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# Principals' Perceptions Of Their Preparedness To Lead Inclusive Schools For Students With Disabilities: An Action Research Study Of A Principal Preparation Program On The U.S.-Mexico Border

Ignacio Estorga Iii
*University of Texas at El Paso*

PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS OF THEIR PREPAREDNESS TO LEAD INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES: AN ACTION RESEARCH STUDY OF A PRINCIPAL PREPARATION PROGRAM ON THE U.S.-MEXICO BORDER

IGNACIO ESTORGA III, M.Ed.

Doctoral Program in Educational Leadership and Administration

APPROVED:

Rodolfo Rincones, Ph.D., Chair

Maria Teresa Cortez, Ed.D.

Holly Fields, Ed.D.

Beverley Argus-Calvo, Ph.D.

Stephen L. Crites, Jr., Ph.D.
Dean of the Graduate School

## DEDICATION

This research is dedicated to one of the most influential individuals in my life: my mother, Hilda Margarita Bennett. My mother graduated from high school with one child and the year after graduation had a second one, me. There was no instructional book or guide on how to raise two children on her own. She used her wits, her instincts, and her love for her children to do the best that she could. She worked two jobs: as a secretary during the day and as a custodian cleaning offices at night, in the same building. We were poor and moved very often. Every time they raised the rent, we packed our "suitcases" (garbage bags for our clothes) and moved. Eventually, I attended five elementary schools, ending elementary school in central El Paso. My middle school teachers knew that something was very wrong with my educational progress but, in the early to mid-1980s, identification and placement of special education students was not what it is today. I was given some tests and eventually was placed in special education courses that were intended to help me to "catch up" to my peers. I was in special education for 3 years, until Grade 9. Although I was dismissed from special education services and placed in "regular" courses, I struggled because I was, and still am, dyslexic. Only years later did I realize why I took tests on the computer, away from the rest of my class. When I asked my mom about this, she replied, "I thought it was because you were special, son."

My mother never let me use my upbringing as an excuse not to achieve in life. When things would go bad, she would say, "Pick yourself up by the bootstraps and keep on going." She would also say, "Who ever said that life was fair, son?"

When I eventually graduated from high school, I had such a distaste for schooling that I almost did not attend college. Eventually, all of my mother's words began to make sense. I enrolled in the Bachelor of Arts program at the local university in my late 20s, taking as many

classes as possible while working two jobs. When I chose to pursue a degree in education, I started as a substitute teacher. Who would have thought that a student who almost fell through the cracks and hated education would eventually decide to pursue a master's degree in education? Although I loved being in the classroom, I felt that I would have a greater impact as a campus administrator, since I would be working with all students, not just the few in my class.

All of my educational experiences, especially those in my middle school years, led to this research. Could I have had a better educational experience if I had had proper identification and placement for special education? Special education is meant to provide tools for success. Although I have accomplished more than I could ever have imagined, it has never been easy. But, as my mother constantly reminded me, "Who ever said life was easy, son?" I love you, Mom; if I have not said it recently, thank you!

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## ABSTRACT

In the “age of accountability,” every student counts. This includes students with disabilities. Principals play a vital role in ensuring that students with disabilities receive a high-quality education. How are university-based preparation programs preparing aspiring administrators to meet the challenges of ensuring a fair and equal education for every student, including students with disabilities? Nearly 25 years ago, a study of principal preparation programs concluded that most principals were ill prepared when they began their leadership tenure. In 2009, a study found that, although there had been an increase in the number of hours that principal preparation programs required for aspiring administrators, many universities required a special education course only as an elective, not as a requirement for certification. This action research study investigated the content of one university-based principal preparation program along the U.S.-Mexico border. The results will inform university certification programs to prepare future administrators regarding laws, policies, and practices in special education.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

For more than a quarter of a century, there have been many challenges to meet both the intent and the spirit of federal laws regarding the education of students with disabilities. In 2006, when I was assigned to supervise the Special Education Department as an Assistant Principal, I quickly realized how little I knew about special education, students with disabilities, the federal law that mandates a free and appropriate education to all students (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA]), complicated state laws and district policies, and mountains of administrative paper work and compliance. I knew very little about the law, curriculum, assessments (for campus accountability and student evaluation), and proper placement of students. I began to ask other administrators about their knowledge of special education and was told that they knew only what was discussed in the Admission, Review, and Dismissal (ARD) process. I was ill prepared and worried when I took on this assignment because I knew that I needed to learn and I knew what was at stake: the education of students with disabilities, a vulnerable and often underserved group. I wondered why I had not been fully prepared to take on this role.

For a new administrator, the ARD process can be complicated because it consists of numerous activities, deadlines, compliance checks, and procedures. The ARD process also has a complex social dynamic. Included in any ARD committee meeting are the teachers of the student (at least one regular education teacher and one special education teacher), a diagnostician (who reviews the data that have been archived and submitted for the committee), the nurse (if the student is taking any type of medication), a counselor (who reviews the student schedule for the current year and the next year), a person qualified to interpret any assessment given to the child,

the parents, the student, and an administrator (who represents the campus and the district). Social workers, mental health clinicians, extended family, or outside counselors and mentors also participate. The sheer number of people, with varied backgrounds and expectations, creates a challenging environment for an administrator. There are also many other factors associated with the daily operation of a school that make special education a challenging area for principals and assistant principals (DeMatthews, 2015; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2013). School leaders are responsible for utilizing their resources effectively to create inclusive and high-quality classrooms as they assign teachers and students with disabilities to classrooms. School leaders assign special education and general education teachers to co-teach and develop a master schedule to ensure that they have time to co-plan and reflect on lessons. School leaders also ensure that all staff have adequate professional training and are fully aware of a child's Individualized Educational Program (IEP) and any specific needs.

My personal experiences as a principal led me to recognize that administrators (e.g., principals, assistant principals) are important to ensuring that students with disabilities receive the highest-quality, most inclusive, and most beneficial education possible. Research on the subject supports my personal experiences (Riel, 2000). Administrators must have knowledge about what services the district is able to provide and physical locations and settings where these services are available. They often act as "gatekeepers" to ensure that the ARD process is conducted in accordance with all state and federal laws. Administrators must also ensure that students are appropriately identified and appropriately placed. As is discussed later, this is not always the case, particularly for historically marginalized student groups (e.g., African Americans, students in poverty, emergent bilingual students; Blanchett, 2006). When administrators fail to serve in this gatekeeper role, students are at greater risk of misidentification

and misplacement, which can have numerous implications, including a significant educational and social/emotional impact on the child, as well as potential litigation for the district.

## Research Problem

Administrators are integral to ensuring that special education students receive a high-quality education that complies with both state and federal laws. Despite the importance of the administrator meeting the needs of students with disabilities, administrators are often not properly prepared to serve in this important role. This is not a new problem in the field of educational administration.

Hirth and Valesky (1991) conducted a national survey of principal preparation focused on special education and special education law. They found that the majority of principals were ill prepared for the duties and responsibilities. Hirth and Valesky argued that, "in response to this trend toward greater accountability for special education, state certification requirements and university preparation programs for school administrators must ensure that school administrators are ready to face the challenges posed by this educational reform effort" (p. 5). A few recent doctoral dissertations followed up on the work by Hirth and Valesky. Powell (2009) found that "a large percentage of university administrator preparation programs are not increasing the time focused on special education law" (p. 4). This finding is problematic, as Powell noted that "the significant number of case law rulings, additions to procedural safeguards, and legislation in the area of special education are demonstrative of the need for additional training in the area of law for pre-service administrators" (p. 8). Lucker (2012) studied the comprehensive knowledge base of educational leaders related to core and current issues in special education and how this knowledge is acquired and found that most programs failed to provide adequate preparation in the area of special education. The research problem in this study was to address the preparation

of programs and practitioners by collaborating to modify principal preparation programs with regard to special education.

## Elements of an Effective Certification Program

In a highly cited paper in *Educational Administration Quarterly*, Pazey and Cole (2012) reported that "administrators often complete their graduate training with the belief they have been adequately prepared until they are faced with accusations of inappropriate services or are confronted with a lawsuit and potentially substantial costs for their school district" (p. 245). This historic lack of preparation exerts a serious effect on administrators, who are forced to learn on the job. Without high-quality and prepared administrators, special education teachers often burn out and resign or change schools (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). The churn and turnover of special education teachers—those few members of a school community with explicit training in special education—can create additional challenges for administrators and lead to further marginalization of students with disabilities. Little is known about how far these programs have come, particularly in relation to the multiplicity of demands, aspects, and duties associated with special education leadership in schools.

While much of the research on principal preparation in the area of special education has used national or statewide surveys of principal preparation programs to assess principal readiness in this area, few studies have considered the state and local contexts of principal preparation. This is problematic, as each state has particular approaches to implementing IDEA and local districts vary in size, demographics, and expectations. Moreover, each community is unique; some of the challenges associated with special education may vary based on student demographics and regional history. The purpose of this action research study was to investigate the level of preparedness of principals and assistant principals in the area of special education in

one local school district and, based on the findings, to explore implications for universities and principal preparation programs. The study explored practices and policies regarding special education by school administration in one school district in the El Paso region. Information was relayed to the university in the region regarding what the university principal preparation program could incorporate into that program. This study is guided by three research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of principals and assistant principals with regard to their preparedness to develop high-quality inclusive schools? What do they think would have been beneficial in the university principal preparation program?

2. How do university faculty members in a principal preparation program devise program changes based on input by school principals and assistant principals regarding students with special needs in inclusive schools? What information would be helpful for the preparation program?

3. What recommendations do university-based principal preparation program faculty and staff have for improving preparation programs for inclusive schools? What recommendations do district principals have for improving ongoing training to sustain high-quality inclusive schools?

This study was designed to gain contextually relevant understanding of principal preparation in a specific geographic region. Moreover, the findings identified national best practices, as well as areas for improvement. Thus, this study can have an impact in advocating for enhancements to principal preparation programs, in-service principal preparation, and potential avenues for district-university partnerships to ensure that administrators are fully prepared. These outcomes are aligned to my professional aspirations. This study was designed to identify best practices in the region that other universities and districts can adopt, as well as lay

the groundwork for future dissertations to focus on principal preparation in a local context, rather than in a broad national context, which often loses sight of important nuances.

## Purpose of the Study

Any discussion about what make a school inclusive to meet the needs of all students is difficult. The word *inclusion* itself is not present in the IDEA; many individuals, advocacy groups, and researchers use the word to connote a wide range of ideas. For the purposes of this study, I adopt DeMatthews and Mawhinney's (2013) definition of inclusion:

> 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. Their daily work must reflect this responsibility. Yet scholars must recognize that inclusion of all students may not be immediately obtainable during transitional reform periods (schools moving from segregation to full inclusion) because inclusive reforms often confront obstacles that cannot be remedied in the short term. Some obstacles include the availability of resources, appropriately trained teachers and staff, legal mandates related to IDEA, and other challenges associated with each individual classroom, student the school and the district level. (p. 851)

This definition is relevant to the study because it not only underscores the important role of school leaders in creating inclusive schools for students with disabilities but also acknowledges the many challenges that are involved in this effort. Beginning this study, I recognized that the challenges that confront principals in the area of special education are manifold and complex. No program or clinical experience can fully prepare a principal for this work. However, this

definition of inclusion reflects a need for principals to have a set of skills and expertise. In sum, administrators must be prepared for these challenges.

I use the definition from DeMatthews and Mawhinney, as well as literature reviewed in Chapter 2, to describe the leadership practices and orientations that are necessary to creating inclusive schools that serve the diverse needs of students with disabilities. This should, in turn, allow me to consider the type of principal preparation that is provided to principals, as well as the areas in which districts and program graduates consider themselves to be prepared to create inclusive schools that meet the needs of all students.

To create inclusive schools and manage the evolving challenges that are associated with inclusive schools, principals must have a social justice orientation that allows them to recognize unequal circumstances of marginalized groups. They must also have the internal drive to work with teachers and communities to address these issues (Furman, 2012). To do so, principals rely on effective school leadership practices described in the literature and professional standards not only to narrow achievement gaps or help students to pass state assessments but to create inclusive classrooms that meet the social, emotional, and academic needs of all students.

Leithwood, Harris, and Hopkins (2008) identified strong claims in the literature about school leadership: (a) School leadership has a significant influence on student achievement second only to teaching, (b) school leaders draw on the same basic repertoire to improve their schools, (c) school leaders adjust their practices based on school context and circumstances, (d) school leaders increase student achievement by motivating teachers and creating school conditions that promote teacher learning, and (e) school leadership is more effective when leadership opportunities are thoughtfully distributed widely among teachers.

A large body of research often described as *instructional leadership* is intertwined with the leadership practices associated with creating inclusive schools for students with disabilities. Marzano, Waters, and McNulty (2005) identified several principal practices that improve teaching and learning that can be related to creating inclusive schools. Like this work, scholars in special education have described the behaviors and actions of principals who create the necessary conditions for inclusive schools (Billingsley, Gersten, Gillman, & Morvant, 1995; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Guzmán, 1997). DiPaola and Walther-Thomas (2003) described the important work of principals:

> To help special needs students learn, principals can do the following: create a positive school culture that supports their academic success, use knowledge of special education laws that protect students' rights, understand how teachers and specialists can better assist disabled students, and work continuously and collaboratively with their key stakeholders to address all students' learning needs. Principals must also provide high quality professional development for all personnel to enhance disabled students' outcomes. (p. 125)

Principal leadership that creates inclusive schools and meets the needs of all students is good leadership practice, but it should include a concentration and focus on special education and students with disabilities. Unfortunately, this focus or concentration has been ignored and principals have been underprepared in ways that do not allow them to apply their instructional leadership skills to supporting students with disabilities.

## Research Methodology

I utilized an action research approach to examine the preparation of assistant principals and principals in the El Paso, Texas, region. The research site of this study is one principal

preparation program in the El Paso region and its recent graduates serving in principal positions within one local school district. The districts in the surrounding areas serve a high population of Latina/o students, many whom are identified as *at risk* according to Texas indicators and who are classified as English Language Learners.

This case study had multiple cycles. First, I interviewed assistant principals with 1 to 2 years experience as they participated in a focus group regarding their experiences in a preparation program. Second, I interviewed principals who were currently serving as leaders of local schools to capture their perceptions of their preparation, as well as the challenges that they confronted in the area of special education after program completion. Third, I shared with the faculty of the principal preparation program the findings from the focus groups of principals and assistant principals to suggest possible modifications to their program based on the findings. I also reviewed the special education course syllabi and questioned the key program faculty to gain a sense of the curriculum and learning experiences that are provided to students.

## Significance of the Study

This study will make empirical and practical contributions to the fields of school leadership and special education. From an empirical standpoint, this study provides a local analysis of principal preparation and captures the perceptions of faculty, program graduates currently serving as principals, principal supervisors, and special education directors. To date, most research on principal preparation and special education has been based on large surveys that generally find the same thing: Principals are not adequately prepared in their preparation programs. This study goes further to identify which specific issues are most pressing, how they relate to the local principal preparation program, and what principal supervisors and directors of special education need for improved preparation in this area. Results can be shared at the

university and district levels, which could lead to greater district-university collaboration for the preparation and ongoing professional development of principals.

## Definition of Key Terms

*Admission, Review, and Dismissal* (ARD): ARD committees are formed to determine a student's initial eligibility for special education services. They meet annually to evaluate student progress and make recommendations based on student progress and determine a student's eligibility to be dismissed from special education services based on progress. Committee members include campus administrator, diagnostician, at least one regular education teacher of the student, one special education teacher or provider, parent, and student.

*Free and Appropriate Public Education* (FAPE): Special education and related services provided in conformity with an IEP; these services are provided without charge and meet standards of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA).

*Inclusion*: An effort to ensure that students with disabilities go to school with friends and neighbors and receive the specially designed instruction and support that they need to achieve high standards and to succeed as learners. All students deserve access to the general education classroom and to the same benefits as those granted to nondisabled students.

*Individual Education Plan* (IEP): A plan that is created for an individual student based on that student's particular needs; the plan is created, reviewed, and revised as needed for each student who receives special education services.

# CHAPTER 2

# REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This chapter begins with an introduction to the legal and historical underpinnings of special education. This foundational review is important because it sets the stage for understanding why principals should create inclusive schools, as well as the legal guidelines that they must follow in their daily work. This is followed by a review of the literature focused on the preparation of principals in the area of special education. Of particular importance in this section is how research in the past three decades has highlighted similar problems with the preparation of principals in the area of special education. The next section of the literature review addresses the principal in two parts: (a) instructional leadership generally and how principals create high-quality schools that promote student achievement, and (b) principal leadership in the area of special education, with the purpose of creating inclusive schools for students with disabilities. The review concludes with an analysis of each of these sections and how the reviewed literature served as a theoretical tool for this study.

## Elements of an Effective Principal Preparation Program and Special Education

Administrators should be well versed in special education. If the administrator focuses on student success, litigation and monetary loss will be avoided. Components of special education include testing requirements, as well as graduation requirements (students who are not on the recommended graduation plan cannot enroll in a 4-year university and may not qualify for financial aid) and the overall stigma of being labeled as a person with a learning disability (not every student wants to be in special education). What happens to the student who does not meet graduation requirements? Was that student provided a free and appropriate education, as required

by federal law? Are higher education programs preparing aspiring administrators to deal with these issues that could have potentially dire consequences if special education is not understood?

DiPaola and Walther-Thomas, in a report for the Council on Exceptional Children (CEC) entitled *Principals and Special Education: The Critical role of School Leaders* (2003), described the role of the administrator as evolving with the evolution of school accountability. "Papers and reports related to the roles and responsibilities of principals in effective schools generally do not make specific references to the needs of students with disabilities and special education teachers (p. 14). However, they noted "emerging research that has demonstrated a significant relationship between special education teacher attrition and school leadership" (p. 14). This relates to the pressure and stress that passes from administrator to teacher and eventually the student. Because teacher accountability is related to student performance, teacher job security is jeopardized, which may lead to unequal treatment of students with disabilities because of teacher instability. Administrators who lack training to support special education teachers will not be able to provide adequate support in curriculum, assessment, or placement of students with disabilities.

In her dissertation, *An Exploratory Study of The Presentation of Special Education Law in Administrative Preparation Programs for Aspiring Administrators*, Powell (2009) wrote that, "after almost twenty years of reform efforts, a large percentage of university administrator preparation programs are not increasing the time focused on special education law; special education litigation continues to be faced by many school districts across the United States" (p. 4). Also, Powell noted that "the significant number of case law rulings, additions to procedural safeguards, and legislation in the area of special education are demonstrative of the need for additional training in the area of law for pre-service administrators" (p. 8).

## Legal and Historical Underpinnings of Special Education

In 1954, "the U.S. Supreme Court issued a landmark civil rights decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. In *Brown*, school children from four states argued that segregated public schools were inherently unequal and deprived them of the equal protection of the laws" (Wright & Wright, 2007, p. 12). Education is possibly one of the most important tasks of state and local governments, particularly because attendance is compulsory for all students (Wright & Wright, 2007). The courts left to states and local school districts the responsibility to desegregate and comply with case law. The natural progression was that parents of students with disabilities filed lawsuits to prevent school districts from excluding and/or segregating their children. "Advocates for students with disabilities, citing *Brown*, claimed that students with disabilities had the same rights as students without disabilities" (Yell, 2012, p. 50). Eventually,

> *Brown* became a catalyst for the efforts to ensure educational rights for children and youth with disabilities because if segregation by race was a denial of educational opportunity for black children, then certainly the total exclusion of children and youth with disabilities was also a denial of equal educational opportunity. (Yell, 2012, p. 50)

The *Brown* decision was important because it opened the door for future litigation, policies, and laws regarding students with special needs and disabilities.

In 1965, Congress passed the ESEA, which was intended to ensure that federal aid was given in addition to state and local aid to schools in low socioeconomic areas. ESEA was intended to "address inequality of educational opportunity for underprivileged children" (Wright & Wright, 2007, p. 13). The intention was to give extra money to support programs that would help students to achieve and succeed (McClure, 2008, p. 11). From the beginning, there was little oversight or accountability, as states found ways to funnel this federal money to schools

challenged by racial inequalities and political strife (McClure, 2008, p. 13). Billions of dollars were spent with no real accountability and no strong federal or state oversight. Although ESEA legislation was passed to curtail racial discrimination and segregation among underprivileged children (to include students with special needs or disabilities), there was still little (if any) legislation regarding students with disabilities until the 1970s. Students with disabilities were kept at home or discarded in the schools because no one knew how to help them or what to do with them. The ESEA became the foundation of future and current legislation.

In the 1970s, two cases were the catapults for change in education of students with disabilities: (a) *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children (PARC) v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania,* and (b) *Mills v. Board of Education of District of Columbia.* "PARC dealt with the exclusion of children with mental retardation from public schools" (Wright & Wright, 2007, p. 13). At its core, the *PARC* decision dealt with the issue of equal opportunity for students with disabilities. Advocates in the *PARC* case argued,

> Students with mental retardation were not receiving publicly supported education because the state was delaying or ignoring its constitutional obligations to provide a publicly supported education for these students, thus violating state statute and the students' rights under the equal protection of the laws clause of the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution. (Yell, 2012, p. 50)

The *Mills* decision was the catalyst for due process hearings for students with disabilities who had been unfairly excluded from a fair and public educational setting. *Mills* could be considered the beginning of what would eventually become the IEP process or ARD process.

Persons with disabilities were still not truly addressed at the federal level until the passage of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. "Section 504, a short provision of this

act was the first federal civil rights law to protect the rights of persons with disabilities" (Yell, 2012, p. 52). In summary, no eligible handicapped student in the United States was to be excluded merely because of a handicap. No handicapped student was to be denied benefits or be the subject of discrimination from any federal financial assistance (Yell, 2012). Although there was case law before federal legislation was passed, students with disabilities were still a forgotten population with regard to free and appropriate education.

In *Special Education Law*, Rothstein and Johnson (2010) stated, "About three million children with disabilities were not receiving appropriate programming in public schools, in addition, about another one million were excluded totally from public education" (p. 10). In 1973-1974, Congress held hearings on educational services to be provided for children with disabilities. Problems in special education were reviewed in statements and personal testimonies (Rothstein & Johnson, 2010).

Before Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 became law, conditions for persons with disabilities were miserable. "State institutions were homes for almost 200,000 persons with significant disabilities. Many of these restrictive settings provided only minimal food, clothing, and shelter" (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education, 2000, p. 2). Also, "too often, persons with disabilities, were merely accommodated rather than assessed, educated, and rehabilitated" (p. 3). However, the initial Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was merely a stopgap measure. It did not adequately address the educational inequality of special education students.

In 1975, Congress passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA). EAHCA protected individual rights and attempted to create equality for students with disabilities as guaranteed by the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution. "States are required under the

due process and equal protection clauses of the Fourteenth Amendment of the Constitution to provide education on an equal basis and to provide due process before denying equivalent educational programming" (Rothstein &Johnson, 2010, p. 1). EAHCA "provided procedural safeguards, integration, and nondiscrimination testing and evaluation materials and procedures" (Rothstein & Johnson, 2010, p. 19). Prior to this, "many students with disabilities were completely excluded from public schools" (Yell, 2012, p. 53). A Congressional study in 1974 found that "more than 3 million students with disabilities who were admitted to school did not receive an education that was appropriate to their needs (Yell, 2012, p. 53).

Also included in the EAHCA were federal financial incentives for states to develop policies that, effective September 1, 1980, all students with disabilities receive a free and appropriate education up to the age of 21 (Yell, 2012, p. 53). For the first time in the history of public education, EAHCA gave persons with disabilities a fighting chance for their equal right to a free and appropriate education.

Although some ground had been gained for students with disabilities, the overall view of the American public education system was that it was broken and lagged the rest of the world. In 1983, U.S. Secretary of Education Bell created the National Commission on Excellence in Education (NCEE) in an effort to determine the state of America's education system. The NCEE delivered the report "A Nation at Risk," which described the nation education system as at war with mediocrity and in the midst of erosion. The report stated that "the educational foundations of our society are presently being eroded by a rising tide of mediocrity that threatens our very future as a Nation and a people" (NCEE, 1983, para. 1). With a sense of urgency, the nation went to work on its education system. The Department of Education sought to guarantee the right for a fair and equal education for everyone, including students with disabilities.

In 1990, EAHCA was renewed as IDEA. There were no significant improvements to the act other than to change the wording to accommodate a wider group of people. The word *handicapped* was replaced by *disabilities*; however, controversy still existed as to exactly who and what was covered under IDEA (Rothstein & Johnson, 2010). Also included in IDEA were requirements for the IEP to include transitional services from school to post-school activities, such as vocational training and integrated employment (Yell, 2012). Even after IDEA was established, there were still inconsistencies from state to state. Not all states followed IDEA with fidelity. It was still easier to put students with disabilities in the back of the classroom and to forget about students' right to a free and appropriate education.

In 1997 IDEA went through another change. Higher expectations for curriculum and instruction were added to the act. Although IDEA gave access to students with disabilities, "the implementation of IDEA had been impeded by low expectations for students with disabilities, an insufficient focus on translating research into practice, and too great an emphasis on paperwork and legal requirements at the expense of teaching and learning (Yell, 2012). The revision of IDEA focused on curriculum that was to be designed to show student progress. Although students with disabilities could attend school and be with other students, many were left out of true meaningful instruction. Students were to be tested by assessments linked directly to the instructional curricula rather than to abstract norms for standardized tests (U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, 2000).

As a *Nation at Risk* was only a position statement, there was little or no direction as to how to accomplish equal education for all. In the 1990s, IDEA set higher standards for students with disabilities. Although significant federal laws have required equality in education and an end to social injustices (e.g., *Brown,* The Civil Rights Act of 1964, EAHCA in 1975, IDEA in

1990 and 1997), many states still lacked guidance and motivation to achieve the goal of a free and appropriate education for all students.

## NCLB and Special Education

For almost 20 years, *A Nation at Risk* sat on the shelves as a good idea. In 2000, in a rare display of partisan unity, Congress enacted legislation that would have an historic impact on the U.S. public education system. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) was signed into law by then-President George W. Bush in 2000. It was one of the first initiatives that the President would pass in his 8-year tenure. The intention of this act was to give guidance and motivation (as well as the consistency) that states needed to focus on education of all students.

> Under the accountability provisions in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, all public school campuses, school districts, and the state are evaluated for Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Districts, campuses, and the state are required to meet AYP criteria on three measures: Reading/Language Arts, Mathematics, and either Graduation Rate (for high schools and districts) or Attendance Rate (for elementary and middle/junior high schools). If a campus, district, or state that is receiving Title I, Part A funds, fails to meet AYP for two consecutive years, that campus, district, or state is subject to certain requirements such as offering supplemental education services, offering school choice, and/or taking corrective actions. (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2011, para. 1)

In 2002, President Bush created the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education. "The purpose of the Commission was to recommend reforms to improve special education and to bring into alignment with NCLB by requiring special education to be accountable for results and to rely on scientifically based programming" (Yell, 2012, p. 57).

Essentially, the Commission required states and districts to develop a curriculum that academically challenges students with disabilities.

High-stakes testing for students with disabilities was addressed in §300.157 of the IDEA, (eventually amended in 2007; U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, 2007). This amended portion was aligned to the 2001 requirements of NCLB, mandating that states, districts, and campuses across the nation ensure that services to students with disabilities meet federal requirements. Administrators are charged with the difficult task of understanding the law and placing special education students in an appropriate educational environment. While the intent is admirable, the fact is that most school administrators who would be responsible for compliance to these requirements have very little training to do so with fidelity. If schools and districts did not meet annual yearly progress requirements under NCLB, they could lose federal funding, including Title I funding. This would be catastrophic to campuses and districts, especially in low-income areas where money is already in short supply and the achievement gap is large. The time for leaving students with disabilities in the back of the class (and, in some instances, leaving them out altogether) was over.

## Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)

Although President Obama acknowledged some of NCLB, he contended that there was more opportunity for growth. He noted that continuing gap between regular students and specific subpopulations of students, such as special needs students and English Language Learner students. In December 2015, President Obama signed ESSA to replaces NCLB, essentially removing a one-size-fits-all plan. ESSA gave more power to state and local decision makers, with more authority to develop local plans based on particular needs. ESSA also focused on

continuing to close the achievement gap for students with disabilities without NCLB constraints on states, districts, and teachers.

## Recent Texas Audit by the U.S. Department of Education

Recently, the TEA was audited by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs with regard to students who would qualify for special education services and related services. In the final report, the Office identified three areas of noncompliance with IDEA by TEA:

> TEA failed to ensure that all children with disabilities residing in the State who are in need of special education and related services were identified, located, and evaluated of the severity of their disability, as required by IDEA section 612 (a)(3) and its implementing regulation at 34 C.F.R. 300.111.
>
> TEA failed to ensure that (a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) was made available to all children with disabilities residing in the State in Texas's mandated age ranges (age 3 through 21), as required by IDEA section 612(a)(1) and its implementing regulation at 34 C.F.R. 300.101.
>
> TEA failed to fulfill its general supervisory and monitoring responsibilities as required by IDEA sections 612 (a)(11) and 616(a)(1)(c), and their implementing regulations at 34 C.F.R. 300.149 and 300.600 along with 20 U.S.C. 123d(b)(3)(A), to ensure that ISD's throughout the State properly implemented the IDEA child find and FAPE requirements. (TEA, 2018, p. 1)

The exclusion of students with disabilities could potentially lead to many consequences. The first (and most important) is that students who have a right to a FAPE are not receiving it. The second consequence stems from the first: litigation against the campus, the independent

school district (ISD), and possibly the state. The campus principals' role in the audit is vital. How are campus principals prepared to make decisions about students and the services that those students should receive?

## The Principal's Role in Special Education

Research shows that a campus and or a district's success begins at the top: leadership. This is particularly true at the campus level, where a knowledgeable leader can make or break a school. In the past few years, several studies and articles have focused on what is required to be successful as a campus leader. In this section I discuss studies and articles that describe the qualities and skills that a successful campus principal should possess.

Leithwood et al. (2008) identified seven strong "claims" about successful school leaders. Claim 1 is that "school leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning" (p. 28). For this claim, Leithwood et al. (2008) gathered evidence from five research projects. Their conclusion was that, "as a whole, leadership has a very significant effect on the quality of school organization and on pupil learning. As far as they are aware, there is no a single documented case of a school successfully turning around its pupil achievement trajectory with the absence of talented leadership" (p. 29). The principal of a successful campus must be talented in instruction of all student groups. Talented principals can control the quality of the educators who come to their campus, including their knowledge of all student populations.

Claim 2 is that "almost all successful leaders draw on the same repertoire of basic leadership practices" (p. 29). According to Leithwood et al. (2008), four components comprise Claim 2: building a vision and setting directions, understanding and developing people, redesigning an organization, and managing the teaching and learning programs. Combining these four components will "capture the results of a large and robust body of evidence about what

successful leaders do" (p. 30). "The key to a successful campus is to give teachers an opportunity to improve their craft, which includes but is not limited to the knowledge and the environment they work in" (p. 29). An effective and successful campus principal should be able to offer suggestions and recommendations on best teaching practices. Part of best practice is to know curriculum that will ensure the success of all students, including special education students. During ARD meetings, administrators should have a strong foundation of testing, curriculum, and proper student placement. While the ARD may make recommendations and suggestions regarding student services, the administrator must identify potentially erroneous recommendations, such as removing a student from all services based on a previous year's tests. Administrators who do not have adequate knowledge or background in special education may not be able to identify potentially harmful recommendations regarding student placement, curriculum, and testing.

Claim 3 is that "the ways in which leaders apply these leadership practices (not the practices themselves) demonstrate responsiveness to, rather than dictation by, the contexts in which they work" (p. 31). Claim 3 is based on four ways in which administrators should respond to the needs of the campus rather than dictate a response to the needs of a campus. First, in b*uilding a vision and setting directions,* involvement of all stake holders is necessary to have schoolwide change to improve a campus. Campus administrators must build capacity in individuals to sustain positive campus growth. Second, *understanding and developing people,* individually, is critical for sustaining positive campus growth. Third, *redesigning the organization* requires developing a culture of new norms, such as building capacity in individuals and empowering them to make decisions for the improvement of student success. This is particularly necessary for the success of special education students. Teachers and

administration must work together to develop IEPs that lead to the success of special education students. Fourth, *managing the teaching and learning program* requires hiring staff who have the capacities and abilities to meet the needs of a campus. As policies change, educators must be updated and informed of these changes, particularly regarding special education students.

Claim 4 is that the administrator must build capacity in the staff educators. Part of building this capacity is to support teachers with their own knowledge. In other words, teachers must know that the administrator has some knowledge of all facets of education, from facilities, budget, and curriculum to the needs of all students, including special education students.

**Building Vision for Inclusive Schools**

Principals are the most important factor for building a vision of inclusiveness on the campus. Billingsley, DeMatthews, Connally, and McLeskey (2018) stated, "Principals played an important role in articulating a vision for inclusion and helping others understand and adopt inclusion as a core value or philosophy" (p. 4). The authors identified four factors that are necessary for principals to build an inclusive school that align with the Leithwood model of successful principals: "building a vision, and setting directions; understanding and developing people; redesigning the organization; and managing the teaching and learning programme" (p. 4). However, "Many principal preparation programs and district professional development opportunities do not emphasize the knowledge and skills that principals need to demonstrate in order to develop and lead schools that are effective and inclusive" (p. 11).

Building a vision for inclusive schools entails buy-in by all stakeholders. "Leaders often engage school faculty, staff, and parents in conversations about the need for including students with disabilities in schools and classrooms" (Billingsley et al., 2018, p. 4). Teams of administrators, teachers, parents, and school psychologists are formed to understand the benefits

of inclusion. These teams address current problems related to including students with disabilities in school initiatives, including in the classroom.

In December 2018, the requirement for future campus leaders changed in Texas. The new principal certification assessment was completely phased in by summer 2019. The new certification assessment contains three components. The first component consists of multiple choice questions and four open response questions regarding these topics: School Culture, Leading Learning, Human Capital, Executive Leadership, Strategic Operations, Ethics, Equity, & Diversity (TEA, 2017). The second component focuses on continuing professional growth of the campus leader. The requirement is that "candidates demonstrate the skills needed to establish and support effective and continuous professional development with assigned staff" (p. 1). The third component focuses on the ability to establish professional learning communities (PLCs). The requirement is that "candidates demonstrate their ability to facilitate stakeholders' efforts to build a collaborative team within the school to improve instructional practice, student achievement, and the school culture" (p. 1).

Demonstration of 11 competencies in six domains is required for future administrators. The sixth competency is the most relevant to this study, as it deals with the ethics, equity, and diversity of a campus. Part C of Competency 11 describes how the principal advocates for all children by promoting "continuous and appropriate development of all learners in the campus community" (TEA, 2017, p. 2). Part G "applies legal guidelines (e.g., in relation to students with disabilities, bilingual education, confidentiality, and discrimination) to protect the rights of students and staff and to improve learning for all students" (p. 2). Future campus leaders must be prepared to facilitate a learning environment that advocates for success by all students.

### Developing People

"Professional caring is also critical to inclusive reform as both teachers and principals frequently reported that they are not prepared to meet the needs of students with disabilities" (Billingsley et al, 2018, p. 4). Campus leaders and teachers must understand what is necessary to facilitate an inclusive campus. Principal preparation programs, as well as ongoing district-level in-service programs, are vital for ensuring that campus leaders are prepared and well versed in curriculum, differentiated instruction, best practices in co-teaching, and interventions for students with special needs. "Overall, teachers typically agree that professional learning was important in addressing the needs of students with disabilities" (Billingsley et al., 2018, p. 5).

### Redesigning the Organization

Inclusion may require changes in policies and programs to suit the needs of students with special needs. By obtaining information from school personnel, changes may be made to meet individual student needs accurately. Changes could include "revising policies (such as grading), getting feedback from school members about inclusion, eliminating special education classes, addressing needs for collaboration and co-teaching, using progress monitoring, securing resources, and adjusting plans over time" (Billingsley et al., 2018, p. 5). Collaborating to address program needs is essential in developing inclusive schools. However, school stakeholders must know what is necessary to produce this change.

### Managing the Teaching and Learning Program

Campus principals should know best practices with regard to co-teaching and instruction. Such knowledge will support regular education teachers and special education teachers to implement their own best teaching practices. Teachers will be able to collaborate to plan effective teaching strategies, tests, and overall student learning. "Inclusive leadership also

involved changes to curriculum and instruction and teachers were largely responsible for this work" (Billingsley et al., 2018, p. 5). However, campus administrators must support teachers with in-service training to develop this collaboration by regular education teachers and special education teachers.

## Problems With Current Principal Preparation Programs

Issues with principal preparation programs with regard to special education are not new; however, a new focus on change must be implemented to serve the best interests of students with disabilities. DeMatthews and Edwards (2014) identified problematic features of principal preparation programs; they identified four commonalities among programs that should be reviewed and eventually changed.

### Coursework

Preparation programs "do not extend much beyond a set of outdated courses that focused on school administration and management" (DeMatthews & Edwards, 2014, p. 43). "Even in elite universities, principal preparation programs have been criticized for being out of sync with the job requirements of the principalship" (p. 43).

### Aligning Theory and Practice

DeMatthews and Edwards (2014) identified a disconnect between theory and practice in preparation programs. "Principals require specific expertise and a variety of skills to provide effective leadership in special education" (p. 44). Examples include cooperative planning by special education teachers and regular education teachers, appropriate budgeting and master scheduling, appropriate training for both the regular education teacher and the special education teacher, and IEPs that are compliant with federal and state laws, as well as local district policies.

Principals must be prepared not only in curricula for special needs students but in the legal areas as well. Preparation programs must provide a myriad of possibilities to future administrators.

### Clinical Experiences

Most programs offer internships that usually do not have adequate supervision related to the expectations of the program. Practical experiences should include exposure to the process in special education and the role of the administrator. Experiences could include attendance at due process compliance hearings, interviewing a school district attorney who handles special education issues, attendance at meetings with special education teachers to discuss topics in special education (especially IEPs), and discussions with diagnosticians regarding assessment, placement, and supervision of special education students (DeMatthews & Edwards, 2014).

### Faculty Experience

A majority of current administrators have little to no experience in special education. This is a trickle-down effect, starting with teacher preparation programs in which there is little to no emphasis on course work or study in special education. Teacher programs should offer exposure to practical experiences in special education. Practical and relevant experiences should be developed by program faculty to foster learning about special education, particularly curriculum and special education law.

## Administrative Interview and Researcher's Experience

When I was assigned to supervise the Special Education department at my high school, I quickly recognized my limited educational background pertaining to special education. I asked other administrators about their knowledge of special education; most knew only about ARD meetings. It was evident that many administrators and staff are placed in positions of power without proper training. In order to understand this situation, and as part of the literature review,

I interviewed an administrator who supervised the Special Education Department on my campus. John Smith (pseudonym), an Assistant Principal at Roanoke High School (all names of schools and districts have been changed), was in education for almost 30 years, serving as an administrator for more than 17 of those years. He was a middle school assistant principal, a middle school principal, and a high school principal. He served as Assistant Principal at my campus (Roanoke High School) his last five years in education. Even with all of this experience, he only supervised the special education program in the latter three years of his career. When I first interviewed him, I noted an air of confidence that approached arrogance. I sat in a chair usually reserved for parents and students, directly across from his desk. He sat in his executive chair behind his desk, facing me directly, slightly pushed away from the desk, with his legs crossed. Although Mr. Smith clearly had extensive experience in education in general, he seemed to be evasive when I asked specific questions regarding special education and his new role as the administrative supervisor of the special education department. He seemed to be unsure about federal law and district policy with regard to special education. The interview with this campus administrator supported Lucker's (2012) research that showed that, although laws and accountability have changed for schools, certification programs for future administrators have not changed.

My program for certification as an administrator included a course on special education. Unfortunately, this was an elective course. In this age of accountability, when every student counts, courses in special education should be required. Perhaps more than one special education course is warranted. When I became an assistant principal, I was not well versed in the area of special education law or curriculum and was ill equipped to make informed decisions about students with special needs.

I have been in education for 19 years, an administrator for 14 of those years. Administrators participate in ARD committee meetings regarding students who are labeled as having disabilities and who are receiving services in special education. Unfortunately, this requirement and procedure were not discussed in my administration certification program. Campus administrators are the district's representative with the responsibility to ensure that students are placed in appropriate classes and that recommendations for state assessments are aligned with the student's curriculum.

If students are improperly placed or assessed, consequences could be dire for the student, the administrator, the school, and the district. When a student is misidentified for special education services, a social injustice is done to the student that could be catastrophic for social development. "Most principals believe that they already lead in socially just ways notwithstanding the numerous equity issues associated with race, disability, and poverty (DeMatthews, 2015, p. 2). Every year schools lose lawsuits brought on by a parent who claimed that their child was not properly served or placed in the appropriate educational setting as required by federal law. The loss to the district can be thousands of dollars. More important, what is the emotional and social damage to the student? Students who could easily be misidentified for special education include minority students and students who do not speak English. "Among the most-longstanding and intransigent issues in field (of education), the disproportionate representation of minority students in special education program has its roots in a long history of educational segregation and discrimination" (Skiba et al., 2008, p. 264). This rings true today.

I have also discovered cases of misidentification on my campus. When I spoke to one student who was in the special education program, she was very well spoken and could write

very well in her home language (Spanish). Yet, she was in resource classes. When I asked the diagnosticians to retest the student, she was found to not need special education services. Eventually, she was placed in an appropriate setting and given the support that she deserved.

Another student, from Korea, had been recommended for special education services because teachers and administrators felt that this student was not on the same educational level as other students. However, his parents refused all testing. This student currently languishes in limbo as the educational system is not set up to address the needs of this student (and many other students) in the student's home language. "Latino (and other language learner) students were somewhat more likely to receive services in the category of hearing impairment" (Skiba et al., 2008, p. 268). "African American students with disabilities are more likely to be educated in a segregated setting than all other racial/ethnic groups" (DeMatthews, 2015, p. 2).

In the past 20 years, many new requirements for accountability for services to students in special education programs have been implemented. However, there have been few substantial changes to administrative certification programs to prepare future administrators to lead special education programs in public schools. The research indicates there is a significant need to provide for improved instructional leadership for students with disabilities.

# CHAPTER 3

# RESEARCH METHOD AND DESIGN

## Methodology

The purpose of this study was to investigate principal preparation in the area of special education in the El Paso, Texas region, with special attention given to how the local university's principal preparation program has prepared administrators for leading local school special education programs.

This qualitative action research study investigated a local principal preparation program in the area of special education by gaining alumni principals' perceptions of their preparedness in the area of special education and identifying what principal supervisors and directors of special education consider to be adequate principal preparedness for supervising special education programs. It was intended that the results of the study be shared with university preparation program staff and local district leaders to result in greater district-university collaboration for the preparation and ongoing professional development of principals regarding the particular concerns about special education services in public schools.

A qualitative case study design was chosen to learn what university preparation programs are doing to prepare future campus principals with regard to special education services. The study was designed to address three research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of principals and assistant principals with regard to their preparedness to develop high-quality inclusive schools? What do they think would have been beneficial in the university principal preparation program?

2. How do university faculty members in a principal preparation program devise program changes based on input by school principals and assistant principals regarding students with

special needs in inclusive schools? What information would be helpful for the preparation program?

3. What recommendations do university-based principal preparation program faculty and staff have for improving preparation programs for inclusive schools? What recommendations do district principals have for improving ongoing training to sustain high-quality inclusive schools?

The results of this study should provide contextually relevant understanding of principal preparation in the target region and inform advocacy for enhancements to principal preparation, in-service principal preparation, and potential avenues for district-university partnerships to ensure that administrators are prepared in the area of special education. This chapter describes the methodology of the study, including the research design, the researcher's role, the participants, the site, data collection procedures, and the data analysis plan.

## Research Design

Lichtman (2013) defined *research* as a process by which to seek answers to questions. It is "a systematic investigation of phenomena" (p. 325). The focus of this research was how to improve education administrative preparation programs to serve special education students. This study used a qualitative method. Creswell (2009) defined *research design* as "a plan or proposal to conduct research, involves the intersection of philosophy, strategies of inquiry, and specific methods" (p. 5).

> [Qualitative research] is a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem. The process of research involves emerging questions and procedures; collecting data in the participants' setting; analyzing the data inductively, building from particulars to general themes; and making interpretations of the meaning of the data. (Creswell, 2009, p. 232)

Federal, state, and local accountability have increased regarding special education. However, research indicates that very little has been done to increase the preparation of future campus principals regarding special education services in public schools. A qualitative research method was used to assess the effectiveness of a principal preparation program.

**Action Research**

In their book *Studying Your Own School: An Educator's Guide to Practitioner Action Research*, Anderson, Herr, and Nihlen (2007) defined *action research* as

> insider research done by practitioners using their own site (classroom, institution, school district, community) as the focus of their study. It is a reflective process but is different from isolated, spontaneous reflection in that it is deliberately and systematically undertaken and generally requires that some form of evidence be presented to support assertions. (p. 2)

They stated that "action research demands some form of intervention" (p. 20). Intervention should address the following goals:

> 1: To develop a plan of action to improve what is already happening
>
> 2: To act to implement the plan
>
> 3: To observe the effects of action in the context in which it occurs
>
> 4: To reflect on these effects as a basis for further planning and subsequent action through a succession of cycles. (p. 20)

Anderson et al. (2007) described 14 characteristics to delineate what is necessary for the action researcher. Nine of these characteristics are herein described as they pertained to this study.

Characteristic 1: The work is conducted in a natural setting. For a research action practitioner, the school environment is the natural setting. My desire was to make recommendations to the administrative program to improve the knowledge of aspiring campus administrators in the area of special education.

Characteristic 2: The primary research instrument and primary data-gathering tool is the researcher. As the primary data collector, as well as a practitioner, the researcher must collect data systematically, without subjectivity, emotion, or personal impressions. "What qualitative and practitioner action researchers share is that, as researchers, we are not distant from that which is being studied; data are registered in our beings and systematically recorded" (Anderson et al., 2007, p. 160).

Characteristic 3: The researcher should utilize tactic knowledge in addition to knowledge expressed in language. The action researcher must make known what is unknown. In other words, the researcher must take a step back and understand what it is being researched.

Characteristic 4: The researcher utilizes qualitative methods. "Qualitative methods are typically open-ended in that they expand our understanding" (Anderson et al., 2007, p. 161). These methods are established by continuous questioning and understanding of the research topic. Qualitative methods allow subjects to express themselves freely so the researcher understands the collected data that are important for the research.

Characteristic 5: Sampling logic is purposeful sampling over random sampling. I gathered data by interviewing current campus administrators who had recently completed the educational leadership program at a local university in the El Paso, Texas region. I also interviewed current faculty in the educational leadership program to gather their perspectives on the program and what they claimed should be included for completion of the program. This does

not necessarily mean that they agreed that the program requires any changes; however, their suggestions could be shared with the current administrators of the program.

Characteristic 6: Inductive data analyses are conducted to identify the multiple realities in the data. “This gets to the heart of practitioner action research in that data collected on-site should help us come up to new understandings of both the issue being studied and possible ways to improve on-site practices” (Anderson et al., 2007, p. 161). Assumptions about what the data should show are either confirmed or not confirmed by the data.

Characteristic 7: Grounded theory is applied to allow the data to lead to identifying a theory, rather going into the research with a set theory. While collecting the data from the focus groups, I moved beyond what I thought and knew and focused on what the data revealed; I reported those findings accurately.

Characteristic 12: The researcher makes tentative application instead of broad application of the findings, because realities are multiple and different and findings are dependent on the interaction between the researcher and the participants. The very nature of a practitioner action researcher is to consider an issue, gather data, consider possible actions, and then reflect on what should be done in relation to the topic of the research (Anderson et al., 2007, p. 163).

Characteristic 14: The trustworthiness of the study is defined by “how we determine if a study has merit and is believable and truthful” (Anderson et al., 2007, p. 163). This is a reference to how an action researcher approaches the study topic.

> For many academics, the acceptance of action research is given only on the condition that a separate category of knowledge be created for it. This is usually expressed as some variation on formal (created in universities) knowledge versus practical (created in schools) knowledge and a strict of research from practice. (Anderson et al., 2007, p. 38)

I reviewed course requirements for the administrative preparedness program. I collected data for this action research via focus groups comprised of local university faculty members and organized a focus group of current campus administrators, principals, and assistant principals.

The focus group session with faculty members from a local university was based on what course offerings exist in the educational leadership program. Do they agree that the number of courses offered is sufficient to prepare future campus administrators? What do they claim future administrators should know regarding law, curriculum, placement, and facilitation of the ARD process?

**Participants**

Participants in this study were current assistant principals and principals who took part in focus groups. Since all campus administrators must participate in the ARD processes, I organized focus groups to consist of campus administrators: those with two or more years experience and those with one year experience as campus administrators. Eight assistant principals with no more than two years' experience participated. The focus groups were conducted to encourage participants to tell their stories without undue influence from the researcher. I also selected seven current principals who were serving as campus leaders and assistant principal mentors to offer their perspectives of what a new assistant principal should know with regard to special education students. The groups were focused on the natural settings of the administrators with regard to the ARD process and their experiences both as administrators (assistant principals) and campus leaders (principals). Lichtman (2013) described this process of carefully looking and listening to people in their natural setting and then analyzing the information as qualitative research.

I organized a select group of new administrators who had just completed the administrative program and a group of current principals (Appendix A). I also organized faculty members from the educational leadership program (Appendix B). The focus groups shared their experiences in special education, in particular how they facilitated an ARD and their comfort level during the process. I also collected documents from the target administrative certification program, such as course requirements, including the class syllabus for a special education course.

**Site Selection**

The sites selected for this study were a local university and large suburban school district in the El Paso, Texas region. The local university was selected because it is the leading university in the area for educators. The university's educational leadership program is a leader in producing educational administration graduates in the region. Current administrators (principals and assistant principals) from a local school district participated in the focus groups. The current partnership between the university and school district facilitated discussion on how to prepare future campus administrators to lead effective inclusive schools. I am a principal in the district and can communicate effectively with current administrators. IRBs have been obtained by both the school district and the university.

**Data Analysis**

I analyzed the data using Creswell's qualitative data analysis and interpretation process. Creswell (2009) identified four steps to data analysis, all of which were followed in this study.

Creswell's Step 1 is to organize and prepare data for analysis. This step involves transcription of interviews and sorting the data depending on the sources of information. In this step, I coded data and identified themes from the interviews. Other data included documents

regarding course requirements of the Education Leadership program at UTEP and the syllabi for courses that are offered in special education for future campus administrators.

In accordance with Creswell's Step 2, I read through all data and reflected on the themes in the data. During data analysis, I asked (a) What general ideas were the participants expressing? (b) What was the tone of the ideas? and (c) What was the impression of the overall depth and how useful is the information?

Creswell's Step 3 deals with the coding process. "Coding is the process of organizing the material into chunks or segments of the text before bringing meaning to information" (Creswell, 2009, p. 186). I organized the data based on particular themes in the focus groups with the campus administrators and university faculty members. This led to identification of the recurring theme of the administrator's lack of preparedness with regard to special education law, special education curriculum, student placement, and facilitation of the ARD process.

In accordance with Creswell's Step 4, I re-read the interview transcripts, making notes to identify underlining themes. I wrote specific codes and topics for each interview and then organized them into specific topics and themes (e.g., curriculum knowledge, knowledge of the law, appropriate student placement).

In the data analysis I combined the themes of the campus administrators and presented this information to the university faculty. As I analyzed the focus group sessions with the campus administrators, several themes became clear: Administrators either participated in a special education course or a bilingual course; administrators were not prepared for recommendation in the ARD process, including student placement, recommendations for student accommodations and/or modifications. Administrators were familiar with special education students because they

had them in their class, and so forth. Topics based on the themes that were presented to the university faculty were course content, practicums (internships), and partnerships (with districts).

## Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations. First, the study was delimited by a geographic boundary (the El Paso, Texas region) and the single university and school district that serve the region. The El Paso area has nine school districts; this study focused on only one large suburban school district. Second, the study included a small focus group of principals and assistant principal supervisors but did not include teachers, diagnosticians, or other relevant stakeholders who could provide insight into principal leadership and preparation in special education. Another limitation was that only faculty from one principal preparation program in the area were included in the focus groups. Confidentiality statements were signed in order to obtain the most honest responses from the administrative focus groups. Finally, this study was limited by time; data were collected from August 2019 to March 2020. More time should be allocated to recruit a wider sample of current administrators from across the El Paso region and from across the state.

# CHAPTER 4

# DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

## Administrative Focus Groups

This study was designed to gain contextually relevant understanding of principal preparation in a specific geographic region. The findings were expected to identify best practices, as well as areas for improvement, for both the university and school district included in the research. As an educational practitioner, I used an action research design to collect the data that were needed to complete this research. The foundation of action research is that the practitioner is the researcher. The researcher identifies a problem and the research should lead to a solution that would be more relevant to the educational practitioner.

This chapter reports the collected data and related results. Three focus groups were organized and interviewed: assistant principals, principals, and university faculty. Each focus group was asked specific questions concerning administrator preparation programs with regard to special education. Current administrators (current principals and first- and second-year assistant principals) were asked five questions (Appendix A) and university faculty were asked five questions (Appendix B). After the focus group sessions concluded, I decoded the information and developed themes related to each question.

## Level of Preparedness

Participants were asked how prepared they were upon graduation from the principal preparation program regarding special education law and placement. The most common theme was that participants did not feel well-prepared at all. One principal stated, “Our program was great, but we did not talk about special education.” Some administrators used whatever tools they had obtained and learned from being a teacher. “It’s nothing that you really are prepared for. In

my program, it is nothing that we really looked at closely or talked about." An assistant principal participant stated,

> I learned from being a teacher and sitting in ARDs. I used whatever tools I had learned; however, they [the ARD committee] would only ask me for information regarding how the student was preforming in their class. But did I learn anything from the university level? The answer is no.

One participant mentioned,

> Whatever I learned was from my diagnostician, not from my principal preparation program. I had a wonderful diagnostician, but I let her guide the ARD, because I really didn't know how. I wasn't prepared after graduation to be a principal to address the specialized areas and respond to the needs of the student.

A principal stated, "In my program, I learned the theory of law, but the practice of special education was not ever covered. We saw a video of how an ARD should be facilitated but that was the extent that my program covered special education."

As further evidence to support the lack of preparation arising from the principal preparation programs, an assistant principal shared,

> In my program there was a semester of Special Education Law that we took but we had a choice, Bi-lingual or Special Education. I used to sit in ARDs and not really understand what was going on. But at the end, I was signing off on the paperwork.

One principal gave an honest and humbling account: "I really didn't feel comfortable in ARDs and the process until my fifth or sixth ARD." One participant emphasized,

> I don't know if I felt prepared. I mean, we go over it [special education] and it's told to us under the perfect circumstances as to what should happen, but when we get in our first ARD, it is nothing like I thought it was going to be.

### ARD Process

Participants expressed concern when questioned about ARD meetings. Some mentioned that they knew about the ARD process from attending ARDs as a teacher. However, as an administrator, they did not know how to facilitate and advocate for both the student and the district. In fact, some administrators had not participated on an ARD committee. For example, one assistant principal stated, "Tested subject areas (English 1) were not to be called into ARDs. So, I really did not know what to expect, especially coming in as an administrator. I didn't know, as an administrator, we had to facilitate the ARD." Other administrators reported that they were well versed in special education as they were former special education teachers. For example, one principal stated, "I was very strong with regard to the ARD process. However, as a teacher, I remember walking my principal through the ARD process."

### Student Placement for Special Education Services

During the ARD process, administrators must know instructional best practices for students with special education needs, including the difference between a modified curriculum and lessons that accommodate the individual needs of each student. However, study participants reported a lack of knowledge about making instructional recommendations. Many were not prepared to make recommendations for special education students. Several mentioned that they did not feel confident to make recommendations for students. Stated one administrator,

> I was not confident in making any recommendations. I left it up to the committee and the diagnostician. But I felt that everyone was looking to me to make a suggestion or I needed somehow to guide them, when I really did not know how.

A novice administrator who had been on the job for only a month said,

> As a brand-new assistant principal, you don't have the confidence to push back with recommendations for students. If you don't necessarily agree and the parents don't agree, who is actually running the ARD and agreeing with the recommendations? We should know [what recommendations to make] but we really don't.

### District Training/Staff Development

Although the local school district provides special education training, participants posited that it may not be enough. A principal said,

> I haven't seen anything from this district or the other district I was at. It was mostly legal updates but nothing that guided you as a new administrator through the ARD process, what we should or should not offer as far as services are concerned, what is in the best interest of the student, or how to be a student advocate. Nothing like that.

One local school district offers SPED 101, a training program offered only to administrators who are in charge of special education. That person is usually the one who knows the most about special education already. However, since most campuses separate administrative duties by student alpha order, it is not necessarily the administrator in charge of special education who sits in on ARDs. Rather, it is the administrator who is responsible for that student based on alpha order and who may not have attended district special education training sessions. Administrators who participated in the focus groups suggested that the district should provide more support for first-year campus administrators. One administrator (an assistant principal) suggested, "Just like

the district has a mentor for a new teacher, they should provide a mentor (not just the principal) for new assistant principals." These mentors can assist new administrators with situations that they may encounter in ARDs or assist them with their first ARD.

### University Higher Education Faculty

A focus group from a local university's College of Education faculty was assembled to discuss the findings from the principal and assistant principal focus groups. Several topics were discussed regarding the university principal preparation program, focused on current courses and content of some of the courses. The discussion also addressed practicums (internships) and what should be included. The theme of partnerships with districts related to the practicum as interns are sent out to districts to obtain real-world experience in administration. As one faculty member mentioned,

> This is a national issue. Nationally, we are still debating. How do we best prepare principals on how to run inclusive schools, not only in special education, but bilingual students? There would be a state level paradigm shift for the preparation of future principals. Specifically, how to be an instructional leader for all students and not just an administrative manager.

### Course Content

Currently, the principal preparation program targeted in this study offers one course for special education that meets 10 five-hour days in two weeks. One faculty member observed, "A 2-week mini-mester window is not enough. However, we are now going back to an eight-week course and hopefully a full semester." The course objectives are as follows.

The instructional processes used in the course include lecture, group discussion, online assignments, problem-based learning projects, individual projects, analyses of readings,

individual presentations, and group activities. Students (a) explore the legal foundations and specific components of IDEA related to student eligibility for special education services, development of IEPs, provision of free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment, and other aspects of the law related to student discipline, parental rights, and disability classifications; (b) understand the current federal, state, and local policy context related to special education and legal compliance; (c) critically examine the construct of disability and its implications for students, teachers, and families; and (d) identify challenges associated with creating inclusive classrooms and school reforms, as well as appropriate leadership responses and actions to overcome those challenges.

The course syllabus states, "This course is an overview of legal aspects of special education, including IDEA and LRE. In addition, the course discusses case law and the history of students with disabilities as well as the various categories of students with disabilities." The course includes discussion of inclusive schools with regard to students with disabilities and how to evaluate a teacher's classroom instruction. Finally, the course includes discussion of Manifestation and Determination/Removal (MDR) for students with disabilities who are recommended to an alternative school and the legalities associated with a change of placement for special education students.

During the university faculty focus group session, one faculty member reported teaching a law class in which IDEA and least restrictive environment are discussed. However, the focus of the course class is not solely on special education; rather, the focus is on education law in general. This faculty member also suggested that there should be more than just a two-week special education course to prepare future campus administrators for creating inclusive schools for students with disabilities.

Another faculty member described the course curriculum as a valuable resource that "emphasizes the understanding of the instructional needs of students in order to be able to make effective decisions." The course is specifically designed to meet the needs of "marginalized populations. Future administrators need to understand the instructional needs of special education students, the instructional needs of English language learners, and the needs of a struggling student."

One faculty member commented on their course curriculum, stating that their course supports the teacher in the classroom by having future administrators conduct walk-throughs (teacher observations) and offering feedback.

> Components of their walk-throughs include identifying how teachers can better serve students with special needs. I do not define the special needs. I let the students in the class determine who those special needs students are in the co-teach environment to see how the practice of servicing each student in that setting is occurring.

The faculty members agreed that practicums (internships) could change for the administrative program to give future administrators realistic situations to enhance their preparedness.

## Practicums

Participating faculty members agreed with campus administrators that more emphasis should be placed on realistic situations during the internship. This does not mean that the program would be extended for extra time, as there would be too much information to study, which in turn could require extra courses. One faculty member suggested that the practicum be extended from the current 200 hours to 300 hours. As a field supervisor for interns mentioned, "Some interns in other programs have to complete 300 hours of internship hours while we are at

200 hours. However, their experiences were different, depending on where their internship was held."

Faculty members stated that interns should be exposed to many things, not just "game duty, lunch duty, or testing." They suggested that interns sit in on at least two ARDs in order to gain exposure to the process. One faculty member stated,

> A lot of students shy away from special education because they know nothing about it or they don't want to be exposed to possible legal issues. They must be motivated to step outside of their comfort zone. If you are going to be a principal of an inclusive school you must be exposed and learn about, not just special education students, but bi-lingual students, LBGTQ students, all students. The principal is no longer just the manager.

One consideration by a faculty member was to incentivize current administrators to expose interns to realistic aspects of the principalship. "There is no incentive from the district coming from us, to say, thank you. Not even a certificate is given. That can be problematic, as some current administrators could potentially say, 'What's in it for me?'"

## Partnerships

The university faculty focus group was asked about partnerships with districts to prepare future campus administrators. The question was, "What can the district do to help support the preparation of student assistant principals? This research should not only relegate itself to the principal preparation program but also what the district can do to support it." One faculty member described an instance in which they were not allowed to observe the intern during testing, although that had been the focus of the intern's work. "I was not able to observe the student and how they are working on testing because I was not allowed to be in the testing room." It is important for field supervisors (part of the university faculty) to observe interns, not

only to ensure proper procedures and processes are taking place but also to guarantee that the intern is participating in all activities that would involve an administrator. The faculty member continued by saying, “The partnerships between the campus and the program are very important, in that it gives me the idea of going into interlocal agreements to have more authentic kinds of exercises that our students need to go through.” The faculty member used the ARD process as an example of authentic exposure to administration.

> They [intern mentors] need to allow the interns to sit in ARDs so they can know that they can last for one hour, or two or three hours, depending on the ARD. To see the whole process with our partnerships would be nice. It would be a type of specialized training for the interns.

## Chapter Summary

This chapter reported the data collected from the focus groups. Three focus groups were organized and interviewed. Each focus group was asked specific questions concerning administrator preparation programs with regard to special education. The three focus groups provided abundant feedback and recommendations. All participants agreed that the principal preparation program provided opportunities for learning. However, they also stressed the importance of improving certain aspects, especially with regard to hands-on experience with special education. The three groups made similar recommendations for increasing competence and confidence upon completion of the principal preparation program. These recommendations included modifying course content, creating strong partnerships with school districts, and requiring focused, in-depth practicums.

# CHAPTER 5

# DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

During this research, very little information was found regarding principal preparation programs and training, especially with regard to special education. The information that was located coincided with the results of the administrator and university faculty focus groups. It is hoped that the conversations and recommendations provided in this action research project will not only lead to significant changes in principal preparation programs but will continue the nationwide discourse on improvement in education. Focusing on developing more purposeful course content, district partnerships, and practicums will be a step in the right direction.

## Course Content

In 1991, Hirth and Valesky conducted a national survey of principal preparation programs that focused on special education. They found that a majority of the participating principals were not prepared for the duties and responsibilities of their positions. The authors stated that, while accountability for special education had increased, state certification requirements for principal certification programs were slow to keep pace. For example, while the latest changes to IDEA occurred in 2004, changes to the Texas Principal Certification examination were not adapted until 2018, with full phase-in not occurring until summer 2019. Standards for this new certification emphasize the critical role of the school principal as an instructional leader and the importance of understanding instructional needs for all subpopulations, including special education.

After almost twenty years of reform efforts, a large percentage of university principal preparation programs are not increasing the time focused on special education law.

> Because of this, special education litigation continues to be faced by many school districts across the United States. (Powell, 2009, p. 4)

Although one special education course is required in the university principal preparation program, many in the university focus group stated that the course might not be enough. This special education course is packed into a two-week time period and focuses on the evolution of special education law in the country. Unfortunately, there is no practical preparation for future campus administrators, as this course only introduces and explores the basic dimensions of special education law, instruction, and policy related to education as a whole (classroom teachers, school administrators, district personnel).

Pazey and Cole (2012) reported that, upon the completion of the graduate program, administrators in the principal preparation program generally reported being inadequately prepared. Not until they were "faced with accusations of inappropriate services or confronted with a lawsuit" did they realize that they lacked preparation. The only instances in which administrators felt prepared were when they had previous experience as a special education classroom teacher. As a principal stated in the focus group,

> I remember that as special education teacher, I used to have to guide my principal through the ARD process and explain how they were supposed to facilitate the meeting. But as far as my principal preparation program, there was nothing I remember that my program gave me to further my knowledge in this area.

University programs must ensure that school administrators are fully prepared to face the questions that they will be asked on state principal certification examinations and the challenges that they will encounter at a campus, especially in terms of special education. In both administrator focus groups, the participants asserted that they were not adequately prepared for

the challenges that they would later face in special education, particularly with the ARD process and the decisions to be made to guarantee that all students were receiving a free and appropriate public education. Ultimately, they relied too heavily on the diagnostician signing off on paperwork of which they were unsure.

One recommendation to improve course content at the university level was to focus lessons on best practices for all students, stressing scenarios that could occur with subpopulations. This would involve incorporating instruction in both bilingual education to include the Language Proficiency Assessment Committee (LPAC) process and special education to include the ARD process. As evident in the assistant principals' responses, knowledge of placement and instructional decisions is lacking. As one participant acknowledged, "Although I had a good understanding of what LRE [least restrictive environment] is, I did not know how to advocate for the placement recommendation of the students."

Another recommendation is to have prospective administrators participate in virtual or simulated ARDs. By using real student situations and data (with identifying markers removed), prospective administrators would be able to experience the ARD process, practice using the skills that they have learned, and compare their thought process with the actual outcomes of the ARD. One participant commented,

> We should have access to an actual ARD using real student demographic information and data, then hold our own mock ARD and come up with a solution. Afterwards, we can see if that was the same solution that the real ARD came up with.

All administrators agreed that more should be offered with regard to special education in their administrative preparation program.

A third recommendation is that principal preparation programs should require at least two courses pertaining to special education. The first course should be a case law course. This course would review and discuss specific case law that has shaped special education in the United States. This course should also discuss both state and local policies and how they support federal laws for students with disabilities.

The second course should require future campus administrators to study accommodations, modifications, and course curriculum for students in special education. Prospective campus administrators should also participate in at least two mock ARDs, in which participants would be given an anonymous student with special needs. Participants would then use federal laws, in combination with state and local policy, in order to create the LRE and IEP for the student.

Recommended readings for administrative programs should include, *What Every Principal Needs to Know About Special Education*, 2nd Edition, by Margaret J. McLaughlin and *Leading for Social Justice: Transforming Schools for all Learners*, by Elise Marie Frattura and Colleen Capper. The former book includes information on how to create high quality special education programs on campuses and explains referrals of potential special education students, IEPs, accommodations, and the legalities of LRE. The latter includes a step-by-step process for integrating schoolwide change in becoming a truly inclusive campus through proactive support services and for raising achievement levels of all sub-populations, including students in special education and English learners.

## Partnerships

According to research by Billingsley, DeMatthews, Connally, and McLeskey (2018), "Many principal preparation programs and district professional development opportunities do not

emphasize the knowledge and skills that principals need to demonstrate in order to develop and lead schools that are effective and inclusive" (p. 11). A strong partnership with local school districts is imperative not only for developing educational leaders but also for growing their craft through both instruction and practice. Both administrator focus groups (principals and assistant principals) agreed that a strong partnership between the university and school district would help to align objectives and standards required for the principal preparation program. To be specific, future administrators cannot just learn theory at the university and then practice a new set of skills at the campus level; the two must interrelated to ensure mastery. As one assistant principal stated, reading a book and writing papers is not the same as on-the-job experiences.

> We do the very superficial things during our internship, such as lunch duty, game duty, testing, all those things, but what did I know about time clock, or LPAC, much less special education? We should have exposure in all of these things.

A participant in the faculty member focus group stated, "The district needs to provide the opportunities for our interns to experience multiple activities of administration. However, because new situations always arise and the job is fast paced, some principals were reluctant to engage interns."

To improve partnerships, it is recommended that the department of education at the university level and administrators at the district level stay in close contact. By increasing communication and collaboration for the purpose of increasing performance levels of prospective and current administrators, all stakeholders will benefit. Connecting coursework to everyday situations creates connections that eventually lead to in-depth understanding that coursework alone cannot achieve.

In addition, it is recommended that campuses who are hosting interns allow them to participate in a variety of administrative duties. These duties should include, but not be limited to, ARDs and other duties concerning At-Risk populations. Because many meetings are conducted during the school day when interns are teaching, it may be beneficial to invite interns to participate during their conference time, or provide coverage for one class, if possible. Check-off sheets should be signed by both the intern and mentor in order to ensure that interns have participated in and completed various tasks. Short reflections should also be included with the check-off sheet document. An example of a possible check-off sheet can be seen in Appendix C.

## Practicums

Billingsley et al. (2018) stated, "Principals played an important role in articulating a vision for inclusion and helping others understand and adopt inclusion as a core value or philosophy" (p. 4). During the internship (practicum), the university principal preparation program requires prospective administrators to shadow a current administrator for 200 hours. However, many participants in the administrator focus group stated that their internship did not adequately prepare them for special education and that they could have participated in the ARD process, as well as several other important situations, as part of their practicum. One assistant principal stated, "During my internship, we did testing, summer school planning, intersession planning, and either lunch duty or game duty. We really did not do anything that would have prepared me for my first ARD."

There has been very little to no research on how practicums should be changed. However, the focus group administrators and the university focus group faculty members made several recommendations. First, practicums should give future campus administrators hands-on practice, such as participation in an ARD. With this added experience, administrators could have the

confidence to lead ARDs on their campus instead of relying on the diagnostician. Diagnosticians of take immediate charge of the ARD, which may lead to anxiety on the part of the administrator as all signed documentation eventually redounds to the administrator.

Second, following a medical internship model may prove beneficial for future administrators. As one university faculty member stated, “This will allow the students completing their internship to get their hands into everything.” Instead of just following a current administrator around and observing what is done or participating in mundane tasks that the current administrator delegates to the student, the prospective administrator would actually “get his/her hands wet.” For example, instead of watching an ARD on video after the fact, the future administrator would lead the session, with guidance from the mentor administrator. This would lead to deeper understanding and connection between what is learned in the classroom and what is expected in the principal role.

The final recommendation for the practicum is to not only increase the various activities interns participate in, but to require them. Aside from testing, discipline, and other general duties, interns should participate in ARDs, LPAC meetings, attendance meetings, and 504 meetings, to name a few.

Specific to special education, interns should observe the various classroom settings of special education students. This would include settings for students in specialized units with severe disabilities (students who are none communicative, with catheters, or low motor functions), behavioral units (students with emotional disabilities or oppositional defiance disorders), and self-contained units (students with severe autism or Downs Syndrome). In order to understand curriculum accommodations, interns should also observe co-teach classrooms in which students with learning disabilities are served and have their individual needs met.

## Conclusion

In the "age of accountability," every student counts. This concept includes students with disabilities. Principals play a vital role in ensuring that students with disabilities receive a high-quality education. How are university-based preparation programs preparing aspiring administrators to meet the challenges of ensuring a fair and equal education for every student, including students with disabilities? Nearly 25 years ago, a study of principal preparation programs concluded that most principals were ill prepared when they began their leadership tenure. In 2009, it was found that, although there had been an increase in the number of hours that principal preparation programs required for aspiring administrators, many universities required a special education course only as an elective, not as a requirement for certification.

The purpose of this action research study was to investigate the content of one university-based principal preparation program along the U.S.-Mexico border. The results were shared with a university certification program to inform its leaders to prepare future administrators regarding laws, policies, and practices in special education. In order to create inclusive schools, administrators must be well versed in every aspect of the student population. This includes special education, bilingual students, LGBTQ students, and so forth. As one participant faculty member stated, "If you are going to be a principal of an inclusive school, you must be exposed to and learn about all types populations, not just special education students, but bi-lingual students, LBGTQ students, all students."

Lucker (2012) studied the comprehensive knowledge base of educational leaders related to core and current issues in special education and how this knowledge is acquired; it was reported that most programs failed to provide adequate preparation in the area of special

education. The research problem in this study was to address the preparation of programs and practitioners to modify principal preparation programs with regard to special education.

For the purposes of this study, I adopted DeMatthews and Mawhinney's (2013) definition of *inclusion*:

> 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. Their daily work must reflect this responsibility. Yet scholars must recognize that inclusion of all students may not be immediately obtainable during transitional reform periods (schools moving from segregation to full inclusion) because inclusive reforms often confront obstacles that cannot be remedied in the short term. Some obstacles include the availability of resources, appropriately trained teachers and staff, legal mandates related to IDEA, and other challenges associated with each individual classroom, student the school and the district level. (p. 851)

For campus administrators to achieve an inclusive school model, they must be offered opportunities to participate in relevant, meaningful preparation experiences. Administrative practicums should be geared to give future campus administrators a broad view of the duties of the administrator. Both administrators and university faculty members agreed that there must be a stronger partnership between the district and the university to provide real-world experiences.

Preparation programs "do not extend much beyond a set of outdated courses that focused on school administration and management" (DeMatthews & Edwards, 2014, p. 43). "Even in elite universities, principal preparation programs have been criticized for being out of sync with the job requirements of the principalship" (p. 43). As this research has shown, most programs

offer internships that do not have adequate supervision related to the expectations of the program. Practical experiences should include exposure to the process in special education and the role of the administrator. This must come from both the university and the district. The expectation is that future administrators should be prepared to "start the position running." As one faculty member stated, "Why would a leader give away their leadership?" In order for future campus administrators not to give away their leadership, there must be stronger practicum experiences.

This research has shown that a stronger partnership between the school district(s) and the university is a possibility. Again, in December 2018, the requirement for future campus leaders changed in Texas. The new principal certification assessment was completely phased in during summer 2019. The new certification assessment contains three components, one of which is a more relevant practicum. The components of the preparation of future campus administrators should have changed, as well. As one faculty member stated, "I think we need to have more of a medical model in terms of our internships (and the campus) where they get their hands into everything."

Additional research is needed on the level of preparedness from principals and assistant principals in the Texas Educational Service Center, Region 19 and include more principal preparation programs. Research is also needed on current students in the principal preparation program and their level of preparedness. Finally, based on any changes that may occur due to recommendations from this research, future focus groups should be conducted with campus administrators who went through the revised principal preparation program.

## Author's Note

I was born a fighter… literally. From day one, I have had to fight for my life. From being born with blood poisoning and being read my last rights to surviving an abusive step-parent, from moving each time the rent increased and attending a new campus each grade in elementary school to being so poor we often did not have electricity, gas, or running water, I almost fell through the cracks. Actually, I did fall through the cracks. It was not until my sixth grade year when a teacher noticed me, actually saw me as more than just a discipline problem, and stepped in to help. This is my "Why".

In first grade, I remember not understanding how to read words. I used to practice my sight words using flash cards the teacher gave the class. My mother would patiently help me read each word, yet some words, I just could not get. The second, third, fourth, and even one-hundredth time I saw the word, it looked like something I had never seen before. In class, my lack of knowing the word got me sent to the classroom next door. There, I was forced to stand against the wall, books in the palm of each hand, arms extended laterally (parallel to the floor). Time seemed to stand still in this position, and to a six-year old, it seemed I stood there for an eternity. It probably was just 10-15 minutes, though.

In second grade, I began having difficulty with math as well. The numbers on the worksheets just seemed to float around. My teacher thought I was just "acting silly," so she isolated me from the rest of the class. I sat in the front of the classroom, my desk abutting hers. These days, I know some teachers may do this to have focused one-on-one time with students or because of an accommodation on an IEP. However, back then, it was to point me out to the rest of the class; it was to snap at me to make me pay attention; it was to hit my on my hand or head with a yard stick to knock some sense into me.

By third grade, I was struggling in all subjects. My favorite periods were P.E. and lunch because I could escape my teacher for that hour and a half. Unfortunately, I had a teacher who did not understand that I was misbehaving because I had deep foundational gaps in reading and math. All she knew was that if she taped me down to the chair at my desk with masking tape and taped my mouth shut, I would be sitting still and silent for a few hours. Those few days when I was not taped down, my teacher would throw an eraser from the chalk board at me to keep me in check.

It was in fourth grade when I had practically given up; and so had my teacher and the school administration. The abuse I endured at home was the worst it had ever been and school was my safe haven, which also provided me a free hot breakfast and lunch. However, in class, I continued to suffer because I was completely confused and felt isolated. I started lying, stealing, and starting fights. The majority of the school year, I spent either in detention or in the principal's office. Yet for me, this was a treat as I did not have to face the taunts and laughter of my peers.

During the summer between fourth and fifth grade, my mother finally had the courage and means to escape my abusive step-father. Once again, we packed our few belongings into black garbage bags, and started anew. But this time, it was just my mom, my sister, and myself. I felt a weight lifted off my shoulders as I walked into my final elementary school. I still had no idea what was going on in class, I still started fights, and I was still sent to detention. But I felt a peace that I had not known before because for the first time in years, I felt safe at home.

Finally, in sixth grade, I had a teacher who took the time to build me up. Mr. Brokaw not only started to fill in my educational gaps, but also helped me gain confidence. He sat with me for countless hours, building the educational foundation that I lacked. He graded me for the

work I had done, not just for any problems/questions I had not completed in the time limit. He asked me questions to ensure I understood the content, and took this into account, as opposed to just what I was able to put in writing. For the first time, I enjoyed going to class because I knew my teacher actually cared about me and was rooting for me to succeed. I began to feel motivated to learn, and tried hard not to get into trouble because I did not want to miss class. Mr. Brokaw believed in me, and so I believed in myself.

Going into middle school, I was tested for special education. After two months in regular education classes, my schedule changed to help address my needs. I was assigned to three English classes (spelling, reading, and writing) and two math classes (grade-level math and resource math). Fortunately, I was still allowed one elective. Band was an outlet for me; I felt hugely successful playing the clarinet and drums as I was more of an auditory learner. Although I could not really read the notes, I could duplicate any melody or sound after hearing it just a few times. For almost three years, I continued with special education classes and began seeing success. I remember the pure joy and excitement the first time I brought home a report card with passing grades in all classes; they were all Ds, but at least I had not failed. Then, I began earning Cs. Every once in a while, I even came home with a couple of Bs or an A (in band).

In the middle of my ninth-grade year, I was called to the counselor's office. My schedule had been changed. As I walked to my new classroom, pre-Algebra, I looked around and saw all the students I had looked up to as "the smart kids." I definitely thought a mistake had been made. But, as I sat in my chair and listened to my teacher, I realized that although I did not understand everything that was going on in class, I could follow along a lot more than I used to.

My experiences growing up and in school motivate me every single day. I was that kid who was overlooked, hungry, wearing clothes two sizes too small. I was that kid who had no

clue about what was going on in class, was punished for my lack of understanding, was ready to drop out of school. I want to ensure that every single student like me knows that I will do whatever I can to advocate for him/her and fight the battle. All too often, people hear educators use the common cliché, "I am here for the students." This cliché, however, is my why.

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## APPENDIX A

## PRINCIPAL AND ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1: How prepared were you when you became an administrator with regard to special education in the areas of:

- Student Placement
- Special Education Law. What is your knowledge regarding least restrictive environment?

2: As the facilitator (at times, the Principal will sit in a ARD meeting when an Assistant Principal is not available) of the ARD meeting, how well do you feel you were prepared to facilitate the ARD? What do feel could have better prepared you for the ARD process?

3: During the ARD process, you must know instructional best practices for special education students; the difference between a modified curriculum and accommodated lessons for the individual needs of the students.

- How prepared are of knowledge for making recommendations for the individual needs of each student?

4: What are your recommendations for the principal preparation program?

5: How does your district support training in the area of special education?

## APPENDIX B

## INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR FACULTY IN THE EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP PROGRAM

1. How important is it to you or your department to prepare school principals in the area of inclusive education specifically special education?
2. How is the program addressing the need to prepare school principals with the knowledge, competencies and dispositions to prepare them in special education?

   A: Is it enough? What else can or will you do in order to prepare school principals?
3. What topics are covered in any courses that students may have to take with regard to students with special needs?

   A: Curriculum

   B: Law/Legal (race versus culture)

   C: Identification of students (placement of students in specific special needs classes).
4. Based on input from practitioners (principals and assistant principals), they indicated the following about this topic. Please react to this feedback.

5: How do you see revising your program based on this feedback?

## APPENDIX C

## POTENTIAL INTERNSHIP LOG

**Name:**
**Expected Graduation:**

| Special Populations | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Dept. | Date | Campus | Activity | Time | Hours | Intern Initial | Mentor Initial |
| *Req. | Special Ed. | | | ARD Meeting | | | | |
| *Req. | Special Ed. | | | ARD Meeting | | | | |
| *Req. | Special Ed. | | | Observation: _____ | | 1 hr | | |
| *Req. | Special Ed. | | | Observation: _____ | | 1 hr | | |
| *Req. | Special Ed. | | | Observation: _____ | | 1 hr | | |
| *Req. | Special Ed. | | | Observation: _____ | | 1 hr | | |
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| Intern Reflection: | |
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| | Dept. | Date | Campus | Activity | Time | Hours | Intern Initial | Mentor Initial |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Req. | Bilingual Ed. | | | LPAC Meeting | | | | |
| *Req. | Bilingual Ed. | | | TELPAS Testing | | | | |
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| Intern Reflection: | |
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| *Req. | Reg. Ed. | | | 504 Meeting | | | | |
| *Req. | Reg. Ed. | | | 504 Meeting | | | | |
| *Reg. | Reg. Ed. | | | Behavioral Intervention Plan | | | | |
| *Req. | Reg. Ed. | | | Behavioral Intervention Plan | | | | |
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| Intern Reflection: | |
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## Other Duties as Assigned

| | Dept. | Date | Campus | Activity | Time | Hours | Intern Initial | Mentor Initial |
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| Intern Reflection: | |

## CURRICULUM VITA

Ignacio Estorga III, Ed.D., is a lifelong resident of El Paso, Texas and a proud alumnus of the University of Texas at El Paso. He has earned all three of his degrees from this university, first with a Bachelor of Arts in Criminal Justice and a minor in Political Science, then with a Master of Education in Educational Administration, and finally with a Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership and Administration.

Dr. Estorga has been in the field of education since 2001. After protecting the U.S./Mexico border for almost two years as a U.S. Border Patrol agent, he decided his true passion was in helping students succeed and become the best versions of themselves. In order to make his dream come true, he attended the Teacher Alternative Certification Program through the Region 19, Educational Service Center and began working as a substitute teacher and an instructional aide. In 2002, after passing all state requirements, he became an 8$^{th}$ grade Social Studies teacher; he also coached cross-country, track, and volleyball. In addition to these duties, he assisted his district in creating Social Studies curriculum, lessons, and assessments. Five year later, he became an assistant principal for a high school, serving over 2,000 students, grades 9 through 12. In 2014, Dr. Estorga was promoted to principal. For five years, he served as the principal of a middle school, containing grades 6-8 and over 1,000 students. Currently, he is the principal of one of the largest high schools in the region, serving over 2,500 students and supporting the educational needs of all students, including three special education units, an early college, and a business academy.

To contact Dr. Estorga, please email iestor@sisd.net.