

# THE ROLE OF THE ELEMENTARY PRINCIPAL IN THE INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP OF SPECIAL EDUCATION\*

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore, understand, and analyze principals' perceptions of their role as the instructional leader with special education teachers. Both surveys and follow-up telephone interviews were utilized for data collection. Findings indicate that principals holding a state special education teaching certificate reported higher knowledge and involvement with special education teachers than any other identified group, indicating that they were better prepared to support their special education programs and teachers. Concerns were noted with other subgroups who reported areas of higher involvement than knowledge, indicating that these principals were engaging in some activities with special education teachers without having appropriate understanding. Finally, recommendations were offered for institutions of higher learning, school districts, superintendents, and principals on how to increase the likelihood of elementary principals providing effective instructional leadership with special education teachers.



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## 1 Sumario en español

El propósito de este estudio fue de explorar, comprender, y para analizar las percepciones de directores de su papel como el líder instruccional con maestros especiales de educación. Ambas inspecciones y las entrevistas telefónicas segundas fueron utilizados para la recogida de datos. Las conclusiones indican que directores que tienen un estado certificado especial de enseñanza de educación informó el conocimiento y la participación más altos con maestros especiales de educación que cualquier otro grupo identificado, indicando que fueron preparados mejor apoyar sus programas especiales de la educación y maestros. Las preocupaciones fueron notadas con otros subgrupos que informaron áreas de participación más alta que el conocimiento, indicando que estos directores entraban en algunas actividades con maestros especiales de educación sin tener la comprensión apropiada. Por último, las recomendaciones fueron ofrecidas para instituciones de aprender más alto, distritos de escuela, los supervisores, y los directores en cómo aumentar la probabilidad de directores elementales que proporcionan liderazgo instruccional efectivo con maestros especiales de educación.

NOTE: Esta es una traducción por computadora de la página web original. Se suministra como información general y no debe considerarse completa ni exacta.

## 2 Introduction

Until the 1900s in the United States, individuals with disabilities were treated with superstition and fear that often resulted in actions of “infanticide, shunning, attributions of witchcraft, and divine punishment” (Bartlett, Etscheidt, & Weisenstein, 2007, p. 5). As such, individuals with handicapping conditions were isolated from the community and educational system and placed in state operated or privately funded institutions (Bartlett, et al, 2007; Pulliam & Van Patten, 2007). It was common practice to exclude students with disabilities from the general education classroom due to the “depressing and nauseating effect [these students had] on teachers and schoolchildren” (Pulliam & Van Patten, 2007, p. 320).

As scientific advances were made and humanistic values embraced in the mid-1900s, the general public’s attitude towards disabilities began to change. Reformers in the United States began to advocate for more humane institutions as handicapped individuals were beginning to be perceived as having the potential to learn. In institutions for the mentally ill and retarded, conditions and care became more compassionate, and patients were freed literally from their restraints (Bartlett, Etscheidt, & Weisenstein, 2007). However, it was the Supreme Court case of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 that began the journey for equal opportunity for education of all children (Yell, 2006). Chief Justice Earl Warren wrote an opinion in the case stating,

### 2.1

In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right that must be made available to all on equal terms. (*Brown v. Board of Education*, p. 493)

As an aftermath of the *Brown* decision, an attitudinal shift was made from educating children with disabilities in residential institutions to community-based programs (Bartlett, et al., 2007; Beyer & Johnson, 2005).

The *Brown* argument, however, did not have the force of federal law obligating states to educate students with disabilities. Though advocates argued that exclusion of students with disabilities was as much a denial of education as segregation by race, several state judicial systems supported the notion that *Brown* did not include students with disabilities. For example, in 1958, the Supreme Court of Illinois ruled in the *Department of Public Welfare v. Hans* that compulsory attendance did not apply to children with disabilities (Yell, 2006). Specifically, this case held that the

## 2.2

state's existing compulsory attendance legislation did not require the state to provide a free public education for the "feeble minded" or to children who were "mentally deficient" and who, because of their limited intelligence, were unable to reap the benefits of a good education. (Yell, 2006, p.63)

Similarly, in 1969 the State of North Carolina made it a crime for parents of a child with a disability to persist in forcing school attendance after the school had excluded the child from public education (Weber, 2002).

Two crucial cases were argued in the early 1970s that extended the due process clause of the 14th Amendment to parents of students with disabilities. In 1971, the Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children (PARC) brought suit against the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania in federal district court to challenge a state law that allowed public schools to deny services to children who did not have the skills necessary for entrance into first grade (Martin, Martin, & Terman, 1996). The major impact of *PARC v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* was that school districts could no longer deny enrollment and services to children with cognitive disabilities and, in fact, were required to provide an educational program appropriate to a student's learning capacity up to age 21 (Martin, Martin, & Terman, 1996). The *PARC* case was significant because it established the right to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) for children with mental disabilities in an environment with non-disabled peers, when possible (Martin, et al., 1996; Yell, 2006).

The second case, filed in 1972, was a federal district court class action suit against the District of Columbia. This case, known as *Mills v. Board of Education*, was brought on behalf of seven children with a variety of disabilities. The premise of the plaintiff's argument was that students were excluded from public education without due process; thereby denying the students their rights under the 14th amendment. Under the 14th amendment, individuals are provided equal protection under the law meaning that all people must be treated alike and are entitled to due process prior to being deprived of life, liberty, or property. This amendment played an important role in this case and subsequently in other "right-to-education" cases. The court held that because racial segregation was unconstitutional, so was segregation based on a student's disability. As a result of the *Mills* case, provisions were made for: (a) a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) for children with disabilities; and (b) due process safeguards for eligibility, placement, and exclusion of services (Yell, 2006). In practice, this judgment afforded families a full range of procedural protections and prohibited school districts from utilizing the "lack of funding" argument as a basis for denying services to children with disabilities (Martin, Martin, & Terman, 1996).

Prior to 1975, approximately one million children in the United States were excluded from public schools because of the nature of their educational needs and approximately four million children with disabilities did not receive the educational assistance they required to succeed in school (Bergert & Burnett, 2001; Pulliam & Van Patten, 2007). In the past 35 years, public education has conformed to different mandates, revisions, and reforms that have expanded services and programs in local school districts for children with special needs. Specifically, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires that all students with disabilities receive a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment with access to the general curriculum. Accordingly, special education placement first begins in a student's home school (Lasky & Karge, 2006; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003).

## 3 Instructional Leadership to Special Education Teachers

Since IDEA requires that all students with disabilities be educated in the least restrictive environment with access to the general curriculum and participation in assessment practices, special education placement begins within the site of a student's home school building under the leadership of the principal (Lasky & Karge, 2006; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). As such, the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), a division of the U.S. Department of Education, has maintained that a central role of the principal is providing instructional leadership to ensure that the rights of students with disabilities are protected and that these students receive an appropriate education (Heumann & Hehir, 1998). This responsibility is also supported in standard two of the Interstate School Leader Licensure Standards and Indicators (ISLLC), which states

that “a school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth” (Council of Chief State School Officers, 1996, p. 14).

The State of Illinois has made it clear that the primary role of the principal is instructional leadership for all programs within the school. According to the Illinois School Student Records Act:

### 3.1

The principal shall assume administrative responsibilities and instructional leadership, under the supervision of the superintendent, and in accordance with reasonable rules and regulations of the board, for the planning, operation and evaluation of the educational program of the attendance area to which he or she is assigned. . .

Additionally,

### 3.2

School boards shall specify in their formal job description for principals that his or her primary responsibility is in the improvement of instruction. A majority of the time spent by a principal shall be spent on curriculum and staff development through both formal and informal activities, establishing clear lines of communication regarding school goals, accomplishments, practices and policies with parents and teachers. . . (Illinois Association of School Boards, 2010, section105 ILCS 5/10-21.4a)

And finally,

### 3.3

School boards shall ensure that their principals are evaluated on their instructional leadership ability and their ability to maintain a positive education and learning climate. (Illinois Association of School Boards, 2010, section105 ILCS 5/10-21.4a)

DiPaola and Walther-Thomas (2003) report that professional organizations such as the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), and the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) emphasize the importance of the principal’s role in effective special education programming. In fact, the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) has collaborated with the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) to create documents for school principals regarding the support of special education staff and services (NAESP, 2001).

While the expectation that school principals serve as instructional leaders for special education teachers is clear, principals often have little preparation or practice in assuming this responsibility. Several studies have noted that most school principals have minimal training, through coursework and field experience, related to special education (Billingsley, 2005; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). Bargerhuff (2001) reported that a principal’s experience with students with disabilities is typically limited to requirements related to federal and state laws, and further acknowledged that even though school principals are expected to serve as instructional leaders, “the extent to which the principal has been responsible for special education students has been less apparent”(p. 3). Heumann and Hehir (1998) described the building principal as an instructional leader for all staff and students and say that if the administrator employed certain strategies “special education could become a service for children with disabilities rather than a place where they are sent” (p.2).

Bays and Crockett (2007) also found that school principals often have minimal interactions with special education teachers about improving teaching and learning. They note that school principals attempt to balance responsibilities of: (a) daily operative administrative duties; (b) tasks associated with legal compliance; and (c) instructional quality in the general education program, leaving little time for special education leadership (Bays & Crockett, 2007).

Bays and Crockett (2007) examined nine elementary schools within three school districts in the southeastern United States and determined that no systematic monitoring of instruction, evidence- or research-based instruction, or accountability to student progress was evident in teaching students with disabilities. Therefore, they concluded that school principals need to include as a component of their instructional leadership

practices: (a) a vision that includes effective instruction for students with disabilities; (b) the offering to all members of the school environment norms of trust, collaboration, and academic achievement; (c) engagement of all teachers and the provision of meaningful support; and (d) the monitoring of instruction and strategies. By establishing these components, efforts could be made that lead to enhanced instructional leadership practices for the special education department. Bays and Crockett (2007) further stated that “instructional leadership should improve special education for students who have unique educational needs and enhance the success of their schools in meeting annual targets for improvement” (p. 145).

Other researchers have identified areas necessary for school principals to be effective in their role as instructional leaders for special educators. Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, and Ahlgrim-Delzell (2006) found that school principals must set expectations for student achievement, establish school climate, and demonstrate leadership with stakeholders.

Lasky and Karge (2006) explicitly state that school principals must perform activities that: (a) display special education knowledge and skills in “effective instruction, assessment, and discipline”(para. 5); (b) develop skills to support instructional teams; and (c) sustain collaborative group involvement in order to be instructional leaders and agents of change for special education staff.

Goor, Schwenn, and Boyer (1997) found that school principals who are most effective in special education: (a) possess essential beliefs regarding the education of special education students, (b) access resources to assist in fact finding and decision making, (c) understand the support that special education teachers need to impact academic and behavioral needs of students, (d) support and monitor procedures, (e) maintain records and confidentiality, (f) ensure parental involvement, (g) participate in the employee selection process, (h) assist in the discipline of special education students, (i) understand and are aware of current legal requirements and technological advances, (j) collaborate and build trust with stakeholders, (k) model positive attitudes, (l) engage in effective listening and problem solving skills, (m) support teaching staff, and (n) practice reflective behaviors.

Guzman (1997) concluded that school principals who develop effective special education programs practice eight responsibilities. One is establishing a communication system that allows staff to discuss with administrators issues for refining special education policies and procedures. A second is attending and participating in initial and difficult IEPs. In addition, a third responsibility is building and sustaining a rapport with parents of students with disabilities. Another is collaborating with building staff to develop modifications in the established behavior policies to address the specific needs of students with disabilities. A fifth is establishing and modeling a shared philosophy of service delivery to students with disabilities. In addition, principals should implement a personal professional development plan that includes topics related to students with disabilities. They should also develop and implement data gathering skills that relate to conducting proper teacher evaluations. Finally, principals need to demonstrate problem-solving and decision-making skills that enhance and refine special education programs and services.

McLaughlin (2009) identified three characteristics of effective leaders in special education. School administrators need to have knowledge of federal and state special education rules as well as an understanding of instructional strategies and techniques utilized by special educators to ensure student achievement. They also need to create a school-wide culture that accepts and integrates all students and identifies special education services and supports that provide students with access to curriculum. Finally, school administrators need to ensure that students receiving special education services participate in state and local assessments and that data are utilized in the school improvement process.

According to Beyer and Johnson (2005), “the role of the school leader in the administration of special education programs has become more complex and multifaceted” (p. 53). Beyer and Johnson (2005) explain that the role of the school principal with special education programming must include: (a) appropriation of necessary space and resources; (b) participation in IEP meetings; (c) supervision of special education personnel; (d) management of student programming; (e) knowledge of legal and ethical practices in special education programming; (f) implementation of current best practices; (g) creation of a supportive and accepting environment between all stakeholders; (h) supervision of the referral, eligibility, and placement process for students requiring specialized services; and (i) leadership skills especially in the areas of relationship-forming, problem-solving methods, conflict resolution, and outsourcing for expertise and assistance. Beyer

and Johnson's research confirmed earlier findings by Schroth and Littleton (2001) who noted that "supervision of special education required that the building principal make arrangements for appropriate facilities, juggle schedules, ensure paperwork is completed correctly and on time, supervise and evaluate teachers, discipline students and attend IEP meetings" (p.17).

Another key component school administrators face in their role as instructional leaders is shaping and building a positive school culture for special education teachers and students (Billingsley, 2005). School principals' own leadership skills and instructional practices are essential in building and maintaining an environment that is conducive for successful special education programming (Sage & Burello, 1994). Additionally, McLaughlin and Nolet (2004) state:

### 3.4

Today's school administrator must be a leader who promotes the success of all students, including those with disabilities, by facilitating the development and implementation of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by the school community. . . . Principals need to ensure that special education students, teachers, and services are fully integrated into the vision and the ongoing operations of their school. (p. 81)

The Council for Exceptional Children (2001) indicated also that a strong instructional leader is required to:

### 3.5

Ensure that all children and their teachers receive the supports and services they need to learn and develop. . . . And, it takes a strong instructional leader to create a positive learning climate that embodies a unifying philosophy of respect for all children and all stakeholders in the total school community. (p. 6)

In summary, it is the role of the school principal to be the instructional leader to both general and special education teachers. Research indicates that although principals are not necessarily prepared to be the instructional leader to special education teachers, in the wake of legislation and school reform, it is critical that they assume this responsibility to ensure program effectiveness and student achievement.

## 4 Problems and Purposes

As school districts are becoming more accountable to all students, it is important to understand the key responsibilities of school principals in providing instructional leadership to special education. One important perspective is that of principals themselves.

As a result, this study was conducted to explore, understand, and analyze elementary principals' perceptions of their: (a) knowledge of special education, and (b) instructional leadership involvement with special education teachers. The aim of this study was to describe how principals rate their knowledge of special education and view their instructional leadership role with special education teachers.

The broad question examined was: To what extent do elementary school principals understand and incorporate knowledge of special education into their instructional leadership role?

## 5 The Research Study

### 5.1 Context and participants.

This study included 132 elementary (including pre-kindergarten and kindergarten) school principals in one county in Illinois. It did not include school principals who managed grade level configurations exclusive to grades 5 through 8.

All elementary principals in the county were sent the web-based survey with a cover letter requesting their participation. Of the 132 principals contacted, 56 usable questionnaires were returned. Of those, 66% of the participants reported serving in the role of principal from one to eight years. Approximately 22% had 9 to 12 years of experience. The other respondents had 13 or more years of principal experience.

All respondents had master's degrees, with approximately 16% holding a certificate of advanced study and almost 9% holding a doctoral degree. In addition, 25% were certified to teach special education. Most of the principals had school enrollments between 301 and 600 students. Almost 11% worked in school settings with fewer than 300 students with the remaining principals, approximately 23%, having school enrollments of more than 600. Almost half of the principals reported that no other administrative support was available to them within their schools.

## 5.2 Questionnaire.

Scheuren (2004) describes a survey as a method of gathering information from a group of individuals in a quick, efficient manner that provides basic scientific knowledge. While surveys can have a variety of purposes and be conducted through various means, well-designed surveys relate to a specific purpose, pledge confidentiality to their participants, and use standardized information collection procedures therein leading to appropriate and accurate data gathering and reporting. The objective of the researcher implementing the survey is to compile and analyze the data precisely to ensure that the survey is reflective of truthful statistical information and not a product of predetermined results (Scheuren, 2004).

In reviewing various survey methods, it was determined that a web-based survey would be an appropriate instrument to collect data. Because all participants were known to have access to computers and the Internet, the survey was conducted online to ensure collection of data quickly and conveniently and to reduce associated data error. In addition, an online survey provides greater anonymity, leading participants to answer questions more honestly (Ritter & Sue, 2007).

The survey was constructed to assess principals' knowledge of special education and to determine the frequency that principals practice instructional leadership behaviors with special education teachers. After the survey instrument was validated with three former principals familiar with special education, the instrument and procedures were approved by the university Institutional Review Board.

Principals responded to a 41-item electronic survey with accompanying open-ended questions. The instrument contained four distinct sections. Part I requested specific demographic detail from the respondent, including professional information and school facts. Part II measured the principal's knowledge of legal, foundational, and contextual aspects of special education. It required principals to rate their knowledge of various aspects of special education. The scale consisted of five levels of knowledge ranging from "limited" to "excellent." Part III measured the frequency that principals said they engaged in specific instructional leadership behaviors with special education teachers. The scale contained five frequency levels ranging from "never" to "always." Part IV consisted of open-ended questions that probed principals' perceptions of their role with special education teachers.

## 5.3 Data collection.

The study, which was completed during fall, 2009, employed a web-based survey method for data collection. Elementary principals were emailed a cover letter which included contact information for the researchers and a link to the web-based survey.

## 5.4 Data analysis.

Quantitative survey data were analyzed using Microsoft Excel 2003 to obtain frequencies and percentages of closed-end responses. Open-ended question responses were recorded verbatim. Data were analyzed through data reduction, display, conclusion creation, and triangulation to identify trends resulting in development of conclusions (McMillan & Wergin, 2006). While this process does not guarantee reliability and validity, it provided "dependable results" Guba & Lincoln, 1981, p. 146. Finally, any substantial differences related to inter-data analysis based on demographic factors were noted.

## 6 Results

### 6.1 Knowledge of special education.

In Part II of the survey, principals were asked to indicate their level of knowledge of various special education aspects. Respondents indicated their level of knowledge using a scale of 1=limited, 2=modest, 3=average, 4=good, and 5=excellent. Items were categorized into three knowledge categories: legal, foundation (activities related to ensuring an effective model of service provision to students with disabilities), and context (research or evidence-based curriculum that aligns with state standards and is appropriate to individual student needs). Table 1 illustrates the compiled results by indicator, item description, and mean.

Based upon the reported data, principals rated all areas of knowledge between a mean span of 3.43 through 4.32 thereby falling within the “average” to “good” range. Principals rated themselves highest in knowledge of their district’s RtI plan (4.32). This may be because RtI is currently a popular education initiative that is a pre-requisite to special education eligibility. Knowledge of their district’s related services delivery model (4.30) as well as their district’s continuum of services (4.28) and parents’ role in the IEP process (4.28) followed closely. The three lowest rated areas were in (a) development of a program improvement plan for special education (3.43), (b) knowledge of state learning standards for students with disabilities (3.55), and (c) knowledge of special education rules and regulations contained in the Illinois Administrative Code (3.57).

Table 1

*Principals’ Mean Ratings of Special Education Knowledge by Item Description*



Indicator	Mean
Item Description	
Please rate your knowledge of:	
<b>Legal</b>	
i. <i>Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)</i>	3.96
j. Special education provisions in the <i>No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)</i>	3.77
k. Components of the Rehabilitation Act (Section 504) that effect public schools	3.81
l. Components of the <i>Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)</i> that effect public schools	3.72
m. Special education rules and regulations contained in the Illinois Administrative Code	3.57
o. Your district's Response to Intervention (RtI) plan	4.32
<b>Foundation</b>	
d. How to accommodate for the academic needs for students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment	4.15
h. Parents' role in developing the IEP	4.28
n. Your district's special education continuum from least to most restrictive	4.28
p. Your district's educational placement procedure for special education	4.23
q. Your district's disciplinary interventions and supports for students with disabilities, such as functional behavior assessments, behavior intervention plans, and manifestation determinations	4.04
r. Your district's related services delivery model (social work, speech, occupational therapy, etc.)	4.30
<b>Context</b>	
a. State learning standards for students with disabilities	3.55
b. Most effective instructional practices for students with disabilities	3.87
c. Academic assessments for students with disabilities	3.60
e. How to design curriculum for students with disabilities	3.58
f. How to develop a plan for program improvement in special education	3.43
g. How student IEPs are evaluated by staff in your school	4.09

By utilizing survey demographics from Part I of the survey, further analyses yielded two interesting findings. First, principals who had additional administrative support, such as a co-principal, assistant principal, special education coordinator, or lead teacher (29 of the 56 respondents), reported higher knowledge on all item descriptions than principals with no additional administrative support. By narrowing the demographics further, data indicated that principals who had additional administrative support also tended to have longer tenure in the principalship. Hence, while principals with additional administrative support rated themselves

<sup>2</sup><http://cnx.org/content/m37402/latest/table1.PNG/image>

higher in knowledge of special education, they also tended to have more experience. Second, principals who held state special education certificates (25%) rated themselves higher on all other items except the district’s Response to Intervention (RtI) plan. Interestingly, 85% of those principals with special education certification also had additional administrative support.

Table 2 provides mean comparisons by the following groupings: all principals, principals with and without additional administrative support, and state special education certification.

Based upon the reported data, all principals’ indicator ratings were at least in the “average” range. All participants rated their knowledge highest in the foundation area just above legal and context. These same groups, with the exception of those with state special education certification, rated themselves lowest in context knowledge as opposed to legal knowledge. While the principals with state special education certification also rated themselves highest in foundation knowledge, they reported a slightly better understanding of context than legal knowledge. In general, principals with state special education certification rated themselves higher than those without state special education certification.

Table 2  
*Principals’ Mean Ratings of Special Education Knowledge by Group and Indicator*

Indicator	All	Administrative Support		State special education certification	
		With	Without	With	Without
Legal	3.86	4.03	3.66	4.13	3.76
Foundation	4.21	4.33	4.10	4.44	4.13
Context	3.69	3.83	3.52	4.20	3.50

In comparing the means between the two subgroups of administrative support and special education certification, two differences were noted. First, principals with and without administrative support had mean differences ranging from .23 (foundation indicator) to .37 (legal indicator). However, the mean differences for principals with and without special education certification ranged from .31 (foundation indicator) to .70 (context indicator). This indicates that principals with special education certification perceive themselves to be more knowledgeable about their special education leadership role.

Research studies show that most principals have minimal special education preparation before assuming their administrative positions (Billingsley, 2005; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Bargerhuff, 2001). Results of this portion of the study indicate that participants noted their personal knowledge to be higher than elementary principals in general. Differences between this study and current research may be related to the recent emphasis on Response to Intervention as a pre-requisite to special education eligibility. It may also be the result of survey bias, whereby participants provided responses that were politically correct instead of representative of their actual practices.

**6.2 Instructional leadership with special education teachers.**

To explore further principals’ perceptions of their involvement as instructional leaders with special education teachers, principals were asked in Part III of the survey to indicate their level of involvement in specific in-

<sup>3</sup><http://cnx.org/content/m37402/latest/table2.PNG/image>

structional leadership activities with special education teachers. Respondents rated their level of involvement on a scale of 1=never, 2=seldom, 3=often, 4=frequently, and 5=always. Table 3 presents the mean response rates by indicator area and item description.

Principals rated their involvement highest in conducting formal evaluations (4.55). Hiring teachers and making classroom visits followed closely (4.32 each). Participants' lowest ratings included (a) annual attendance at professional development opportunities pertaining to special education legal issues (2.89), (b) monitoring alignment of IEPs to state learning standards (3.17), and (c) planning program improvement for special education programs and services (3.17).

Table 3

*Principals' Mean Ratings of Special Education Knowledge by Item Description*

Indicator	Mean
Item Description	
Indicate your level of involvement in:	Mean
<b>Legal</b>	
a. Hiring special education teachers	4.32
b. Monitoring student IEPs	3.49
e. Monitoring the implementation of federal and state special education requirements	3.32
f. Attending annually professional development related to legal issues in special education	2.89
g. Attending pre-referral meetings of the school-based service team	4.02
<b>Foundation</b>	
c. Attending annual IEP meetings for individual students	3.96
d. Reviewing annually special education workload assignments to ensure an adequate amount of staff is retained	3.66
h. Encouraging parents of students with disabilities to participate in school functions	4.17
i. Conducting formal evaluations of special education teachers	4.55
k. Monitoring alignment of IEPs to state learning standards	3.17
<b>Context</b>	
j. Arranging monthly activities that build collegiality between special and general education staff	3.70
l. Planning program improvement for special education programs and services	3.17
m. Making weekly informal visits to special education classrooms	4.32
n. Attending team meetings with special education staff to discuss concerns	4.15
o. Monitoring special education curriculum to ensure that it is research- or evidence-based	3.42

4

The range of principals' overall mean scores for individual items was 2.89 to 4.55, which fell between the "seldom" and "always" rating ranges. The difference between the highest and lowest item mean score was 1.66, indicating a wide range of reported principal involvement. In fact, the range in the mean involvement score was almost twice that of knowledge (.89). This wide variance of principals' perceptions of their knowledge and actual involvement may indicate that they are not applying this knowledge in their daily practices as instructional leaders with special education teachers.

In addition to the analysis of the mean data per item, data were analyzed by demographic factors to identify any unique differences. First, principals who reported that they had no additional administrative

<sup>4</sup><http://cnx.org/content/m37402/latest/table3.PNG/image>

support rated two survey items higher than those principals with additional administrative support. The principals without additional administrative support were more likely to attend individual student annual IEP meetings (by a mean difference of .45) and attend team meetings with special education staff (by a mean difference of .32). While at first glance it may appear that principals without additional administrative support more frequently attend these meeting, those with administrative support more likely ensure representation by delegating these tasks.

A second finding was that principals with administrative support attend professional development sessions on legal issues in special education more frequently than those without. A mean discrepancy of .92 was noted between principals who do and do not have additional administrative support. As novice or less experienced principals tend not to have additional administrative support (20%), data suggest that these principals are not regularly engaging in this task.

A third finding was that principals with state special education certification rated themselves higher in all areas of involvement with special education teachers than principals without this certification. This could indicate that when principals also hold state special education certification, they are more likely to seek involvement with the special education teachers within their schools.

Table 4 reports the mean comparisons by groupings of all principals, principals with and without additional administrative support, and principals with and without state special education certification.

Table 4  
*Principals’ Mean Ratings of Special Education Knowledge by Group and Indicator*

Indicator	All	Administrative support		State special education certification	
		With	Without	With	Without
Legal	3.61	3.78	3.41	3.92	3.62
Foundation	3.90	3.91	3.90	4.16	3.81
Context	3.75	3.85	3.64	4.02	3.66

Interestingly, all groupings of principals rated their involvement in the same order. Principals indicated their involvement was highest in the foundation area followed by the context area. Principals rated themselves lowest in involvement within the legal area. However, all areas were rated in the “often” or higher range.

In comparing the means between the indicators for the two subgroups, differences were noted. The greatest difference was between principals with and without administrative support. The mean differences ranged from .01 (foundation indicator) to .37 (legal indicator). However, the mean differences for principals with and without special education certification was more stable with a range of .30 (legal indicator) to .36 (context indicator).

When comparing the indicator and mean information for the knowledge and involvement statements for all principals, “knowledge” in both legal and foundation areas were rated higher than “involvement.” However, principals rated themselves higher in “involvement” as opposed to “knowledge” in context. This finding is interesting because these responses indicate that principals acknowledged engaging in tasks without having the necessary knowledge.

<sup>5</sup><http://cnx.org/content/m37402/latest/table4.PNG/image>

A closer examination of subgroup data shows that principals with and without administrative support rated their knowledge and involvement in legal and context indicators similarly with comparable mean differences. However, in the foundation area, there was a .22 mean difference between knowledge and involvement. This indicates that principals with administrative support tended to rate their knowledge higher than their counterparts, while their levels of involvement were nearly identical.

A somewhat similar finding occurred between the principals with and without special education certification. While the overall mean differences for knowledge and involvement in legal and foundation indicators were consistent, a difference was noted between knowledge and involvement in the context area (.34). Hence, while a major difference was noted in the context indicator of knowledge (.70), principals with special education certification rated their involvement at a lower mean than their knowledge than principals without special education certification.

### 6.3 Open-ended survey question.

In Part IV of the survey, principals were asked the following open-ended question, “What do you perceive as your primary responsibilities with special educators?” Principals provided a total of 96 responses. Participant responses were categorized within 12 themes and are listed by frequency of response in Table 5.

Table 5  
*Principals’ Report of Primary Responsibilities with Special Educators*

Rank Order	Category	%
1	Administrative support	22.91
2	Student instruction and achievement	16.67
3	Resource dispersion	13.54
4	Creating a positive school culture	9.37
5	Involvement with parents	8.33
6	Legal compliance	6.26
6	Delivery of instruction	6.26
6	Professional development	6.26
9	Assignment of an appropriate workload	4.16
10	Hiring	3.12
11	Data collection and analysis	2.08
12	Response to Intervention (RTI)	1.04
	<b>Total</b>	<b>100.00</b>

6

Of the 96 responses, 22.9% identified administrative support as the primary responsibility of a principal’s role with special education teachers. “Administrative support” was defined as guidance, supervision, communication, and evaluation. In addition, 16.7% of the participants reported that student instruction and achievement were primary responsibilities while 13.5% said resource dispersion. While all other primary responsibilities were recorded, each was cited at less than 10% by the participants.

While many participants provided a general listing of responsibilities, others wrote detailed narratives, including several principals who noted that their responsibilities are the same with special and general education teachers. One such statement was, “My primary responsibilities with special educators are the same as with general educators – to ensure that a quality educational program is delivered to students in an equitable and just manner.”

Another wrote:

<sup>6</sup><http://cnx.org/content/m37402/latest/table5.PNG/image>

### 6.3.1

The same as with all certified staff; making sure caseloads are within limits, making sure teachers have materials for curriculum and interventions, making sure those programs are research based, monitoring student progress, [and] provide weekly scheduled time for collaboration with regular education teachers.

Other principals responded specifically to their role with special education teachers. One respondent stated:

### 6.3.2

My primary responsibilities include hiring, evaluating, and supporting special educators. I ensure that lines of communication between special educators and classroom teachers stay open and mutually respectful. I help them with their school-home communications and sit in on difficult meetings with parents. I attend the weekly special education meetings that cover discussions about students at all parts of the special education testing continuum.

In comparing responses in Parts II and III of the electronic survey with Part IV (the open-ended questions), one important difference was evident. The types of instructional leadership tasks were mentioned less frequently in Part IV of the survey. Greater percentage results were anticipated in all instructional leadership responsibilities in Part IV as principals had previously rated their involvement from a menu of activities in Part III.

Three conclusions can be made to explain these results. First, the structure of the survey may have discouraged more responses because respondents thought that this question was asking for activities in addition to those already presented. Second, the length of the survey may have limited written responses. Third, since other administrative resources are available to the principal within some schools to assist with administrative duties, principals themselves may not be as directly engaged in tasks with special education teachers since they may have been delegated to other administrators.

While job descriptions for additional administrative support positions were not obtained from survey or interview respondents, comments such as “building principals support the special ed [education] teachers through our lead teachers,” “we have a special education director who basically facilitates all that [meetings and trainings],” and “our district is fortunate in that we have some administrative people that are involved directly with our special education staff” were obtained through the study. As a result, it was reasonable to conclude that some responsibilities are delegated to various staff by the principal.

## 7 Discussion

In analyzing demographic data, two primary patterns were noted. On the one hand, some school districts provided principals with access to additional administrative support at their buildings. While this additional support took on various forms such as co-principal, assistant principal, special education coordinator, and lead teacher, it was slightly more than 50% of the survey participants and most of those interviewed who reported having some level of additional support. These principals commented positively on the use of additional administrative assistance in supplementing support to special education teachers. However, this practice runs contrary to state regulations and researched best practices, which require that the building principal is to act as the instructional leader. In some instances, data suggest that the use of additional administrative support allows the principal to be less engaged with special education teachers. Further research is needed in this area to offer more substantive insight into the use and effectiveness of additional administrative assistance with special education teachers. Of note, however, is that the data analysis showed that principals with additional administrative support also tended to have longer tenure in their positions, which provided them with increased opportunities to expand their knowledge and experience.

In addition, approximately 25% of the principals held state special education certification. Several principals indicated through their survey comments that because of additional certification, they were better prepared to support their special education programs and teachers. Interestingly, approximately 85% of those with special education certification also reported having access to additional administrative support.

Data show that principals who hold special education certification perceive themselves to have greater knowledge of special education and say they are more involved in special education than even those with additional administrative support. These findings indicate possibly that when principals hold state special education certification and have access to additional administrative assistance, they tend to provide greater support to special education teachers.

These two patterns were useful in identifying differences in participant responses. These will be discussed further under the analysis of individual research questions.

### **7.1 Principal knowledge.**

A primary finding was that principals tended to rate themselves between “average” to “good” in their overall knowledge of special education. Operationally, principals indicated that they were most knowledgeable about their district’s RtI plan. Special education fundamentals such as the district’s related service delivery system, continuum of placements, and parents’ involvement in the special education process followed closely. Principals were least knowledgeable about how to develop a plan for program improvement for special education, state learning standards, and special education rules and regulations contained in the Illinois Administrative Code. In analyzing the knowledge data by indicators, principals overall rated themselves highest in the foundation area, just above legal, leaving context with the lowest rating.

Interestingly, principals with special education certification also rated their knowledge in the foundation area highest. They indicated a slightly better understanding of context knowledge over legal. As one would anticipate, principals who held state special education certification rated themselves higher in knowledge than any other sub-group.

As indicated above, principals rated themselves relatively high in their knowledge of special education. The highest-rated item in Part II of the survey, knowledge of a district’s RtI plan, may have impacted the higher-than-expected overall ratings. Response to Intervention (RtI) is defined as “the practice of providing high-quality instruction and interventions matched to student need, monitoring progress frequently to make decisions about changes in instruction or goals, and applying child response data to important education decisions” (Batsche, Elliot, Graden, Grimes, Kovalski, Prasse, Reschly, Schrag, & Tilly, 2005, p. 5).

In Illinois, the state has enacted rules and regulations that require school districts to develop Response to Intervention processes for implementation beginning with the 2010-2011 school year. Since RtI is both a district and school-wide initiative, staff and administrators have had to work collaboratively to devise an RtI process that integrates curriculum, assessment, and intervention to maximize student academic and behavioral achievement before consideration of special education services, particularly for the learning disability classification. Because of the interconnection between RtI and special education and the expectation to implement it, administrators may have rated themselves more knowledgeable in special education than they might have otherwise. Hence, it is likely that the findings in this study demonstrate administrators’ increased knowledge in special education as a result of the training and collaboration in constructing an RtI process. This finding must be viewed with caution as RtI is only a “bridge” between general and special education services. While some special education aspects were examined to ensure a smooth, seamless transition and process between general and special education programming, many special education aspects were not explored by principals, as they did not relate to the RtI process.

### **7.2 Principal preparation and training.**

Principals rated themselves lowest on the survey in familiarity with creating a plan for program development in special education, understanding state learning standards for students with disabilities, and designing a curriculum for special education instruction. Interviewed principals substantiated this finding by noting that training in interventions, strategies, and techniques utilized in special education programs would be of most benefit to them as school leaders. Training in the legal and foundation areas was suggested, though to a lesser extent.

As mentioned previously, surveyed principals who held state special education certification (25%) felt better prepared to support their special education programs and special education teachers. As a result,



school districts should provide district-supported training for the remaining administrators. This professional development should be specific, on-going, and related to special education.

### 7.3 Principal involvement.

Another important finding was that principals rated themselves overall between “seldom” and “always” in their involvement with special education teachers. Operationally, principals indicated that they were most involved in conducting formal evaluations, hiring teachers, and making classroom visits. The lowest-rated activities were attending annual professional development sessions pertaining to special education legal issues, monitoring alignment of IEPs to state learning standards, and planning program improvement for special education programs and services.

In analyzing the data by specific item description and demographic factors, principals without additional administrative support indicated greater attendance at annual IEP meetings (a mean difference of .45) and team meetings with special education staff (a mean difference of .32) than principals with additional support. While it may appear that principals without additional administrative support are more likely to attend these activities, this may be primarily a function of task delegation. In addition, data show that those with additional administrative support were more likely to attend professional conferences on special education legal issues.

In analyzing the data by type of involvement, it was noted that all sub-groups ranked involvement highest on the foundation indicator and lowest on legal. Specifically, principals indicated high involvement in teacher evaluation, parent involvement, and IEP attendance in the foundation area. Low ratings for the legal area were noted in attending annually special education legal professional development, monitoring the implementation of federal and state special education requirements, and monitoring student IEPs. As anticipated, principals who reported having a state special education certificate rated themselves higher in involvement with special education teachers than any other sub-group. This supports the premise that when principals hold special education certification, they are more likely to be better prepared to service their special education programs and support their special education teachers.

Of importance, however, is the mean difference of 1.66 between the highest and lowest rating in involvement activities. This range is almost twice that of the knowledge section, indicating a wide range of principal involvement. Three conclusions could be drawn.

One is that principals truly do not possess the special education knowledge necessary to engage in activities with special education teachers, which may have resulted in inflated knowledge ratings. Second, even though principals reported knowledge, they are not applying it in their daily interactions with special education teachers. Third, some principals have the knowledge but are not engaging regularly in activities as they are delegating these tasks to others within their building. Participants indicated that administrative-level staff, besides the principal, is conducting such activities. This finding runs contrary to Illinois law, which states that the principal should be the instructional leader to all teachers (Illinois Association of School Boards, 2010, section 105 ILCS 5/10-21.4a). Further research would be helpful in this area to determine the effectiveness of other administrative-level staff, besides the principal, who engages in instructional leadership responsibilities with general or special education teachers.

Additional analyses were completed to determine any other explanations for the relatively scattered ratings. As mentioned previously, RtI is mandated in Illinois for the 2010-2011 school year. Therefore, school districts are engaging in developing and implementing RtI systems. However, school districts are at various RtI implementation stages, which may account for a portion of the spread in mean ratings.

### 7.4 Data from open-ended question on survey.

To understand more thoroughly how principals are involved with special education teachers, participants were asked to complete an open-ended survey question about their primary responsibilities with special education teachers. A total of 96 responses were received. Approximately one-quarter of the responses related to administrative support such as guidance, supervision, communication, and evaluation. Less than 20% of the responses were associated with student instruction and achievement.

Interestingly, several principals indicated that their responsibilities with special education teachers were similar to those with general education teachers. While some reported general responses for both groups, such as providing support, leadership, and feedback, others cited specific responsibilities, such as making classroom assignments, ensuring appropriate curriculum materials and quality instruction, and monitoring student progress. This finding was interesting, as special education is structured differently, with multi-grade levels supported in each classroom, an assortment of methodologies utilized based upon student need, and a multitude of support staff coordinating services. Hence, to conclude that the duties of a principal are similar for general and special education teachers appears inaccurate. Although these responses were intriguing, it was not the focus of this study, and the findings were not investigated further.

### **7.5 Comparison of principal knowledge and involvement.**

Overall, knowledge in the foundation and legal indicators was rated higher by almost all sub-groups. The only exception was with principals who held state special education certification; they rated knowledge in the context area slightly higher than legal. However, all groupings of principals rated their involvement in the same order. Principals indicated their involvement was highest in the foundation area, followed by the context area. Principals rated themselves lowest in involvement within the legal area. Overall, principals indicated that both their knowledge and involvement were strongest in the foundation indicator.

Principals with additional administrative support reported higher ratings in both knowledge and involvement areas than those principals without additional administrative support. Moreover, principals who reported holding a state special education certificate rated themselves higher in both knowledge and involvement than any other sub-group. Not surprisingly, this may indicate that principals with special education certification perceive themselves to be more knowledgeable about their special education leadership role and more likely to seek involvement with the special education teachers within their schools.

A closer examination of subgroup data shows that principals with and without administrative support rated their knowledge and involvement in legal and context indicators similarly with comparable mean differences. However, in the foundation area, there was a .22 mean difference between knowledge and involvement. This indicates that principals with administrative support tend to rate themselves higher in the knowledge area than their counterparts, while their levels of involvement were nearly identical.

Similarly, principals with and without special education certification perceived themselves to have comparable knowledge and involvement in the legal and foundation indicators; however, a difference was noted in the context area. Principals with special education certification rated their knowledge substantially higher (.70) than those without, but noted a lower involvement level. Principals without special education certification reported their involvement slightly higher than their knowledge. This may indicate that principals with special education certification are not making full use of their knowledge. On the other hand, it may also indicate that principals without special education certification are engaging in activities without the necessary knowledge.

## **8 Implications for Practice**

This study provides valuable information which institutions of higher learning, school districts, superintendents, and principals can use to increase the likelihood of elementary principals providing effective instructional leadership with special education teachers.

- To increase special education teacher retention, future administrators should be required to complete additional graduate courses and field work in special education. Hence, institutions of higher learning should structure their administrative program course requirements to include instruction and experiences related to the field of special education based upon the redesigned framework. This would provide future administrators with opportunities to develop increased knowledge and skills prior to entering the principalship position. If, however, principals graduate from administrative preparation programs where special education knowledge and involvement were not stressed, further professional development by the district should be emphasized.

- Principals should be required by their superintendents to attend professional workshops annually that address instructional leadership responsibilities with special education teachers to ensure they are current with legal, foundation, and context knowledge and to engage in tasks with the necessary knowledge.
- Less-experienced principals should receive initial intensive legal training related to special education to prepare them for their management and instructional leadership responsibilities.
- Districts should recruit principal candidates who hold special education certification and utilize the final framework as a guide in the interview process.
- Districts should provide additional administrative support to principals to increase their involvement in special education.
- School districts should develop and implement staff exit interview procedures to collect more accurate attrition data. This will provide school administrators with information as to why attrition occurs and identify factors that may influence staff retention. Information should be used to analyze the attrition issue with the goal to improve teacher retention rates.

## 9 Limitations of the Study

Caution should be exercised in drawing conclusions from this study due to the following limitations:

1. The sample size was small (n=56). Therefore, the results are specific to those who participated in this study and cannot be generalized to other settings.
2. The validity of the survey and interview data was limited to the respondents' interpretation of special education terminology.
3. Since respondents were principals of elementary districts in one Illinois county, it is possible that elementary principals in other counties and states may have responded differently.
4. Because respondents were only elementary principals, middle level and high school principals may have responded differently.
5. Because the number of principals who participated in follow-up interviews was small, their responses only reflect their perceptions and cannot be generalized to a larger context.
6. Because several of the interviewed principals were known to the researcher, they may have provided less accurate descriptions because of lack of anonymity.
7. Surveyed principals may not have precisely answered the first open-ended question because they had answered similar questions in the forced-choice portion of the survey.
8. Surveyed and interviewed principals may have provided responses that were politically correct instead of actual practice, thereby producing a bias.

Additional replication of this study in a similar setting with broader samples before transfer of findings may be possible.

## 10 Summary

Over the past 35 years, special education has evolved from guaranteeing an education to students with disabilities, to ensuring students a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment with access to the general curriculum. As school districts are expected to be increasingly accountable for ensuring that students with disabilities succeed, so too are the expectations for principals to be the instructional leader for all teachers in their schools.

This study was designed to explore, understand, and analyze elementary principals' knowledge of special education as well as how they incorporate this knowledge into their leadership role. The study provided valuable information that both institutions of higher learning, which prepare principals, and school district superintendents, who employ principals, can use to help ensure that elementary principals provide instructional leadership to special education teachers.

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