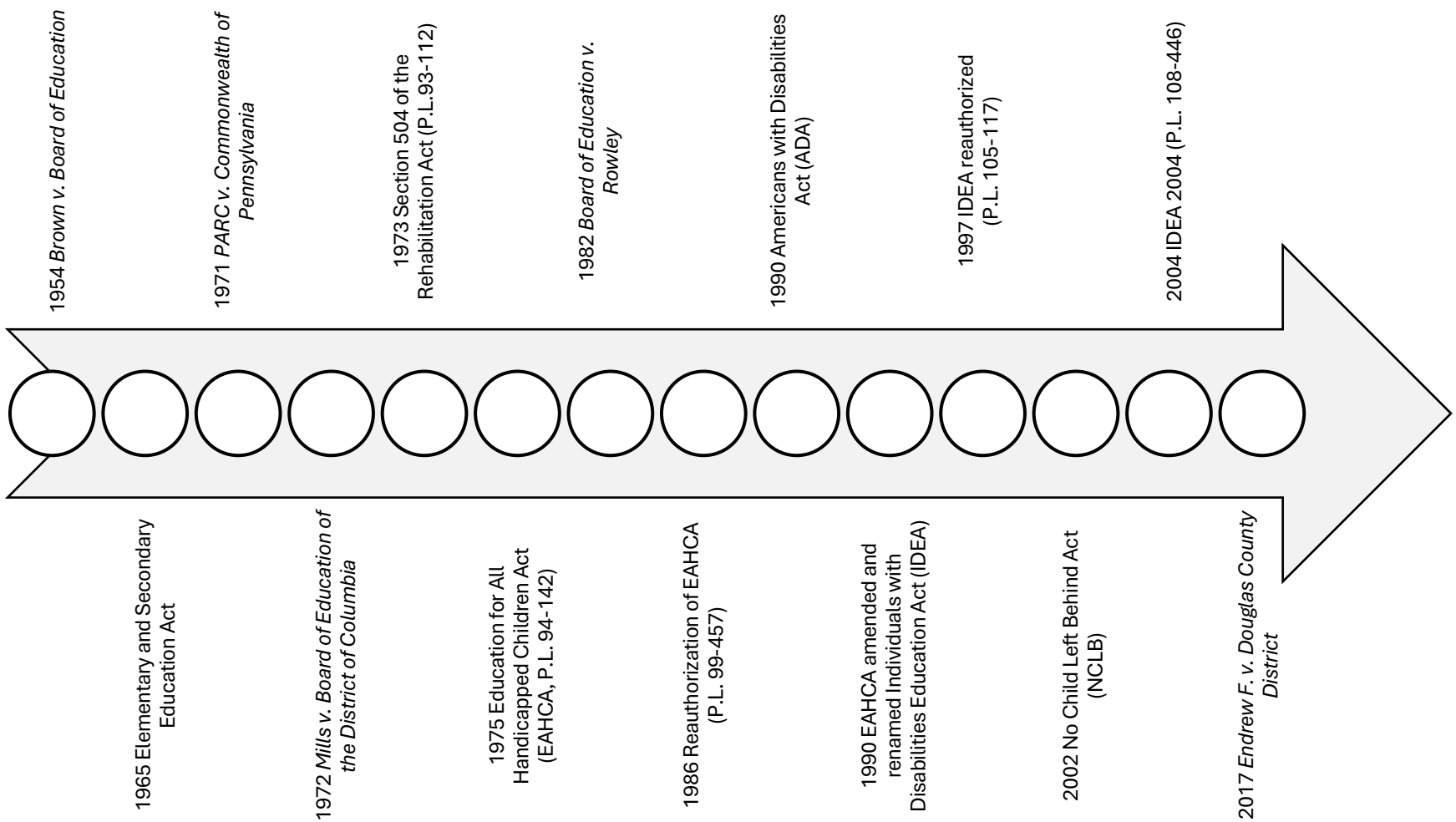
The 14th Amendment to the United States Constitution, enacted in 1868, had an overwhelming influence on public education. Although its objective was to eradicate discrimination against Black people who had been freed from slavery, the amendment ensured equal protection for all Americans; it prohibited any state from denying a government benefit to any group or individual because of "specific or uncontrollable characteristics, such as race, sex, age, or handicap" (Zettel & Ballard, 1979, p. 7). This amendment created a critical shift toward ensuring equitable educational opportunities for all children. However, despite these protections, most school-aged children with disabilities were not given an appropriate education or learning setting.

The outright violation of human rights became apparent in *Brown v. Board of Education*, which set a precedent for SWDs to be entitled to free and public education alongside their nondisabled peers. This landmark case was a significant turning point, highlighting the need for access to educational reform. To better illustrate the progression of special education legislation

and the notable cases that impacted SWDs, Figure 2 depicts a timeline of these events. This graphic starts with the civil rights case that established a foundation for SWDs to advocate for their rights and ends with a recent case regarding FAPE, showing the milestones achieved in ensuring rights and equity for SWDs.

Figure 2

Timeline of Special Education Case Law and Legislation



In 1954, the Supreme Court decision in *Brown* stated that separate but equal had no place in an educational setting because it deprived people of their protection under law (Williams et al., 2014). This decision led to the recognition that all people, regardless of race, gender, or disability, have the right to public education. Importantly, in the *Brown* case the Supreme Court justices referenced the equal protection and due process clause of the 14th Amendment, which would later serve as a stimulus for SWDs to receive special education in public school settings (Williams et al., 2014). Yet, while the case marked a significant step forward, it did "not have the force of federal law obligating states to educate students with disabilities" (Frost & Kersten, 2011, p. 2). Nevertheless, parents of SWDs paralleled their advocacy for equity to that of this civil rights case (Thompson, 2015). *Brown* was the catalyst for parents and advocates to guarantee a right to an education for SWDs because "if segregation by race was a denial of equal educational opportunity, then obviously the exclusion of children with disabilities was also a denial of equal educational opportunity" (Markelz & Bateman, 2021, pp. 17–18).

Stemming from the decision, many cases were filed to ensure SWDs had access to FAPE (Zettel & Ballard, 1979). Of those 40-plus cases, two were the most precedent-setting for educating SWDs—*Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children (PARC) v. Pennsylvania* (1972) and *Mills v. Board of Education of the District of Columbia* (1972). These cases reflected a growing awareness and acknowledgment of the rights of SWDs in public school settings.

A decade after *Brown*, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 was signed into law by President Lyndon B. Johnson. He believed that educational opportunities for all should be a national priority. ESEA was a civil rights law that established federal grants to districts serving low-income students, funding for special education centers, and agencies to

improve the quality of education for students in elementary and secondary settings (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). This act was a fundamental step toward inclusivity in education.

PARC v. Pennsylvania (1972) was the first right-to-education class-action lawsuit. Pennsylvania state law allowed public schools to deny children the right to an education if they did not have a "mental age" of 5 by the start of first grade. Mental age was used to measure students' intellectual functioning and development, and could then be used to consider a student "too disabled" to participate in public education. Consequently, the PARC and 13 school-aged children with intellectual disabilities brought a class action against the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania for failing to provide these children with public education (Zettel & Ballard, 1979). The suit was resolved by an agreement with the state to provide free public education for all children with mental disabilities between the ages of 6 and 21 (Markelz & Bateman, 2021). This lawsuit was part of the basis for the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975, further securing educational rights for SWDs.

Continuing the momentum of advocacy, a second right-to-education lawsuit occurred in the same year as PARC, this time in the Federal District Court for the District of Columbia. In *Mills v. Board of Education*, the parents of seven children in Washington, DC, brought a class-action suit against the district on behalf of all children with disabilities who were denied entrance or excluded from public programs (Zettel & Ballard, 1979). They stated that based on the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment, these children were excluded without due process (Markelz & Bateman, 2021). The district argued that it needed more money to educate these students. The court ruled that based on the *Brown* decision, excluding children with disabilities was unlawful (Markelz & Bateman, 2021) and ordered the district to provide public education to all children with disabilities, regardless of their mental, physical, or emotional impairment

(Zettel & Ballard, 1979). Within a few years following the *PARC* and *Mills* cases, 46 additional lawsuits were filed on behalf of children with disabilities who were excluded from school, across 28 states (Markelz & Bateman, 2021; Zettel & Ballard, 1979).

As the landmark cases developed, legislation began to evolve as well. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 is a federal civil rights law prohibiting discrimination against individuals with disabilities. Yell (2012) stated that discrimination arises when SWDs are "excluded from participation or receive inferior or different treatment because they have a disability" (p. 93). This brief section of the Rehabilitation Act ensures that people with disabilities have equal access to employment and public accommodations, and that SWDs are protected in public schools. This law covers a wide range of disabilities and requires reasonable accommodations for people with disabilities to have equal access. The law additionally states that people with disabilities cannot be denied benefits or excluded from participation in any activity that is federally funded (Yell et al., 1998). Section 504 was a significant step forward in ensuring the rights and equality of SWDs and continues to be an important tool for promoting inclusivity and accessibility.

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) was signed by President Ford on November 29, 1975. This act, also called the Education for the Handicapped Act, guarantees that all SWDs are provided FAPE (Rothstein, 2021). Notably, Congress reported that in 1974 around 1.75 million children with disabilities were not provided with educational opportunities and 3 million SWDs were receiving an inadequate education. In response to this disturbing situation, the law mandated that states make funding available for two vulnerable groups of students: SWDs not receiving an education and SWDs receiving an inadequate education (Markelz & Bateman, 2021). The EAHCA requires "appropriate education (which

includes related services), in the least restrictive environment (known as mainstreaming), individualized to each child's needs, for all (zero reject), at no cost to the parents" (Rothstein, 2021, p. 405). This mandate also guaranteed these students the right to procedural due process of law and a nondiscriminatory evaluation and/or placement process (Zettel & Ballard, 1979).

In 1982, the *Board of Education v. Rowley* case influenced how FAPE was interpreted. In this particular case, the parents of a deaf student at the Furnace Woods Elementary School in Peekskill, NY, asked for a sign language interpreter in the classroom. Although the student excelled while working toward academic standards in school, the parents believed that the denial of an interpreter in her IEP meant their daughter could not learn at the same level as her nondisabled peers (Couvillon et al., 2018). This situation led the Rowleys to file a suit in federal court. The federal district court and the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Second Circuit both ruled that the district had failed to provide the student with a FAPE. Following this, the district appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court, which favored the district and stated that the elementary school had met all procedural requirements set forth by the law. It also concluded that the student was passing each grade, so the IEP must have provided her with educational benefits (Couvillon et al., 2018). As a result, the Supreme Court developed a two-part test to assist courts with future cases of FAPE. The first part assesses whether the district adheres to the procedural requirements of the law, and the second evaluates the IEP to determine if it enables students to receive services and support that benefit their education (Couvillon et al., 2018).

EAHCA was reauthorized in 1986. The reauthorization addressed and authorized an early intervention program for disabled infants and toddlers (DeGraw et al., 1988). It mandated that all states must provide services to families with young children born with disabilities. Through this

amendment, each family is involved in creating an individualized family service plan for their child (Eads et al., 1995). DeGraw et al. (1988) stated that the law

> provides financial support to state governments to assist them in developing and implementing services for handicapped infants and toddlers, and, perhaps most importantly, it requires states to begin, within 5 years, to serve all eligible handicapped children from birth to 3 years of age as a condition for receiving continued federal support. (p. 971)

Before this reauthorization of EAHCA, children could not receive "any service, initiated prior to 36 months of age, which is designed to improve the development of the handicapped, at-risk, or disadvantaged child" (DeGraw et al., 1988, p. 971). Therefore, these early intervention services provided children from birth to age 3 with programs to meet their social and academic needs.

In 1990, another significant legislative development occurred with the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). This law was modeled after Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Smith & Colon, 1998). The primary purpose of the ADA was to provide "civil rights to the 43 million Americans with disabilities who have been unable to access their communities and necessary services" (Bateman & Bateman, 2014, p. 27) in all areas of public life, including public services, public accommodations, transportation, housing, and education (Eads et al., 1995). It included the provision that employers and supervisors could not discriminate against a qualified person with a disability under all employment conditions (Smith & Colon, 1998).

That same year, the EAHCA was amended and renamed IDEA. This law is one of the most important to school building administrators because it protects all SWDs. Additionally, the amendment saw a shift in terminology. The term "handicapped" was changed to "disability" and

the law was updated to use person-first language (Markelz & Bateman, 2021). Under this law, the federal government became a partner in educating SWDs (Couvillon et al., 2018). The amendment also added new provisions to the law. For example, under the EAHCA, students were guaranteed a FAPE in the least restrictive environment. IDEA further emphasized each student's right to an IEP laying out the special education interventions and related services provided by the district (Couvillon et al., 2018). The IEP serves as a blueprint that outlines how the student is provided with an appropriate education, detailing specific goals and objectives, as well as the necessary supports. An appropriate education, as cited by Bateman and Bateman (2014), can be realized if "the district follows a certain process in the development and implementation of the IEP, then the student should be receiving an acceptable result" (p. 16). Importantly, the IEP is revisited and/or revised annually and functions as a legally binding contract between the district and the student.

IDEA was reauthorized in 1997. President Bill Clinton signed IDEA 1997 to add provisions that included access to the general curriculum, requirements for schools to provide assistive technology to students who need it, and the authority for states to expand the definition of developmental delay to include children up to age 9 (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). The reauthorization also established a process for parents to mediate disputes with schools or local educational agencies.

President George W. Bush signed NCLB in January 2002. NCLB aimed to identify students needing additional support, irrespective of race, disabilities, background, language, or income (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.). The act's main feature compelled states to conduct annual student assessments linked to state standards to "identify schools failing to make 'adequate yearly progress' (AYP) toward the stated goal of having all students achieve

proficiency in reading and math by 2013-2014 and to institute sanctions and rewards based on each school's AYP status" (Dee & Jacob, 2011, p. 418). By focusing on opportunities for all learners, NCLB aimed to close achievement gaps for diverse marginalized groups.

NCLB was a reauthorization of ESEA and worked to improve education by elevating educational standards and staff while reducing the "gaps between disadvantaged student subgroups and their more advantaged counterparts" (Ladd, 2017, p. 461). It also highlighted the disparities between SWDs and their nondisabled peers. Schools had to report yearly progress data for the following subgroups: students below the poverty line, students from racial and ethnic subgroups, SWDs, and students with limited English proficiency (Yell et al., 2006). This information ensured that districts remained accountable. NCLB included SWDs in this data to keep districts accountable so they would not be ignored in the classrooms and "receive the academic attention that they deserved" (Yell et al., 2006, p. 34).

IDEA was reauthorized by President George W. Bush in December 2004 (Yell et al., 2004). The 2004 version of the act aligned with NCLB conditions, calling for schools to measure students' progress. It mandated that interventions be provided to students failing to make adequate progress, raised standards for special education instructors, and provided early intervention services for children not identified as special education who needed additional behavioral or academic support to succeed in a general environment (U.S. Department of Education, 2023). Reauthorizations and revisions of these laws occur every few years to guarantee that SWDs are supported and receive the necessary services in the correct placement.

IDEA (2004) guaranteed that SWDs throughout the nation were provided with individualized services at no cost to their parents. This law governed how educational agencies and states provided services to infants, toddlers, children, and people up to the age of 21 years. It

additionally covered early intervention services for infants and toddlers (birth to 3 years) and transition services to prepare older students for what comes after school, which taught employment skills, how to further their education in college, and independent life skills (IDEA, 2004). This act mandated that eligible school-aged students receive services that meet their unique needs, including (a) instruction specifically tailored to the student; (b) adaptations to the curriculum; and (c) teaching methods that address the student's specific goals. IDEA (2004) also granted students access to related services that would benefit them (e.g., speech, occupational therapy, physical therapy, transportation, counseling). Moreover, this act defined 13 categories of eligibility for students to receive special education supports in educational settings. In order to qualify, a child must be evaluated and found to need special education services. IDEA serves as the guidebook for special education services and programs (Markelz & Bateman, 2021).

When the requirements of NCLB were deemed unworkable and unachievable, the Obama administration worked to create a more effective law to prepare students for success (Ladd, 2017). President Barack Obama passed the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) on December 10, 2015, replacing the NCLB Act of 2002 and reauthorizing ESEA of 1965. ESSA includes provisions related to the education of SWDs, such as requirements for schools to provide evidence-based interventions and report on the progress of SWDs. Other provisions include access to high-quality preschool and accountability to effect change in underperforming schools where students are not making progress and there is a low graduation rate (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

The second landmark case regarding a school district's responsibility to provide FAPE was *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District* in 2017. Endrew F. was a fourth-grade student in Colorado diagnosed with autism and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). His

parents felt that he was not making academic or functional progress, so they rejected his IEP and placed him in a private school. The parents filed for due process, alleging that the district had failed to provide him with FAPE (Couvillon et al., 2018). When the hearing officer sided with the district, Endrew's parents escalated the case to the U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals for the Tenth Circuit, which also found that the district provided FAPE. The parents then appealed to the U.S. Supreme Court. The parents stated that according to the Rowley Test, the district failed to provide FAPE because "the IEP was not reasonably calculated to provide [Endrew] with educational benefit" (Couvillon et al., 2018, p. 292). In a significant ruling, the court overturned the Tenth Circuit's decision, stating that the student was entitled to an educational program that provided more than "de minimis" educational benefits (Rothstein, 2021). As a result, the case returned to the Tenth Circuit and then to the U.S. District Court for the District of Colorado. The previous ruling was reversed, and Endrew F.'s parents were reimbursed for the private school placement, as well as attorney fees and litigation costs (Couvillon et al., 2018).

Principal Preparation Programs, Standards, and Special Education

Principal preparation programs must be aligned with state certification requirements, but can vary for different reasons, such as the educational institution's accreditation criteria, the needs of the school district, and students' needs (Johnson, 2016). Leadership programs are vital in preparing preservice administrators for their roles, providing the foundational knowledge base for their future responsibilities (Johnson, 2016). Although educational leadership programs may differ in terms of the courses offered and their specific focus, they are guided by national standards that provide a comprehensive framework.

These leadership standards were developed by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) in response to the recommendations in the 1987 report of the National

Commission on Excellence in Educational Administration (J. Murphy, 1990). The NPBEA utilized the report's information to create standards that would help reform principal preparation programs nationwide. Young et al. (2017) noted that the first set of NPBEA leadership standards was established by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) in 1996 under the guidance of the Council of Chief State School Officers and NPBEA. These policy standards offered a common framework and created a set of expectations for school administrators. Shortly after the introduction of the ISLLC standards, the Educational Leadership Constituent Council developed its own leadership preparation standards, identifying key competencies that principals needed to know and implement (Young et al., 2017, p. 229). While these standards were applied in principal preparation programs, the ISLLC standards focused on the ongoing development of practicing school and district leaders (Farley et al., 2019).

In 2015, the NPBEA replaced the ISLLC standards with the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL), which were replaced by the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) standards in 2018. Farley et al. (2019) described the revised standards as follows:

- Grounded in the current research.
- Emphasize student success.
- Provide a clearer vision of being a school leader.
- Describe the characteristics necessary for a highly qualified school leader.

The NELP standards were specifically developed to mirror the PSEL standards, focusing on the foundational knowledge and skills that preservice leaders need to effectively manage school buildings. These standards aim to ensure that preservice leaders possess a comprehensive understanding of the essential knowledge and skills required for successful school management.

The NELP standards provide a framework for evaluating the competencies and abilities required to effectively lead schools. By examining these standards, researchers can gain insights into the specific knowledge and skills that building administrators need to create an inclusive learning environment for SWDs.

It is important to note that the NELP standards are the framework for the principal preparation program at William Paterson University of New Jersey, the researcher's university. For this study, a critical examination of the NELP standards will enhance our understanding of preservice leadership standards. Table 1 lists the seven standards along with their descriptions.

Table 1

NELP Standards and Summaries

NELP standard	Brief summary
Standard 1: Mission, Vision, and Improvement	Contains two components that address the collaborative development of a school's mission and vision, and the ability of the candidate to plan and lead school improvement processes utilizing data
Standard 2: Ethics and Professional Norms	Consists of three components; these include professional norms, ethical behavior, and the candidate's ability to evaluate, communicate and advocate for legal and ethical decisions.
Standard 3: Equity, Inclusiveness, and Cultural Responsiveness	Has three components that focus on the candidate's ability to create a supportive and inclusive school culture that promotes culturally responsive practices and equitable access to support and resources.
Standard 4: Learning and Instruction	Consists of four components that promote the candidate's ability to provide high quality, equitable, technology-rich curricula programs that employ best instructional practices and data-informed assessment systems.
Standard 5: Community and External Leadership	Contains three components that promote the candidate's ability to engage with and advocate for students and families, and to develop productive partnerships with school stakeholders and the community to meet students' needs.

NELP standard	Brief summary
Standard 6: Operations and Management	Consists of three components that promote effective school management and operations systems, including candidate's appropriate use of data and resources, and the effective implementation of policies, laws, and regulations.
Standard 7: Building Professional Capacity	Has four components focused on human resources management, creating a positive and professional school culture, facilitating ongoing professional learning for faculty/staff, and effective supervision and evaluation of faculty/staff.

Note. From "Effectiveness of Principal Preparation per the NELP Standards: An Assessment of One University's Performance," by L. G. Boyland, M. M. Quick, R. L. Geesa, S. K. Sriver, and E. M. Dyke, 2022, *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation*, *17*(1), p. 26. NELP = National Educational Leadership Preparation.

While these standards focus on the building administrators' responsibilities and duties at the school level, some may align with principles of special education, although none explicitly use the term "special education." Considering the standards as they relate to SWDs, the language used is vague. For instance, Standard 2 relates to legal decisions in which building administrators must know the laws and legislation related to SWDs. Nevertheless, the standards and components do not list special education. Similarly, Standard 3 refers to equity and inclusion principles that align with special education and other subgroups.

Boyland et al. (2022) reviewed the effectiveness of a university principal preparation program in relation to the NELP standards. Many participants in the program stated that they wished they had more preparation around special education laws, developing and monitoring IEPs/504s, and other issues related to SWDs (Boyland et al., 2022). Participants in this study also suggested that standards should directly address special education, among other areas.

Principal preparation programs must equip future leaders with the knowledge and skills needed to effectively run school buildings. This essential knowledge base should include special education, yet the "majority of current administrators report a lack of preparedness to meet the duties and responsibilities for special education" (Gilson & Etscheidt, 2022, p. 43). In a study completed by Christensen et al. (2013), administrators reported that principal preparation programs lacked content related to SWDs and special education, and emphasized the importance of better training in relation to special education. Almost 90% of principals expressed a need for knowledge on how to modify or adapt the curriculum to meet the needs of SWDs (Christensen et al., 2013). This is one of the critical points of IDEA: schools must provide SWDs with access to the curriculum and any necessary accommodations and modifications that students need to succeed.

Principals are the key players in maintaining practical and functional school systems, representing the school district in the community, and implementing educational policy (Khaleel et al., 2021). They take on the role of front-line manager and small business executive and lead faculty using data to make effective decisions (Hess & Kelly, 2007). As the leader of the building, the principal is given the task of caring for the students' instructional, personal, and emotional needs. The education of all students, including SWDs, is one of the principal's numerous responsibilities. While most principals are not adequately trained in special education, they need an understanding of special education services, current federal mandates, and the ability to ensure that their staff provides and implements the correct services for SWDs. Despite the national trend and call for inclusion, building administrators are still not required to take courses on special education or have the knowledge to work with SWDs (Patterson et al., 2000).

Principals are responsible for being the change agents that create inclusive environments; without proper training or experience, this can be a challenging obligation.

Principal Preparation Programs and the Need for Special Education Content

Many preservice building administrators enter principal preparatory courses without special education courses or training (Billingsley et al., 2018). Due to this lack of a special education foundation, principals rely on PD, collaborate with special education administrators, and delegate to other educators (Melloy et al., 2021). Their lack of background knowledge and experience leads principals to focus on compliance and special education laws rather than improving special education programs within their buildings (Billingsley et al., 2018). Without adequate preservice training to prepare them, building administrators need help assuming special education responsibilities (Hess & Kelly, 2007; Sirotnik & Kimball, 1994). They may look to special education experts to advise and guide them on their administrative journey (Pregot, 2021). Given the numerous responsibilities related to SWDs and the fact that most principals have not received special education training (Bateman & Bateman, 2014), it is common for tasks related to special education to be assigned to special education teachers or administrators. Building administrators who feel underprepared often delegate duties or do not fully understand the extent of their responsibilities toward individuals with disabilities (Goor et al., 1997).

Principal preparatory courses focus on many responsibilities, which include how to (a) lead a school building; (b) work with all stakeholders; and (c) support the educational journeys of all the students in their building. Preservice building administrators typically finish their courses feeling ready to lead a school building—until they become school leaders and realize they lack the skills and knowledge to lead in special education (Billingsley et al., 2018). This gap in preparation is especially pronounced when creating inclusive buildings for SWDs. While

principal preparation programs cover various leadership skills, specific training designed to meet the needs of building administrators rarely includes their leadership role in creating inclusive buildings. Nevertheless, in many districts, building administrators are the prominent people responsible for supervising the special education programs and services provided. It is urgent and necessary that principal certification programs "include special education content, which could provide school leaders with the knowledge and professional skills needed in decision making and service provision to support students with disabilities" (Sun & Xin, 2019, p. 107). Sirotnik and Kimball (1994) argued that, at minimum, building administrators should understand the following:

> Public Law 94-142 and state regulations governing special education practices; the Regular Education Initiative (REI); definitions and characteristics of handicapping conditions; service delivery models; appropriate teaching strategies; financial, legal, and ethical implications of special education programs; and enough of the history (successes and failures) of special education programming in public schools to understand contemporary issues and debates. (p. 622)

Notably, many principal preparation programs lack courses related to special education content; in fact, it seems nonexistent. The National Association of Secondary School Principals (n.d.) reported that "a survey of more than 3,500 principals administered through the RAND American Educator Panels found that only 12% felt 'completely prepared' to support the needs of students with disabilities." Research indicates that school administrators require more special education training but rarely receive it in their preparatory programs (Garrison-Wade, 2005; Pazey & Cole, 2013). To illustrate the severity of this issues, in many cases, building administrators are not required to be knowledgeable in special education, partake in coursework related to special

education, or fulfill special education supervision hours to complete principal certification requirements (Horrocks et al., 2008). This gap highlights the crucial need for reform. University and college principal certification programs need to be improved on specific topics related to special education (Praisner, 2003). It would make sense for preparatory programs to provide leaders with foundational knowledge about special education (Pazey & Cole, 2013).

This point was echoed in a study by Casale et al. (2024), who reviewed textbooks and standards for preservice teachers and administrators. In the six most popular preservice textbooks for teachers and administrators, they found that more special education content was provided to teachers than to administrators. Of the 32 special education concepts examined, the textbooks for administrators referenced 3% to 12%. In those six textbooks, the only common special education concept mentioned throughout was personnel development. Concepts that were inadequately mentioned included eligibility, least restrictive environment, IEPs, intervention, and 504s. When looking at the NELP standards, the only special education concept explicitly mentioned was IEPs (Casale et al., 2024). Casale et al. (2024), called for improving instruction in special education content and laws for preservice administrators.

Although administrative programs cover special education laws, it is critical to recognize that these laws are constantly evolving, presenting new information and challenges. Special education law is typically taught in an education law course for only 1 to 2 weeks (DeMatthews & Edwards, 2014). Therefore, there is a need for more courses and information about special education law, as it comprises most school-related litigation (Katsiyannis et al., 2016; Zirkel & Machin, 2012). Knowledge of special education law is critical for building administrators because “judicial consequences result when decisions are not in compliance with federal mandates” (Davidson & Algozzine, 2002, p. 43).

The consequences of principals not following the law can be costly for districts (Garrison-Wade, 2005). The mistakes that lead to litigation often include (a) failing to develop an educational plan that enables a student to progress, (b) failing to implement a student's special education program, or (c) failing to follow the procedural requirements of the law (Couvillon et al., 2018). It is crucial to emphasize that "ignorance or lack of knowledge of the law is not an acceptable defense for a principal not to enforce federal mandates and regulations" (Garrison-Wade, 2005, p. 236). Building administrators must be knowledgeable about special education law to ensure "an appropriate education for special education students and to reduce the school district's liability for potential litigation" (Valesky & Hirth, 1992, p. 399). Given the high stakes involved, the extensive litigation surrounding special education should be "indicative of the need to improve university-based administrator preparation programs" (Gilson & Etscheidt, 2022, p. 44).

To illustrate this point, Davis (1980) investigated the amount of formal special education training received by principals in Maine. Of the 345 principals who participated, over 95% did not hold major or minor roles in special education. Principals were also asked whether they had received formal special education training in their undergraduate, graduate, or continuing education courses. Of the 345 principals, 178 received no courses on special education, 51 received one course, 54 received two, 59 received three or more, and three did not respond (Davis, 1980). Remarkably, however, the results from the study showed that 85% of the principals considered formal training in special education necessary. Principals also viewed their time handling special education tasks as having increased with the growth of legislation related to special education.

Hirth and Valesky (1990) discovered that principals knew more about procedural requirements than about delivering services to SWDs, and that they had gaps in their knowledge about special education laws. The authors stated that a "principal's knowledge of special education law is not sufficient to ensure that mistakes in implementation of procedural safeguards and/or the provision of educational services will not occur" (Hirth & Valesky, 1990, p. 136). This lack of knowledge is particularly alarming, since many cases brought against school districts are caused by mistakes or oversights related to special education. In another study, Valesky and Hirth (1992) observed that very few states required administrators to take courses dedicated to special education law; rather, the certification course was typically a law course with a special education component. The amount of coursework covered in a principal certification program is extensive and the amount of time dedicated to special education topics is minimal (Valesky & Hirth, 1992).

McHatton et al. (2010) surveyed 169 principals regarding their perceptions of preparedness in special education content. They found that about half of the participants did not receive any special education courses in their principal preparation programs, and over a quarter stated that they received one course. Participants were further asked if they had special education PD or coursework in their preparatory program on the following topics: legal issues, characteristics of students, modifications and accommodations, discipline issues, and funding issues related specifically to special education. Seventy-five percent of participants said that they received instruction focused on legal issues (McHatton et al., 2010). Although these principals lacked training in special education, they reported that they spent a great deal of time (a) in IEP meetings, (b) in special education department meetings, (c) reviewing special education lesson plans, and (d) evaluating special education teachers (McHatton et al., 2010). The participants in

this study stated that while they spent most of their time on special education tasks, they did not feel prepared to participate or engage. The authors highlighted a noticeable disconnect between the activity building administrators engaged in and the content of their principal preparation programs or PD opportunities (McHatton et al., 2010).

Additionally, Pazey and Cole (2013) stated that special education issues are not seen as an integral part of educational leadership programs, and that the requirements for principal preparation programs are focused on management and leadership. Reinforcing this concern, Terrell et al. (2018) maintained that many university preparation programs treat special education and regular education as "separate and distinct programs" (p. 95). This disconnect further suggests that building administrators should be well versed in special education before running a building with SWDs. Ultimately, without these courses being required or even provided as electives, building administrators can feel underprepared to work with this population. Principal certification programs should take action to develop future leaders into special education leaders. Patterson et al. (2000) stated that:

> Certification boards, schools of educational leadership, and professors of educational administration should seriously consider what strategies, coursework, and certification requirements principals need to provide effective instructional leadership to special education programs in site-based managed schools. The policy issues surrounding special education program implementation are multiple, complex, and ever-changing. (pp. 19-20)

Researchers have investigated ways to reform principal preparation programs by adding special education content. Patterson et al. (2000) proposed the recommendations and rationales listed in Table 2.

Table 2

Recommendations for Principal Preparation Program Reform

Recommendations	Rationale
1. "Principals must have a basic understanding of special education services, laws, and regulations, court cases, and funding."	Administrators' knowledge of various aspects of special education can be a factor in providing services to SWDs. Principals need access to the legal aspects of special education to provide effective leadership.
2. "Principals must understand district policies and their implications for the entire school."	District policies are created with general education students in mind. This excludes the needs of SWDs. Building administrators should hold space to create conversations about how these policies affect SWDs.
3. "Principals must understand district policies and their implications for the entire school."	Historically, the central office would oversee special education issues. Responsibility for monitoring compliance and ensuring funds make it to special education programs can fall on the building administrators. To be an effective special education leader, the building-level administrators should not fully depend on district-level leaders.
4. "Principals must participate in ongoing education regarding changes and trends in the field of special education, particularly the multiple definitions of inclusion."	Building administrators need functional and working knowledge of innovations in education and current trends. Building administrators need to understand inclusion and support inclusive practices.
5. "Principals must participate in ongoing education regarding leadership philosophy and strategies that facilitate both site-based management and inclusive practices."	Building administrators need to create and foster an authentic and inclusive environment that views SWDs as essential to the school community. The principals' attitude directly correlates to creating a climate of acceptance and inclusion.
6. "If principals are to assume greater responsibilities for special education programs in their schools, district administrators responsible for special education must support them by providing more direct communication	District administration must keep school-based leaders abreast of changes in educational laws and legislation. These can result from recent court cases and reauthorizations of different educational laws.

Recommendations	Rationale
and dissemination of accurate and current information."	

Note. From "Are Principals Prepared to Manage Special Education Dilemmas?" by J. Patterson, C. Marshall, and D. Bowling, 2000, *NASSP Bulletin*, *84*(613), pp. 18–19, https://doi.org/10.1177/019263650008461303. SWDs = students with disabilities.

Lack of Special Education PD

After building administrators complete their principal preparatory programs and oversee their own school buildings, they receive minimal to no training designed to support special education. PD opportunities within school districts should include opportunities to observe and participate in topics about special education with support from the director of special education, special education teachers, and outside resources (Praisner, 2003). Special educators require considerable and meaningful PD throughout their career to stay abreast of new and current legislation; the same should be said for building administrators (Lynch, 2012). Thus, PD is not only beneficial but essential, as it allows building administrators to continue their educational growth and journey. Praisner (2003) stated that there was a need for in-house PD in different aspects of special education for all school-based staff. Sider et al. (2017) interviewed principals regarding their training and experience in special education; most participants stated that they felt on-the-job training and workshops about special education prepared them for their administrative role.

Bai and Martin (2015) explored what training building administrators needed to effectively implement inclusive education. The study surveyed 162 administrators, assessing their knowledge, self-efficacy, and perception of support for inclusion in their buildings. Data from the study showed a significant difference in special education needs based on the

backgrounds of the administrators. The gaps in knowledge included legal mandates, disability classifications, managing inclusive classrooms, and using data to monitor student progress. While the administrators mostly expressed positive attitudes toward inclusion, many recognized the need for more training, support, and information. All school administrators in this study expressed a need for PD so that they could effectively serve SWDs. This study further highlighted the need for continuous support in special education for building administrators.

Sun and Xin (2019) pointed out that principals may have received their principal certifications years ago and need refreshers:

> It seems that updating knowledge and skills of special education via professional development is important not only for teachers, but also for school principals. We believe that school leaders with adequate and up-to-date knowledge and skills will present potentials and abilities to facilitate teaching and learning, and will be highly involved in fostering, developing, and implementing best practices for students with disabilities. (p. 112)

This shows the crucial link between PD and effective leadership in special education. Principals can feel underprepared to handle special education responsibilities in their buildings because of their lack of knowledge about special education. The gap in principal preparation programs needs to be supplemented with PD in special education content. Cobb (2015) suggested that "providing adequate time for principals to complete special education-oriented documentation, and offering professional development to prepare principals for their work in special education would help to address these needs" (p. 229). Cobb went on to reason that principal preparation programs and PD should offer (a) experiences that identify the values and skills lacking and (b) multiple and varied experiences that help principals develop these values and skills. Identifying

the building administrator's role as a special education leader and supporter of SWDs is critical when envisioning the benefits of PD.

Building Administrators' Perceptions of Preparedness in Special Education

Leadership is essential for creating inclusive buildings to meet the needs of all students, especially SWDs (DeMatthews et al., 2019). Despite variations in principal preparation program quality and their ability to keep up with current trends, special education consistently receives insufficient prioritization. Principal preparation programs only provide future administrators with a small amount of knowledge deemed necessary by experts in special education and its implementation (Praisner, 2003). This shortcoming can have repercussions for both administrators and SWDs alike. Leadership preparation in special education is vital because research has shown that building administrators with special education experience are more likely to be involved in providing support for SWDs and improving special education programs (DeMatthews et al., 2019). Without much support from principal certification programs, building administrators are not equipped to participate in and lead special education programs successfully.

Goor et al. (1997) stated that "principals often feel unprepared for their roles in the administration of special programs in their schools and thus may be unaware of the extent of their responsibilities, or they may delegate their duties to other personnel in the building" (p. 133). School administrators must be knowledgeable about special education because they are part of the team that implements IDEA and ESSA (DiPaola & Walter-Thomas, 2003). Building administrators have reported that "having a special education background was certainly advantageous in providing leadership to special education at the site level" (Patterson et al., 2000, p. 16).

Stevenson-Jacobson et al. (2006) surveyed principals about their perceptions of skills needed for special education administrators. Of the 81 participants, 38 stated that they had never taught special education, nor did they have special education certification. This raises critical questions about the preparedness of leaders in special education. Of those 38, three-fourths had three or fewer special education graduate courses. In a question about their responsibility for special education in their building, the principals with special education certifications reported spending more time on issues related to special education than those without. The results also showed that principals not certified in special education spent 36% of their time on special education matters, whereas principals with special education certifications spent 58% of their time on special education (Stevenson-Jacobson et al., 2006).

Sun and Xin (2019) investigated how principals perceived their knowledge of special education and supported SWDs. They found that even though the principals had previously made decisions for SWDs, they needed more field experience and expertise in special education. Of the participants, 75% stated that almost all their special education skills and knowledge came from mandatory inservice training provided by the district, and none came from their university leadership programs. The principals also disclosed that they were not involved in the PD of their buildings in special education. The results showed that "the level of knowledge and skills that school leaders pertained to may greatly impact their competency in facilitating and implementing the programs and services that could ultimately improve the learning outcomes of those with special needs" (Sun & Xin, 2019, p. 113).

Building Administrators' Attitudes Towards Special Education

As the instructional leader of a building, the building administrator influences instructional practices, the overall climate of the building, and whether there is buy-in among the

staff in a particular program (Goor et al., 1997). This statement is especially true for administrators who lead buildings that house SWDs. In fact, research shows that a significant predictor of whether a special education program will be successful is the building administrator's attitude toward it (Garrison-Wade et al., 2007; Goor et al., 1997). Therefore, it is essential that building administrators exhibit behaviors that support the success of each student with disabilities. The development and success of a special education program is based on the principal's interest, role, support, and expertise (Patterson et al., 2000). The degree to which building administrators support and are interested in the programs is determined by their values and attitudes (Praisner, 2003). The attitudes and beliefs of building administrators regarding special education are central to shaping behavior toward SWDs, with Van Horn et al. (1992) identifying the principal's most significant role in inclusion as that of a symbolic leader.

Cline (1981) created a study in which he evaluated the knowledge and attitudes of principals. The participants were asked to look at a student profile that included a behavioral profile so they could place the student in the appropriate classroom. The data showed that the participants' attitudes toward SWDs were not negative, and many principals would place students with different disabilities closer to mainstreaming. However, the participants' lack of knowledge was concerning and affected their ability to make educated decisions for SWDs. Cline suggested that trainings should emphasize educating building administrators in special education. "Since the principal is, indeed, the school's gate-keeper, mainstreaming has a poorer chance of success if the principal is not knowledgeable concerning the educational needs of the children to be managed" (Cline, 1981, p. 174).

In a study conducted by Praisner (2003), 408 principals were surveyed to investigate their attitudes toward the inclusion of SWDs. About one in five principals' attitudes toward inclusion

were positive, while the others were mostly uncertain. Data were also collected on specific topics related to special education in courses and workshops taken by building administrators. Of the 408 principals, most had learned about special education law, the characteristics of SWDs, and behavior management (Praisner, 2003), but only 2% had taken courses or workshops that covered all 14 special education topics. The findings also showed that principals who had taken more special education courses had a more positive attitude toward inclusion. Praisner reinforced the notion that principals with experience working with SWDs had a more positive attitude toward inclusion and service delivery to these students. The same applied to placing SWDs: the student placements were less restrictive when the building administrator had experience working with SWDs.

Gaps in the Literature

Special education is a complex and multifaceted field that requires specific knowledge and skill. However, many principal preparation programs lack comprehensive coursework and field experiences focusing on special education obligations. As a result, aspiring building administrators may graduate without expertise to effectively lead inclusive schools and support SWDs. The research reviewed in this study has demonstrated building administrators' willingness and need to learn more about SWDs and special education than is presented in principal preparation programs.

This study sought to contribute to the growing body of literature by shedding light on this necessary aspect of educational leadership and professional learning opportunities that often goes underexplored or overlooked—namely, special education. I investigated the perceived preparedness of building administrators to foster inclusive environments for SWDs and explored potential correlations with their background and experience in special education. By employing a

prescreening questionnaire and rounds of interviews, I gathered information about (a) the extent of experience building administrators had working with SWDs, (b) the perceived preparedness of building administrators upon completing their principal preparation programs, (c) the sources of their special education knowledge base, (d) the PD opportunities provided to both administrators and their staff about special education, and (e) the specific information and support that building administrators needed to foster inclusive environments effectively. Through these data collection methods, this study aimed to provide insight into how principal preparation programs can be enhanced and PD opportunities can be used to better meet the diverse needs of students.

Furthermore, this study aimed to offer an understanding of the current landscape of special education in principal preparation programs and how it affects building administrators' understanding and handling of special-education-related requirements. To achieve this, I examined two groups of school-based administrators to determine whether any disparities existed between those who had prior experience working with SWDs and those who did not. The building administrators in this study were asked about their backgrounds in special education to compare the experiences and outcomes of their administrative journeys in relation to working with SWDs. Building administrators with a background in special education brought an understanding of how to work with diverse learners, how to individualize instruction based on their needs, and laws that must be followed to ensure that all SWDs are given the supports they need. In contrast, building administrators without this background relied more heavily on special education administrators and staff. Through a comparative analysis of these two groups, this study sheds light on how administrators' knowledge base in special education influences decision-making and support within a school building. Looking at these discrepancies can inform

resource allocation, PD initiatives, and optimistically, revisions of the curriculum provided to preservice principals and vice/assistant principals in their preparation courses.

Most studies focusing on the expertise of school-based administrators regarding special education have exclusively involved principals as the sole participants. I used both principals' and vice principals' input for a more comprehensive understanding of the decision-making process regarding SWDs within school buildings. While principals often hold the most significant leadership role, their viewpoints may be influenced by various factors such as administrative priorities and personal biases. In contrast, vice principals, being directly involved in day-to-day operations and interactions with students, staff, and stakeholders, offer different and invaluable insights into the realities of school management. Incorporating the viewpoints of both vice principals and principals enriched the discussion with more perspectives. By filling this gap in the literature, this study contributed to advancing the field of educational leadership, creating more opportunities for building administrators to be inclusive leaders, and enhancing outcomes for SWDs in educational settings.

Summary

Chapter 2 synthesized research across five critical areas related to building administrators and special education. First, it examined the impact on SWDs of building administrators possessing a strong knowledge base in special education. Second, it provided a historical overview of special education legislation, contextualizing the current landscape of service provision. Third, it analyzed the identified gap in special education content within principal preparation programs, reviewing studies that documented the inadequacy of current training. Fourth, it explored the existing literature on administrators' perceived preparedness in special education, highlighting discrepancies between perceived and actual competence. Finally, this

review examined research on building administrators' attitudes toward working within special education, investigating factors influencing their engagement and efficacy. The following chapter describes the research methods used to answer the questions guiding this study.

CHAPTER 3

METHOD

Introduction

Chapter 3 presents the research methods used in this qualitative study. The study utilized a phenomenological research design to interpret the lived experiences and perceptions of building administrators (principals and vice/assistant principals) working in special education and with SWDs. This chapter reviews the design and rationale for this type of qualitative research, how participants were selected, and the researcher's role in the study. The data collection method is also explained in detail below.

Research Methodology and Design

This study analyzed how prepared building administrators felt when leading school buildings that included SWDs. Building administrators may not feel adequately prepared to tackle special education responsibilities without a background or certification in special education, and may want to delegate these tasks to special education administrators or teachers in their buildings. Using a qualitative approach allowed for a deep exploration of the lived experiences of principals and vice principals who oversaw buildings with SWDs.

The perceptions and experiences of building administrators cannot be numerically measured; therefore, I focused on determining the reasons for this phenomenon by utilizing a phenomenological design. In this design type, "the investigator abstains from making suppositions, focuses on a specific topic freshly and naively, constructs a question or problem to guide the study, and derives findings that will provide the basis for further research and reflection" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 47). This method is rooted in describing the meaning of experience, both in what was experienced and how it was experienced (Neubauer et al., 2019).

A phenomenological design was best to answer the research questions because the building administrators had different views, experiences, perceptions, and backgrounds regarding special education. I used questionnaires and interviews to collect rich descriptive data about the lived experiences of building administrators. Neubauer et al. (2019) stated that by exploring the lived experiences of others, new meaning can be developed to guide how we understand an experience. Van Manen (2007) defined phenomenology as a "project of sober reflection on the lived experience of human existence—sober, in the sense that reflecting on experience must be thoughtful, and as much as possible, free from theoretical, prejudicial and suppositional intoxications" (p. 12). Table 3 provides a further description of the phenomenological research design.

Table 3

Qualitative Research Design Approach

Phenomenology
Purpose, goal—to describe experiences as they are lived • Examines uniqueness of individual's lived situations • Each person has own reality; reality is subjective
Research question development • What does existence of feeling or experience indicate concerning the phenomenon to be explored? • What are necessary & sufficient constituents of feeling or experience? • What is the nature of the human being?
Method • No clearly defined steps to avoid limiting creativity of researcher • Sampling & data collection o Seek persons who understand study & are willing to express inner feelings & experiences o Describe experiences of phenomenon o Write experiences of phenomenon o Direct observation o Audio or videotape

Phenomenology
Data analysis • Classify & rank data • Sense of wholeness • Examine experiences beyond human awareness/ or cannot be communicated Outcomes • Findings described from subject's point of view • Researcher identifies themes • Structural explanation of findings is developed

Note. From "Qualitative Research Designs" by University of Missouri–St. Louis, n.d., http://www.umsl.edu/~lindquists/qualdsgn.html.

Of the different types of phenomenological approaches, I chose to use descriptive phenomenology. In a descriptive phenomenological approach, "the focus of the research is to describe, understand, and clarify human experiences; this means that the participants should be chosen because they can offer fertile examples of the theme under study" (Sousa, 2014, p. 214). When using this approach, the researcher must suspend all personal biases and experiences that could affect their objectivity regarding the phenomenon (Sousa, 2014; Tuohy et al., 2013). To avoid impacting the integrity of the research and to accurately capture the lived experiences of the participants, I used "bracketing," or suspending any preconceptions and previous knowledge of a topic when listening to participants (Lopez & Willis, 2004). Through this process, I objectively gathered information from the participants about the significant challenges faced by building administrators in providing an inclusive environment for SWDs.

The building administrators' lived experiences provided insight into the challenges or barriers they might face when they felt underprepared to operate inclusive buildings for SWDs. In the qualitative interviews, each participant described their professional experiences of leading school buildings inclusive of SWDs, provided insight into their special education knowledge

base, and identified areas where they needed more comprehensive information. This allowed them to state what they felt should be added to principal preparation courses or what PD opportunities would help them lead special education programming in their schools.

Researcher Description

I have worked in special education for 14 years: 2 years at a Catholic school providing individualized instruction for students who needed extra support, 8 years as a teacher of students with autism, 3 years as a coordinator for special services, and this current year I transitioned into a special education supervisor role in an urban school district. I have a dual bachelor's degree in Elementary and Special Education and two master's degrees in English as a Second Language and Educational Leadership. Certifications I hold include Teacher of Students with Disabilities, Teacher of Grades K-6, Teacher of Pre-K–Grade 3, Supervisor, and Principal.

Role of the Researcher

I played the roles of participant recruiter and data collector, which involved observing interactions within the interview setting. I took detailed notes, recorded events, and paid attention to the context of the information given. I also participated by actively engaging with, and constantly reflecting on, my impact on the research. I understood that my participation could affect the data collected, but carefully navigated the data collection process by maintaining objectivity. I built trust with the participants by respecting their boundaries and was transparent about the aims of the research.

The interviews consisted of questions and probes to gather information necessary to answer the two research questions. All interviews were recorded, and I took notes on the in-person and virtual interviews. I had no personal relationship with any participant, though some had previously worked with me professionally. I was professional and objective, remained

neutral, and did not ask questions or probes considered leading. Transparency was maintained with all participants throughout the research process. I was committed to the research objectives and refrained from any form of bias throughout the research process. This was vital to ensure the credibility of the research and findings.

Participants

Participants were selected based on criteria pertaining to their backgrounds in educational leadership and working with SWDs. The research focused on the perceptions and experiences of public-school principals and vice principals working in Kindergarten–Grade 5 buildings with integrated special education programs. I chose this grade range to remove confounding variables that would influence the outcome of the study, such as the type of school (e.g., middle or high school) and the absence of special education programs. This allowed participation from administrators of schools that housed any of the grades within the K-5 range (i.e., Pre-K-2, K-8, 3-5, etc.). By focusing on K-5 schools with special education programs, I aimed to control for the variables and focus on the perceived preparedness of building administrators. Furthermore, the study specifically examined administrators in the United States to ensure relevance to the American educational context.

Participation in this study was voluntary and there was no incentive or compensation for completing the screening tool or interviews. Convenience sampling was used to identify potential participants, along with snowball sampling to contact additional participants. Participants were recruited through a detailed approach, including emails sent to district principals and to members of Kappa Delta Pi, an inclusive honor society that promotes leadership, service, and scholarship. Recruitment materials were also posted on LinkedIn targeting a wider network of potential respondents.

Inclusion Criteria

Participants in this study had to be public school building administrators (principals or vice/assistant principals), currently work in buildings housing K-5 students and special education programs, and reside in the United States. Living in New Jersey was not an inclusion criterion, but the final sample consisted of all New Jersey participants. A Qualtrics prescreening questionnaire was used to ensure that candidates met these criteria before advancing to interviews. The Qualtrics results filtered out the participants who did not meet criteria.

Building administrators were asked to participate based on their background in special education. The researcher employed two groups of building administrators in the interviews to determine whether any disparities existed between those who had a background in special education and prior experience working with SWDs and those who did not. For context, a background in special education included an undergraduate degree in special education, a master's degree in special education, a certification in special education, or experience as a teacher of SWDs. A minimum of 14 participants were required for the interviews; however, I recruited 26 principals and vice principals, 13 with a background in special education and 13 without. The two groups were compared to determine whether the administrators perceived themselves as being prepared to lead inclusive buildings for SWDs.

Demographics

Principals and vice principals were invited to participate in the study online. Of the 98 initial responses, 56 were either incomplete or indicated no interest in an interview. The remaining 42 responses were filtered using the inclusion criteria. The 37 respondents who met the criteria were sent follow-up emails.

The final sample consisted of 26 New Jersey building administrators, comprising seven vice principals and 19 principals. Including both administrative positions ensured representation of different administrative experiences and diverse perspectives on special education leadership. The sample was evenly divided into two groups of 13 based on special education experience. Gender distribution was 16 women and 10 men. The majority of participants were White (23), and the remaining three participants were Hispanic. Ages varied, but the largest participant group fell within the 51–60 range. Educational attainment was high, with 13 participants holding doctorates, nine holding master's degrees, and four holding master's degrees and currently enrolled in doctoral programs. This sample provided a representation of building administrators with varying levels of teaching experience, administrative experience, and education, allowing for an exploration of different perspectives on their role in special education, albeit with limited racial diversity. Table 4 displays the participant demographic by special education background.

Table 4

*Demographics of Interview Participants (*N = *26)*

Variable	No special education background (*n* = 13)	Special education background (*n* = 13)
Gender		
Female	7	9
Male	6	4
Race		
White	12	11
Hispanic	1	2
Age range		
>30	0	1
31-40	1	3
41-50	5	2
51-60	5	5
61-70	1	1
71+	1	1
Degree level		
Masters	2	7
Enrolled in Ed.D.	2	2
Doctorate	9	4
Admin level		
Principal	11	8
Vice Principal	2	5

Data Collection Instruments

This study used two data collection instruments: a prescreening questionnaire and an interview schedule.

Prescreening Questionnaire

The prescreening instrument used was the Building Administrator Screening Questionnaire (BASQ), which collected demographic information from the prospective participants. I created this instrument based on the NELP standards and Cobb's (2015) study. The

NELP standards are summarized in Table 2 and provide insights into the knowledge and skills necessary for a building administrator to be successful in their role.

The administrators were asked about their personal demographics, their paths to becoming administrators, all certifications and degrees they held, and what special education looks like in their schools. This information was gathered through Qualtrics and used to determine whether the administrators met the study's selection criteria. The collected information ensured that sufficient participants were available for the interviews and helped determine who could provide information to answer the research questions. Please refer to Appendix A for the complete BASQ tool.

Interviews

I developed the Disability and Inclusion Perspectives Interview Questions (DIPIQ) instrument to answer the research questions. The DIPIQ was comprised of questions related to working with SWDs and the participants' time spent working as teachers and building administrators. The participants discussed their professional experiences in supporting SWDs and leading inclusive buildings. Their educational backgrounds were reviewed, as well as suggestions to make them more successful when working with SWDs and creating an inclusive environment for all students. The interview questions were open-ended and semi-structured, allowing flexibility in the interview process so that participants could provide insight into their experiences with special education and SWDs. Please refer to Appendix B for the complete DIPIQ schedule.

In order to avoid swaying the participants' mindsets when completing the pre-interview questionnaire, I intentionally kept the explanation of the study vague prior to the interviews. Despite the intentional vagueness, focusing the interviews on SWDs and special education did

not alter the participants' perceptions and beliefs about completing special education tasks. This suggests that the responses accurately reflected the firmly held views of the participants.

IRB Approval

Consent forms for interviews were sent to the Institutional Review Board (IRB) as part of the protocol narrative. All questions in the prescreening questionnaire and interviews were submitted to the IRB for approval before interacting with the participants. The interview questions were developed in accordance with American Psychological Association guidelines and used appropriate, bias-free, and respectful language. My school district was also kept anonymous. Data gathered from the prescreening instrument and interviews were not shared in a way that could identify the participants.

Data Collection

Upon IRB approval, I searched for building administrators willing to participate in the study. Emails were sent to principals in New Jersey (see Appendix C) and a post was uploaded to LinkedIn (see Appendix D) to solicit participants to complete the questionnaire. Exclusion criteria included administrators presiding over Grades 6-12, those residing outside the U.S., and non-building administrators.

The Qualtrics link to the prescreening tool was distributed to 1,350 principals in New Jersey. I excluded administrators of high schools, charter schools, special education schools, and middle schools (Grades 6-8) to avoid skewing the data. Responses were reviewed to ensure there were enough potential participants to interview. After I received a sufficient number of responses to the prescreening tool, they were reviewed to ensure they met inclusion criteria. Once criteria were met, I progressed to recruiting participants for the interviews. The same criteria were used for all the interviews. Building administrators had to be employed in buildings that housed both

general and special education classes. However, for the interviews, their backgrounds as teachers and knowledge of special education became part of the inclusion criteria.

Upon receiving completed questionnaire responses, I initiated contact with potential participants via email. I thanked each participant for completing the BASQ and scheduled interviews at times convenient for myself and the participant. I then emailed participants the statement of informed consent to be completed and returned before their scheduled interview. Consent forms indicated that interviews would be both audio and video recorded and made clear that participants' names, images, and voices would not be shared. All participant names have been replaced with pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality and anonymity.

As previously stated, I used a semi-structured interview format to provide deeper insights into participants' responses. The interviews were guided by the DIPIQ questions, designed to address this study's research questions. Each interview lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. This time frame was deliberately chosen to find a balance between gathering data and mitigating interview fatigue. By keeping interviews this length, I respected the participants' time while maintaining the engagement and quality of the responses.

Before beginning each interview, I provided a concise introduction to the significance of the study that emphasized the potential impact of the findings. I explained my personal motivation for conducting the study and stressed the importance of the participants' contributions to advancing knowledge in the area. This introductory pitch served to create rapport and encourage open and honest responses from interviewees.

Interviewees were given the option to participate in an interview via a video conference platform, a phone conversation, or in person. Of the 26 interviews, 19 were conducted via Zoom,

six were completed over the phone, and one was held in person in the building administrator's office. All interviews were video- and/or audio-recorded and then transcribed.

Data Analysis

The units of analysis for the prescreening questionnaire were elementary building administrators who chose to participate in this study. Demographic questions from the BASQ were coded using cross-tabulation to record the frequency of the answers. This helped in recording the frequency of answers from different questions to compare answers and variables that were not accounted for.

The interview data aided in answering the two research questions and provided more information for current research on principal preparation programs and SWDs. In the interviews, the participants were asked about their knowledge of special education, including what they learned preservice, what they learned on the job, and what they might need more information about. Data from the interviews were reviewed, transcribed, and coded to highlight repeated themes. The coding was inductive; this means that I searched for emerging codes based on keywords and phrases while reviewing transcription data (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). The recurring themes contributed to findings related to the research questions.

The processes used to analyze the data were broken down based on the research questions.

RQ1. What is the impact of special education training or background on the ability of building administrators to lead inclusive schools effectively for SWDs?

RQ1a. How do building administrators with special education training perceive their preparedness to lead inclusive schools for SWDs compared to those without such training?

RQ1b. How does special education training or background affect the self-reported efficacy of building administrators in leading inclusive schools for SWDs?

To answer RQ1, administrators were asked about their background and training before becoming administrators and how it helped or hindered them in their current role. I analyzed the transcriptions using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is a technique used to identify, analyze, and interpret themes within data; it provides an approach to organizing a set of data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

RQ2. What professional growth opportunities or training do building administrators feel they need to improve their leadership and better support SWDs?

The second question was analyzed using thematic analysis by looking for similarities in the collected data. Participants were asked to share their personal experiences related to my preconceived notion of this phenomenon. This analysis guided the themes so that the research was not swayed by my perspective.

Summary

This study assessed what special education training building administrators received, what information they still needed, and how often they completed special-education-related tasks. Data were collected through a prescreening questionnaire and interviews with building administrators. I reviewed relevant literature and noted that building administrators play a significant role in creating inclusive environments for SWDs and have a need for more comprehensive special education content in principal preparation programs.

The prescreening questionnaire gathered demographic information, while the interviews examined the administrators' feelings of preparedness and areas where they required further

support in special education. The qualitative approach allowed for an in-depth exploration of the administrators' experiences regarding their role in advocating and supporting SWDs.

Chapter 3 described the qualitative methods used to answer the two research questions. Interviews were conducted to delve deeper into building administrators' perceptions of readiness and preparedness for supporting and leading SWDs. This chapter outlined the participant selection process, the rationale behind it, and the inclusion criteria. It also described the data collection process and the use of in-depth interviews. The next chapter summarizes the results of the interviews to provide answers to the research questions.

CHAPTER 4

RESULTS

Chapter 4 presents and interprets the results of this qualitative study. It starts by reviewing the research questions and methodology used for data analysis, followed by a summary of the findings. This chapter is organized in five sections: Interview Question Alignment to Research Questions, Review of Methodology, Data Analysis, Findings, and Summary.

Interview Question Alignment to Research Questions

The research design used interview questions to respond to the research questions. Two separate interview groups were created to determine whether background or certification was crucial to effectively lead buildings inclusive of SWDs. The interview questions (DIPIQ) are presented in Appendix B.

The interview questions were guided by the research questions. Each interview question was aligned with a research question to delve deeper into the backgrounds and experiences of the participants. The research questions are listed below along with the corresponding interview questions.

RQ1 was “What is the impact of special education training or background on the ability of building administrators to lead inclusive schools effectively for SWDs?” Below are the corresponding interview questions:

- Prior to your role as a school-based administrator, what was your experience with SWDs?
- Where does your knowledge base come from regarding SWDs? Who do you look to for more information about a specific special-education-related problem?

- About how many hours a week do you spend addressing special education matters in your building?
- How do school-based administrators promote an inclusive environment for SWDs?

This research question investigated the relationship between the administrators' lived experiences and their knowledge of special education. Participants were asked to reflect on their effectiveness in creating an inclusive school environment for SWDs. The goal of the questions was to understand how the administrators' backgrounds influenced their support for SWDs and how they worked to promote inclusion.

RQ1a was "How do building administrators with special education training perceive their preparedness to lead inclusive schools for SWDs compared to those without such training?" Below are the corresponding interview questions:

- Coming out of the Educational Leadership program, did you feel ready to handle special-education-related matters?
    - Was there anything you wished you had learned about SWDs through the program?
- Describe your role as a leader in relation to special education.
- What specific knowledge about SWDs do school-based administrators need to have to be effective special education leaders?

RQ1a investigated the perceived preparedness of participants with a special education background to lead inclusive schools for SWDs, compared to those without the same training. The interview questions were utilized to determine if or how special education background and experience influenced an administrator's perceived competence in supporting SWDs.

RQ1b was “How does special education training or background affect the self-reported efficacy of building administrators in leading inclusive schools for SWDs?” Below are the corresponding interview questions:

- About how many hours a week do you spend addressing special education matters in your building?
- How do the school administrators collaborate with special education teachers to support students?
- How do school administrators collaborate with general education teachers to support SWDs?
- How do the school administrators collaborate with paraprofessionals to support students?
- How do the school administrators collaborate with other specialists to support students?

RQ1b explored the impact of a special education background on the self-reported efficacy of building administrators. Participants were asked how they addressed special education situations, where they got their information from, and how they collaborated with various stakeholders to support SWDs. Their judgement in these matters can significantly impact the educational journey of the SWDs in their buildings. The interview questions were designed to help determine if or how special education background and experience influenced an administrator’s competence to support SWDs.

RQ2 was “What professional growth opportunities or training do building administrators feel they need to improve their leadership and better support SWDs?” Below are the corresponding interview questions:

- What PD do you offer staff regarding special education?
- What PD opportunities are provided to administrators in your district to enhance your ability to support SWDs?
- How does your school district stay updated on best practices in special education?
- How does your school district stay updated on recent laws and litigation in special education?

This research question explored PD opportunities and training that the participants believed they needed to support and champion SWDs better. The interview questions probed this topic by asking the participants about the PD they offered their staff and what, if any, opportunities were available to them from their districts. The participants were also asked to identify how their school districts stayed up-to-date on recent laws and litigation.

Review of Methodology

This study used a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the relationship between building administrators' perceptions of their preparedness to support SWDs and the training they received in principal preparation courses or PD. The study also investigated whether special education experience influenced leadership skills or commitment to work with SWDs. The approach enabled a deep exploration of administrators' lived experiences, perceptions, challenges, and insights into effective special education leadership.

Data were collected through questionnaires and interviews. The BASQ was used to identify administrators for the two interview groups, gathering information on demographics, professional journeys, building composition, and involvement with SWDs. Following the questionnaire, I utilized the DIPIQ to probe how administrators handled special education tasks, their training backgrounds, and their suggestions for improving inclusion for SWDs. The study

sample was comprised of building administrators (principals and vice principals) who worked in buildings inclusive of special education classrooms.

Table 5 below shows the demographics of the participants (n = 26) who were interviewed using the DIPIQ. Participants are listed in order by the date they completed the BASQ. Each participant was assigned a pseudonym for anonymity.

Table 5

*Interview Participant Demographics (*n *= 26)*

Pseudonym	Gender	Race	Age range	Degree level	Level of admin	Years in position	Special education certification/ background
V.P. Garrett	M	White	30-40	Enrolled in Ed.D.	Vice Principal	1	No
P. Heather	F	White	70+	Doctorate	Principal	10-15	No
P. Aaron	M	White	61-70	Master's	Principal	15+	No
P. Monica	F	Hispanic	>30	Master's	Principal	1	Yes
P. Savannah	F	White	30-40	Master's	Principal	2-5	Yes
V.P. Malcolm	M	White	51-60	Master's	Vice Principal	2-5	Yes
P. Bradley	M	White	51-60	Enrolled in Ed.D.	Principal	10-15	Yes
P. Grant	M	White	51-60	Doctorate	Principal	10-15	No
V.P. Janice	F	White	41-50	Master's	Vice Principal	5-10	No
V.P. Erica	F	Hispanic	30-40	Enrolled in Ed.D.	Vice Principal	1	Yes
P. Cora	F	White	41-50	Master's	Principal	10-15	Yes
P. Emmitt	M	White	51-60	Enrolled in Ed.D.	Principal	10-15	No
P. Sylvia	F	White	51-60	Doctorate	Principal	10-15	No
P. Gina	F	Hispanic	41-50	Doctorate	Principal	2-5	No
P. Taylor	F	White	30-40	Master's	Principal	5-10	Yes

Pseudonym	Gender	Race	Age range	Degree level	Level of admin	Years in position	Special education certification/ background
P. Caitlin	F	White	51-60	Doctorate	Principal	15+	No
P. Allyson	F	White	41-50	Doctorate	Principal	5-10	No
P. Bryan	M	White	41-50	Doctorate	Principal	15+	No
P. Vaughn	M	White	51-60	Doctorate	Principal	15+	No
P. Whitney	F	White	51-60	Doctorate	Principal	15+	Yes
P. Lydia	F	White	51-60	Doctorate	Principal	10-15	Yes
P. Deanne	F	White	70+	Doctorate	Principal	15+	Yes
P. Kelly	F	White	41-50	Doctorate	Principal	15+	No
V.P. Owen	M	White	41-50	Master's	Vice Principal	5-10	Yes
P. Ruby	F	White	51-60	Doctorate	Principal	5-10	Yes
V.P. Bryce	M	White	61-70	Enrolled in Ed.D.	Vice Principal	10-15	Yes

Note. P = principal; V.P. = vice principal.

Table 6 lists demographic data on the students in each administrator's district. This allowed for an exploration of potential relationships between administrator profiles and the characteristics of the student populations they serve. Understanding this interplay provided for a more nuanced analysis of inclusion practices, leadership perspectives, and the overall support systems within the participants' school settings.

Table 6

Participant District Demographic Data 2018-2022

Participant	Geographic area type	% White	% Black	% Hispanic	% SWDs
V.P. Garrett	Not Available	Not Available	Not Available	Not Available	Not Available
P. Heather	Suburban	62	9	15	12.4

Participant	Geographic area type	% White	% Black	% Hispanic	% SWDs
P. Aaron	Urban	8	24	63	2.8
P. Monica	Not Available	Not Available	Not Available	Not Available	Not Available
P. Savannah	Suburban	73	2	15	1.4
V.P. Malcolm	Urban	66	12	14	4.5
P. Bradley	Rural	86	1	7	< 1
P. Grant	Suburban	68	2	5	4.6
V.P. Janice	Suburban	63	12	12	7.2
V.P. Erica	Urban	13	44	39	7.8
P. Cora	Suburban	73	3	12	4.5
P. Emmitt	Urban	23	20	27	3.5
P. Sylvia	Suburban	40	10	40	1.8
P. Gina	Urban	8	24	63	2.8
P. Taylor	Suburban	59	3	31	4.6
P. Caitlin	Suburban	65	7	12	2
P. Allyson	Suburban	59	4	5	< 1
P. Bryan	Suburban	71	1	16	Not Available
P. Vaughn	Suburban	66	7	10	2.7
P. Whitney	Suburban	58	3	21	1.8
P. Lydia	Suburban	66	7	10	2.7
P. Deanne	Suburban	68	1	6	3.7
P. Kelly	Suburban	88	0	10	1.2
V.P. Owen	Suburban	83	5	6	6.7
P. Ruby	Suburban	89	2	7	Not Available
V.P. Bryce	Urban	8	24	63	2.8

Note. Data from "ACS-ED School District Demographics Dashboard | 2018–2022," Institute of Education Sciences, n.d., https://nces.ed.gov/programs/edge/acsdashboard. Information for some

districts was unavailable. P = principal; V.P. = vice principal. Participants without a background in special education are highlighted in gray.

Data Analysis

To analyze the interview data, I listened to the recordings and reread the 26 transcripts to identify recurring ideas and phrases participants expressed regarding their perceptions of special education leadership. A detailed examination of the interview responses uncovered shared phrases, repeating terminology, and elements that formed codes that represented the concerns and experiences of the participants. I used Quirkos, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software, to visually tag and categorize specific sentences, phrases, and ideas within the transcripts. I highlighted the key concepts within the transcripts to group them into preliminary codes, then organized and refined these codes to identify significant patterns that emphasized shared experiences. From this analysis, 21 codes emerged that represented participants' perceptions and lived experiences as leaders of special education. The individual codes were linked and synthesized to form the overall themes.

Findings

The following themes emerged from the analysis: Insufficient Training in Principal Prep Programs for Special Education, Legal Knowledge and Compliance, PD Needs and Behavior Management, Advocating for SWDs and Promoting Inclusion, and Collaboration and Support Systems for Special Education Management. Table 7 presents the themes, associated codes, and a selection of supporting quotes taken from the interviews.

Table 7

Themes and Codes from the Data

Themes	Codes	Selected quotes from interview
Theme 1: Insufficient Training in Principal Prep Programs for SPED	• Nonexistent SPED training • Need for SPED coursework • Rely on experience • Case-based learning	"Preparation programs … don't really cover special education at all, and I would say no I didn't feel prepared at all, and it was kind of really scary honestly"—V.P. Garrett "There is a whole component missing in these [principal] prep programs"—P. Caitlin
Theme 2: Legal Knowledge and Compliance	• Familiar with SPED law • Understanding IEP requirements • Reactive vs. proactive • Legal implications of noncompliance	"I think they have to have an understanding of IEP compliance, and what that means, and how to best support their teachers in ensuring that they are meeting the requirements established within students' IEPs"—V.P. Owen "They have to know the legality of it. Starting from the top. You know, what's IDEA, what's FAPE…"—P. Bradley
Theme 3: PD Needs and Behavior Management	• Lack of SPED PD for teachers • Lack of SPED PD for administrators • De-escalation strategies • Managing challenging behaviors	"Behaviors are becoming more and more challenging, and it not only involves understanding [that students are] struggling academically, but struggling emotionally" – P. Deanne "I would say we don't really do as much [PD] as we should"—V.P. Janice
Theme 4: Advocating for SWDs and Promoting Inclusion	• Role of advocate • Inclusion in general education • Sense of belonging • Way of leading/teaching	"I talk about this non-stop. I model this. I teach demo lessons"—P. Emmitt "We try to infuse our literature and classrooms in a way that's representative of who the children are in the building, not just diversity of race and ethnicity, but in types of thinkers, too"—P. Grant
Theme 5: Collaboration and Support Systems for	• Teamwork across departments • Time spent on SPED	"I relied on the other assistant principals and the principal and the supervisor of special education to kind of steer the ship and I just

Themes	Codes	Selected quotes from interview
SPED Management	• Collaboration with SPED staff • Trusting staff • Rely on SPED staff (behaviorists, case workers, supervisors, directors)	kind of learned from them. I kind of rode along"—P. Aaron "I would be willing to bet that at least 50% of my day, every single day is special education"—P. Vaughn

Note. FAPE = free and appropriate education; IDEA = Individuals with Disabilities Education Act; PD = professional development; SPED = special education; SWDs = students with disabilities.

Theme 1: Insufficient Special Education Training in Principal Prep Programs

This theme focused on the special education preparation that building administrators did or did not receive through formal training. It also focused on learning through experience, the need for special education coursework, and looking into learning special education through case-based instruction.

Participants were asked if they were prepared to handle special education matters coming out of their principal preparation programs. Some building administrators (n = 7) said that the special education information they received in their principal preparation courses involved education law. No participants were able to recall a course that solely focused on special education content. All participants with a background in special education (n = 13) stated that their special education knowledge did not come from principal preparation courses, and without a background in special education, they would not have been prepared. Seven of the 13 (54%) building administrators without a special education background stated that they felt prepared to work with this population because of their teacher experience. P. Heather stated, "I think knowing children, liking children, and working with children was all the education that I really needed."

Eighteen of the 26 participants (69%) cited their teaching experience as an integral part of being effective in their administrative positions. Fourteen participants (54%) spoke about using their experience as teachers on the job when supporting SWDs. Eight of the 13 (62%) building administrators without a special education background spent more than 10 hours a week on special education, outside of instruction, behavior, or IEP meetings. Only five of these participants (38%) spent less than 10 hours per week on these matters. Ten of the 13 (77%) building administrators with a background in special education spent over 10 hours a week handling matters related to special education, while the remaining three spent between 5 and 10 hours. The amount of time spent could vary by the number of SWDs in the building, the number of self-contained classrooms, or the time of year.

All 26 administrators stated that throughout their teaching careers, every class they taught had an SWD or a student who needed individualized instruction. This reality has significant implications for all educators. Two administrators felt that all educators should be trained to work with SWDs. P. Vaughn stated that all learners learn differently and that all learners could be considered diverse. To address this diversity, P. Cora noted that all teachers should come out of teacher preparation programs with a special education certification because “nobody’s going to be able to teach a single year of their life without having a student with a disability in their room.” P. Savannah shared that belief, expressing that she wished every teacher could come out of a program dual-certified because “it doesn’t matter anymore if you’re teaching in a fourth-grade general class, there will be classified students in there.” The participants having to rely on their teaching experience emphasizes the significant gap in principal preparation programs regarding special education.

The participants in this study reported a lack of special education content or instruction within their principal preparation program courses. Approximately 42% of the participants mentioned that their coursework only covered information on special education laws, rather than providing in-depth knowledge. For example, V.P. Gorman stated, “If ever there was something special ed related, it was like a subtopic within another class.” Similarly, V.P. Erica spoke about the limited focus on special education during her interview. She specified, “In my master’s program, we only had one 8-week course on educational law, but that was all-consuming, not just with special education law, which, that in itself could take a whole semester.” The information was often provided during a general education law course rather than a separate class dedicated to special education. None of the participants could recall a course strictly focused on special education unless it was taken as an elective. The participants expressed a need for more specialized and specific coursework or training at the master’s level that would have equipped them before becoming administrators.

Over half of the participants stated that they felt a course or training in special education would have been beneficial to them as preservice administrators. P. Vaughn evaluated his experience, saying, “I don’t think that [the principal preparation] program really prepared me much at all for special education.” While P. Vaughn expressed personal disappointment in his preparation, P. Caitlin addressed a broader issue in the inadequacy of addressing special education within principal preparation programs, pointing out that “there is a whole component missing in these prep programs.” When the participants were asked what information was necessary to be efficient in this position, responses ranged from learning the 13 disability categories to understanding how to support families during their transition into special education.

Table 8 lists the topics that participants mentioned as crucial for preservice principals and vice principals to be effective in an administrative position.

Table 8

*Special Education Topics Building Administrators Think Are Important to Be Effective (*N = *26)*

Topic	*n*	%
Inclusion and belonging		
Inclusion model	4	15
Accepting differences	4	15
Individual needs and differentiation		
Accommodations and modification	3	12
Differentiation for learners	6	
Student needs	4	15
Interventions	3	12
Behavioral management		
Behavior training and management	25	96
De-escalation training	4	15
Applied behavior analysis strategies	4	15
Support for stakeholders		
Support for teachers	9	35
Working with families	4	15
Resources for families	2	8
Communicate with families	3	12
Legal knowledge and compliance		
Child study team and their roles	6	23
How to read/write an IEP	3	12
IEP implementation and compliance	8	31
Timeline for IEP	6	23
IDEA	7	27
Least restrictive environment	4	15
Special education law/NJ Code	18	69
Comprehensive understanding of disabilities		
Classroom placement	11	42
Disability categories	14	54

Note. IDEA = Individuals with Disabilities Education Act; IEP = individualized education program.

Table 8 shows a strong emphasis on the need for training in behavioral management, which was cited by all participants except one (96%). Behavioral management was the topic with

the most comments from the building administrators. P. Deanne commented that behaviors were becoming increasingly challenging and there needed to be an understanding of how to de-escalate. P. Gina also thought understanding why behaviors were happening and what to do in various situations was important to be effective as a leader.

Participants also named legal knowledge and compliance topics, including IDEA (27%), child study teams (23%), IEP implementation (31%), and especially special education law/NJ Code (69%) as essential topics for building administrators to learn about. Working with families and learning how to implement accommodations were important to P. Emmitt and V.P. Janice. Additionally, V.P. Garrett, P. Bradley, and P. Aaron commented on the importance of understanding the IEP process. A comprehensive understanding of disabilities and disability categories were highlighted by 69% and 54% of respondents, respectively. Support for stakeholders, particularly teachers (35%) and families (15%), was another area of importance for the participants. These findings offer insights into the priorities and concerns of building administrators in special education.

Table 8 illustrates that the building administrators in this study wanted more special education coursework in their principal preparation programs. This growing demand stemmed from the challenges they faced in supporting SWDs. P. Savannah indicated that there was always a need for more special education knowledge. She stated that having the knowledge and supports in place was as necessary as knowing how special education laws impacted the school. V.P. Garrett made it evident that he came out of his preparation program unprepared to handle special education matters in his building, which was worrisome. P. Gina disclosed that she “was not ready at all. It was, like I said, all-on-the-job learning and experience.”

While few participants explicitly stated this, four participants mentioned that they felt they would have benefitted from an opportunity to work in special education classrooms during their graduate training or through a case-based instruction course. P. Aaron revealed that "having no prior knowledge was a little bit of a learning curve, so I do believe that something along the lines of some type of hands-on coursework would have been beneficial specific to the needs of special education students." V.P. Bryce and V.P. Janice proposed that case studies could be beneficial to preservice administrators. Specifically, V.P. Janice advocated for a course dedicated to case studies that would provide a student profile and scenarios prompting questioning about strategies for student needs and success. V.P. Bryce suggested that case studies would be beneficial to preservice administrators because "most people learn by cases and legal resolutions." These participants indicated that there was an absence of special education instruction, and they required more during their principal preparation programs.

Some building administrators also felt that educators should now be dually certified in general and special education because SWDs were present in many classrooms within their districts. The participants all spoke about experiences they had with SWDs, classified or unclassified, in their time as classroom teachers. P. Ruby specified that all preservice educators should come out of college with dual certifications:

> We've done a good job to integrate [sic] SWDs in general education classes … Everyone can teach specialized kids. The seven classes or the master's in Special Ed doesn't make you have so much more than anyone else. But it teaches you to have a strategy and toolbox of strategies to care about kids.

The absence of special education content in principal preparation programs leaves building administrators with a feeling of uneasiness when taking on an administrative role. Five (19%) of

the administrators who had been in their positions for many years were unable to recall if they even had a course or any information regarding special education in their principal preparation coursework. Without sufficient training, these administrators relied on their experience as teachers and their years as administrators. This lack of preparation has become increasingly concerning, given that special education is the most litigated area within education and there are an increasing number of SWDs in schools each year. Understanding special education laws and ensuring compliance with state and federal mandates are critical parts of the building administrator's role.

Theme 2: Legal Knowledge and Compliance

The second theme discussed in all interviews was the importance of legal knowledge and compliance for building administrators. Every participant had SWDs in their building, so understanding laws such as IDEA became a central and frequent theme. Building administrators oversee the special education departments in their buildings and should advocate for proper implementation of IEPs and ensure that instruction meets students' needs effectively. Administrators also need to be aware of the legal repercussions of failing to comply with special education laws. Therefore, all participants were asked about their familiarity with special education laws and whether they were involved in legal proceedings as building administrators.

Three of the 26 building administrators disclosed that they felt their training on special education law, both in graduate courses and PD, was delivered in a reactive way rather than proactively. Preservice special education law training is often considered reactive because legal precedents and legislation are created in response to court decisions. When PD training appears reactive, it comes after a problem arises and leaves the administrators playing catch-up. The building administrators are then better prepared for future situations. For example, P. Bryan

relied on the special education staff around him when it came to the legalities of special education. He said they guided him in directions that would be helpful in a proactive way. P. Bryan went on to say that the information about special education law in his principal preparation courses was given in a reactive manner. P. Grant disclosed that he did not feel the information covered in his principal preparation program prepared him to understand and lead SWDs. Information about special education law was provided after a situation occurred, and was not proactive to prepare the administrators. P. Emmitt described his education law course as making him feel as though he always had to be on the defensive. He did his own research and surrounded himself with people who understood the special education process. He stated that,

> You have to have a very good team that's working on this stuff with you. And I'm fortunate that I've worked with good people. Most of the people I've worked with have been really outstanding in this area, so I've been lucky. But if I had somebody who wasn't strong in this area, and I have at certain times, it has really affected us. We've wound up in difficult, contentious court cases, and it's not served our students well.

These administrators were familiar with special education law through their special education backgrounds or their own research. However, special education law comprised an insignificant portion of their principal preparation courses. The interviews revealed that, due to this lack of training and instruction, they were led to conduct their own research or turn to directors or school board attorneys for answers.

Eleven of the 26 building administrators interviewed (42%) had been involved in legal proceedings. The administrators who had not been involved reported that the director of special education, superintendent, and board attorney were the people typically called on for court hearings. Sixteen administrators (62%) recalled conducting their own research because of a

situation in their buildings. P. Heather emphasized the importance of knowing about special education laws:

> You really need to know the law, because people will make things up. The worst thing I ever had was I walked into being a principal, in which the child study team promised a particular program and wrote it in the IEP. Instead of just writing, "the child needs a phonics-based program." And then you could choose.

This instance was written into an IEP, a legally binding document that the school staff must follow. It became a legal issue, and when P. Heather was in front of the administrative law judge, she said there was no reason to be there because she knew it had to be provided legally.

Understanding and following IEP requirements is another area where building administrators need to be knowledgeable. Each student's IEP is unique to that student and has different legal requirements. V.P. Garrett stated that his daily responsibilities as a building administrator included overseeing students' IEPs and ensuring that they were being followed in the classroom. P. Kelly commented that when she hired special education staff, she confirmed that the hire could read and interpret an IEP, understand what was required of them as special education educators, and then provide the required services. V.P. Owen commented on the importance of IEP compliance for special education staff and building administration:

> We need an understanding of IEP compliance and what that means and how to best support our teachers in ensuring that they are meeting the requirements established within students' IEPs. And I would add to that how to ensure that you are appropriately following the process of offering support [to the] whole IEP process in general, I think is not necessarily well understood outside of the special ed world. And I think that that's where you bump into challenges, especially if you have a brand-new teacher or a unique

> case that has specific accommodations or requirements. You know, even if a teacher does everything they're supposed to do as far as, like, reading the IEP and being aware of the accommodations, if they don't know how to effectively implement that, you're going to bump into a challenge, right? The school administration is the one who is going to have to answer for what the teachers are providing the students.

V.P. Janice also spoke about the importance of ensuring staff understood IEPs and defined her role in special education as compliance officer. P. Emmitt reacted similarly regarding compliance with IEPs: "When you don't know what to look for, you can miss things and wind up in serious legal problems." A lack of understanding of these legal requirements can expose building administrators to significant risks and serious legal issues.

IEPs are created according to students' unique needs and are required to plan for an education that considers the students' differences in a way that improves their physical, mental, and social skills (Ayanoğlu & Gür-Erdoğan, 2019). The program developed outlines the student's needs and goals and the services and accommodations necessary to meet those needs. The IEP is a legally binding document. Failing to adhere to the IEP or denying services outlined by legal mandates has detrimental effects on both the SWD and the district. Failure to follow up can lead to litigation from families, reimbursement of students with compensatory services, and loss of federal funding for special education programs (Diambri, 2022).

This theme shed light on the challenges faced by building administrators regarding their knowledge of special education laws and legislation. Only six (23%) of the 26 participants felt they were adequately prepared in special education law, even though it was the only special education topic covered in principal preparation programs. Eleven administrators reported involvement in legal proceedings, and sixteen stated that they researched special education laws.

Building administrators understood the importance of knowing special education laws, but required more information to better prepare them to be efficient as special education leaders. This conclusion is based on the participants' statements expressing their need for further training and resources. This also suggests that a working understanding of special education law could enhance administrators' capacities as the special education leaders of their buildings.

Theme 3: PD Needs and Behavior Management

This theme related to PD efforts made in the participants' buildings regarding special education. They were asked questions about the PD their teachers received about special education and what PD they received as administrators. Almost all building administrators spoke of the need for PD when it came to effectively managing behavior or de-escalating situations.

Building administrators were asked if they or their district provided teachers with special education PD and what topics were covered. Eighteen of the 26 building administrators (69%) spoke about the need for de-escalation strategies and how teachers needed this specific training for their students. Eight (31%) of the building administrators mentioned that behaviors were becoming more frequent and challenging and that this needed to be addressed using appropriate interventions before they affected students' education. P. Deanne stated,

> Behaviors are becoming more and more challenging, and it not only involves understanding struggling academically but struggling emotionally. And you have to collaborate with the behaviorist to convince your staff that these children are not misbehaving, they're trying to communicate something to you. So, if you don't have that understanding, your reaction to much of it could be misguided.

Four building administrators admitted that the district did not provide their teachers with special education PD, and another four stated that it was given ad hoc. P. Grant stated that there was

always a need for more, but because the district was piloting new instructional programs, special education PD seemed to always be on the back burner. Table 9 provides a breakdown of what PD, if any, was offered to the staff of the building administrators interviewed.

Table 9

*Special Education PD Topics Offered to Staff (*N = *26)*

Topic	*n*	%
De-escalation techniques and crisis intervention methods	18	69
Behavior (function, as communication, managing, etc.)	13	50
Inclusion	5	19
Special education instruction and curriculum	11	42
Registered Behavior Technician training	1	4
Implementing IEPs and 504s, accommodations and modifications	2	8
Tiered systems of support	3	12
Outside PD requested by teacher	8	31
Ad hoc basis	4	15
None	4	15

Note. IEP – individualized education program; PD – professional development.

Table 9 presents the special education PD topics offered to staff in the 26 participants' districts. The most frequently offered were de-escalation techniques and crisis intervention methods, followed by understanding behaviors. A smaller percentage of the districts provided PD on special education instruction, curriculum, and inclusion. Almost a third of the districts allowed their teachers to go outside the district for requested special education PD. Four of the participants' districts, or 15%, provided no special education PD to their staff.

Building administrators were also asked to recall the PD their district offered them. Only six administrators said they had been asked to participate in PD, which directly affected their building and ways of supporting their students. P. Gina commented that she had the opportunity to learn crisis prevention methods and took advantage of it; other than that, nothing else was offered. Eleven of the 26 (42%) took the opportunity to use PD funds from the district and look

outside for PD. However, with this self-direction, five of these 11 did not use the funds for PD related to special education. One of the building administrators who did partake in special education PD outside of his district was P. Emmitt: "That's my decision as a school leader. I get to choose my own adventure." Table 10 lists the PD topics offered to the 26 building administrators interviewed.

Table 10

*Special Education PD Topics Offered to Building Administrators (*N = *26)*

Topic	*n*	%
De-escalation strategies/crisis prevention	3	12
Tiered systems of support	1	4
Special education programming	2	8
PD provided outside of participant's district	11	42
None	9	35

Note. PD – professional development.

Eleven of the 26 building administrators had the opportunity to leave the district for PD, but only a few took advantage of this for special education PD. Six of the PD offerings provided were related to behavior, systems of support, and special education programming. These PDs were not geared toward building administrators; they were for teachers, and the administrators took advantage of this opportunity. Some administrators supplemented their lack of PD by reading about special education laws and litigation to stay up-to-date.

Interestingly, 35% (n = 9) of the interviewed building administrators admitted that they had no PD related to special education. V.P. Garrett stated, "No, we do not. It's really a shame." P. Cora and V.P. Owen both indicated that their districts did not provide any PD in special education, so they did their own reading and research into special education. This lack of PD offerings was also called out by P. Aaron. Behavior management and de-escalation strategies

were the topics most identified as necessary, yet only three of the participants attended PD sessions on them. This lack of PD could possibly leave building administrators ill equipped to support their teachers and provide behavior management and crisis prevention techniques to support SWDs.

All participants in this research noted the necessity of addressing student behaviors and emphasized the importance of de-escalation strategies and techniques within their buildings. Of the special education PD offerings mentioned by participants, 31 were related to de-escalation and managing behaviors. Eighteen (69%) of the building administrators spoke about programs that helped staff safely de-escalate student situations, including Crisis Prevention and Intervention (CPI) training. This training helps educators look for signs and indicators that may contribute to crises and try to prevent them from happening. It also provides strategies on how to keep the educators, the student, and other students safe in the event that a student compromises their own safety or the safety of others. P. Allyson had her staff CPI trained because she said restraints should be a last resort and she wanted to provide her staff with strategies to understand and support the students. She emphasized to her staff that no child should be restricted in a way that immobilized them unless it was an emergency where someone could be seriously injured.

P. Malcolm and P. Heather shared the same thought process about learning how to de-escalate behaviors, while emphasizing the need for self-regulation. They acknowledged how challenging these situations could become and the importance of knowing how to approach the student while keeping themselves in check. P. Heather went on to say that “part of the inclusivity and leadership is letting the staff know the other behavior they can control is their own.”

P. Vaughn reflected on how teachers should come out of their preparation programs with a course or two that provided a foundational understanding of behavior, including Registered

Behavior Technician (RBT) training and applied behavior analysis. He also mentioned that principal preparation programs should include a course of hands-on training in what a behavior analyst does. This aligned with P. Grant's thoughts about hands-on behavior training for administrators:

> The hands-on behavior piece was really important for me to understand, because that's an area that I need to make sure that my staff that's placed in rooms that may have to put a child in a hold for whatever reason, I have to be able to defend their actions. So, I need to be able to speak to it, but I also need to be in there so that I can see what's happening so that I can speak to it because when something happens, they're going to come after me, they're not going to go after the teacher. I'm going to be the one who's called to the carpet, and I have to be able to speak to it. So, I think just managing students in crisis would be something that would have been a lot more helpful rather than learning on the fly.

P. Gina stated that it was her duty to be knowledgeable in special education and learn how to handle different students in different situations. She was one of the building administrators who participated in CPI training in the previous school year. She felt that, as a principal, she would not ask her staff to do something she was unwilling to do. She said,

> It's my duty to learn how to deal with certain situations, certain behaviors, how to approach certain behaviors. What happens if a student has a meltdown, depending on what kind of meltdown it is. Some students are violent. How do I handle that? I think having background knowledge and being trained in de-escalation strategies to manage a student's behavior is one of my many roles. This is because someone who does not have

> knowledge or training may handle a child differently and less effectively than what I have been trained to do.

An understanding of behavior is a necessity for educators and administrators to address the diverse needs of students. Behavior, as defined by Johnston and Pennypacker (2009), is "that portion of an organism's interaction with its environment that involved movement of some part of the organism" (p. 31). Simply put, human behavior is the complete range of what people do, including moving, speaking, feeling, and thinking (Cooper et al., 2020). Behaviors have different functions and present themselves in ways that SWDs cannot always effectively self-regulate, which can create barriers in their social and academic development. P. Deanne stressed the significance of teaching her staff that behavior presents in different forms, and that some students are not misbehaving, but are trying to communicate their needs. P. Monica provided her teachers with an understanding of which challenging behaviors might present themselves in SWDs and why. P. Lydia stated that in the past, her district may have been ill equipped to manage behavior effectively, but after PD on behavior management, the administrators and staff had the tools and techniques to work with SWDs and understand their behavior.

These participants emphasized the importance of PD in supporting SWDs and addressing behaviors that may interfere with students' learning. Many administrators recalled the importance of staff PD in de-escalating behaviors and actively working on addressing the behaviors of SWDs. They identified this PD as crucial and necessary to help SWDs emotionally, mentally, and academically. The building administrators indicated that the behaviors they were observing were becoming more frequent and substantial, signifying the need for more PD for staff.

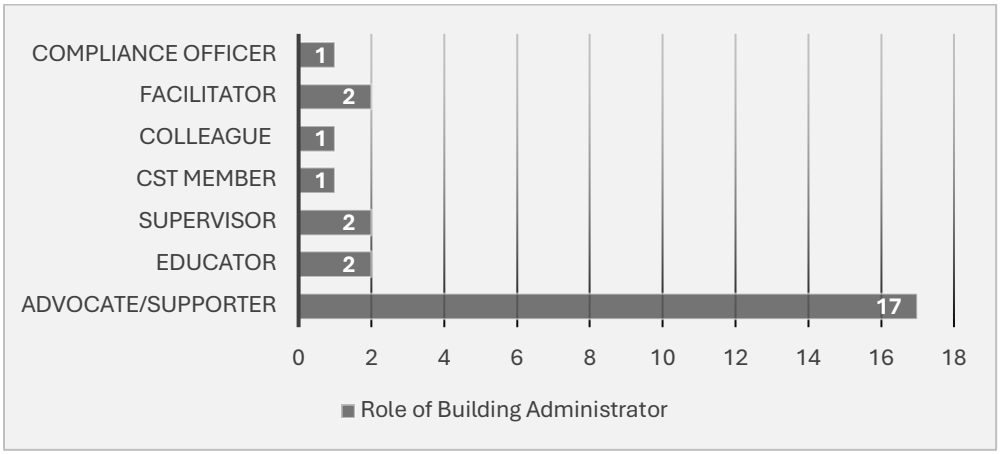
While PD on many topics was provided to their staff, the building administrators struggled to recall any PDs provided to them on special education topics. A few administrators considered special education PD opportunities outside their districts, but there was an apparent inconsistency in the availability of PD in their districts. P. Aaron, a principal without a special education background, reported not having any special education PD in the last few years. He commented that there was always a need for more, and said he kept his eye out for PDs pertaining to special education law so he could keep up on best practices. The participants highlighted the need for PD opportunities to work with SWDs. Special education PD opportunities were few and far between for building administrators, which could impact their ability to support and include SWDs effectively.

Theme 4: Advocating for SWDs and Promoting Inclusion

This theme focused on how administrators viewed inclusion and how it affected the stakeholders in their districts. Inclusion was articulated as making people feel a sense of belonging as well as physical placement in the school building. The building administrators were asked to define their roles in relation to special education in their buildings. Seventeen of the 26 (65%) said they were advocates and supporters of the staff, parents, and students. The roles named by the building administrators are listed in Figure 3.

Figure 3

Building Administrators' Roles in Special Education



Note. CST = child study team.

Most of the participants described themselves as playing support and advocacy roles in special education. Five of the 13 building administrators without a background in special education called themselves supporters and advocates. P. Bryan and P. Heather were two of these; both spoke about how being an effective leader meant supporting SWDs and their families, forging connections, and ensuring that everyone believed SWDs should be treated no differently than typically developing students. P. Bryan said that her role as a special education leader was

> supporting my teachers, supporting the support staff, being in the classrooms, having a sense of what my students' strengths are, areas that my students need to work on, forging connections with the parents, making sure I know all my students' needs at the very minimum. I would say that those would be the key ingredients that make a good leader.

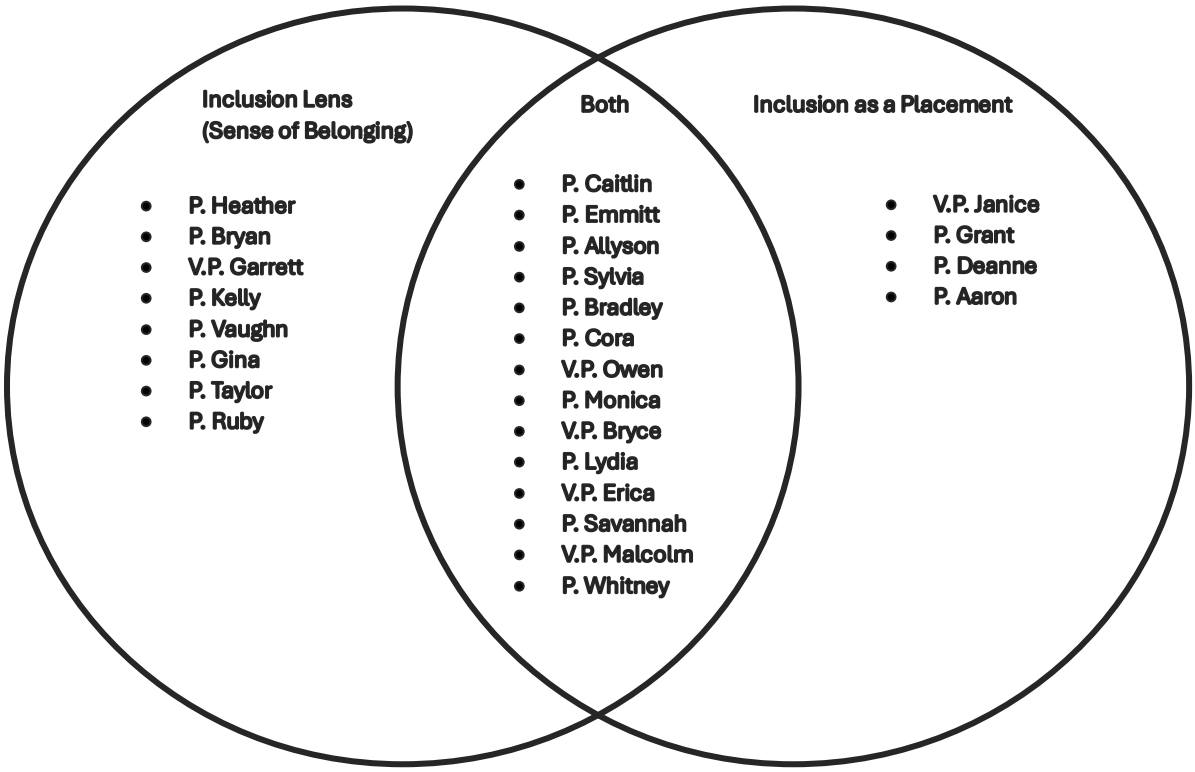
Intriguingly, this meant that 12 of the 13 administrators with a special education background described themselves as supporters/advocates, leaving the last administrator labeling themselves as a facilitator. P. Monica stated that she had a special education supervisor who

came to her building almost daily, so she helped facilitate the day-to-day and spoke with the parents regularly. On the other hand, P. Deanne said that "you have to show that you are a champion for SWDs. It's not always easy, but being an advocate is my most important role." P. Lydia, another principal with a certification in special education, saw herself as an advocate for all the students in her building. She "makes sure that every student is being loved and being received by all teachers, no matter whose classroom they are in … we give them what they need so they can make growth academically, emotionally, and socially." P. Ruby echoed these ideas by stating that she provided her students with what they needed to be supported so they felt included and went on to excel.

There is no single definition of the word "inclusion" as it pertains to SWDs. It can be defined as physical placement in general education classrooms, whether it is all the time or part of the time (Keefe & Davis, 1998). Another view of inclusion is "an attitude or belief system that implies everyone belongs and is accepted" (Keefe & Davis, 1998, p. 57). By adopting this inclusion lens, educators can consider the needs and experiences of marginalized or excluded groups, such as SWDs. Applying an inclusion lens in educational practices fosters a sense of belonging for SWDs. Some of the building administrators used only one definition of inclusion, but most spoke about how they used placement inclusion in their buildings while making SWDs feel like they belonged. Figure 4 shows a breakdown of how building administrators spoke about inclusion.

Figure 4

Participants' Answers About Inclusion



Of the 13 participants with special education backgrounds, only one spoke about inclusion as a placement, two spoke about it as a sense of belonging, and the other 10 spoke of it as both a placement and a feeling of belonging. The participants without a special education background were split as follows: three spoke about inclusion placement, six about a place of belonging, and four about inclusion in both terms.

Inclusion as a placement was conducted differently in different districts and buildings. P. Caitlin relayed that inclusion in her building was not pull-out: everyone was included in the general education setting for everything. P. Emmitt spoke about using his PD training for his staff to learn about a new inclusion initiative. P. Allyson partnered with a company to come to

her building and observe how her staff used inclusion in the building. She sought feedback from the company to create a schedule that allowed for more inclusive practices for the students. Many of these initiatives and pushes for inclusive practices went hand in hand, making students feel like they belonged. P. Allyson used the feedback to make sure the students felt included, "because it's their school. It's all of their schools, collectively."

Inclusion as a sense of belonging was a common theme for over half of the 26 participants. Building administrators play a vital role in creating and promoting an inclusive environment. Several said they were fostering environments where the SWDs in their buildings were engaging with general education students throughout the day. Many administrators stated that they believed in inclusion and modeled and provided training for their teachers in this area. P. Emmitt modeled inclusion and taught demo lessons so that his teachers could learn through the example he set. P. Heather was also a role model for her teachers through repetition and leading by example. P. Sylvia said that "our inclusive environment is just our school in general. We promote inclusivity whenever possible." P. Gina spoke about doing the same so that her faculty and students became accustomed to including SWDs. She said,

> We are inclusive of our special needs children. They attend our assemblies, they attend class trips, and the students are aware that there may be time when a student will have a meltdown. They don't blink an eye because they are well-informed and understanding.

P. Kelly also worked hard to promote inclusivity in her building. In her interview, she boasted,

> Everybody's welcome. We have this big mural that says, "Be You." And so, kids here know, everybody's coming to our band assembly. And somebody might be wearing big, giant noise-canceling headphones. And somebody might be screaming a little bit in the back because they're learning to stay for a concert. You know, they might stay for 10

> minutes because they're working to spend time in that environment. But everybody accepts it. And everybody kind of rolls with it. And everybody understands that, like, we're all behind this, bringing something unique to the table, and it's, we're really proud here of what it looks like for all kids.

However, four of the 26 participants in this study used outdated language when referring to SWDs. The four participants all did not have a background in special education. The language used included the terms "handicapped," "behavioral students," and "special ed kids." This highlights that a lack of understanding and knowledge can shape the perceptions of building administrators, which in turn influences their language when referring to SWDs. This is supported by Van Horn et al.'s (1992) research finding that a building administrator's beliefs and attitudes about special education impacted their behavior toward SWDs. Without a background in special education, building administrators may unintentionally perpetuate deficit-based language that portrays SWDs in a negative light, which can lead to adverse impacts and outcomes.

Overall, participants emphasized the importance of inclusion within education. By making inclusion a priority, building administrators can create learning opportunities that go beyond the classroom. P. Vaughn spoke about having his students understand that diversity is not just race and ethnicity, but includes all types of thinkers. To get that message across, he tried to "infuse our literature and classrooms in a way that's representative of who the children are in the building," so that students could build empathy. These initiatives and school activities normalized inclusion and prepared students to accept diverse student populations.

P. Vaughn said it best: "Inclusion is work, you have to work at it." It is something taught. To promote an inclusive environment, these building administrators were doing the work, and

many of them felt that it was a part of the way they led their buildings. P. Ruby stated that inclusion was a part of who she was, and she could not ask others to be inclusive if she did not believe in it. P. Bradley "encourage[d] staff to take ownership over students" because the students were theirs. V.P. Bryce simply asked, "How can you not?"

Inclusion was defined and examined based on how the building administrators spoke about it. Inclusion is part of school culture in many buildings and placements. The building administrators described the efforts they made to ensure that all students felt as though they belonged. They also collaborated with their staff to integrate SWDs and to normalize and promote inclusion.

Theme 5: Collaboration and Support Systems for Special Education Management

Theme 5 related to the interview question that asked building administrators whom they leaned on when they had a special-education-related question or needed help with a situation. Collaborating with special education staff involves tapping into a vast network of expertise to ensure that SWDs receive the support and education they need and deserve. Building administrators collaborate with their staff members and work closely with them to address challenges and seek guidance on issues that may arise in their buildings. When it came to legal issues, many administrators with special education training spoke about looking into the NJ Administrative Code to get their answers. However, they noted that if an issue was something that went beyond this, they would contact their board attorney.

Building administrators with a background in special education provided three main sources for answers to questions about SWDs: school board attorneys (n = 4), special education directors (n = 7), and the NJ Code (n = 2). The building administrators who mentioned board attorneys used them to clarify legal questions and ensure that decisions were being made

correctly. P. Bradley stated that his board attorney was valuable in ensuring that the district was compliant and knowledgeable in special education topics. Others relied on special education directors, who offered insights grounded in policy from the state and district. V.P. Owen used his special education director as a resource because they helped make sure he had "the most accurate information, especially as someone to spitball an idea off of to ensure compliance with the law." Two administrators conveyed that they turned to the NJ Administrative Code 6A:14 for answers. This administrative code relates to SWDs and outlines the laws governing special education services in New Jersey. P. Whitney and V.P. Erica mentioned looking at the code before consulting another person. These three sources of information enabled administrators to make informed decisions that focused on the needs of students while adhering to state and federal requirements.

Building administrators without a background in special education found themselves looking to access different sources when addressing special education situations. One possible explanation was offered by P. Cora, a principal with a background in special education. She explained that "unless you have a background in special education, you can end up leaning on student support services to the point of a fault because you do not know what you do not know."

Each administrator without a background in special education had a list of people with a background or working knowledge of special education that they looked to when they needed more information. These experienced groups included special education teachers, case managers, child study teams (including social workers, psychologists, and learning disability teacher consultants), specialists (including speech therapists, occupational therapists, physical therapists, behaviorists, and teacher intervention referral specialists), special education coordinators, supervisors, directors, superintendents, and board attorneys. Many of these administrators stated

that this was a group effort because these specialized staff members played a significant part in handling special education situations. The administrators worked closely with these professionals to address challenges and seek guidance on special education matters. P. Bryan described it in this way:

> Surrounding myself with good people, really strong people that have expertise in the area of special education, and really just conversing with them, tapping into their knowledge base, and then just having really good contact over the years to help guide me in the direction where things are going to be profitable.

Many administrators mentioned teamwork across departments and staff, and made sure to support their staff in working with SWDs. Three of the administrators spoke to their general education and special education teachers with a common prep time to plan to align lessons and support SWDs. The administrators also collaborated with behaviorists to understand behaviors and create PDs for teachers to learn why behaviors were happening. P. Caitlin and a district behaviorist created a PD called "W.T.F.—What's the Function," in which teachers would be given different scenarios and work through the function of the behavior. P. Aaron consulted child study team members regularly to learn more about IEP timelines and requirements. He also participated in IEP meetings to be visible to parents and create a welcoming environment fostering inclusion for all students, staff, and parents.

Additionally, "communication" was a word mentioned repeatedly by the administrators. P. Deanne stated that planning for the SWDs in her building "really does take a village." P. Vaughn felt that the best support he could provide to his teachers was through the five minutes he spent walking alongside them in the hallway and being hands-on with the students in the classroom. He also stated that he required his general education teachers to be present and

prepared for IEP and intervention meetings. P. Gina also understood the importance of conversation and collaborating with her team. She explained,

> I lean on seasoned teachers. I lean on my special education supervisor; I lean on my whole team, including my special education teacher coordinator, and my child study team. It's really a whole group of people. OT (occupational therapy), speech, there's different aspects that when certain situations come up, depending on what it is. I go to that group to say, hey, we have this situation going on and this is what I think, tell me your thoughts, and then we have the conversation to come up with the best solution.

Collaboration among staff helped feed into the inclusion that the participants tried to provide in their school buildings. This collaboration set the foundation for understanding how much time building administrators dedicated weekly to ensuring that SWDs received FAPE while meeting their individualized needs.

The time building administrators spent on special-education-related matters varied according to different factors. One of the interview questions asked how much time the participant spent working on special education topics or situations in a 40-hour workweek. The timeline of the question seems unrealistic because many building administrators exceed the 40-hour work week and will give up evenings and weekends to ensure that student needs are being addressed. P. Grant stated that if he was asked this question last year, it would have been more than 40 hours because two new self-contained classrooms had opened in his building. V.P. Janice stated,

> I think that it depends on the time of year, right? So, in the first couple weeks of September, it's definitely more than it is once we get schedules established, routines in place, staff familiarized with IEPs and all of that … But then once we kind of get things

> up and running, then it lessens just a little bit. It resurfaces when we have a student that either the parents have requested a referral for evaluation or we feel we've gone through, our tiered process enough that we are saying that special education is necessary. But, I would also say when we get into the re-evaluation season with all of those re-eval meetings, that's a little bit longer too.

Eight of the 13 (62%) building administrators without a special education background spent more than 10 hours a week on special education, excluding instruction, behavior, or IEP meetings. Only five of these 13 (38%) participants spent less than 10 hours. Ten of the 13 (77%) building administrators with a background in special education spent over 10 hours a week handling matters related to special education. The remaining three (23%) spent between 5 and 10 hours. The amount of time varied by the number of SWDs and self-contained classrooms or by the time of year. Figures 5 and 6 depict how both groups of participants spent their time on special education matters.

Figure 5

Time Spent on Special Education in a Work Week—Without Special Education Background

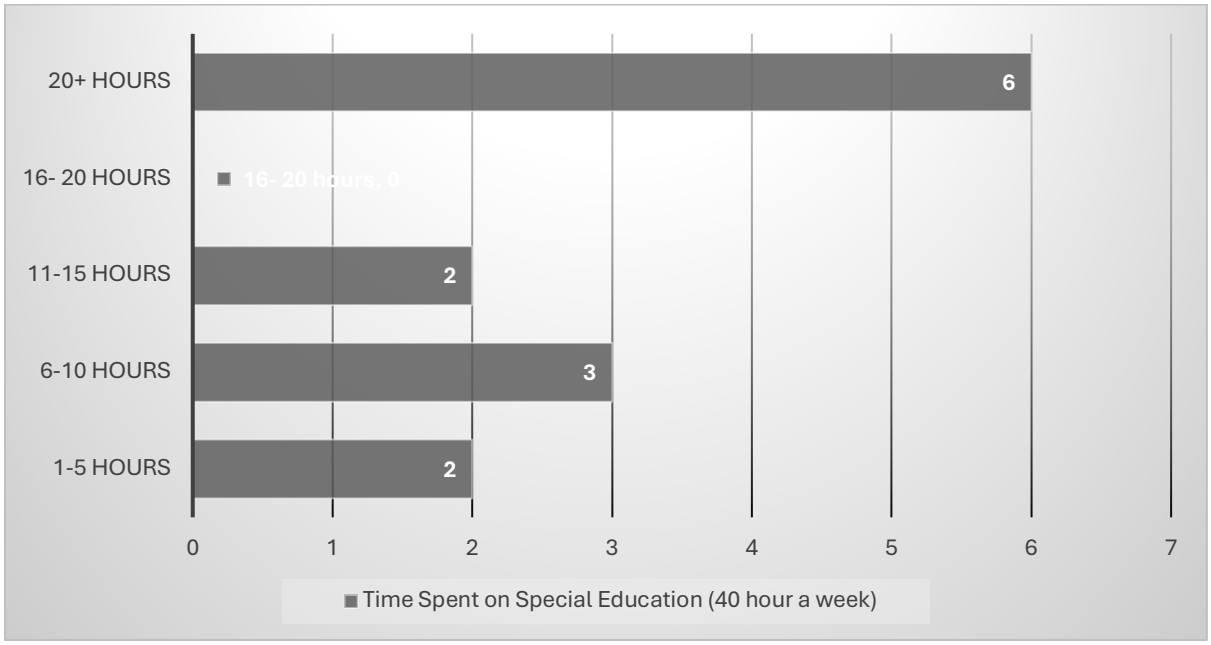


Figure 5 visually represents how the participants without a background in special education spent their time on special education during the school week. None of the participants spent 16-20 hours. Two administrators spent 1-5 hours and two 11-15 hours. Three participants spent 6-10 hours. Six of the 13 administrators without a background in special education spent 20 hours or more handling special education tasks or matters.

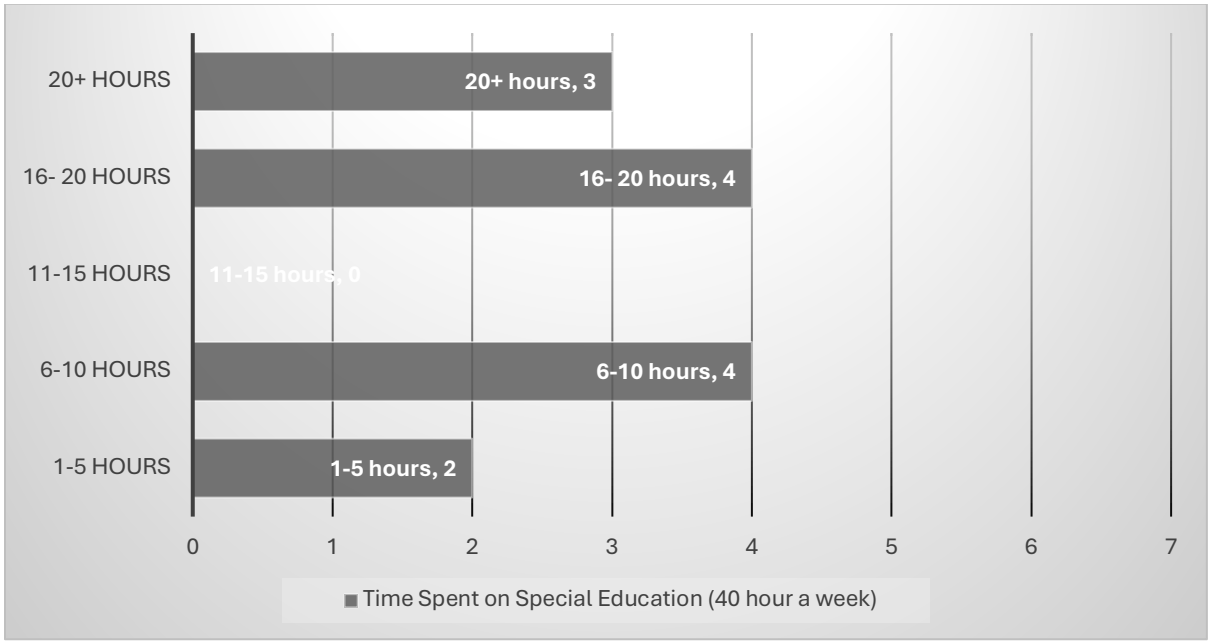
Many of the participants spoke to how they spent their time in special education. V.P. Janice stated that it depends on the year. She is more heavily involved in September and when it's re-evaluation season. P. Gina spoke similarly. She stated that, "it depends on the day. And it also depends on the year, like last year we had certain students who did have behaviors that I did tend to every single day. Then there's other times when it's a little more quiet". P. Aaron spent more than 20 hours a week because of the special education population in his building. V.P

Garrett recalled that on a weekly basis he would spend more than 20 hours and immerse himself in the meetings to learn.

Figure 6 similarly depicts the amount of time spent by the administrators with a background in special education. None of the participants with a background in special education spent 11-15 hours handling special education matters. Only two spent less than 5 hours. Four spent 6-10 hours and four spent 16-20. Three spent 20 hours or more dedicated to special education. Factors that affected the time allocated to special education included the number of self-contained classrooms in the building, the behaviors in these classrooms, the population in the building, discipline, and collaboration with teachers to support the staff, students, and families.

Figure 6

Time Spent on Special Education in a Work Week—With Special Education Background



Participants with a background in special education also stated that sometimes it depends on the time of the year. P. Lydia specified that she spent 20% to 50% of her week on special education matters but indicated that it was a definite part of every day. V.P. Owen and V.P. Bryce spoke to how special education is involved with other pieces of the day. V.P. Owen stated that when "special education bumps into things like discipline, or student behavior or motivation or attendance or all those other things, you're probably somewhere in like the 25 to 30 [hour area]". V.P. Bryce spoke about how special education blended into different areas because, "often it's not a special education issue, it's a grade level issue which might have special education students". He quantified hiss time working in special education topics as 25% of his time, "knowing that on any day it could be 100%".

Factors that affected the time allocated to special education depended on the number of self-contained classrooms in the building, the behaviors in these classrooms, the population in the building, discipline, and collaboration with teachers to support the staff, students, and families. Figures 5 and 6 illustrated the time that both groups of building administrators spent weekly regarding special education and SWDs.

The participants highlighted the vast resources they utilized to address special education situations and to support SWDs and their school staff. Collaboration between staff and administration played an integral part in time spent on special education and addressing the needs of SWDs. The time that building administrators spent working with SWDs could not be precisely quantified, as no administrator working in education can leave their work at work. However, the time they reported spending on special education differed according to various factors and building demands.

Summary

The results presented in this chapter showed differences in a variety of areas between building administrators with a background in special education and those without. Building administrators with a background in special education perceived themselves as supporters and advocates of SWDs. They reported that their principal preparation programs did not adequately prepare them for leadership roles due to the lack of special education content. When seeking solutions to a special education situation or looking for information, they consulted the state code, a board attorney, or a director of special education. This group agreed that there was a need for more PD in special education for their staff and themselves. They typically interpreted inclusion as both a placement for students and a sense of belonging.

Building administrators without a background in special education believed that their experience had prepared them to lead schools inclusive of SWDs. They concurred that their principal preparation programs did not provide special education content beyond the law. They relied on special education staff for assistance. However, this reliance on specialized staff may lead to gaps in understanding and decision-making, potentially impacting the school's overall effectiveness in inclusive education.

The next chapter includes further interpretation and discussion of the findings. Additionally, it establishes a connection between the existing literature and the findings and draws conclusions from the results. The limitations and implications for future research are discussed in detail.

CHAPTER 5

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Building administrators are vital in creating and fostering a sense of belonging and a culture of inclusion for all students. Theoharis (2007) emphasized their role as catalysts for enacting social justice leadership within their schools by creating equitable spaces for all, including SWDs. Creating inclusive spaces for SWDs is one of the many tasks that building administrators assume. Given this significant responsibility, it is essential for building administrators to be knowledgeable about special education history, laws, policies, and services (Thompson, 2015). To better understand how building administrators navigate these responsibilities and create inclusive schools for SWDs, this study examined 26 building administrators' lived experiences with special education and SWDs.

This study sought to determine whether there was a relationship between the perceived preparedness of a building administrator to lead an inclusive building and a formal background in special education. Specifically, it examined how special education training influenced administrators' feelings of preparedness and their perceived need to foster inclusive school environments. The lived experiences of building administrators were explored in relation to how they supported SWDs as leaders of their school buildings. Analysis of the data identified five recurring themes in these administrators' lived experiences.

This chapter connects the study's findings back to the established theoretical framework. It addresses the study's limitations and offers recommendations for future research. In addition to interpreting the results presented in Chapter 4, this chapter discusses their implications, particularly regarding the identified gaps in principal preparation programs, and proposes recommendations for improvement.

Interpretation of Findings

In striving for objectivity, it is necessary to acknowledge the researcher's position and potential influences on the interpretation of findings. Through the investigative process, I brought my own experiences, perspectives, and potential biases to the research design, collection, and analysis. Prior experience working with SWDs has shaped my understanding and teaching methods. I also have strong beliefs in the inclusion of all children, empowering marginalized groups, and supporting SWDs; these beliefs could have contributed to a potential bias of the data. However, some steps were taken to mitigate these potential biases.

I remained transparent throughout the research process, including during data collection and analysis. Multiple sources of data, including questionnaires and interviews, were used to verify the findings. The qualitative software Quirkos was used to ensure that information was triangulated and accurate. I was reflective and acknowledged that my personal beliefs and experiences could influence the research. Through the combination of methods and transparency, I demonstrated a commitment to creating a reliable and ethical study.

Analysis of the data revealed insights into the lived experiences and perspectives of 26 building administrators in regard to special education and SWDs. Five central themes emerged from the research, capturing the priorities and challenges of building administrators as the leaders of special education in their school buildings. The themes were insufficient special education training in principal preparation programs, legal knowledge and compliance, PD needs and behavior management, advocating for SWDs and promoting inclusion, and collaboration and support systems for special education management. The research provided insights into the challenges and daily needs of building administrators in supporting SWDs. The analysis of the findings below is broken down by research question.

Research Question 1

What is the impact of special education training or background on the ability of building administrators to lead inclusive schools effectively for SWDs?

The analysis revealed two prominent themes that shed light on the challenges of effective inclusive school leadership: Theme 1, insufficient special education training in principal preparation programs, and Theme 5, collaboration and support systems for special education management. Theme 1 emerged as a significant concern across both participant groups.

Building administrators with a background or formal training in special education (n = 13) demonstrated their capacity to lead inclusive schools for SWDs. This capacity stemmed from their formal training, previous knowledge, and experiences as both teachers and administrators. This experience translated into making more informed decisions and prioritizing the needs of SWDs. This group of administrators had a deeper understanding of inclusion, viewing it not only as a placement for SWDs but also as a sense of belonging. This distinction most likely influenced their ability to create and contribute to an inclusive learning environment for all students. This finding aligns with Praisner's (2003) finding that building administrators' beliefs and attitudes were vital in effectively implementing special education programs.

Interestingly, when asked to identify their roles as special education leaders, the participants with a special education background identified as advocates for SWDs. The participants used their role to support SWDs, their families, and their teachers. Building administrators play a crucial role in advocating for and promoting inclusive practices in school buildings. These administrators also highlighted the need for special education PD for their staff. Administrators with special education training were more likely than administrators without special education training to ensure that their staff was prepared to work with SWDs. Building

administrators' influence creates buy-in with the staff and improves the inclusive culture of their building (Goor et al., 1997). This suggests that specialized training in special education could create a strong sense of commitment to supporting SWDs in their educational journey (DeMatthews et al., 2019; Patterson et al., 2000).

Conversely, building administrators without a special education background (n = 13) relied heavily on their special education staff to guide decision making and ensure compliance. This could possibly hinder their own understanding and involvement in working with and supporting SWDs. Having a background in special education and understanding the relevant legalities can better prepare building administrators to effectively lead schools that are inclusive of SWDs.

A deficiency in understanding and knowledge can adversely influence and shape the perceptions of building administrators, subsequently affecting their language when referring to SWDs. Without a background in special education, building administrators may inadvertently perpetuate deficit-based language that portrays SWDs negatively, potentially leading to detrimental impacts and outcomes. Notably, four participants lacking a background in special education employed outdated language concerning SWDs, underscoring a possible correlation between insufficient preparation in special education and the use of non-inclusive terminology. Incorporating comprehensive special education information into principal preparation programs and ongoing professional development can facilitate a shift in administrators' thinking and perceptions towards recognizing abilities rather than focusing on student deficits.

It should be noted that when speaking about the special education content provided during their graduate courses in principal preparation, many participants recalled exclusively learning about special education laws. No other content was provided that could strengthen the

participants' understanding of special education. The lack of preservice training is troubling, considering that all the building administrators spent their entire educational careers supporting students who needed extra help or who were on the timeline to be classified. Many participants suggested the need for more special education information in their principal preparation programs. This need highlights the impact that specialized training can have on how building administrators view SWDs and how to best support them. Bai and Martin (2015) highlighted the need for continuous support in special education for building administrators. Their research found a disconnect in the training and information building administrators received in their preparation programs about special education and SWDs.

Research Question 1a

How do building administrators with special education training perceive their preparedness to lead inclusive schools for SWDs compared to those without such training?

Two key themes emerged in exploring how building administrators with and without special education training perceived their preparedness to lead inclusive school buildings: Theme 1, insufficient special education training in principal preparation programs, and Theme 5, collaboration and support systems for special education management. These two themes were interconnected in understanding how the two groups perceived their preparedness related to special education and SWDs.

The data revealed that principal preparation programs provided inadequate training for preservice principals and vice principals. Most participants stated that they were unprepared to support SWDs based on their principal preparation program alone. The findings from the interviews indicated that building administrators with a background in special education relied instead on knowledge acquired from their special education programs, educational experience,

and certification in special education. Most stated that they would not have been prepared if they had to rely solely on principal preparation because of the severe lack of special education content and instruction. Unsurprisingly, seven of the 13 building administrators without a background in special education also stated that they learned through experience and not from their principal preparation programs. This finding is consistent with Samuels' (2018) article, which observed that building administrators' main form of learning about special education was on the job.

The interviews indicated that building administrators with certification and teaching experience in special education were more informed about their abilities and knowledge related to special education and working with SWDs. These findings align with both DeMatthews and Edwards (2014) and Jacobs et al. (2004), who established a link between educators with special education training and improved outcomes for SWDs. Twelve of the 13 participants with a special education background (92%) saw themselves as advocates and supporters of SWDs while emphasizing the importance of inclusive practices in their schools. The findings indicated that building administrators with a background in special education were more likely to promote inclusive environments and practices effectively. This suggests that incorporating special education training into principal preparation programs will significantly impact the overall knowledge of administrators and, crucially, their commitment to inclusion. Unfortunately, the findings also highlighted that special education training received during the principal preparation program was minimal.

Many building administrators without a background in special education also reported a lack of special education training in their principal preparation programs. All building administrators consistently stated they had some experience as teachers working with students who were classified or needed extra help. No building administrator could recall teaching a

classroom without a student who had a disability, whether it was an inclusion student or a student who was not yet classified. Their lack of special education training led most of these administrators to depend on their special education staff for guidance on special education topics. These findings support Melloy et al.'s (2021) finding that without a strong foundational knowledge, building administrators rely on collaborating with special education staff. In contrast, building administrators with a special education background consulted the NJ Administrative Code, special education directors, or their board attorneys for guidance when addressing special education issues, perhaps reflecting a deeper understanding and confidence in their abilities to handle special education matters independently. This is consistent with Patterson et al.'s (2000) findings emphasizing the importance of building administrators having adequate knowledge and skills to effectively facilitate programs and meet the needs of SWDs.

Research Question 1b

How does special education training or background affect the self-reported efficacy of building administrators in leading inclusive schools for SWDs?

The same two themes emerged in answering this question: Theme 1, insufficient special education training in principal preparation programs, and Theme 5, collaboration and support systems for special education management. Both themes influenced self-reported efficacy in different ways. Theme 1 highlighted the critical role of special education training in shaping the competency of participants to address the individualized needs of SWDs. Theme 5 showed the importance of collaboration and its consequences, both positive and negative, for self-reported efficacy.

Special education backgrounds influenced building administrators' self-efficacy in leading inclusive schools. Building administrators with formal training felt they were prepared to

lead inclusive schools for SWDs because of their training and experience working with SWDs, but not because of their principal preparation programs. Their knowledge and training gave them confidence in their ability to create an inclusive environment for SWDs. P. Taylor stated that without the specialized training, they "would handle special education situations in a much lower capacity," while others stated that the training they received in special education was necessary. Tailored coursework and experience with SWDs gave them the skills and tools to feel more prepared. Many stated that if they had only been given principal preparation training, their efficacy would have been almost nonexistent because of the lack of special education instruction within those courses. Confidence in their abilities came from their understanding of special education issues, as did feelings of preparedness to handle situations affecting SWDs. Another factor was the amount of time they spent with the special education population. Eleven of the 13 building administrators with special education training spent more than 10 hours out of a 40-hour work week handling special education matters. This translated into dedicating more time to ensure the inclusion and success of SWDs.

The building administrators' self-reported efficacy varied. The administrators with formal training in special education considered themselves as advocates and supporters of SWDs. They reported their principal preparation programs did not adequately prepare them for their leadership roles. In comparison, administrators without special education training reported drawing on both their preparation programs and experiences. The lack of training they received affected their perceptions of their own preparedness and their ability to effectively lead inclusive schools. Participants without this training relied on their experiences as general education teachers to work with and support SWDs. This aligns with Samuels (2018), who stated that because building administrators did not receive fundamental information in special education,

they relied on developing their own skills and “learning on the job is still the main way that principals gain knowledge about special education” (para. 21).

Although almost all participants stated that there was a noticeable lack of special education content in their preparation programs, eight participants (62%) reported feeling prepared in their current administrative positions, while five (38%) did not feel prepared. Only four of the 26 participants (15%) said they felt confident in their understanding of special education laws and compliance. Administrators without special education training shared that they frequently relied on special education staff for guidance. These findings support the finding of Goor et al. (1997) that when building administrators felt underprepared or did not understand the extent of their responsibilities to SWDs, they delegated their duties to other staff members. Such collaboration could create dependency on others while limiting the involvement of the building administrator when it comes to supporting and leading SWDs.

The participant group without a background in special education also spent a considerable amount of time handling special education matters. Six of the 13 participants (46%) spent less than half of their weekly hours (~20 hours) in special education. The other seven, or 54%, spent more than 20 hours working in special education within their buildings. In a study conducted by Stevenson-Jacobson et al. (2006), participants who did not have a background in special education spent less time on special education than those with the background. However, this study seemed to demonstrate the opposite. Reasons for the increased time included IEP season and other related times of the year, having a majority of the student population require special education services, and working alongside staff regarding student behaviors. The participants’ dedication to SWDs, even without the specialized training or background, emphasizes the growing need for more content to provide support and inclusion for these

students. One of the participants who felt unprepared in their position revealed that they spent half of their time on special education because they inserted themselves into meetings to have a better understanding of special education.

A notable finding in this study is the high amount of time building administrators dedicate to special education and SWDs, regardless of background. Administrators without specific SPED training report spending significant hours on SPED-related tasks, which may indicate time spent trying to acquire knowledge they did not gain in their preparation programs. This large time commitment underscores the necessity for principal preparation programs to include comprehensive special education coursework.

These findings shed light on the impact of special education training on building administrators' self-reported efficacy in leading inclusive schools for SWDs. Building administrators without formal training in special education reported higher self-efficacy because of their experience and knowledge of how to support and lead SWDs. Only a small percentage of participants without formal training stated that they felt unprepared and expressed lower self-efficacy. However, all participants without formal training (100%) stated they utilized the people in their buildings who had a background in special education to address any situation that required additional help or knowledge. This ranged from special education teachers to the special education director, and in certain cases the parents of the SWD. This inconsistency in understanding all aspects of special education can potentially impact the processes and decisions that affect the education of SWDs and the inclusive environments they need to thrive.

Research Question 2

What professional growth opportunities or training do building administrators feel they need to improve their leadership and better support SWDs?

Theme 1 was insufficient special education training in principal preparation programs. This finding directly correlates with RQ2, which explored what topics and training were necessary for the participants to be more informed and prepared in their roles. From RQ2, three important themes developed: Theme 2, legal knowledge and compliance, Theme 3, PD needs and behavior management, and Theme 4, advocating for SWDs and promoting inclusion. These themes contained targeted topics that can build capacity in building administrators to lead inclusive buildings and provide equitable outcomes for SWDs effectively.

Most building administrators noted the lack of PD offerings with special education content. PD offered to administrators was almost nonexistent, with nine participants receiving none. There was a resounding call from participants for more PD opportunities and comprehensive training to better support SWDs. The administrators with backgrounds in special education were more likely to seek PD outside of their districts or partake in it because of programming in their buildings. Many administrators felt that the training they received annually was not sufficient in terms of special education content. None of the participants stated that there was special education PD offered solely to them to build their knowledge base. All participants recognized the importance of expanding their knowledge base and skills to become better special education leaders.

When asked what special education topics were crucial for them to understand, participants mentioned the following categories of topics:

- Inclusion and belonging
- Individual needs of SWDs and differentiation
- Behavioral management
- Support for stakeholders

- Legal knowledge and compliance
- Comprehensive understanding of disabilities

The list further demonstrates the urgent need for more comprehensive special education content in principal preparation programs. These results corroborate the findings of Jacobs et al. (2004), who stated, “There is evidence that most universities do not require a course in special education in initial administrative certification programs” (p. 11). Currently, the one topic cited by participants as most frequently covered in principal preparation courses and PD sessions was legal knowledge. Ironically, while it was the only consistent topic where participants received training, it was also frequently mentioned as a topic for further training and development. However, other areas were identified as necessary for these administrators to be more effective in their role of advocating for and supporting SWDs.

Behavioral management PD was provided to staff, yet almost no building administrators were provided the same opportunity. This lack of behavior support and management PD could leave the building administrators unable and possibly unwilling to provide crisis prevention techniques and supports to SWDs.

New Jersey Public Law 2017, Chapter 291, was written into law in January 2018. It defines restraints and seclusion for students and limits the uses strictly to emergencies. Worthington (2018) wrote a New Jersey Department of Education memo with the following guidance on restraints for SWDs:

> All staff working directly with students with disabilities be trained on, at least, an annual basis on the policies and procedures adopted by the local education agency (LEA) with respect to restraint and seclusion … In addition to districtwide training and PLCs, LEAs should also consider additional training for all staff who will be responsible for

> implementing the Individual Education Programs (IEPs) which include behavior intervention plans for students with disabilities. This training should include a framework that emphasizes de-escalation techniques, identifying positive behavior supports, and behavioral strategies which support appropriate behavior in all school settings. Staff responsible for implementing the behavior intervention plans in student IEPs should be trained on the use of continuous monitoring techniques and the collection of data which can be used to inform decision making regarding the continued use of restraint.

Understanding student behavior is a necessity to foster a safe and supportive school environment for SWDs. Administrators need the same training provided for the staff so that there are no gaps in how behavioral situations are handled. Without the proper supports, tools, and knowledge, building administrators may struggle to support students effectively or rely on reactive methods instead of proactive methods. Training that includes de-escalation techniques, positive behavior supports, and data-driven decision-making helps ensure that everyone is taught the same information and working on the same page. When all educators, including administrators, are equipped with these skills, schools can better support SWDs, reduce crisis situations, and create an inclusive learning environment.

Garrison-Wade (2005), Pazey and Cole (2013), Sirotnick and Kimball (1994), and Sun and Xin (2019) all emphasized the need for more special education content in principal preparation programs by including lists of skills and knowledge that administrators should understand at a minimum. The results of this study further emphasize the demand for more special education content. Participants expressed a desire for more training and coursework in their principal preparation programs. Given the limited special education content in the participants' preparation programs, they should use PD and other professional growth

opportunities to effectively support inclusive practices and address the individualized needs of SWDs.

The consensus among building administrators with a background in special education was that there was a dire need for PD in special education for both their staff and themselves. Many were not given the opportunity in their districts, and some looked outside for PD they wanted to partake in. Patterson et al. (2000) emphasized the importance of building administration staying current with training to support their SWDs and special education programs. They highlighted the need for ongoing PD because the landscape of special education is constantly changing and laws have been revised. These findings underscore the need for both ongoing PD and more special education content in principal preparation programs to better support building administrators who can then address the needs of SWDs.

Implications

The review of literature established the necessity of building administrators possessing a strong working knowledge of special education and its positive impacts on school environments. It focused on the need for more special education content in principal preparation programs and building administrators' perceptions of preparedness in supporting SWDs. Since special education is the most litigated area of education (Strader, 2007), it is incomprehensible that more time is not dedicated to learning and understanding how to support SWDs and create inclusive buildings.

This study has confirmed a perceived lack of preparedness by participants and a demand for more comprehensive special education training in both principal preparation programs and PD opportunities provided by districts. This need was supported by Hess and Kelly (2007) and Sirotnik and Kimball (1994), who stated that many building administrators felt underprepared to

handle special education tasks because of limited and insufficient training. Bateman and Bateman (2014) and Goor et al. (1997) echoed this confusion, noting that many administrators without special education training did not understand the immensity of the responsibility of making decisions for SWDs.

The findings from this study contribute to the field of leadership by emphasizing the need for more special education training in principal preparation programs. The findings indicate that building administrators, regardless of their background in special education, learned almost nothing related to special education in their principal preparation programs unless it was about special education laws. This left the administrators without a background in special education to rely on their experience as teachers or to learn on the job. While most did not explicitly state that they felt underprepared, many stated that they relied on others' knowledge when there were special education tasks that they did not fully understand, ultimately limiting their ability to effectively create inclusive buildings. This reliance on others' knowledge is a missed opportunity for building administrators to develop their own understanding that could positively affect the outcomes of SWDs and increase self-reported efficacy. The administrators without specialized training over-relied on their special education staff, which in turn could potentially widen the knowledge gap they had in special education.

This lack of knowledge presented itself in different ways. Some of the participants did not use updated language when speaking about or working with SWDs. This deficit-based language can be corrected through more specialized training and coursework that focuses on the strengths of the students. Time spent on special education tasks for participants without a background in special education was another area that indicated there was a need for more specialized knowledge. Figure 5 depicted that the timeframe that most of the participants fell into

was 20+ hours. This time spent could indicate the participants spending more time to try and learn how to address different processes because of the lack of foundational knowledge. This further supports the need for better special education preparation for building administrators so that they can be effective special education leaders, and not reactive problem-solvers.

By emphasizing the specific skills these administrators needed through their lived experiences and suggestions, this study can be used as a starting point to inform the design of more effective training in both principal preparation programs and PD opportunities. This may include expanding coursework in special education law, behavior management, inclusive practices, and a comprehensive understanding of how to support students with different disabilities in a school setting. Ongoing PD in special education is of paramount importance because building administrators should stay updated on recent legislation and best practices. By addressing these gaps, this study aimed to help improve the abilities of building administrators to lead inclusive schools while advocating for and supporting SWDs.

Connection to Theoretical Framework

This study's theoretical framework was developed based on the principles of social justice and inclusive school leadership. Theoharis (2007) stated that principals work to address and eliminate marginalization. Social justice is grounded in the belief that different groups of people receive different treatment based on one or more of their identities. The identity at the heart of this study was disability. Inclusive leadership emphasizes the importance of providing access and resources to marginalized students while promoting the inclusion of all students, regardless of their backgrounds or abilities.

The findings of this study are connected to these frameworks in several ways. First, the study found that building administrators with a special education background were more likely to

view inclusion as both a placement and a sense of belonging for SWDs. This aligns with inclusive leadership, which emphasizes that all students are valued and are an integral part of the school community. Second, the study found that these same administrators were more likely to view themselves as advocates for SWDs and promote inclusion within their schools. This finding aligns with social justice leadership because these leaders use their positions to ensure that marginalized groups of students are empowered through the creation of an equitable school environment.

One of the themes that emerged from this study was advocating for SWDs and promoting inclusion. The findings from the study revealed that 65% of the participants saw themselves as advocates for SWDs. When the participants were interviewed, they all spoke about how their buildings included SWDs, whether in mainstream classrooms or through inclusive practices. Christensen et al. (2013) stated that the rights of marginalized groups can only be accounted for when educational leaders are equipped with the skills and knowledge to make informed decisions. Using inclusive practices is one of the many ways that building administrators can be social justice leaders.

The lack of special education information in principal preparation programs could restrict building administrators' ability to fully embrace and implement the principles of inclusive and social justice leadership, especially concerning SWDs. Administrators without this formal training might focus on perceived deficits rather than the individual strengths and potential of SWDs, potentially missing opportunities to focus on social justice and inclusion principles. Without having a foundational special education knowledge to build on, building administrators are playing 'catch up' because they must learn on the job. Without special education knowledge, building administrators could unintentionally create barriers for SWDs that affect their right to

FAPE, their ability to access the curriculum, and their participation in the school community. This could be amended through incorporating special education content into the principal preparation courses and curriculum, empowering building administrators to advocate for SWDs and promote inclusion for all students.

Inclusion was viewed as a placement (mainstreaming classrooms) and a lens (a sense of belonging to the school community). Fifteen percent of the participants viewed it as a placement, 31% as a lens, and 54% understood the term in both ways. The participants were emphatic when speaking about inclusive initiatives and daily practices that made SWDs feel like they belonged and celebrated for who they are. One of the participants stated that they modeled inclusion for the staff and students, and another said, “How can you not?” (V.P. Bryce). Inclusive and social justice school leadership shone in the responses on this theme. Bhugra (2016) stated that social justice values diversity, promotes an equitable environment, and provides an equitable society for all. The participants may not have explicitly called themselves social justice leaders, but many promoted the ideals by using inclusion in their buildings and advocating for their students.

The commitment of these participants to advocate for and include SWDs is an example of social justice and inclusive school leadership. By incorporating new practices, actively promoting inclusive practices, and creating a sense of belonging, these participants were using their positions to dismantle systemic barriers and create equitable learning opportunities. Ryan (2007) argued that inclusive leaders include SWDs in their schools. The actions of the participants demonstrated that their commitment to inclusion could provide marginalized groups of students access to the resources and supports they needed.

While none of the participants called themselves social justice leaders, one spoke about an inclusion lens that he used. P. Vaughn stated:

> I use this idea of a lens, but the glasses that you see things through. If you put on glasses, if you believe in inclusion and you put the inclusion glasses on, then your parent communications [are] going to talk about inclusion, your literature in your classroom is going to show it. The way that you differentiate is going to show it, who should be in your room is going to show it. It should be obvious. It should be on the walls, it should be in the air, it's everywhere. So, getting those lenses on people is the real work … You really have to work at understanding it. Not just from your perspective, but from others'.

The participants in this study consistently avoided framing SWDs in terms of their limitations; they focused on their potential and strengths. Not surprisingly, the participants created a sense of belonging by involving SWDs in mainstream classrooms and other school activities. The participants described advocating for the students in their buildings and fostering a school environment where all students and identities were celebrated. All the actions described by the building administrators demonstrated a commitment to accepting and supporting all SWDs.

This study found that building administrators without a background in special education relied heavily on their network of special education staff to support their SWDs. Although collaboration with all staff creates an inclusive environment and excellent school culture, this sheds light on the dire need for more special education training in both principal preparation programs and PD opportunities. With training through these two educational avenues, all building administrators would better understand how to use social justice and inclusive practices to ensure that all marginalized students are provided with a more effective, equitable, and just school system.

The administrators who viewed themselves as advocates and saw inclusion as both a placement and a sense of belonging were more likely to create an inclusive environment and

promote inclusion so that SWDs felt valued, celebrated, and accepted. This stresses the importance of equipping building administrators with special education instruction and skills so that they can use it to fight for this marginalized group of students and create inclusive school buildings where SWDs can thrive. By prioritizing social justice and inclusion, building administrators can become effective in their role of special education leader.

Limitations and Recommendations for Future Research

This study had some limitations that must be acknowledged. The sample size of 26 participants limits the generalization of the findings; a larger sample size could increase confidence in recreating the methodology and applying it to other groups. Therefore, this study should be replicated with a bigger participant pool. In addition, the study focused on participants in New Jersey, which may have limited the transferability of the findings. Educational policies and systems vary according to location; therefore, the results may not be directly applicable. To better understand the impact of location, this study should be replicated with a participant pool including administrators from various states across the country.

A second significant limitation was the lack of racial diversity among participants. Thirteen participants were White women, three were Hispanic women, and 10 were White men. This limitation arose because of the need for separate IRB approval through two of the largest school districts in New Jersey, which took over a month to be emailed back to me. This timeline restricted my ability to recruit a more diverse sample. While this study's participants lacked diversity, they did approximate the racial demographics of principals in New Jersey. In this study, 88% of the participants were White and 12% were Hispanic. NCES (n.d.) reported that in the 2020–2021 school year, New Jersey principals were 77.3% White, 11.3% Hispanic, and 11.5% Black or African American. However, this study may lack important insights that could emerge

from a more racially diverse participant pool. Administrators from diverse backgrounds could offer a deep understanding of how disability intersects with other marginalized identities. Racially diverse participants could also provide insight into different biases and systemic inequities in school buildings. A similar study should replicate this study with more diverse groups of people who might have different outlooks, backgrounds, and views of preparedness in administration.

Beyond the limited racial diversity, the study also lacked representation of different levels of building administration, with only five vice principals compared to 21 principals. A similar study could review how vice principals perceived perceptions of leading inclusive buildings. The role of principal and vice principal can vary by school, district, or need; investigating the different roles would be interesting and provide more data to the field.

Replication in different states is another recommendation to ensure broader applicability of the findings. This expanded study would enhance the generalizability of the findings by exploring how administrators in other states view their preparedness to support SWDs. This type of comparative investigation could reveal variations in training and resources by state or region and offer insight into principal preparation program development. Similarly, an examination of the curricula used in educational leadership graduate programs is necessary. Investigating whether the lack of special education information varies by institution could potentially identify curriculum gaps and inform revisions to the curriculum and training for administrators. Future research could also compare the needs of administrators in different school settings (e.g., middle schools, secondary, urban, suburban, and rural areas) regarding their role as special education leaders. Understanding the unique demands faced by administrators in different contexts could aid in developing PD and educational opportunities to support SWDs.

Another limitation that surfaced in this research was that I asked building administrators to discuss how they perceived themselves on a topic they might not be well versed in. Many building administrators who are proficient in instruction or general education may feel underprepared to discuss special education topics. Building administrators may have been hesitant to reflect because a response could have exposed a deficit in their special education knowledge base. This may have reduced the participant pool, potentially affecting the depth of information gathered. The topic may have also unintentionally elicited biased responses from the groups of participants. The implication of deficiencies in the participants' knowledge bases may have motivated them to modify their answers accordingly. Therefore, the self-reported nature of the data presents a limitation, and future research should delve into the perceived self-efficacy of participants.

In addition, the self-reported data may have led to inaccuracies in participant responses due to relying on memory. Participants had difficulty recalling information and specific details from their principal preparation programs, especially if the programs occurred a long time ago. A way to address this limitation could be to utilize multiple data collection methods, including examining the participants' preparation program courses and syllabi and conducting observations to assess how they integrate special education knowledge into their leadership roles.

A recommendation could be to examine how time in one's role impacts perceived self-efficacy and preparedness. In this study, the participants had been in administration for a range of years. Many expressed having a hard time remembering their preparation programs and what the coursework entailed. One participant with less than 5 years of administration experience stated that they were unprepared for their role, suggesting that years of experience was a factor. Therefore, explaining how building administrators who have been in administration for less than

2 years perceive their preparedness and self-efficacy could provide insight into the impact of experience over time.

Another recommendation is a quantitative study in which building administrators rate their self-efficacy and preparedness using a quantitative instrument. This would provide numerical values for the participants' knowledge regarding special education and allow for a comparison of perceived preparedness levels. A study of this nature could identify specific areas of strength and weakness in preparedness, which could in turn inform targeted PD.

The two final recommendations involve significant changes in how school administrators are prepared and supported to effectively serve SWDs. The findings of this study revealed that administrators felt underprepared to lead schools with SWDs. Principal preparation programs need to address this gap by incorporating more special education content into their curriculum. One recommendation is that the NELP standards be revised to ensure that principal preparation programs include comprehensive special education coursework, thus equipping future administrators with essential knowledge and skills.

This revision should also be implemented at the state level. As Johnson (2016) noted, principal preparation programs must align with state certification requirements and can vary due to factors such as accreditation criteria, district needs, and the needs of the students within the state. State standards serve as the foundation for the building administrator and should include a requirement for a deeper understanding of special education, equipping them with the ability to support diverse learners and create inclusive environments.

This study highlighted the value of building administrators having a strong background in special education. To address the need for this expertise, school districts and universities should collaborate to create pathway programs that support special education teachers in obtaining

administrative roles. Such programs, along with scholarships, could attract special education teachers to administrative roles to leverage their invaluable expertise and experience to foster inclusive and supportive school environments.

Although this qualitative study provided a wealth of information, further research is required. Additional research is needed on the lived experiences of building administrators and how prepared they feel to provide an inclusive environment for SWDs. Research should be focused on specific challenges building administrators face and what information and training are beneficial to support SWDs. This will help to ensure that all students are provided with an inclusive education, regardless of their identity.

Conclusion

This descriptive phenomenological study investigated the relationship between building administrators' perception of their preparedness to support SWDs and the training they received during their principal preparation courses or PD. The most prominent finding was that both groups of administrators (with and without a background in special education) reported a noticeable lack of special education content in their preparation programs. Most participants reported learning about special education from experience, not a principal preparation program. The only area touched upon in their preparatory courses was education law related to special education.

The research also showed that the impact of a special education background manifested in different ways. Administrators with special education backgrounds viewed themselves as advocates for SWDs, spent more time addressing special education matters, and demonstrated a broad understanding of inclusion. They also used their special education backgrounds and experience simultaneously to navigate special education processes and procedures.

A third important finding was that all 26 administrators mentioned improvements that could provide educators with more special education information. These improvements included hands-on or case-based training in principal preparation programs, more special-education-focused PD for staff and administrators, and requiring teachers to come out of their programs with a dual certification that included special education. While PD was nonexistent for some participants, most agreed that behavior management and de-escalation strategies were top priorities in special education PD for themselves and their staff. Many of the administrators described an overall serious lack of special education PD, with almost half stating it was nonexistent or ad hoc.

After behavior management, legal knowledge and compliance and a comprehensive understanding of disabilities were topics that building administrators deemed critical to be effective in their role. Many reflected on only learning about special education law during one course in their principal program, and expressed an overwhelming need for more targeted training in both areas. This was a common sentiment among the participants.

The final finding was that 77% of building administrators with a background in special education viewed inclusion as both a placement and a sense of belonging. This emphasis on their role in promoting inclusion created a sense of responsibility to SWDs. Several administrators were able to describe the inclusive practices they used to ensure that these students were part of their school community. Some administrators spoke about how they embodied inclusion and made it a daily practice for all students.

This qualitative research found that building administrators' principal preparation programs did not prepare them adequately to handle all the intricacies of leading a building inclusive of SWDs. Many felt underprepared to handle the role of special education

administrator and looked to others with a more comprehensive knowledge of special education. The participants also highlighted the need for ongoing training and PD in special education. Almost all participants stated that the training they received focused mainly on special education laws and compliance; building administrators require more to support the SWDs in their buildings. More comprehensive training will equip administrators with strategies that improve their leadership while improving the education of SWDs.

This study highlighted the significant gaps in principal preparation programs and ongoing PD opportunities for building administrators in special education. Addressing these gaps in training and knowledge can significantly enhance building administrators' ability to effectively lead inclusive schools and advocate for SWDs, ultimately promoting social justice and equitable education for all students.

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APPENDIX A

The Building Administrator Screening Questionnaire (BASQ)

William Paterson University
Project Title: Building Administrators as Leaders of Special Education
Principal Investigator: Veronica Ricigliano
Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Danielle Wallace
Faculty Sponsor Phone Number:
Department: Educational Leadership
Protocol Approval Date:
IRB Contact Phone Number: 973-720-2852

This preliminary questionnaire concerns building administrators as leaders of special education. It is being conducted to fulfill graduate requirements to obtain a doctorate through William Paterson University. I understand that my participation is voluntary, and I may stop completing the questionnaire at any time and I do not have to answer any question(s) I choose not to answer. The risks associated with my completing this questionnaire are minimal and I accept them. Due to voluntary participation in this research, there are no greater risks than those encountered daily. Benefits of my participation in this study are presentations at different conferences and expansion of research through journal articles, and I accept them. I understand that any data collected as part of this study will be stored in a safe and secure location, and that this data will be destroyed when this research is completed or when the data is no longer needed by the investigator. I understand that I will be an anonymous participant in this study, that no one, including the investigators will be able to connect my responses to me. I understand that my identity will not be revealed in any way through the way that data and findings are reported. To protect my identity, I will not write my name on this document. I understand that my email address will be collected so that the researcher can contact me about establishing my further participation in this study. However, my collected data will be kept in aggregate and separate from my identifying information.

I understand that by providing consent for this study I am also providing consent for my anonymized responses to be included in datasets that may be used in the future the investigator of this study or other investigators for research related to the purpose of this research study. By providing consent for this study, I am also confirming that I am at least 18 years old.

Consent: If I do not want to complete this questionnaire, I will close the browser OR select “I do not wish to participate” and click continue. If I do choose to participate, I will click “I accept” to continue and proceed.

- I accept
- I do not wish to participate

Please select your age group

- Under 30
- 30-40
- 41-50
- 51-60
- 61-70
- 70+

What is your gender identity?

- Male
- Female
- Non-binary / third gender
- Prefer not to say

What is your ethnicity?

- Hispanic
- Non-Hispanic

What is your race? Choose all that apply

- White
- Black or African American
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander
- Other

Which College/University did you complete your Principal Preparation (Educational Leadership) courses?

_____

What Degrees do you possess?

_____

What Certifications do you currently hold?

_____

What is your current position?

- Principal
- Assistant/Vice Principal

How long have you held your current position?

- 0-1 year
- 2-5 years
- 5-10 years
- 10 - 15 years
- 15+ years

4. How many special education classrooms (self-contained, resource, inclusion) are in your building?

_____

5. What is the grade range in your building?

_____
_____

What positions did you hold prior to this current position? (List all administrative and teaching positions)

_____

If you are interested in participating in an interview, please list your email address and times and days of the week that work to schedule an interview.

_____

Please indicate how you would prefer the interview be held

- In person
- Virtual via Google Meet or Zoom
- Telephone

APPENDIX B

The Disability and Inclusion Perspectives Interview Questions (DIPIQ)

SELF

- Prior to your role as a school-based administrator, what was your experience with SWDs?
- Coming out of the educational leadership program did you feel ready to handle SPED related matters?
- Describe your role as a leader in relation to special education.
- What specific knowledge about SWDs do school-based administrators need to have to be effective special education leaders?
- What special education training do you feel is necessary prior to taking a role as a school-based administrator?
- Where does your knowledge base come from regarding SWDs? Who do you look to for more information about a specific SPED-related problem?
- Have you had to do your own research about special education laws and regulations because of a situation that happened in your school?
    - Without using personal information can you explain how you handled the situation?
- As an educational leader, have you ever been involved in legal proceedings regarding a special education student or situation?
    - Without using personal information can you explain how you handled the situation?
    - What would you have done differently?

SCHOOL

- About how many hours a week do you spend addressing special education matters in your building?
- How do school-based administrators promote an inclusive environment for SWDs?
- How do the school administrators collaborate with special education teachers to support students?
- How do school administrators collaborate with general education teachers to support SWDs?
- How do the school administrators collaborate with paraprofessionals to support students?
- How do the school administrators collaborate with other specialists to support students?
- What professional development do you offer staff regarding special education?

DISTRICT

- How does your school district stay updated on best practices in special education?
- How does your school district stay updated on recent laws and litigation in special education?
- What professional development opportunities are provided to administrators in your district to enhance your ability to support students with disabilities?

APPENDIX C

Recruitment Email

TOPIC: Building Administrators' Perceptions of Their Preparedness as Leaders of Special Education

Dear Principal / Assistant Principal:

My name is Veronica Ricigliano, and I am a doctoral student at William Paterson University. For my dissertation, I am examining how building administrators use their knowledge of special education to lead buildings that are inclusive for students with disabilities (SWDs) and how they are building on their knowledge base.

You are being invited to participate in this research because you are a principal or assistant/vice principal in a school building that houses both general and special education students between grades K-5. Your answers are very important to help add to the research about this topic.

While your participation in filling out this questionnaire is voluntary, I would greatly appreciate your assistance. The questionnaire will take approximately 5-10 minutes to complete. There is no compensation for responding to this survey nor are there any known risks. At the end of the questionnaire, there is the opportunity to participate in a 45-minute interview to delve further into this topic. If you choose, please respond with your email address so a date and time can be scheduled.

Results from this questionnaire will be used in the research. Your identity will remain anonymous and no identifying information will be associated with your responses. Pseudonyms will be used throughout the dissertation and all stored information will be destroyed three years after the dissertation is completed.

Clicking on the link below and completing the survey will serve as your consent to participate.

CLICK THIS LINK TO BEGIN: https://wpunj.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_29wRN08caOenwea

I hope you will be willing to complete the survey at your earliest convenience. If you require any further information about the survey, please do not hesitate to contact me riciglianov1@student.wpunj.edu. You may also contact my committee chair, Dr. Danielle Wallace at wallaced12@wpunj.edu.

Sincerely,

Veronica Ricigliano

Doctoral Candidate

William Paterson University

APPENDIX D

LinkedIn Post

My name is Veronica Ricigliano, and I am a doctoral student at William Paterson University. I am currently recruiting participants for my research. Please see the flyer below and repost or share it with anyone who might be able to participate. The research study will examine building administrators' experiences in leading buildings that house students with disabilities. Here is the link to the questionnaire: https://wpunj.qualtrics.com/jfe/form/SV_29wRN08caOenwea

VITA

Veronica Lynn Ricigliano

Education: Doctor of Education, William Paterson University of New Jersey, 2025

Master of Education, St. Elizabeth, 2017

Master of Arts, Wilkes University, 2014

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