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EXAMINING THE BELIEFS AND PRACTICES OF EFFECTIVE SCHOOL LEADERS AS THEY RELATE TO SERVING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

by

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Spring Term
2010

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ABSTRACT

As academic reform movements push schools to provide more rigorous learning environments for students, it is essential that the “person in charge” at the school level be prepared and capable of meeting the demands of high stakes measures that affect critical dimensions of school life. Educational leaders today face a significant amount of pressure to improve the quality of education at all levels and across all disciplines. While school leaders face the pressures of No Child Left Behind in terms of increased student performance, they must also be concerned about serving students with disabilities appropriately. The purpose of this study was to examine the beliefs and practices that effective school leaders in a large urban school district revealed in the specific area of serving students with disabilities. An examination of the school leader’s beliefs and knowledge in relation to the leadership practices put in place at their schools when serving students with disabilities was completed. Identification of a relationship between the leader’s beliefs and practices as associated with the leader’s prior education and leadership experience was possible. Finally, through a grounded theory perspective, the researcher discovered specific practices put in place by these effective school leaders that can be generalized to other school settings under fellow school leaders.
This dissertation is dedicated to the many beautiful and talented women in my life who have provided amazing examples of what it means to be Godly women, dedicated mothers, committed professionals, and precious friends. To Mom, Kelly, Aunt Christine, Claudia, Tammy, Jane, Michele, Brooke, Shirley, Jeanette, Maria, and Martha: thank you for your prayers, encouragement, laughter, support and love. You’re the best!

To my daughter, Kelsey Kay; know that you have been the number one reason that I have pursued this doctoral degree and the motivation behind everything I do in life. I am blessed beyond measure to have you and I hope that you will one day experience the kind of love that only a mother knows and that I have in my heart for you. This serves as proof that no matter the obstacles you face, anything is possible with the dedication and steadfastness that lies within us.

You are my true inspiration. I love you babe.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would first like to acknowledge Dr. Suzanne Martin and thank her for her vision in forming the National Urban Special Education Leadership Initiative. Without you and this program none of this would be possible. Thank you for your passion for serving students with disabilities and their families, as well as your belief in the power of educational leaders and the support systems that maintain us. Most importantly, thank you for your diligence and dedication to the people and world around you including the perseverance you demonstrate in pushing systems forward no matter how many obstacles come your way. I am grateful to learn from you, honored to work with you, and blessed to call you friend.

I would also like to acknowledge the other members of NUSELI. Mark, Margaret, Millie, Ilene, Anna, Tom, Karen, Martha, Maria, Gabe, Bruce and Lorrie; you are amazing individuals in your own right and we are mighty powerful as a group. I’ve enjoyed the long Saturdays, trips to Boston and Louisville, what seemed like thousands of presentations, discussions and most of all the laughter we have shared over the last 5 years. When we’re ALL done we need to have one big party!

Thank you to Dr. Cindy Kiffer. Our meetings at Starbuck’s, your willingness to read (and re-read) my chapters and your warming smile has meant the world to me while being a reliable support for me in this process. Thank you for being a wonderful mentor.
Lastly, I must recognize my family--Mom, Dad, Kevin, Kelly, Kyle, Kelsey, Kreighton and Kannon. Thank you, thank you, thank you for providing me with the foundation to support my dreams and the constant encouragement to work hard. Regardless of anything else in my life you are the one thing I can always count on for refuge. God has blessed us with a strong unit that sticks together, loves each other, enjoys each other, laughs together and constantly wants the best for each other. Many families can’t say that these days and I am so very appreciative of the fact that I can. I love you all more than I’ll ever be able to express and I thank you for just being you!
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Across the United States, school district leaders face the challenge of increasing the numbers of highly qualified principals who can meet the demands of closing achievement gaps and raising student achievement (Goor, Schwenn, & Boyer, 1997; Shellard, 2003; Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2006; Whitaker, 2006). Peter Litchka (2007) supports the need for current and future school leaders to possess the knowledge and skills to lead our schools and school districts in a manner so that all children can achieve and be successful. School leaders who can effectively address challenges posed by current legislation while meeting the needs of a variety of students are essential in moving the core of America’s education system forward if America is going to succeed.

A strong need for change is indicated by the following statement (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005):

At no time in recent memory has the need for effective and inspired leadership been more pressing than it is today. With the increasing needs in our society and in the workplace for knowledgeable, skilled, and responsible citizens, the pressure on schools intensifies. The expectation that no child be left behind in a world and economy will require everyone’s best is not likely to subside (p. 123).

The call for qualified and prepared school leaders is a theme that has always been at the forefront of school leadership training programs at both the university and school district level. Some research indicates a belief that the role of the school leader should be composed of an equal and complementing balance between instructional leadership and managerial responsibilities.
(Shellard, 2003). However, research also raises doubt about the content of school leadership preparation programs and the reality that many vary in their level of focus in developing effective school leaders who function as school site managers and quality instructional leaders (Hess, Kelly, & Harvard Univ, 2005; Levine, 2005).

Current legislation under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) requires states to administer assessments within their individual school districts to measure the performance outcomes of students. NCLB mandates that schools are responsible for ensuring that all students are proficient in reading and math by 2014. NCLB requires each school to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) on state standards for all students including those considered at risk and identified in eight subgroups: White, Black, Hispanic, Asian, American Indian, Economically Disadvantaged, English Language Learners and Students with Disabilities. One of these subgroups, students with disabilities, is often the most challenging in making AYP for almost all schools (Zirkel, Jones, & Barrack, 2007).

As academic reform movements push schools to provide more rigorous learning environments for students, it is essential that the “person in charge” at the school level be prepared and capable of meeting the demands of high stakes measures that affect critical dimensions of school life. Educational leaders today face a significant amount of pressure to improve the quality of education at all levels and across all disciplines. In an environment of increased accountability created by policymakers at federal, state and local levels, meeting the demands for higher levels of student achievement is a challenge (Litchka, 2007). These increased levels of accountability stemming from the federal level and flowing down to the individual student’s level can lead to higher degrees of anxiety for students as they seek to
understand the academic demands and requirements placed on them. Consequently, American students in today’s education system face the trials and pressure of meeting high academic achievement and behavioral performance levels (Cawelti, 2003). To assist students in decreasing stress levels as well as assist teachers in preparing students to meet rigorous learning goals, effective principals must be both capable instructional leaders and skilled site-based managers (Shellard, 2003). As NCLB pushes for unprecedented levels of student achievement, the need for school leaders who are focused on instruction and increased student performance are critical (Olson, 2007).

While school leaders face the pressures of NCLB in terms of increased student performance, they must also be concerned about serving students with disabilities appropriately. In 1975, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (Public Law 94-142) was enacted by congress as a supportive measure for states and localities to meet the needs and protect the rights of students with disabilities and their families. As a response to parental and educator concerns over the lack of support services for children with disabilities and their exclusion from school, PL 94-142 was reenacted as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1997 by the United States Congress. Reauthorized again in 2004 as the Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Education Act, this law is commonly referred to as IDEA 2004. Revisions for IDEA 2004 included requirements for academic achievement as well as the functional performance levels of children with disabilities that were in concordance with state and federal accountability guidelines as set forth in NCLB (Handler, 2006; "The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act," 2007; Smith, 2005). Key components including analyzing performance data of children with disabilities in order to ensure this subgroup’s attainment of Adequate Yearly
Progress (AYP) and the requirements for highly qualified teachers as defined in NCLB were also added to the new IDEA. Because of the high demands and finite details of meeting the needs of students with disabilities in our schools and in order to prepare them for success in society, school leaders must be acutely aware of the measures associated with providing services appropriately for these students.

Statement of the Problem

The fact that principals can be removed from school leadership positions as a result of not meeting annual performance goals as outlined in NCLB supports the notion that, for today’s school leaders, there is no doubt that the stakes are high (Quinn, 2005). School leaders, especially new ones, are stressed and overwhelmed with doubt and angst if and when they are faced with situations for which they have not been previously prepared (F. Brown, 2005). For many outside the field of education, a perception exists that one of the problems with public schools is the institutions of education where our leaders are prepared, thus undermining the credibility and influence of these settings (Murphy, 2006). Because school leaders are required to serve as instructional leaders, the need to meet the demands of legislative mandates directly encompasses NCLB and IDEA. It is a fundamental challenge to provide and prepare these school leaders with the knowledge and skills necessary to meet the variety of issues they will face every day; especially the issues presented while serving students with disabilities related to these pieces of legislation. Unfortunately, the majority of school leaders may not be fully prepared with the knowledge and skills needed to effectively lead special education programs in their schools (M. F. DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003).
Purpose of the Study

Considering the heightened levels of accountability and demands for increased student achievement levels, there is an enormous need for dedicated and experienced school leaders to handle the pressure of our nation’s education system in the future. In addition, these leaders need to meet the diverse needs of at-risk students in their schools; specifically, those served through special education. The purpose of this study was to examine the beliefs and practices that effective school leaders in a large urban school district revealed in the specific area of serving students with disabilities. School leaders included current principals, identified as effective by district level supervisors (specifically Executive Area Directors) in serving special education populations in their schools. Previous research studies (Goor et al., 1997; Valesky & Hirth, 1992) demonstrate that school leaders (specifically principals) did not feel adequately prepared with the knowledge and information to appropriately serve students with disabilities. However, recent studies (Wakeman et al., 2006) indicate that current school leaders report being better informed and knowledgeable about issues related to special education, yet the need for more knowledgeable and skilled school leaders in the area of special education exists. This study will contribute to the research base and was compared to national descriptions of school leader’s knowledge as described in the work of Goor, Schwenn & Boyer (1997), Valesky & Hirth (1992), and Wakeman et al. (2006). The identification of a relationship between the leader’s beliefs and practices as associated with the leader’s prior education and leadership experience was possible. An examination of the school leader’s beliefs and knowledge in relation to the leadership practices put in place at their schools when serving students with disabilities was completed. Finally, through a grounded theory perspective, the researcher discovered specific practices put
in place by these effective school leaders that can be generalized to other school settings under fellow school leaders.

**Significance of the Study**

The school leader’s role is pivotal in special education processes and procedures that are implemented at a school. However, many school leaders may not be well prepared for this role (M. F. DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). While it may not be necessary for school leaders to be special education experts, it is important for them to have a fundamental working knowledge and set of practices that allow them to perform required special education leadership tasks. The inception of special education mandates in the early 1970’s encouraged the establishment of comprehensive programs and services for serving students with disabilities and on educating the child well. However, the change in focus over the past 15-20 years towards legal compliance, increasing legislation and costs for servicing these students has drastically changed the reality of the role of the school leader in special education (McIntire, January-February, 2000). School leaders, specifically principals, hold the keys to school level compliance related to meeting the needs of students with disabilities. A thorough understanding of NCLB and IDEA may prove to be beneficial in facilitating effective special education programs. “People who are competent administrators and are willing to advocate for what is necessary and right for children with disabilities are desperately needed” (McIntire, January-February, 2000). Unfortunately, the current state of affairs suggests that many school leaders today lack the necessary preparation, whether through previous course work or field experiences, to create and maintain school
environments that promote academic success for students with disabilities (M. F. DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003).

The results from this study create new awareness in the field of school leadership specific to serving students with disabilities, as well as contribute to a solution of the significant problem of current school leader’s lack of knowledge and skills in this critical leadership domain. Students with disabilities present a unique set of learning and behavioral challenges within the school environment. In order to protect the educational rights of all students it is critical that school leaders have a high level of familiarity and understanding of the rules and regulations that are required by legislation (Litchka, 2007).

Research Questions

The following research questions were proposed in this study:

1. What are the beliefs of effective school leaders when serving students with disabilities in their schools?
2. How do school leader’s prior education, teaching and leadership experience affect the school leader’s practices when serving students with disabilities?
3. What are the effective practices that can be identified by effective school leaders when serving students with disabilities?

Limitations and Delimitations

Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh and Sorenson (2006) describe qualitative research as a focus on understanding social phenomena from the perspective of the human participants in a study (p. 24). This type of research uses interviewing to explore and understand attitudes, opinions,
feelings and behaviors of individuals. When conducting such a study, interview techniques are used to extract information from subjects regarding their beliefs about a specific experience. Due to this method, limitations exist in the participant’s ability to be truthful and comprehensive in their responses as well as in the interviewer’s ability to ask the correct questions. Sometimes what is not asked or not answered can also prove to be a limitation.

Reliability of qualitative research studies is often low because the research cannot be repeated or replicated and analyzing the results is more subjective than other types of research studies. By only interviewing effective school leaders as a part of this study, limitations exist in gaining knowledge of the practices of ineffective school leaders.

Definitions of Terms

The following terms (or phrases) were used in this study and are defined as listed below.

**School Leaders**: For the purposes of this study, school leaders refers to principals or assistant principals (elementary and secondary) and district level personnel including program specialists or directors as they are commonly referred to in this large urban school district.

**Students with Disabilities**: For the purposes of this study, a student with disabilities refers to any student identified and staffed into a program for special education services. Programs can include but are not limited to those providing services for learning disabilities; physical, mental, emotional or behavioral handicaps; speech or language disorders; vision or hearing impairments; autism; and traumatic brain injuries.

**IDEA**: The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act as originally reauthorized in 1997 based on the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (passed as legislation in 1975 and
commonly referred to as Public Law 94-142), and as recently reauthorized in 2004. (from idea.ED.gov)

**NCLB**: The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001; reauthorized the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and is built on four main principles: accountability for results, more choices for parents, greater local control and flexibility, and an emphasis on doing what works based on scientific research (from ED.gov)

**AYP**: Adequate Yearly Progress; an individual state's measure of progress toward the goal of 100 percent of students achieving to state academic standards in at least reading/language arts and math; sets the minimum level of proficiency that the state, its school districts, and schools must achieve each year on annual tests and related academic indicators (from ED.gov)

**Knowledge**: (1): the fact or condition of knowing something with familiarity gained through experience or association (2): acquaintance with or understanding of a science, art, or technique b (1): the fact or condition of being aware of something (2): the range of one's information or understanding (from Merriam-Webster.com)

**Fully Prepared**: completely ready beforehand for some purpose, use, or activity (from Merriam-Webster.com)

**Highly Qualified Teacher**: teachers who know how to manage classrooms, develop standards-based lessons, assess student work fairly and appropriately, work with special-needs students and English-language learners, and use technology to bring curriculum to life for the many students who lack motivation (Berry, Hoke, & Hirsch, 2004)
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Unlike any other time in history, the role of the current school leader has become more complex (Thompson, 2001). Considering the instructional responsibility of school leaders, Thompson (2001) provided insight into its importance based on current accountability systems when he stated,

If principals have, to varying degrees, always been instructional leaders, that role has reached a new height of demand and complexity since standards and accountability have become the watchwords in public education. The principal is expected to lead in the design of a curriculum that meets the learning needs of all students and is aligned with state and local standards, to know what constitutes good instructional practice, and to coach and otherwise guide teachers in the continual improvement of the educational knowledge and practice.

Shaping the atmosphere of an educational environment that includes providing the opportunity for all students to reach their maximum potential and for teachers to feel supported as professionals is a critical factor in the role of the school leader. As determined by the school leader’s talent in creating this type of climate, school leaders can structure educational practices and schools can be communities where teachers and students, both disabled and nondisabled, are given the highest level of opportunity for success (Barnett & Monda-Amaya, 1998; Dyal & et al., 1996). Research demonstrates that effective school leaders who are familiar with current research clearly understand the needs of students with disabilities, including guidelines and regulations set forth in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA). School
leaders who fully recognize the academic, behavioral and instructional challenges of working with students with disabilities and their families are much better prepared to provide support and resources leading to improved student outcomes and performance (M. F. DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). School leaders are seen as visionaries, change agents and the key components to effectively integrating successful (or unsuccessful) special education programs within general education settings. The additional accountability measures placed on school leaders as they provide special education services in their buildings along with the school site responsibilities of managing a school have amplified the duties of the school leader (Cruzeiro & Morgan, 2006). In order to fulfill these duties and meet the objectives of regular education settings, school leaders must possess the knowledge, skills and dispositions related to appropriately serving students with disabilities. This responsibility includes knowledge of special education law related to effectively implementing special education programs under their control (Valesky & Hirth, 1992).

The School Leader’s Role in Retaining Special Education Teachers

A major part of the school leader’s role is the necessity to respond to students needs, parents concerns, and teachers’ attitudes and professionalism; all while managing countless administrative duties. School leaders have a profound ability to influence positive attitudes and efforts central to sound instructional services and support on behalf of their teachers and in aid of students with disabilities. A review of previous studies described in Barnet & Monda-Amaya (1998), recognized the need for school leaders to provide training and support to teachers as the instructional leader of the school. Many special education teachers today work with school administrators who are responsible for providing enriching learning environments that impact
school culture and climate. However, many of these school leaders have minimal knowledge of the specific learning theories and teaching strategies used with special education students. Consequently they are unaware of the various issues that affect placement and services. As a result, the high level of teacher burnout in the field of special education has been directly attributed to a lack of support from school leaders in meeting the needs of students and teachers in general (M. F. DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Murtadha-Watts & Stoughton, 2004; Otto & Arnold, 2005).

Current trends indicate that special education teachers are leaving the field in favor of regular education classrooms, career changes and retirement. More teachers are leaving the field of special education than general education and overall teacher attrition (i.e., teachers changing positions or leaving completely) is seen as the largest determining factor for the demand for teachers in the United States (Otto & Arnold, 2005). A study regarding special educators’ intentions to stay in special education teaching positions indicated that building level support from principals and general educators has strong effects on “virtually all critical aspects of (special education) teachers’ working conditions” (Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, & Harniss, 2001; Otto & Arnold, 2005). Various professional organizations such as the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), the National Association for Elementary School Principals (NAESP) and the National Association for Secondary School Principals (NASSP) have begun work to promote the growing importance of the school leader’s role in providing effective services and support for special education programs in their schools. As discussed in Otto and Arnold (2005), the CEC reported that there are profound negative effects on teacher attrition when school leaders demonstrate a lack of knowledge, time, or interest in students with disabilities. Providing
support for students with disabilities through the knowledge of placement procedures, discipline procedures, and funding decisions, school leaders can help to relieve special educators’ levels of stress and frustration eventually establishing incentives for the retention of special education teachers (Otto & Arnold, 2005). More important, research has demonstrated that outcomes are enhanced for students with disabilities (and others at risk of school failure) when school leaders are able to effectively focus on instructional issues and exhibit support for special education (M. F. DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Otto & Arnold, 2005). Consequently, a change in schools (Litchka, 2007), and the growth of a consistent research basis regarding the presence or absence of administrative support for serving students with special needs (Otto & Arnold, 2005), each require a focus on the development of school leaders with a different set of skills to effectively lead schools in this era of change.

**Principal Shortage**

Understanding the intricacy of federal and state guidelines related to special education services while also trying to balance the load between school leadership responsibilities whether instructional or managerial, creates a challenge for school leaders. One of the biggest challenges principals face and one that causes a great deal of stress is finding time for these responsibilities (Tirozzi, 2001). These challenges are having a direct effect on the numbers of available future school leaders. In the United States, fewer teachers are choosing to follow administrative career paths leading to a critical shortage for the future (Litchka, 2007). Even those teachers who may have appropriate certification and are qualified to be school leaders are simply not applying for leadership positions. In 1998, the Educational Research Service, in conjunction with the National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) and the National Association of
Secondary School Principals (NASSP), found a critical shortage of future principal candidates at all school levels and in all types of districts (urban, suburban and rural) that was expected to last long into the next decade (Litchka, 2007).

A vivid perception exists amongst school personnel that the job of the principal has drastically and negatively changed over the years. Issues involving dealing with teacher shortages, increased accountability measures, constant changes in curriculum, instruction, and assessment, as well as having less support staff, are all leading to the current shortage of future school leaders (Litchka, 2007). Many view the principalship as: (a) being too stressful, (b) requiring work and time overloads, (c) having no true salary advantages, and (d) too difficult when dealing with inside and outside sources perceived to be out of the school leader’s control (Litchka, 2007). Based on the view of the CEC that the principal’s role is essential in improving the educational outcomes and opportunities of students with disabilities, it is easy to understand how the shortage of future school leaders can impact the quality of leadership in schools. Inexperienced individuals will find it difficult to understand, appreciate, and meet the needs of diverse learners; especially students with disabilities (M. F. DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003).

**Self Awareness**

In their focus on middle school level principals and accountability, Clark and Clark (2006) stated that one of the characteristics of successful principals is self-recognition regarding the importance of continual learning. Successful principals hold themselves accountable in strengthening their own individual development as intellectuals. When it comes to supporting their teachers and the eventual achievements of their students, successful principals acknowledge that maintaining a current level of expanding knowledge is a crucial factor in their overall
success as principals (Clark & Clark, 2006). Not only is a strong knowledge base a crucial factor in a principal’s success, but respect is also earned from teachers who go to principals for information and guidance when implementing programs in their classrooms. As discussed in Clark and Clark (2006), conclusions drawn from comparing two NASSP studies from 2002 regarding middle level education demonstrated that principals of highly successful schools were more knowledgeable of middle level practices. Their comprehensive knowledge base assisted them in successfully implementing practices associated with the middle school concept. Overall, Clark and Clark (2006) found that principals who commit themselves both personally and professionally demonstrate key habits including commitments to their own learning with accountability and encouragement factors for themselves and others, an awareness of their strengths and weaknesses with openness to learning opportunities, and the direct use of their knowledge in leadership practices, decision making and assessment design.

**NCLB and IDEA**

Specific to the school leader’s role is the requirement to meet federal legislation guidelines pertaining to No Child Left Behind of 2001 (NCLB) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA). In an effort by the United States Congress to improve the educational outcomes of students with disabilities, NCLB and IDEA present a clear focus of shared responsibility and accountability between special and general educators through procedures, duties and expectations of success in serving students with disabilities (Handler, 2006).

Focusing on overall school improvement and increased student performance levels, the school leader’s role has changed on a wide scale due to the advent of NCLB and the push for
higher levels of public accountability, instructional leadership, progress monitoring and data
driven decision making in schools. NCLB requires a list of measures aimed at overall
improvement through the process of statewide student assessments that is tied directly to targeted
curriculum taught by highly qualified instructors. Schools are required to demonstrate that
students are making Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) as reflected in school assessment data that
is disaggregated into various subgroups of students including those with disabilities. Continual
failure to meet the requirements of AYP and student performance goals can result in school
sanctions (Lashley, 2007) including removal of the school leader. Paired with NCLB, the same
requirements are shared for students with disabilities through IDEA’s accountability and
improvement efforts. Any longstanding differences in access to a quality education that has been
experienced by students in the past due to race, class, gender, ethnicity, language differences, or
disability have been directly addressed through the policies initiated in NCLB and IDEA and the
supports given to school leaders to address these issues (Lashley, 2007). Overall, NCLB and
IDEA have come together to bolster change on a large scale in school leadership and
administration.

Predominantly related to NCLB, current information from accountability results indicates
that this piece of legislation is working (“No Child Left Behind Act Is Working,” 2006).
Although the law is viewed by many to be controversial, the No Child Left Behind Act
recognizes what truly makes a difference in providing a quality education (Handler, 2006). As
noted by the U.S. Department of Education, NCLB is based on the premise of local control and
flexibility with stronger accountability for results while requiring a highly qualified teacher in
the core subjects in every classroom, use of proven research-based instructional methods, and
timely information and options for parents (Reese, 2004). Schools that underperform are held accountable through the provision of free student tutoring or student transfer to a better performing public school. Children’s education needs are placed first—where they belong (Spellings & Department of Education, 2007). Before NCLB was passed, less than half the states fully measured their students against clear academic standards. Today, every state and the District of Columbia hold schools accountable for improving academic achievement (Spellings & Department of Education, 2007). However, while NCLB may be working overall, school leaders have identified the need for help and information about implementing successful special education programs, as suggested in IDEA, as their greatest need (M. F. DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). Because accountability requirements are aligned more than ever before through NCLB and IDEA, school leaders must work to perfect their practices and skills in providing the appropriate educational services for students with disabilities including providing the procedural safeguards legally required through special education law (Lashley, 2007). The shared vision proposed through NCLB and IDEA to support and promote higher achievement levels for all students including those with disabilities can only be achieved through a change in approach to special education services; specifically at the professional preparation level (Handler, 2006).

**Principal Preparation Programs**

A critical factor in assisting school leaders in meeting the responsibilities of leading effective schools is the preparation programs in which they participate prior to attaining school leadership positions. While research is abundant with examples of how the role of today’s school leader position has changed from the need to be more of an instructional leader rather than a manager (Barnet, 2004; Shellard, 2003; Wakeman et al., 2006), the link between school
leadership preparation programs and their relationship to services for students with disabilities has only recently begun to surface.

A groundbreaking study published in 1992 and conducted by Valesky and Hirth (1992) demonstrated results that school leaders must possess knowledge of special education and special education law for two critical reasons. The rationale were first, to ensure an appropriate education for all students with disabilities as required by P.L. 94-142 (revised and enacted in 1997 to be known as IDEA), and second, to minimize the potential loss of impending litigation resulting from inappropriate implementation of special education services (Valesky & Hirth, 1992). The authors highlighted previous research that demonstrated the need for improved knowledge levels of special education by school leaders. They concluded that a school leader’s knowledge is not sufficient enough to ensure that services to students with disabilities will be appropriately provided at all times and without error. Based on these results, the possibility for a school to become increasingly entangled in losing litigation regarding improper delivery of special education services may exist. The final outcome of Valesky and Hirth (1992) concluded that although 75% of all states offered some type of training opportunities for school leaders in the area of special education, the majority of states at that time did not have requirements in place for administrative certification that included the need for school leaders to be knowledgeable in the specific area of special education.

Although principals may be able to learn the requisite knowledge and skills to manage a school and meet legal obligations, the need for school leaders to develop the dispositions necessary to meet these obligations and improve the performance of all students is critical in their leadership role (Lashley, 2007). Dr. Sandra Stein (2006), Chief Executive Officer of the
New York City Leadership Academy stated, “If schools of education are to remain relevant in this era of accountability, they must approach the preparation of school leaders as part of an urgent social justice agenda” (p. 522). When presented with the question of whether today’s administrators are prepared to be the instructional leaders that are required to bring about improved school leadership, participants from the Policy Forum on Education Leadership answered that only twenty-five percent of today’s principals are prepared to be effective instructional leaders (National Institute on Educational Governance as cited in Barnet, 2004). This finding seems to suggest that school leadership preparation programs are not providing the needed training for today’s public school leaders. Reflecting on the principalship as a profession in crisis, Tirozzi (2001) remarked,

The bottom line is that not only is it difficult to attract qualified candidates, but [also] the training that candidates receive from administrator preparation programs is often inadequate, and ongoing professional development is episodic at best. Many university programs for school administrators are not closely aligned with the instructional and real-world demands principals face, and the use of post certification development programs is the exception rather than the rule. (p. 43)

Often times, school leadership preparation programs lack a focus on the real life responsibilities and tasks of school leaders. It isn’t until school leaders are entrenched in the day to day operations of their schools that they experience the need and develop the skills required to effectively handle challenging leadership roles. In a recent survey based on the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC): Standards for School Leaders given to graduates and non graduates of the Morehead State University graduate programs (including school based
administrators and district wide administrators), Barnet (2004) specifies results that in “every instance respondents indicated that the frequency of completing the identified tasks was greater than the effectiveness they had received in their preparation program.” (p. 122). The more often school leadership candidates have the opportunity to work through school leadership decisions and challenges in their preparation programs, the better prepared they will be to face those same types of issues at the helm of a school in the future.

The need for school leaders to act as constant change agents, promoting pressure points for others to think about ways to work with students and families that may deviate from the norm, is a crucial aspect that must be initiated at the leadership preparation level. When students are not being successful, especially students with disabilities, school leaders must be equipped with the knowledge and skills to adequately and appropriately address the situation. School leaders must know how to determine when discrepancies between the curriculum and the learning styles of students exist, thus raising concern that possible inconsistencies are leading to failure (Murtadha-Watts & Stoughton, 2004). As school leaders provide guidance and support for teachers, they must possess the knowledge and skills associated with effective instruction, assessment and discipline related to serving diverse groups of students (Barnett & Monda-Amaya, 1998). A significant need exists for future school leaders to be provided the opportunities, support and resources to better understand their students needs and themselves as leaders. Included is the considerable necessity for how to meet the constructs of 21st century education so that school leaders are better prepared to provide the necessary level of school leadership in order to ensure that no child is left behind.
In an effort to address the concern regarding the professional preparation of school leaders, the Council of Chief School State Officers (CCSSO) created the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC). Through its leadership of a national initiative creating a common vision for effective school leadership, the ISLLC’s mission has been to establish a national set of standards and a professional development process ensuring quality and consistency throughout school leadership preparation programs. The six standards of professional excellence entitled *Standards for School Leaders* were originally developed in 1996 and present research based knowledge and skills that are needed by effective school leaders. With an emphasis on a comprehensive understanding of effective teaching and learning dynamics, valuable student learning is placed as the primary focus for all school reform and improvement efforts (M. F. DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). Within each standard, a definition relating to the specific knowledge, dispositions and performances that educational leaders should possess is included. Since 1996, the *Standards for School Leaders* have been widely adopted by individual states, professional development programs, university programs, and various professional organizations. Each group has worked to align their practices with the standards in an effort to ensure the future of quality school leadership (Litchka, 2007).

In 2006, the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA), a steering committee of 10 membership organizations that represent state policymakers, school leaders, professors of education, and other scholars, began work through the ISLLC to revise the original *Standards for School Leaders*. After two years, these standards were adopted in December 2007 as the *Educational Leadership Policy Standards: ISLLC 2008* (retrieved from [www.ccsso.org](http://www.ccsso.org)).

The newly revised and now current standards include:
Standard 1: An educational leader promotes the success of every student by facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by all stakeholders.

Standard 2: An educational leader promotes the success of every student by advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning and staff professional growth.

Standard 3: An educational leader promotes the success of every student by ensuring management of the organization, operation, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment.

Standard 4: An educational leader promotes the success of every student by collaborating with faculty members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources.

Standard 5: An educational leader promotes the success of every student by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner.

Standard 6: An educational leader promotes the success of every student by understanding, responding to, and influencing the political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context.

In an effort to promote the release of the new policy standards, Gene Wilhoit, executive director of the Council of Chief State School Officers ("Introduction to the Educational Leadership Policy Standards: ISLLC 2008," 2008) commented,

These policy standards are the foundation to building a comprehensive and cohesive leadership system that effectively recruits, supports, retains, and rewards high-quality
leaders. They give state and district leaders a guide for what to consider in gauging quality and monitoring and supporting improvement in educational leadership. (p. 1)

Considering the amount of previous research and documentation of current policy focusing on the need to develop and maintain high quality school leaders, a shift in direction may be required in order to determine where such leaders will originate. The need for colleges, universities, and school districts to work together in preparing these types of leaders has never been greater than it is today. The idea of preparing school leaders is obviously important when considering the demands that current school leaders routinely face including: (a) meeting the requirements of NCLB, (b) closing an achievement gap that has only widened over the years, (c) understanding the customs and struggles of students with English as a second language, and (d) meeting the needs of students with disabilities as mandated through IDEIA, (Whitaker, 2006).
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research is an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting. In quantitative studies researchers work with a few variables and many cases; qualitative researchers rely on a few cases and many variables. (Creswell, 1998 p. 15)

Qualitative studies ask how or what rather than asking why and comparing groups or a relationship between variables. Qualitative studies allow topics to be explored and theories to be developed including detailed views of the topic. Participants in qualitative studies are allowed to be studied in their natural setting rather than removing them and risking the chance that results may be out of context. Finally, qualitative research allows the researcher to participate as an active learner in the study rather than as an expert (Creswell, 1998).

Design

The study described in this chapter was an effort to examine the beliefs and practices of school based leaders in a large urban school district related to serving students with disabilities. Research was conducted through grounded theory methods. This type of qualitative research focuses on understanding social phenomena from the perspective of human participants while also trying to be free of initial bias, assumption or interpretation on the part of the researcher (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorensen, 2006; Heath, 1997). The high adaptability level of grounded theory research to a variety of fields has made it immensely popular (Piantanida, Tananis, & Grubs, 2004). The objective of the grounded theory research model is to generate a substantive theory related to a particular situation, based on data primarily collected through an
interviewing method that is then analyzed and coded in a systematic and rigorous procedural manner, resulting in a narrative statement, visual image or series of hypothesis or propositions of the theory described by the researcher (Creswell, 1998).

Grounded theory research was first proposed by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss in 1967. Glaser and Strauss believed that theories should be “grounded” in data from the field, especially in the actions, interactions, and social process of people (Creswell, 1998 p. 56). Grounded theory research involves unraveling the elements of experience and how they are interrelated leading to the researcher’s ability to develop a theory of understanding of the nature and meaning of the experience for the participants (Ary et al., 2006; Moustakas, 1994). Although writing the methodology for a grounded study can be difficult due to the continual evolvement of the study; researchers must have some type of starting place. Here the researcher is able to provide preliminary ideas about the participants, the setting, and the plan for data collection.

The results from this grounded theory research study sought to create new awareness in the field of school leadership specific to serving students with disabilities, as well as contribute to a solution of the significant problem of current school leader’s lack of knowledge and skills in this critical leadership domain.

**Research Questions**

The following research questions were proposed in this study:

1. What are the beliefs of effective school leaders when serving students with disabilities in their schools?
2. What are the effective practices that can be identified by effective school leaders when serving students with disabilities?

3. How do school leader’s prior education, teaching and leadership experience affect the school leader’s practices when serving students with disabilities?

Participants

Participants are chosen in a qualitative study based on their prior participation in the experience being investigated and the fact that they can share their thoughts, feelings and ideas about it (Ary et al., 2006). The participants in a grounded theory study should be people who have taken part in or have taken action that is fundamental to the topic of study. They must give permission to be studied and have a level of understanding and comfort with the researcher that will encourage them to reveal details about the topic being studied if asked. Through a theoretical sampling strategy, participants are chosen for a grounded study because of their ability to contribute to an evolving theory (Creswell, 1998).

Upon approval through the university’s Institutional Review Board and school district (See Appendix A and B), the researcher began by requesting the nomination of up to ten school leader candidates (specifically principals) from Executive Area Directors (EADs) who serve as personnel resources for principals in regional communities under the leadership of an area superintendent. The participants in this study were school leaders from a large urban school district serving approximately 13% of its population in some type of special education program (per student enrollment summary data from May 2009 from district website). In this district, special education program placement includes students with learning disabilities, intellectual disabilities, emotional and behavioral disorders, autism, speech and/or language disorders, other
health impairments, visual impairments, traumatic brain injured and gifted. However, the previously mentioned special education population data (13%) does not include gifted students.

The EADs were given the freedom of nominating school leaders using whatever criterion they deemed to fit into their personal definition of “effective”. A criterion for nominating each principal was solely left to the EADs discretion, yet details on the criteria were requested by the researcher after nominations were submitted. (See Appendix C) As a result the EADs nominated forty-three school leaders for the study. Two principals were nominated twice by different EADs resulting in a total of forty-five nominations. After forwarding their nominations to the researcher, the EADs described their definitions of “effective” including the principal’s ability to impact staff resulting in positive changes in school culture, the desire to put forth continual efforts to make data based improvements, and those who were highly respected by their peers and looked to as leaders in the areas of leadership and curriculum. According to the EADs, “effective” principals also set priorities when serving students based on their needs while being sensitive to parents and hiring teachers who were skilled in working with students with disabilities.

Notification of Nominated School Leaders

Each of the forty-three nominated principals was sent a description of the research study including the nomination process and an invitation to participate. Also included were consent to participate descriptors and a Principal Information form. The consent agreement described the research study while guaranteeing the anonymous recognition of each participant. The Principal Information form requested data pertinent to the eventual selection criteria to be used by the researcher when identifying the final five participants to be interviewed. Principals were asked
to complete and return the form to the researcher as soon as possible. (See Appendices D, E, and F)

Three separate attempts were made including emails, district mail courier service and telephone calls over a period of two months to collect principal information from each nominee. Out of forty-three nominated principals, twenty-one (48.8%) returned their information forms to further the process. Upon receipt of the information forms, the researcher then compiled demographic data for each principal to be used in the final selection process. School demographic data regarding population size and percentage of students served with disabilities was taken from school district reports. School letter grade and Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) success was taken from the state FCAT database. All other demographic data was taken from the Principal Information forms. Once all of the demographic data was completed, the process began to determine the final candidates to be selected for interviews. In order to meet the minimum requirements for interview, the principal candidate had to meet the criteria listed in Table 1.
Table 1: Criteria for Choosing Final Interview Participants

<p>| | |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Must be nominated as an “effective” principal by EADs.</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Must have been a principal in OCPS for at least 3 years.</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Principal age should fall in one of the following ranges: 22-29, 30-34, 35-40, 41-46, 47-55, 56-65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>School size should serve at least 497 students at the elementary level, 838 students at the middle school level, or 1650 students at the high school level. These population numbers were based on district enrollment summary data from May 2009 and represented 75% of the average size school for each level.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>School demographics should match those of an “urban” school setting as defined by Merriam-Webster and American Heritage dictionaries. (Urban is defined as of, relating to, characteristic of, located in, or constituting a city)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>The school where the principal is serving shall have a special education student population no less than 5% of the total student population.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>School grades under the state of Florida’s A+ Grading system should be a C or higher for the previous 3 years.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>School FCAT/AYP data for the students with disabilities sub-group must be available for the previous 3 years. (Per AYP guidelines, no data means there were not enough students tested for an identified sub-group.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Per information provided on a demographic questionnaire, the participating principal may or may not have specific experience in the area of special education whether via a previous college degree, classroom teaching experience, personal experience or identified school leadership experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Principal may not have previous leadership related experience with the researcher.</td>
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Selection of Final Participants

Demographic criteria were created by the researcher to determine the final 5 principal candidates from the pool of those nominated who were then invited to participate in the study. It was important that the criteria were objective in nature so that all nominees had a fair and equal chance of being chosen as long as they met the criteria. Demographic criteria included the principal’s number of years in service as a principal within the school district, the principal’s age, a minimum size of the principal’s school population, school demographic data match when compared to definition of an “urban school”, size of the school’s special education population, school grade history under the state’s grading system, the school’s special education data on the
state assessment test, the principal’s prior experience with or without special education leadership roles, and the principal’s professional relationship status with the researcher. Principal candidates were between the ages of 22-65 in general and were required to have at least 3 or more full years experience as a school based principal. Because the entire district where the research study was completed is an urban school district, all schools met the specific requirement of being an urban school.

After demographic data were completed, the researcher identified principal candidates who failed to meet at least one or more of the selection criteria. Any criterion that was out of range resulted in the principal candidate’s removal from the list of possible interview participants. These areas are identified in Table 2. For confidentiality purposes, the final five interview participants were given name identifiers of SL1 through SL5 (SL= School Leader) based on the way their name fell alphabetically in the listing. Principal candidates who failed to meet criterion were identified with X1, X2 and so forth. Out of twenty-one possible candidates, eight principals met all criterions. In order to finalize the list to five candidates, the level of the school where the principal was a leader for the previous three years was taken into consideration. Based on this consideration there were five elementary level principals, two middle school and one high school level principal. Out of the five elementary schools, the eighth criteria of school FCAT/AYP data were used to determine the candidate with the best results. Although all five candidates had FCAT/AYP data available for all three previous years as required, only three had met AYP goals at least one year or more and were therefore chosen as final candidates for interviews. Out of the two middle school principals, the candidate with the most experience as a principal in special education was chosen. The candidate not chosen was considered an alternate
in the case that one of the final five was unable or chose not to participate in the interview session. The only high school principal was selected thus finalizing the five interview candidates to include three from elementary, one middle and one high school level candidate.
### Table 2: Nominee Demographic Information

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</tr>
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<tr>
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<td>636</td>
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<td>YYY</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
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<td>YNN</td>
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<td>Yes*</td>
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<td>XXX</td>
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</table>

* Indicates a candidate with personal experience in addition to professional experience.
Interview Protocols and Questions

In grounded theory research an emphasis on discovering or building a theory in a specific area by the researcher serves as the primary purpose. This aspect sets this type of research apart from other types of qualitative research designs. Through a process of choosing participants, conducting interviews, analyzing the data and then subsequently building a theory “from the bottom up,” the researcher can present a theory grounded in data with no preconceived ideas that is developed throughout the research process and from the data collected (Ary et al., 2006; Moustakas, 1994). The grounded theory approach involves a cyclical process of recognizing information, forming interpretations, asking new questions, and developing an integrated theory.

Relative to this process and concurrent to the participant nomination and selection process, the researcher completed the bracketing interview process. Bracketing interviews involve the researcher’s formulation of prior personal thoughts and beliefs of the subject to be studied. In this case, the researcher wrote down her thoughts and beliefs about school leaders and their role in serving students with disabilities. Using the results of the bracketing interview process the researcher developed a set of interview protocols and questions that were then used with each participant. Interview protocols are advantageous because they simply assist the researcher in initiating and formalizing the interview process (Harchar, 1993), through a predetermined set of statements and procedures to be used when introducing the interview to the participant during the session. Protocols include items such as introducing the study to the participant, providing start and ending times, asking interview questions, guaranteeing participant confidentiality and thanking the interviewee at the end (Creswell, 1998). Overall,
protocols seek to add fidelity to the interview process while maintaining consistency and accuracy from one participant to the next. (See Appendix G)

The participant interview questions themselves were built around the themes of the research study questions in a manner that was believed to garner the best information to meet research study goals. Using an additional frame of reference based on the Educational Leadership Policy Standards: ISLLC 2008 (retrieved from www.ccsso.org), a total of 15 questions were developed and asked of each participant. (See Appendix H) The questions contained (but were not limited to) topics including the principal candidate’s thoughts on resources, special education knowledge, personal experiences and beliefs, teacher qualities and leadership practices. Developed to reflect a combination of previous research literature and bracketing interview results, questions numbered 1, 4, 5, 7, 14 and 15 were specifically related to the beliefs of school leaders when serving students with disabilities. Questions numbered 2, 6, 8, 9, 12 and 13 focused on the practices of school leaders when serving students with disabilities. Finally, questions numbered 3, 10 and 11 could be attributed to both beliefs and practices of school leaders.

**Interview Sessions**

Interviews conducted with each participant lay the foundation for the grounded theory approach; therefore participant interviews serve as the primary data collection tool in these types of qualitative studies. The final five principal candidates were contacted via email by the researcher to schedule interview appointments. Targeted timelines were requested if possible and all candidates responded quickly. Interview appointments were scheduled with each participant, took place at the participant’s work location at an agreed upon meeting time between the
researcher and the participant, and were held over a three week period. Sessions were conducted following the protocols previously discussed and lasted in a range of 30 minutes to almost 2 hours in length. Participants were asked to answer specific interview questions and with participant permission, verbal discourses were recorded for transcription and data collection purposes using an audio device (Pulse Smartpen© technology) including the use of written notes by the researcher. Upon completion of each interview, principals were thanked for their time and participation. Interview recordings were then downloaded to the researcher’s computer and saved on a DVD-rom.

**Process of Data Analysis**

One of the most daunting and time consuming phases of qualitative research involves the data collection process (Ary et al., 2006). Most data analysis is done concurrently while the study is conducted (Moustakas, 1994); therefore there is a need to be structured and methodical. Beginning the process by being familiar and organized regarding the data is a key step in the initial stages of the research. This may involve reading and rereading notes and transcripts or repeatedly listening to audio tapes.

Data analysis during grounded theory research follows a systematic and standard format in order to identify data. In their description of the grounded theory research process, Glaser & Straus (1967) propose stages in the data collection and analysis process. The first phase is called *open coding* where the researcher collects interview data and marks key points of the conversation or participant’s responses to place into *categories*. This step is often seen as the core of qualitative research study analysis and allows the researcher to physically organize the material on each topic or idea (Ary et al., 2006). Defined by Strauss and Corbin (1990) and
referenced by Creswell (1998), categories are defined as units of information that are represented by events, happenings and instances.

Information from interviews is continually collected so that categories can be saturated with content until nothing further can be found. By coding key points, the process proposed by Glaser and Straus of identifying similar concepts throughout the data will take effect. Often times, the researcher may make multiple trips back and forth to interview participants. As the researcher continues this process, referred to as the constant comparative method, new categories may emerge as data is continually analyzed. Ideally, the database of information is decreased to a minimal set of themes that demonstrate characteristics of the topic of exploration.

In order to review the responses of all five school leaders for this study, the researcher began the first phase in the grounded theory research process of coding individual key terms and phrases given in response to each question during the interview session. Interview data was entered and coded within an Excel database. Column headers contained the interview question numbers (Quest. 1, Quest. 2, etc.), while rows were identified specific to the interview participant (SL1, SL2, etc.). Key to maintaining the nuance of responses in relation to the context of the question asked, the researcher initially organized each question (regardless of the respondent) within the same columns of the database being used. This meant that all responses for individual questions were listed in one list so that coding was consistent relative to the question.

After all participant responses to each question were entered into the database, the specific coding process was initiated. Each response (over 500 in total) was individually coded based on a code created by the researcher that associated with the topic of the specific response.
Codes were created depending on the specific interview question they derived from in consideration of the theme of the question itself (whether the question was a belief or practice based question) as well a code that identified the response based on its individual meaning. For example, responses such as “include as much as possible” and “it is the parent’s responsibility to be directly knowledgeable and communicate and supportive of the school” were coded with a “B” for belief statements. “We have in-house meetings” and “we look at cumulative records of students” responses were identified with “A” codes for approach statements. Other responses such as “sometimes there’s IDEA money available” and “90% of my budget goes to personnel” were assigned “F” codes designating their association with funding issues. “Q” codes associated with qualifications of the teacher were assigned to statements such as “has technical capabilities to design lessons that will ensure kids are meeting IEP goals.” All codes were formulated at the researcher’s discretion and are identified as listed in Table 3.

Table 3: Coding

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A-</td>
<td>Approach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B-</td>
<td>Belief</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C-</td>
<td>Collaboration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CS-</td>
<td>Current Status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-</td>
<td>Environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F-</td>
<td>Funding</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K-</td>
<td>Knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LT-</td>
<td>Leader Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P-</td>
<td>Personnel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PN-</td>
<td>Prepared No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pr-</td>
<td>Practice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PY-</td>
<td>Prepared Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Q-</td>
<td>Qualification of Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>R-</td>
<td>Requirements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rs-</td>
<td>Resources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S-</td>
<td>Students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sit-</td>
<td>Situational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sys-</td>
<td>Systems</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>T-</td>
<td>Tangent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TM-</td>
<td>Teaching Methods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XN-</td>
<td>Experience No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XPS-</td>
<td>Experience or Preparation Source</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XY-</td>
<td>Experience Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Following the open coding phase, the axial coding phase takes place that should result in the identification of themes and relationships among the data. During this phase the researcher re-assembles the data into new categories using paradigms and diagrams where a central category about the study is formed. Several ideas are woven together through different connections to each other. Finding causal conditions which influence the central category, strategies for addressing it, the content and conditions that shape the strategy and the consequences that may be felt if the strategy is used are all a part of this phase.

Lastly, the researcher will embark on the selective coding phase where they will build a narrative, or story, in an attempt to connect all the categories. Theoretical propositions (hypothesis) are presented in this final phase which will eventually evolve into and generate the theory (Creswell, 1998). The findings offered in this phase form the basis of the grounded theory itself including how the concepts and propositions link together, thus serving to explain the subject of the research. From here a narrative report of what was learned in the study can be completed.
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

The purpose of this study was to examine the beliefs and practices that effective school leaders in a large urban school district revealed in the specific area of serving students with disabilities. School leaders included current principals, identified as effective by district level supervisors (specifically Executive Area Directors) in serving special education populations in their schools. The principal investigator (researcher) of this study intended to:

- Compare research results to national descriptions of school leader’s knowledge as described in the work of Goor, Schwenn & Boyer (1997), Valesky & Hirth (1992), and Wakeman et al. (2006).
- Examine the school leader’s beliefs and knowledge in relation to the leadership practices put in place at their schools when serving students with disabilities.
- Identify a relationship between the leader’s beliefs and practices as associated with the leader’s prior education and leadership experience.
- Discover specific practices put in place by effective school leaders that can be generalized to other school settings under fellow school leaders.
- Build a grounded theory highlighting the beliefs and practices of effective school leaders when serving students with disabilities.

The researcher’s intention was that the results from this study would be used to create new awareness in the field of school leadership specific to serving students with disabilities, as well as contribute to a solution of the significant problem of current school leader’s lack of knowledge and skills in this critical leadership domain.
Research Questions

The following research questions were proposed in this study:

1. What are the beliefs of effective school leaders when serving students with disabilities in their schools?
2. How do school leader’s prior education, teaching and leadership experience affect the school leader’s practices when serving students with disabilities?
3. What are the effective practices that can be identified by effective school leaders when serving students with disabilities?

Participant Summary

The qualitative aspect of this grounded theory study allowed the researcher to be an active learner in the process alongside participants who were studied in their natural settings and comfortable environments. The ability to study participant’s actions and interactions with research questions when interviewed provided insight into topics that were relevant and meaningful to both the participant and researcher.

The final five principal participants in this study had four to twenty three years of experience as principals and ranged in age from thirty-four to sixty-one years old. School populations ranged from 636 to 4029 students and all schools served at least 20% of their students in special education. Except for one, all principals reported personal and/or professional experience in serving students who were in special education. Four out of five schools where the principals served earned the highest school letter grades possible for the majority of the years possible, yet meeting AYP goals per federal guidelines were not as successful. None of the
candidates had any previous professional or personal relationship with the researcher. (Reference Table 2)

**Research Question Results**

**Research Question 1**

What are the beliefs of effective school leaders when serving students with disabilities in their schools?

Participant responses to interview questions indicated that overall, effective school leaders who serve students with disabilities believe in meeting the needs of the individual students as the priority of their service delivery and actively base their approach on these beliefs. The principals in this study specifically commented that “all students are important and have a place.” They “look at students needs and provide services” including “services that promote success” and they “want kids to be successful”. Although these leaders recognize that each student’s needs are “situational,” they believe the “IEP is the key” and everything should be “based on needs”. One school leader specifically reported that it can sometimes be a challenge to provide programs to serve students with disabilities but it is a challenge he wants and this belief is a large part of his philosophy. Each of the school leaders reported that any time they make decisions they try to do what is best for children.

Relative to legislation, accountability and funding issues, these school leaders expressed beliefs such as “it is the school’s responsibility based on the law and NCLB,” they must “be in compliance” and that in order to provide services with fidelity they must ensure that they “follow the paperwork and requirements”. Although they recognized that providing services was “more difficult with fewer resources” they believed they must “budget money to support needs”
because “dollars should be allocated to meet the needs based on the IEP”. The beliefs that “teachers need to understand that the law dictates certain things,” and they must “work united to get the best out of the child” were supported by their approach that they provide “training, time for collaboration, and planning”. Overall, effective school leaders believed in working with other school based staff as a team unit to assist students in meeting IEP goals and understood the school’s responsibility under NCLB and IDEA; including the bar that continually gets higher with accountability factors.

Research Question 2

How do school leader’s prior education, teaching and leadership experience affect the school leader’s practices when serving students with disabilities?

The school leaders who participated in this study provided direct accounts of their prior education, teaching and leadership experiences as they related to how these things had an effect on practices when serving students with disabilities. First, when specifically asked whether or not their prior education prepared them for their leadership role specific to special education, the school leaders responded with either an adamant yes or an adamant no. Participants stated that either their “prior educational experience did not prepare me” or that their “instructional programs covered what works well with special education students” and that they “came away with a good base knowledge”. A detailed personal account was provided by one participant including the hands-on experiences he remembered and relationships he built with professors as a result of his academic preparation specific to serving students with disabilities through his graduate level program. The ability to maintain contact with his university colleagues provided
this school leader with a direct link to accessing resources to assist him in leading the special education program at his school.

When it distinctively came to their prior professional experience as a teacher or principal and the level of preparation it provided, participants overwhelmingly responded that their “life experiences,” “personal background,” “on the job training” and “leadership at schools with large special education populations” were the most beneficial types of experiences they had.

**Categories to Concepts**

Secondly, the effects that prior education, teaching and leadership experience had on the practices reported by these school leaders was derived from the analysis completed in the initial coding and subsequent axial coding phase of the research study. Once all individual codes were in place according to each response, question headers were removed and responses were re-organized into coded categories. With this action and through a constant comparison of categories, preliminary concepts began to emerge and a relationship between the school leader’s prior education, teaching and leadership experience and the current practices they put in place in their schools was identified.

To understand this connection, it is important to recognize how categories were determined to have direct effects on others, how some were cross referenced and how others appeared to have no relationships to the others. For example, responses coded with the “F” code for funding directly related to the “CS” (current status) responses when it came to the level or amount of resources (“Rs” code) available at the school level. School leaders openly stated that the decrease in available funding mechanisms lead to a status of depleted resources within the current school environment thus making it difficult to adequately provide services to students.
with disabilities. Similarly coded, school leaders placed emphasis on the qualifications (“Q” code) for their teachers while also putting a large amount of value and dependence on their specialized school personnel (“P” code) when serving students with disabilities. Experienced and dedicated teachers, staffing specialists, behavior specialists and school psychologists were specifically and repeatedly mentioned as valuable and highly dependable assets on the school campus and as part of the school leader’s leadership team. Finally, while the needs of students were often mentioned as the center of the school leader’s belief foundation, students themselves (“S” code) were not a major part of participants responses overall. The emergence and relationships between concepts from the original categories is illustrated in Figure 1.

As a specific answer to research question number 2, participants reported that their prior experiences through university and college programs, previous leadership roles, and/or personal experiences assisted them in knowing the importance of practices that ensured that “programs were in place within the context of the district and assured that we meet the law requirements”. The leaders understood that they needed to “make it possible for teachers to do what is best for kids,” “prioritize very carefully” and “make sure we are in compliance”. The requirement from NCLB and IDEA to have highly qualified teachers was clearly an understood and necessary priority for these school leaders as they stated their focus on hiring teachers who are “knowledgeable in their field,” “experienced,” “have an understanding of the LRE” and are “committed to making kids the best they can be”. School leaders discussed the procedures they use in the hiring of teachers using multiple interviews and opportunities to place possible hires in classroom based situations with students to observe their performance and abilities. This allowed the leader a level of assurance in the teacher candidate’s skill to serve students with
disabilities in a manner that the principal believed was appropriate and valuable for his school. Through participant responses, the researcher concluded that there is an overwhelming level of assurance and confidence when a school leader can relate their prior education, teaching and leadership experience with the practices they put in place at their school.

Figure 1: Phase 1 Categories to Concepts

Research Question 3

What are the effective practices that can be identified by effective school leaders when serving students with disabilities?

School leaders who are effective in serving students with disabilities acknowledged a variety of effective practices when leading special education programs at their schools. First,
these leaders take an approach to serving students based on their belief that everything they do must be supported by the student’s individual needs. These leaders stated they make sure that “resources are directly tied to services and programs” to support students with disabilities including “physical and instructional materials”. They “focus on the IEP,” “look at data,” “look at needs from year to year,” provide “training for staff,” and ask themselves the question “it’s not working- what do we do?”. School leaders specifically reported making classroom accommodations and curricular modifications for students while charting student progress. An additional critical practice reported by these school leaders included looking at learning gains amongst the students with disabilities subgroup in a similar fashion to the review of gains amongst regular education students.

Participants in the study reported that they actively communicate and collaborate with colleagues and stakeholders to provide appropriate programs and services in their schools. By “consulting with the staffing specialist, behavior specialist or leadership team,” “have team meetings with teachers, administrators, case managers and staffing specialists” and “acting as co-council,” these leaders put practices in place to support students. They also revealed their practices based on the “great dependability they have on their staff,” “reliability on specialists,” and the value they have for teamwork and in their highly qualified personnel. These leaders “work with other administrators” and have “conversations that matter” when it comes to serving students with disabilities.

Finally, school leaders who are effective in serving students with disabilities, “follow the law,” “follow the IEP including offering accommodations and modifications,” and “ensure
teachers are working to meet IEP goals”. They “consider recommendations” and “chart student progress”; overall they “provide support for kids”.

**Establishment of a Grounded Theory**

Following the reported results of research study questions, a grounded theory designated to the beliefs and practices enacted by effective school leaders when serving students with disabilities was established. Through the *axial coding* process, the researcher was able to determine *causal conditions* (such as those presented and illustrated in Figure 1), to formulate larger categorical themes and relationships between the smaller individualized categorical responses. This task was completed through the re-organization and grouping of similarly coded responses regardless of the interview question from which the response was generated. At this point, interview questions were no longer included in the data analysis allowing the conversion of relationships to commence. In order to maintain the essence of participant responses, careful attention to the overlapping of ideas was considered. A strategy of merging concepts into central themes and relationships was completed by highlighting repeated responses and similar statements. A sample of this process is provided in Table 4. Through this phase, topics such as the value and characteristics of school based personnel, the central belief patterns and preparedness levels of school leaders, and references to tangible and intangible resources available when serving students with disabilities began to surface as larger topics of study. Remaining centrally woven throughout these larger topics was the concept that these school leaders reportedly base everything they do on student’s individual needs.
In this stage, relationships between themes were connected into broad theoretical premises with an intended outcome leading to a narrative statement that would eventually describe the researcher’s perspective and grounded theory of the overall topic. At this point, the beliefs and practices of effective school leaders when serving students with disabilities took shape. Central to the theme and focus of serving students based on their individual needs, several propositions can be proposed as they specifically relate to the research questions. (See Table 5)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 5: Selective Coding- Themes and Relationships</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Approach &amp; Philosophy (Beliefs)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Collaboration &amp; Communication (Practices)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Teacher Quality (Beliefs &amp; Practices)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Funding &amp; Resources (Beliefs &amp; Practices)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Specialized Personnel (Practices)</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Preparation, Experience &amp; Training (Beliefs)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Grounded Theory Narrative

From the answers to these research study questions, and in culmination of the grounded theory process, a narrative was built by the researcher providing an overall perspective as it relates to examining the beliefs and practices of effective school leaders when serving students with disabilities.

The researcher was able to determine that the attributes associated with the school leaders in this study included ideas and themes that were inter-twined and definitely relational to each other. School leaders revealed leadership characteristics based on the interaction of their belief systems and practices put forth in their schools. Specifically, school leaders who are effective in leading special education programs revealed an approach and philosophy that is student focused, based on individual needs and is in the best interest of children. Regardless of how prepared they may or may not have felt when leaving their college or university programs, the knowledge and experience these leaders have gained within the field of teaching and school leadership have been the most valuable sources of preparation and skill attainment for them as individuals. They are actively engaged in communicating and collaborating with their colleagues, teachers, specialized staff members and parents in providing support for students with disabilities. Leaders who are effective in leading special education programs are committed to hiring and maintaining teachers on their staff who are knowledgeable, skilled and dedicated to serving students with disabilities while pushing them towards their highest level of success. The understanding that funding and compliance measures must be taken seriously and carefully in order to ensure the most beneficial programs, services and supports for students with disabilities is inherent to these effective school leaders. Specialized personnel such as staffing specialists, behavior specialists,
inclusion specialists and psychologists are highly regarded as required expert resources for serving students with disabilities. Finally, school leaders who are effective in serving students with disabilities have distinct beliefs with a foundation built on student needs and put practices in place based on these beliefs to increase student achievement and promote programmatic success.
CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY AND DISCUSSION

In the opening pages of the Journal of Special Education Leadership’s recent issue dated September 2009, Mary Lynn Boscardin, Ph.D., comments in her Letter from the Editor that

“Understanding the state of special education leadership and administration is more than just supply and demand numbers. It is being able to analyze and synthesize indicators of strengths, challenges, and advances in the field of special education leadership to cultivate growth.”

Considering the idea that 20,000 school administrators are the responsible agents for leading special education programs in America’s schools (Crockett, Becker, & Quinn, 2009), the notion that effective school leadership is required when serving students with disabilities cannot be overlooked.

Effective school leadership encompasses many domains at the school building level, especially when considering accountability areas. The reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 2004 following the enactment of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in 2001 has only served to heighten the intense focus and accountability measures placed on schools and educators to meet high standards for student achievement, specifically including the inclusion of students with disabilities (Boscardin, McCarthy, & Delgado, 2009; Crockett et al., 2009; Wheeler & LaRocco, 2009). As a result of these legislative mandates, those who are educating children are now required to be “highly qualified”; consequently preparation programs must meet this expectation too (Boscardin et al., 2009). Referencing Finkenbinder (1981), Wheeler and LaRocco (2009) report that in previous years the specialized needs of administrators working in special education was addressed, yet the process of implementing professional development and training geared to this issue were not made. “When
a school principal fails, it comes at great social cost to the school’s students and families, at significant economic and often political cost to the school district, and at an extreme personal cost to the principal” (Knuth & Banks, 2006). The harsh realities supported in recent research demonstrate that the pressure, workloads, and demands placed on school leaders are stressful for those in leadership positions. Adding to the strain, leaders who serve students with disabilities often face complex, difficult, and sometimes conflicting accountability measures for which they are responsible (Wheeler & LaRocco, 2009). It is no wonder that out of 13 possible educational fields reported by the American Association for Employment in Education (2008), nine are identified as shortage areas specific to special education (Provost, 2009). Ultimately, when the topic at hand includes serving students with disabilities, principals face the expectation of being knowledgeable about current issues and trends in the field of special education in order to be deemed effective and competent (Crockett et al., 2009).

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine the beliefs and practices that effective school leaders in a large urban school district revealed in the specific area of serving students with disabilities. With the demands placed on school leaders in today’s schools to meet intense requirements for student achievement and answer difficult questions about their programs and services for all children, principals are struggling to survive. One of the aspects analyzed was the effective leaders’ beliefs on their previous preparation levels prior to becoming a principal. In order to do this I compared the school leader’s beliefs of their previous knowledge base to national descriptions of school leader’s knowledge as described in the work of Goor, Schwenn & Boyer (1997), Valesky & Hirth (1992), and Wakeman et al. (2006). In the earlier research of
Goor, Schwenn & Boyer (1997), and Valesky & Hirth (1992), these authors stated that leaders did not feel prepared with information regarding special education prior to becoming school based principals. More recent research completed by Wakemen et al. (2006) provided information that school leaders reported being better informed for their roles as principals as it specifically related to serving students with disabilities. As school reform efforts have taken shape and as the needs of students with disabilities has risen to the forefront, a confidence level was necessary relating the practices reported by effective school leaders and their leadership preparation.

Following the comparison of the school leader’s preparation levels I examined how the school leader’s beliefs and knowledge manifested itself in the leadership practices put in place at their schools when serving students with disabilities. This examination included an identification of the connection between the leader’s beliefs and practices and their prior education and leadership experience. A determination was made regarding whether effective school leaders put things in place at their schools for students based on what they believed in as leaders, what is mandated for them through their district or through legislation, or if their practices are based on other factors.

Finally, this information was compiled together to create what some might consider a profile, or description, of what it is that effective school leaders believe and practice at their schools to effectively serve students with disabilities. The grounded theory process was used to create this description. Ideally, through the completion of this research study I have discovered specific practices put in place by these effective school leaders that can be generalized to other school settings under fellow school leaders. Additionally, the results from this study can be used
to create new awareness in the field of school leadership specific to serving students with disabilities, and will contribute to the problem of current school leader’s lack of knowledge and skills in serving all students.

Discussion

Grounded theory research is qualitative in nature and is often used to determine the outcomes of beliefs, relationships and experiences of people involved in educational environments (Harchar, 1993). Gathering data through documents, observations or interviews, analyzing the data, and finally interpreting the data leading to theory development, are the essential steps in Glaser and Strauss’s grounded theory process. Such systematic processes are required when inductively building a theory regarding some type of phenomena (Harchar, 1993). In summarizing the outcome of this research study the following points serve as a premise for final discussion.

The first idea is that of the school leader’s belief system when serving students with disabilities. While often described as situational in nature, the school leaders in this study believed in an overall approach based on individual student needs. These effective school leaders want students with disabilities to be successful while recognizing it sometimes takes patience, perseverance and determination to make this happen. School leaders have the power to build a school community where all learners are accepted as valuable members regardless of their disability or to negatively build a system of fragmented programs that do not focus on student wide success (Dyal & et al., 1996). The leaders in this study specifically believed it was important to focus on ensuring services are in place that promotes student success through the constant review and monitoring of student performance data, while also re-assessing and re-
aligning school based initiatives for change as needed. Overall, the support systems put in place for students with disabilities and the interaction these students have within the regular education school setting is determined significantly by the beliefs of the school leader and the climate they develop in the school (Goor et al., 1997).

Secondly, a direct connection to the school leader’s comfort levels with overseeing special education programs and their prior preparation and experience levels does exist. Participants in this study had individual backgrounds in the area of special education as a specific preparation field whether through a previously earned degree, leadership experience, or personal situation. All participants provided consistency in stating that on the job training experiences and personal life experiences were the most valuable preparation mechanisms. School leadership preparation must include rich experiences that will assist the potential leader in acquiring the skills and abilities to build strong school communities through the use of effective leadership practices (Leech & Fulton, 2002). Phi Delta Kappan contributing author, Pamela L. Brown (2006) proposes four specific changes that need to be made in current university programs in order to better prepare today’s school leaders for the challenging roles in which they serve as principals. In order for principals to meet the demands of legislative mandates such as No Child Left Behind (2001) (Bays & Crockett, 2007) and provide enriching academic environments for children, Brown (2006) believes principal preparation programs should have higher admission requirements including areas of prior leadership and teaching experience, professional recommendations and an explanation of the applicant’s involvement in increasing student achievement. Principal preparation programs should include coursework that is more aligned with everyday situations faced by current school leaders such as intensive data
analysis intended for school improvement and field experience in real life school environments. Standards for preparation programs should guarantee that only the most proficient and qualified candidates are placed in school leadership positions. Lastly, principal preparation programs should include experiences outside of the school environment such as business settings so future leaders are able to learn a full spectrum of leadership qualities and thus increase their chances of becoming effective principals in the future (P. F. Brown, 2006). Taking the results of this study and adding the accountability factors and requirements of serving students with disabilities under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) (Bays & Crockett, 2007); school leaders must be knowledgeable and prepared to provide all children, teachers and families with the best they can as a leader (Wakeman et al., 2006) no matter where their preparation originates.

With foundational belief systems and experiences, school leaders who are effective in serving students with disabilities understand they may not have all of the answers all of the time and therefore reflect a strong practice of communicating and collaborating with other stakeholders who are also interested in student success (Goor et al., 1997). All of the school leaders in this study believed in the support from colleagues and in local, state, and national training opportunities, research literature, and online resources as valuable sources of information. By engaging in conversations that matter and through the involvement and concentrated collaboration of professionals and families who are important to serving students with disabilities appropriately, effective principals demonstrate the importance of collaboration in a student’s success and in a special education program’s efficiency (M. DiPaola, Tschannen-Moran, & Walther-Thomas, 2004). Furthermore, the development, implementation and
assessment of instructional programs aimed at meeting the needs of diverse learners require the collective work of all stakeholders as discussed by the school leaders here.

Based on the results of this study, ensuring teacher quality is a critical factor in providing effective service delivery to students with disabilities. The facts that special education is a critical teacher shortage area, high numbers of special education teachers are not fully certified and many teachers burn-out early supports the idea that the education students with disabilities receive is threatened (Billingsley, 2004). School leaders in this study repeatedly called attention to the qualities and attributes desired and needed in a teacher who can work with and facilitate the growth in a student with a disability. In recognition of this priority, the school leader makes provisions and seeks resources to provide the supportive mechanisms necessary for the continual growth and support of their teachers. Because student learning is often contingent on teacher effectiveness, the effective school leader provides opportunities for staff development, knowledge sharing and team building (M. DiPaola et al., 2004) as an indication of the importance they stress on ensuring teacher quality for the students with disabilities they serve.

One of the most critical areas of need when leading a special education program is the funding sources available for support. Dipaola, Tschannen-Moran, and Walther-Thomas (2004) maintain that “competent leaders are also effective school managers.” School leaders who are effective in leading special education programs understand that ensuring adequate and appropriate funding is vital when serving students with disabilities. The school leader reviews needs on a regular basis in order to prioritize dollars in a manner that will support programs that serve students with disabilities. At times when resources appear inefficient, the goal to meet critical needs is supported by the actions of effective school leaders as they work to analyze data
and find creative methods to re-align resources in a more efficient manner (M. DiPaola et al., 2004). Overall, effective school leaders take the time, initiative and pay careful attention to setting budgetary items in place based on student need and desired student success.

Lastly, with a central focus on serving students based on their individual needs, the school leader places great value and high dependability on resource "specialists" in the field of special education. The effective school leader recognizes the key roles specialists play in the success and management of special education programs in schools while maintaining program fidelity, compliance and support in a manner that is most beneficial to children.

Conclusions

In order for results of grounded theory studies to be viewed as authentic, standards are suggested for judging their structure. These standards include a connection between theory results and real life occurrences, the general practicality of theory ideas for those to whom the theory applies, the conceptual quality of the theory, and the level of variation within the theory making it applicable within a variety of situations. Criterion for judging the quality and empirical grounding of a study are also suggested and include questions of how the sample was selected, how categories emerged, if concepts were generated and if they were systematically related (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). In consideration of these criterions, there is no doubt in my mind that the results of this study meet each of these standards and have answered the research questions.

The real life beliefs and practices shared through the interviews in this study and the day to day activities and experiences of these school leaders provide a direct connection to the theory generated here. The ability to link beliefs and practices together when serving students with
disabilities provides a practical perspective on the theory itself and the application of it to other school leaders in general. The practices put in place by the school leaders in this study are things that can be acted upon by school leaders everywhere. Due to the conceptual formulation of the study based on the processes involved in data collection and analysis, the theory provides a level of quality that is “grounded in the data”. Finally, although this study and subsequent theory is dedicated to serving students with disabilities, I believe the premises and components of practice reported by these school leaders can be functional within a variety of situations despite the types of students served.

Research Thoughts and Observations

I had several thoughts and made many observations during the course of this research study. I was immediately re-assured of the purpose for this study as soon as the interviews began to take place. The enthusiasm and love for children exhibited in these school leaders’ voices was evident from the beginning. Serving students with disabilities and working within the constant mazes of legislation can be a cumbersome and exhausting task for school leaders. However, this study quickly provided the affirmation that the majority of people in the field of education truly desire what is in the best interest of students no matter the type of background, baggage or disability the student has.

While the actual research process was clearly defined, I struggled with wondering if the thought or intent of a specific question was being understood as a participant provided a response. There were moments when the participant clearly had a very different understanding of the question. Participants also strayed off topic at times offering “tangent” comments. For example, prior to the transition of moving from concepts into the following phase of grounded
theory research known as *axial coding*, a few extraneous comments were removed from the data. These comments were directly mentioned by the school leader as tangent comments and were not directly answering the question being asked at the time. While the participant personally referred and commented to their departure from the question being asked, the random comments provided a perspective on a specific situation commonly encountered by school leaders when serving students with disabilities. In this example, the school leader reported that during his process of looking at funding for his school, he specifically looked at details relating to students with disabilities. In this instance he took the categories of accountability used when determining a school’s result in meeting state AYP goals and weighted each student based on the categories to see which students were more important due to the student’s presence in multiple categories. AYP categories (also referred to as subgroups) include the student’s race/ethnicity (specifically white, black, Hispanic), socioeconomic status (based on free/reduced lunch status), and designation as a student with disabilities and/or English language learner. Therefore, a black student who receives free lunch and is in the specific learning disabilities program will “count” more than an average white, general education student. While possibly viewed as a controversial move, this school leader was able to use this information to prioritize the allocation of resources towards those students based on critical accountability factors. The inclusion of these comments during the interview process may not have been connected in the participant’s mindset as they related to the specific question at hand; however they added an interesting element and serve as an example of the purposes of this study. When school leaders are faced with critical decisions about programs at their schools, increasing student achievement, and
serving students with disabilities, they will often make every effort possible to ensure the best results.

Lastly, as I reviewed interview sessions through the data analysis process I often found myself hearing things that I didn’t necessarily hear the first, second or third time. This makes me believe that the option of completing a larger study with a broader focus is possible. Through gathering data related to demographics and listening to participant responses; questions and perceptions came to mind that could or could not have an effect on this study or future studies. One factor that I noticed was in relation to the population size of a school, the percentage of students served in special education and the school’s success in meeting Annual Yearly Progress requirements. Based on the schools listed in my study, I observed that the schools with smaller populations outperformed schools with larger populations despite the fact that they served a relatively similar percentage of students with disabilities. I also observed a difference in the beliefs of leaders based on the level of the school where the leader was currently working as principal when it came to the topics of the inclusion and mainstreaming of students with disabilities. Without a full analysis of the topic I was assured that all of the leaders believe in meeting students’ individual needs in the least restrictive environment. However, leaders at the elementary level appeared to believe in more inclusion and serving all students in the same manner while providing supports across the board. On the contrary, secondary level leaders believed in serving students with more specific supports tailored to the individual child within an inclusive classroom.
Final Summary

The results of this study support the view of current literature regarding the significant need to prepare school leaders with the tools necessary to lead schools successfully in the future (Mazzeo, 2003). Considering that a consistent base of information focusing on the correlation between effective principal’s leadership behaviors and positive levels of student achievement has been established (Knuth & Banks, 2006), the ability to relate this study to previously mentioned pieces of research literature is possible. Strong and effective school leaders exhibit a variety of characteristics including a focus on school improvement through the foundations of teaching and learning. Successful school leaders stand outside the norm of others in the profession by being moral and social advocates for the students they serve including demonstrating a passion for the people who are part of the educational community around them ("Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium- Standards for School Leaders," 1996). Based on the increasingly growing need for school administrators [in 2005 the Bureau of Labor Statistics projected the area of school administration to have the largest number of job openings compared to any other job through 2014 (Kersten & Kersten, 2006)], it is critical that future school leaders possess the ability to lead schools in a manner that will promote high levels of student achievement. A key component to effective school leadership must include serving students with disabilities.

Implications and Recommendations for Further Research

Completing a qualitative research study utilizing an interviewing technique includes limitations that are minimal yet unavoidable. Due to the human nature of interviewing, the ability of the participant to provide comprehensive answers to questions and the researcher’s ability to ask specific questions, understanding the phenomena from the participant’s perspective
can be complicated. An example of this is the school leader’s capability to verbalize and articulate the actual practices they exhibit on a regular basis in serving students with disabilities. The implications based on these types of limitations in qualitative research require the researcher to be focused and as objective as possible. Using the grounded theory approach in this study and developing a database of concepts, ideas, themes and relationships allowed the researcher to maintain a focal point on effective school leadership while building a comprehensive theory related to the beliefs and practices revealed by the school leaders in this study.

The *Educational Leadership Policy Standards: ISLLC 2008* (retrieved from [www.ccsso.org](http://www.ccsso.org)), provide a specific framework for effective school leadership. With a mission of establishing a set of national standards and a professional development process to ensure quality and consistency in school leadership preparation programs, these standards present research based knowledge skills that are needed by effective school leaders. In 2009 the Council of Administrators of Special Education (CASE) worked in conjunction with the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) to formalize and update Professional Standards for Administrators of Special Education where the identification of knowledge and skills characterizing effective special education leadership was completed. These standards are current and relative to issues faced in special education today, therefore helping to steer the potential needs of leaders in special education (Boscardin et al., 2009; Provost, 2009). In support of these standards and relative to previous research in the field, the results of this research study further indicate the need and value for school leaders to increase their foundational knowledge, acknowledge belief systems and put effective practices into place when serving students with disabilities in their schools.
Further considering the results of this study as well as much of the research literature before now, there are many avenues that could be taken for continued research in this field. The inclusion of teacher’s beliefs regarding the school leader’s practices and success in serving students with disabilities could prove to be an interesting follow-up to this study. Other aspects could include replicating this study with participants who do not have any prior background or experience in special education, with the additional question of where their beliefs come from and what they base their practices on as a leader. Substituting participants with school leaders who are new in their positions or principals with less than 3 years experience might generate fresh perspectives on school leadership more relative to 21st century learners. The updated CEC professional standards for administrators provide a wonderful point of reference on which to base a research study in order to determine the effectiveness of school leaders. Completing a current analysis of school leader preparation programs specifically in the area of special education is needed. Finally, the school leader’s knowledge and leadership action concerning the quick rise and intense immersion of Response to Intervention (RtI) as it relates to the identification of students with disabilities is a powerful opportunity for a future research study. RtI changes the way all students are supported academically and behaviorally while also focusing on the requirements for quality core instruction provided by teachers in our classrooms.

The individual perspective that is taken by school leaders concerning the reasons, supports, methods, and services for students with disabilities is critical in determining the level of success of these students in school settings. This perspective comes from the leader’s belief system, no matter where that system is based, and evolves into practices put in place at their
schools. This research study has served its purpose in examining the connection between beliefs and practices of effective school leaders and their effects on serving students with disabilities.
APPENDIX A: UCF IRB OUTCOME LETTER
Approval of Exempt Human Research

From: UCF Institutional Review Board #1
FWA0000351, IRB00001138

To: Kimberly Steinke

Date: October 08, 2009

Dear Researcher:

On 10/8/2009, the IRB approved the following activity as human participant research that is exempt from regulation:

- **Type of Review:** Exempt Determination
- **Project Title:** Examining the Beliefs and Practices of Effective School Leaders as They Relate to Serving Students with Disabilities
- **Investigator:** Kimberly Steinke
- **IRB Number:** SBE-09-06378
- **Funding Agency:** None

This determination applies only to the activities described in the IRB submission and does not apply should any changes be made. If changes are made and there are questions about whether these changes affect the exempt status of the human research, please contact the IRB.

In the conduct of this research, you are responsible to follow the requirements of the Investigator Manual.

On behalf of Joseph Biedrzycki, DVM, UCF IRB Chair, this letter is signed by:

Signature applied by Janice Turchin on 10/08/2009 04:25:43 PM EDT

IRB Coordinator
APPENDIX B: SCHOOL DISTRICT RESEARCH REQUEST/APPROVAL
# Research Request Form

**Requester's Name:** Kimberly Steinke  
**Date:** 8/3/09  
**Address:** 1203 Lake Piedmont Circle  
**Phone:** 407-230-1417  
**Institutional Affiliation:** University of Central Florida  
**Project Director or Advisor:** Dr. Suzanne Martin  
**Phone:** 407-823-4260  
**Address:** 4838 Sudbury Drive, Orlando, FL 32826

**Degree Sought:**  
☐ Associate  
☐ Bachelor's  
☒ Doctorate  
☐ Master's  
☐ Specialist  
☐ Not Applicable

**Project Title:** Examining the Beliefs and Practices of Effective School Leaders as they Relate to Serving Students with Disabilities

## ESTIMATED INVOLVEMENT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PERSONNEL/CENTERS</th>
<th>NUMBER</th>
<th>AMOUNT OF TIME (DAYS, HOURS, ETC.)</th>
<th>SPECIFY/DESCRIBE GRADES, SCHOOLS, SPECIAL NEEDS, ETC.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Students</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teachers</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrators</td>
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<tr>
<td>Schools/Centers</td>
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<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Others (specify)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Specify possible benefits to students/school system: The purpose of this study is to examine the beliefs and practices that effective school leaders in a large urban school district demonstrate in the specific area of serving students with disabilities. This study will attempt to examine and identify the relationship between the school leader’s beliefs and knowledge in relation to the leadership practices put in place at their schools and the leader’s beliefs and practices as associated with the leader’s prior education and leadership experience when serving students with disabilities. Through a grounded theory perspective, the researcher desires to discover specific practices put in place by these effective school leaders that can be generalized to other school settings under fellow school leaders.

## ASSURANCE

Using the proposed procedures and instrument, I hereby agree to conduct research in accordance with the policies of the Accountability, Research, and Assessment. Deviations from the approved procedures shall be cleared through the Senior Director of Accountability, Research, and Assessment. Reports and materials shall be supplied as specified.

Requester’s Signature:  
RECEIVED AUG 05 2009

Approval Granted:  
☐ Yes  
☐ No  
**Date:** 8-12-09

Signature of the Senior Director for Accountability, Research, and Assessment:  

FORM ID #GB0103/23-1/1FY REV 6/07
APPENDIX C: LETTER TO EXECUTIVE AREA DIRECTORS
From: Steinke, Kimberly K.  
Sent: Monday, June 29, 2009 11:52 AM  
To:  
Subject: Principal Nominations

Dear Executive Area Directors, 

I have spoken with a few of you personally regarding this request and for those of you whom I have not spoken with (nor met before) I greatly appreciate the quick few moments you will take to read this email. I realize some of you will be changing positions within the next few days so I wanted to make sure to touch base with you prior to your move; I know your time is valuable. I am currently a doctoral candidate in the National Urban Special Education Leadership Initiative at the University of Central Florida. (www.urbanespecialeducation.org) I am in my dissertation phase and have plans to finish by this December. The research study I am conducting involves the construction of a grounded theory focused on the beliefs and practices of principals who are effective in leading special education programs at their schools. Due to the need to serve students with disabilities appropriately and with fidelity when considering the heightened levels of accountability we are all working under, it is critical that principals are capable of leading special education programs in their schools that provide the academic and behavioral support that students need. Determining the best practices of current effective principals can assist me in generating a grounded theory for future use with new principals entering the field and provide them with clearer information needed to serve students with disabilities.

I am specifically writing to you to request that you send me the names of up to ten building level principals whom you believe are effective in leading the special education programs at their schools. Please feel free to send me principal names from anywhere in the district and from any level. You can define “effective” in any manner you wish; I only ask that at the end of your list of names you also provide me with a brief description of what “effective” means to you. From your list of names I will use criteria (years in their current position, level [K-12], school size, demographics, grades, etc.) to choose 5 principals whom I will then ask to voluntarily participate in my study. Principal participation will require 1 (possibly 2) one-on-one interview sessions with me during the month of July or early August and nothing else. With your approval I would also like to refer to your nomination as an encouraging factor in their participation while also reinforcing that their participation is strictly voluntary. All principals names and references will be confidential in the study.

Once you have sent me your principal nominations and I am fully cleared to proceed through UCF & [ ], I will send you another email asking you to verify your list of nominees. (Even if you have changed positions by that time.) Right now all I am asking for is your list of names and a definition of “effective” as it pertains to your list.

In closing I want to thank you for your time and willingness to support me in my doctoral work. Healthy discussions with experts in their fields can only lead to results that are beneficial to the students we serve.

Sincerely,

Kimberly K. Steinke
APPENDIX D: LETTER TO NOMINATED SCHOOL LEADERS
Dear Principal,

My name is Kimberly Steinke and I currently serve as the [REDACTED]. As a member of the National Urban Special Education Leadership Initiative at the University of Central Florida, I have been completing work on my doctoral dissertation. I have secured permission from [REDACTED] office to conduct my research study in [REDACTED] entitled *Examining the Beliefs and Practices of Effective School Leaders as they Relate to Serving Students with Disabilities.*

The research I am conducting involves the construction of a grounded theory focused on the beliefs and practices of principals who are effective in leading special education programs at their schools. Due to the need to serve students with disabilities appropriately and with fidelity considering the heightened levels of accountability under which we all are working, it is critical that principals are capable of leading special education programs in their schools that provide the academic and behavioral support that students need.

I am writing to ask you to participate in my study. You were nominated by your current (or former) [REDACTED] Executive Aces Director. It is my sincerest wish that this acknowledgement reaches you as a testimony to the fine work you have done as a leader in [REDACTED] and in gratitude for the service you have provided to children as a principal. Determining the best practices of current effective principals can assist me in generating a grounded theory for future use with new principals entering the field and provide them with clearer information needed to serve students with disabilities. You have been nominated by your EAD as a principal who is effective in leading a successful special education program.

Therefore, I am asking you to answer the questions on the attached form and return your responses to me as soon as possible. (Via email, courier, and mail) Once I have compiled each nominee’s information I will use criteria (years of experience, school characteristics, your ESE background/experience, etc.) to choose 5 principals I will then ask to voluntarily participate in my study. Principal participation will require 1 (possibly 2) one-on-one interview sessions with me between now and January. If you are one of the five participants I will come to your school (or alternative location) based on your convenience and schedule. Participation in this study is strictly voluntary. All principals’ names and references will be confidential in the study.

Thank you for your time and willingness to support me in my doctoral work. Please contact me via email or at [REDACTED] if I can answer any questions for you.

Sincerely,

Kimberly Steinke

Doctoral Candidate
National Urban Special Education Leadership Initiative
University of Central Florida
APPENDIX E: PRINCIPAL INFORMATION FORM
Principal Name: ____

Current School (2009-2010): ____

Previous School (2008-2009): ____

Number of Years Experience as a Principal: ____

Age: ____

Please describe your previous experience in Special Education: (Do you have a specific degree in special education? Have you been the principal of a special needs school? Were you ever specifically responsible for a special education program prior to serving as principal or in any other type of position? Do you have a personal experience with a friend or family member who requires special education services? Etc.)


Do you have any specific type of previous relationship with the researcher (Kim Steinke) that you feel would affect or influence your participation in this study?

☐ Yes (Please explain) ____

☐ No

Please complete, save, and return this form via email to steinkekim75@gmail.com.
APPENDIX F: INFORMED CONSENT
Informed Consent for an Adult in a Non-medical Research Study

Researchers at the University of Central Florida (UCF) study many topics. To do this we need the help of people who agree to take part in a research study. You are being invited to take part in a research study which will include about five people. You can ask questions about the research. You will be told if any new information is learned which may affect your willingness to continue taking part in this study. You have been asked to take part in this research study because you are a school principal who has been nominated by an Executive Area Director(s) as effective in leading a special education program. You must be 18 years of age or older to be included in the research study.

The person doing this research is Kimberly Steinke of The University of Central Florida’s National Urban Special Education Leadership Initiative. Ms. Steinke is a doctoral student working under the supervision of her faculty advisor, Dr. Suzanne Martin.

Study title: Examining the Beliefs and Practices of Effective School Leaders as they Relate to Serving Students with Disabilities

Purpose of the research study: The purpose of this study is to examine the beliefs and practices that effective school leaders in a large urban school district demonstrate in the specific area of serving students with disabilities.

What you will be asked to do in the study: As a study participant you will be asked to commit to being interviewed (and audio taped) by the researcher. Interview questions will focus on your beliefs regarding special education programs, your knowledge of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and the practices you have put in place at your school to serve students with disabilities.

Voluntary participation: You should take part in this study only because you want to. There is no penalty for not taking part, and you will not lose any benefits. You have the right to stop at any time. Just tell the researcher or a member of the research team that you want to stop. You will be told if any new information is learned which may affect your willingness to continue taking part in this study.

Location: The researcher will come to your work location to complete interview sessions. No further travel is required on your part.
**Time required:** It is anticipated that interview sessions will last no more than one hour unless a longer time frame is agreed upon between you and the researcher ahead of time. Only one interview session should take place but it may be necessary to schedule a follow-up session should research data indicate the need for further information or clarification.

**Audio or video taping:** You will be audio taped during this study. If you do not want to be audio taped, you may not be able to be in the study. Discuss this with the researcher or a research team member. If you are audio taped, the tape will be kept in a locked, safe place until what you say has been written down (transcribed). Once it is written down, the tape will be erased or destroyed.

**Risks:** There are no expected risks for taking part in this study. You do not have to answer every question and you will not lose any benefits if you skip questions. You do not have to answer any questions that make you feel uncomfortable. The highest level of effort will be made to keep your answers to questions confidential. However, as in all research studies the slight risk exists that a breach in confidentiality could occur.

**Benefits:** Other than gaining new knowledge in serving students with disabilities, there are no expected benefits to you for taking part in this study. As a research participant you will not benefit directly from this research, besides learning more about how research is conducted.

**Confidentiality:** Your identity will be kept confidential. The researcher will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from knowing that you gave us information, or what that information is. For example, your name will be kept separate from the information you give, and these two things will be stored in different places.

Your information will be assigned a code number. The list connecting your name to this number will be kept in a password protected computer. When the study is done and the data have been analyzed, the list will be destroyed. Your information will be combined with information from other people who took part in this study. When the researcher writes about this study to share what was learned with other researchers, she will write about this combined information. Your name will not be used in any report, so people will not know how you answered or what you did.

There are times when the researcher may have to show your information to other people. Also, the researcher may have to show your identity to people who check to be sure the research was done right. These may be people from the University of Central Florida or state, federal or local agencies or others who pay to have the research done.

**Compensation or payment:** There is no compensation or other payment to you for taking part in this study.
Study contact for questions about the study or to report a problem:
Kimberly Steinke, Doctoral Student, email at [email]
National Urban Special Education Leadership Initiative
Dr. Suzanne Martin, Faculty Supervisor, Department of Child, Family and Community Sciences at [email].

IRB contact about your rights in the study or to report a complaint: Research at the University of Central Florida involving human participants is carried out under the oversight of the Institutional Review Board (UCF IRB). For information about the rights of people who take part in research, please contact: Institutional Review Board, University of Central Florida, Office of Research & Commercialization, 12201 Research Parkway, Suite 501, Orlando, FL 32826-3246 or by telephone at (407) 823-2901.
I. Introduction:
   a. Say: “Hello, my name is Kimberly Steinke and today I will be interviewing you
      as a part of my research study on the beliefs and practices of effective school
      leaders when serving special education students. I will identify you as School
      Leader number ___. Your number is based on the placement of your name
      alphabetically out of the interview candidates.”

II. Procedures:
   a. Provide a copy of the interview questions to the candidate.
   b. Set up audio recording device and note-taking materials.
   c. Say: “I will ask you all of the questions on the list you have. I will go straight
      down the questions and ask them directly as written. I will also takes notes as you
      respond. It may be necessary for me to return a second time to interview you after
      I have analyzed your answers. Will that be OK?”
   d. Wait for response.
   e. Turn on audio recording device.
   f. Say: “Today I am interviewing School Leader number ___.”
   g. Begin with questions.
   h. Provide question clarification as needed and/or prompt for further information as
      the response lends itself to further investigation.
   i. Turn off audio when completed.

III. At completion of interview thank candidate for their time.
APPENDIX H: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
1. Describe your approach as a leader to serving students with disabilities. What is important to you? How does this approach differ from the approach you take with general education students?

2. How do you implement federal laws such as the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* and *No Child Left Behind* when serving students with disabilities? Explain how you ensure as a school leader that implementation is completed with fidelity.

3. How do you prioritize the services, programs, or plans you have in place to serve students with disabilities at your school?

4. What qualities do you look for in a teacher or staff member who will be responsible for working directly with and supporting students with disabilities in your school?

5. What do you believe is the responsibility of the school versus the family and/or community when serving students with disabilities?

6. How do you ensure that the funding your school receives for the services provided to students with disabilities is allocated in a manner that promotes increased performance for these students?

7. As a school leader, do you believe you were adequately or appropriately prepared (whether through your university program, district training program or other methods) to lead the special education program in your school? Please explain.

8. When you have a student identified as a “problem child,” how do you approach assisting the child and your staff with improving outcomes for the student?

9. Do you converse with colleagues (other administrators, ESE personnel, district supervisors) regarding serving students with disabilities in your school and what issues do you often seek the most guidance?

10. How do you relate the phrase “what is best for kids” to serving students with disabilities?

11. Describe your comfortability level in explaining the process for initial identification of students with disabilities. Include the amount of dependability you have on special education staff members (placement specialist, teachers, behavior specialists, psychologists) as they are included in the process.

12. How do you differentiate and prioritize the services for a student with disabilities who demonstrates both academic and behavioral weaknesses?

13. How do you ensure that paperwork requirements for special education programs are completed appropriately in order to document proper services for students as well as critical funding levels?

14. What do you believe is the best way for school leaders to remain knowledgeable about current special education topics, trends and issues?

15. Do you believe your prior experience in special education prepared you for leading the special education program in your school? Please explain.
LIST OF REFERENCES


