

Fall 2019

## Secondary School Administrators' Preparation as an LEA Representative in South Carolina

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SECONDARY SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS' PREPARATION AS AN  
LEA REPRESENTATIVE IN SOUTH CAROLINA

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in

Education Administration

College of Education

University of South Carolina

2019

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## DEDICATION

“Peace is the beauty of life. It is sunshine. It is the smile of a child, the love of a mother, the joy of a father, the togetherness of a family. It is the advancement of man, the victory of a just cause, the triumph of truth” (Begin & Sadat, 2011, p. 110). My life thus far has been a journey full of hills and valleys. It’s taken years for me to fully understand and appreciate the meaning of life reflected in this quote. For years, I searched for peace and happiness and failed to realize it was right in front of me all along. Thankfully, through the love of my husband, children, family, friends, and mentors, I’ve learned to appreciate each experience through this journey called life. I am blessed beyond measure and excited about the future.

This dissertation is dedicated to my family. To my husband, John David Evans, thank you for your fierce love and dedication to me and our family. Without your love, support, and guidance, I would not be where I am today. In so many ways, this dissertation is as much yours as it is mine. I know full well that I have the most amazing, generous, kind, and patient husband. You have been by my side through thick and thin and ALWAYS supported me no matter what. You have sacrificed in almost every conceivable way to help me get through school during the last seven years and never once complained. For all the many nights you stayed up late to proof my work. For all the car rides you listened to me read research articles and textbooks or that you read aloud to me. For all the weekends you gave me the time and space to work. For the endless hours spent working as my APA editor. THANK YOU!

Words cannot adequately express how much I love and appreciate not only who you are as a person, but the example that you set for our children. Your generosity is boundless. Your patience is limitless. I am thankful for our life together every minute of every day. You make me want to do better...to be a better person. I am honored to be your wife. I love you ardently, John David. This dissertation is dedicated to you, my love.

To my outstanding children, Corey, Adam, Faith, and Luke, thank you for your encouragement and support throughout the years. I know it wasn't always easy or convenient for you to watch mom work all weekend, but you rarely complained; instead, you cheered me on and encouraged me to finish. Thank you for your patience and understanding. I am so proud of the individuals you have grown into. You are each unique in your own way and it is a pleasure to watch you live out your own dreams. I am so very proud of you all! I love you all to infinity and beyond and I am so thankful and blessed to be your mother.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the help of the administrators who have participated in the research process to make this dissertation a reality. Without their input and assistance, this dissertation would not exist. Their dedication to students with special needs gives me hope for our future. To my dear friend and fellow doc student, Sarah Longshore, thank you for your friendship and faith in me. Your words of encouragement were a constant support to me through this process and I will be forever grateful. To the best dissertation chair ever, Dr. Susan Bon. I am eternally grateful for your leadership and support. When most everyone else stated that I could not achieve the goal of completing my dissertation in the timeframe I established, you gave me the courage to try. You were right there by my side the entire way providing encouragement and feedback. Without your willingness to see me through to the end, I would not be where I am today. You are a ROCKSTAR and a blessing to me. THANK YOU for everything! Finally, I want to acknowledge and thank the professors who have advised and encouraged me through the dissertation process, and the four-year buildup to the degree – Dr. Angie Slatton, Dr. Suzy Hardie, and Dr. Katie Cunningham. Without your wisdom and counsel, I would not have seen the process through to a successful conclusion.

I began my career in education as Dr. Harrison Goodwin's secretary while he was the principal at Chapman High School. He encouraged me to pursue my degree in education and spent time mentoring and teaching me different aspects of education. He has had a significant impact on my life as an educator. He is a man of integrity,

principles, and ethics. He believes in leading by example, a motto that aligns with mine. Dr. Goodwin has played a huge role in my life as to what it means to be an educational leader in today's society. His continued encouragement, advice, and support mean more to me than words can adequately express. His influence and leadership have had a significant impact on my success as an educator, not to mention, his unfailing belief in me and continued willingness to help me learn and grow. Without a doubt, I would not be where I am today without Dr. Goodwin taking a chance of this young mother of three small children and providing me my first job in education. I will forever be grateful to him for the influence he's had in my life.

Dr. Duane Graham offered me a position as an assistant principal at Chester Senior High School in 2016. Although I had a lot to learn, his patience and guidance taught me the importance of building relationships with all stakeholders. He gave me permission to try new things—sometimes fail—and learn along the way without judgment. Because of his influence, I grew and flourished as an education leader in this field. Thank you, Dr. Graham, for your leadership!

## ABSTRACT

Prior research has suggested that many principals are underprepared and that some lack any background from coursework and field experience which may be required to exert strong leadership in special education (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; DiPaola, Tschannen-Moran, & Walther-Thomas, 2004), but the number of students receiving special services is on the rise. The purpose of this research study is to determine how secondary school administrators are prepared to make legally and ethically defensible decisions as the authorized LEA representative.

If school administrators are expected to be effective in their role as the authorized LEA representative, it is vital that they have the appropriate knowledge and skills to do so. Further, to create an inclusive environment, it is vital for school leaders to have effective training and preparation. Given prior research indicating the lack of required training for school administrators during certification programs, this study examines whether secondary school administrators have completed required training at the local or state level or have developed their own individually driven learning and seeks to determine what developmental path they may have followed towards gaining knowledge.

Since administrator licensure programs may not be adequately preparing school administrators to be effective leaders of special education, and there is limited literature stating how principals are prepared for this lofty task, my research will fill a much-needed gap determining how secondary school administrators are prepared to lead their



schools in the area of special education with adequate knowledge to make legally and ethically defensible decisions while serving as the authorized LEA representative.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CEC.....	Council for Exceptional Children
CEEL.....	Center for Executive Education Leadership
IEP.....	Individualized Education Plan
FAPE.....	Free and Appropriate Public Education
ILA.....	Instructional Leadership Academy
LEA.....	Local Education Agency
LRE.....	Least Restrictive Environment
ISLLC.....	Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium
SCASA.....	South Carolina Association of School Administrators
SDT.....	Self-Determination Theory
SEA.....	State Education Agency
Spec Ed/Sped.....	Special Education

## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

### **Research Statement**

Prior research has suggested that many principals are underprepared and that some lack any background from coursework and field experience which may be required to exert strong leadership in special education (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; DiPaola et al., 2004), but the number of students receiving special services is on the rise. A U.S. News & World Report discussed the results of a recent Department of Education report, titled the *Condition of Education 2018*. This report revealed that “the number of students receiving special education in public schools is rising, with about thirteen percent of all students receiving such instruction” (Salem, 2018). The combination of underprepared school administrators with a rising special-needs student population creates cause for concern. Although principals report being well informed about fundamental issues, they report having a limited understanding of current issues of special education (Crockett, Becker, & Quinn, 2009; DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003). School administrators are expected to make legally and ethically defensible decisions for students with special needs when they serve as the authorized Local Education Agency (LEA) representative.

The landscape of leadership for special education has markedly changed over the past forty years in response to legislative and social priorities regarding the inclusion of



and outcomes for students with disabilities (Crockett et al., 2009). Crockett et al. (2009) reviewed the knowledge base of special education leadership and administration programs from 1970-2009 by conducting a sampling of literature large enough to identify themes and analyze historical trends. Unfortunately, there is one aspect that is severely lacking in many educational leadership programs: specialized training for school administrators in the area of special education.

Numerous other applicable studies indicate that school administrators may not possess adequate knowledge regarding best practices in the education of students with disabilities (e.g. see Lasky & Karge, 2006; Lynch, 2012; Pazey & Cole, 2013). Because the literature is clear that leadership, specifically principal leadership, is central to creating and sustaining inclusive schooling practices that work for all students (e.g. see Capper, Frattura, & Keyes, 2000; Riehl, 2008; Stainback, Stainback, & Forest, 1989; Burrello, DeClure, & VanHorn, 1992), it is essential to determine how school administrators are prepared to make legally and ethically defensible decisions for their exceptional students.

### **Research Purpose**

School administrators must work to create and maintain a school climate in which all students can feel a sense of identity, belonging, and place (Sergiovanni, 1994). While this is a daunting task, it is not impossible. Salisbury and McGregor (2005) identified six characteristics of inclusive school leaders (i.e., risk-takers, invested in relationships, accessible, reflective, collaborative, and intentional). When school leaders strive to incorporate these characteristics into their school culture, creating an inclusive environment for all students is attainable.

The purpose of this research study is to determine how secondary school administrators (grades 7-12) are prepared to make legally and ethically defensible decisions as the authorized LEA representative. If school administrators are expected to be effective in their role as the authorized LEA representative, it is vital that they have the appropriate knowledge and skills to do so. Further, to create an inclusive environment, it is vital for school leaders to have effective training and preparation. Given prior research indicating the lack of required training for school administrators during certification programs, this study examines whether secondary school administrators have completed required training at the local or state level or have developed their own individually driven learning, and seeks to determine what developmental path they may have followed towards gaining knowledge. Also, this study seeks to determine how they currently make sense of special education laws, and how they gain the necessary skills and knowledge in the area of special education.

Secondary assistant principals will participate in the study because they are the primary school leader who fulfills the LEA representative role regularly. At the secondary level, there is a higher rate of litigious concern due to non-compliance, specifically in the area of discipline. Assistant principals typically provide discipline consequences when behavior issues arise for all students, with or without disabilities. If they are not effectively trained, they may not have adequate knowledge of the laws, policies, and procedures that impact the consequences that protect students with disabilities and ensure that those students are not punished for actions that are a manifestation of their disability. It is in these situations that arise from discipline concerns, as well as a plethora of other responsibilities required of the LEA

representative, that result in the necessity to make legally and ethically defensible decisions that require a specific knowledge base of special education law. Specialized preparation and training in the area of special education is vital.

### **Rationale for the Study**

To understand how secondary school administrators are prepared to make legally and ethically defensible decisions as the authorized LEA representative, this study will examine whether policies and training currently exist at the local education agency (LEA) or state education agency (SEA) or whether school administrators primarily gain knowledge of special education laws, policies, and procedures on their own. Because of special education legislative mandates, schools must be inclusive of all students regardless of whether or not a disability exists. “Principals who are not prepared in the area of special education have a difficult time implementing an inclusive culture at their schools” (Hofreiter, 2018, Abstract).

Disparities among race and gender are also concerns for educators. Coutinho & Oswald (2004) discussed,

The ultimate challenge for educators and policymakers is to address the underlying problems that produce disproportionality (i.e., the unequal opportunities for many students of color because of the consequences of structural poverty and the discriminatory treatment of students of color in the general education system) as well as the referral assessment, and identification process for special education (p. 1).

The results of this study may assist in mitigating the disparities by discovering how secondary school leaders are prepared to make legally and ethically defensible

decisions as the authorized LEA representative and determining how to ensure school leaders should be prepared going forward.

In order to guide specific aspects of special education training that need to be addressed, I must also determine the areas of special education that school administrators are most frequently in violation of at the school level. The following questions will be researched:

- How many secondary schools violate special education policies in South Carolina?
- What types of violations are most frequently reported in South Carolina in secondary school?

The answers to these questions will assist in guiding my research.

### **Personal, Practical, and Intellectual Goals**

According to Maxwell (2013), there are reasons for having personal, practical, and intellectual goals for your research study. "First, they help to guide your other design decisions to ensure that your study is worth doing, that you get something of value out of it. Second, they are essential to justifying your study, a key task of a funding or dissertation proposal" (p. 15). He also defines personal goals as "things that motivate you to do the study" (p. 24). As a former special education teacher and current school administrator, this study is one of great importance to me personally. Too often, I witness a school administrator serving as the LEA representative who has little knowledge regarding their role.

"Practical goals are focused on *accomplishing* something-meeting some need, changing some situation, or achieving some objective" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 28). The goal

of this research study is to gain an understanding of how secondary school administrators are prepared to make legally and ethically defensible decisions when serving as the authorized LEA representative. By understanding how they are trained, the potential to seek change in this area may occur.

Maxwell (2013) states, “Intellectual goals are focused on understanding something-gaining insight into what is going on and why this is happening, or answering some questions that previous research has not adequately addressed” (p. 28). To understand how K-12 school administrators are prepared to make legally and ethically defensible decisions as the authorized LEA representative, we must first be able to answer the following questions regarding what training procedures currently exist.

- What special education training policies and procedures do we already have in place in South Carolina for school administrators at the university level, district level, and school level (i.e., administrator preparation programs, professional development, on-the-job training, etc.)?
- What characteristics do successful school administrators possess in the area of special education and how did they gain the skills and knowledge necessary to be an effective LEA representative?

### **Major Research Question(s)**

In order to understand how secondary school administrators are prepared to make competent decisions for students who receive special services, the following research questions will be addressed:

**RQ1.** How are master’s programs in educational leadership, including principal licensure/certification programs, preparing assistant principals to make legally and ethically defensible decisions as authorized LEA representatives?

**RQ2.** What developmental path do secondary school administrators follow to make legally and ethically defensible decisions?

These two research questions will guide the examination of how principals are trained and continue to develop with respect to special education. Specifically, RQ1 focuses on understanding pre-service preparation and training, while RQ2 will determine the extent of training after the participant already holds the assistant principal position.

### **Research Context/Background**

To examine current trends in South Carolina, a review and analysis regarding how districts are performing in the area of special education across the state were necessary. Patton (2015) encourages the review of the document, stating, “they can reveal goals or decisions” (p. 293), providing useful information not otherwise observable. SC IDEA Part B Program Monitoring reports were requested from the South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE) via the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). Reports were obtained for 64 school districts across the state of South Carolina. The Office of Special Education Services (OSES) is responsible for fulfilling its oversight responsibilities by monitoring services that LEAs and State-Operated Programs (SOPs) provide to students with disabilities. After the district assessment, a formal letter is sent to each outlining their results. The letter explains the OSES role in the program evaluation process:

The South Carolina Department of Education, Office of Special Education Services (OSES), in carrying out its roles of leadership, resource allocation,

technical assistance, and general supervision are required to oversee the performance of Local Education Agencies (LEAs) and State-Operated Programs (SOPs) in the implementation of educational requirements under state and federal statutes and regulations relating to students with disabilities. One purpose of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is to assess the effectiveness of efforts to educate children with disabilities (Section 300.1 (d) of Title 34, Code of Federal Regulations [CFR]). In accordance with IDEA, the SCDE is responsible for ensuring that LEA's adhere to the requirements of Part B of IDEA and the educational requirements of the State (34 C.F.R. §§ 300.149(a) (1) and (2) and 300.600 through 604).

Based on the data analysis of these documents, it was evident that there is a great need for school administrators to be appropriately trained to fulfill their role as the LEA representative effectively. Twenty-one out of 64 (33%) school districts noted a lack of preparation and training for school administrators. The SCDE required school districts to provide training for their school leaders to address their roles and responsibilities, discipline, placement, and IEP development. Forty-one out of 64 (64%) of the school districts assessed had issues with adhering to discipline procedures with regard to special education. Further, 20 out of 64 (31%) school districts did not appropriately address student behaviors, which may interfere with the learning progress, (i.e., Behavior Intervention Plans [BIP] did not address behaviors, Functional Behavior Assessments [FBA] were being completed without proper data collection, BIPs and FBAs have not been reviewed or updated regularly, lack of understanding, etc.). Finally, all 64 districts assessed were out of compliance and required corrective action with the specific LEA

level IEP development, including but not limited to, adhering to timelines and procedures, development of present levels of academic and functional performance (PLAAFP) including impact of the disability findings that include baseline data; development of appropriate, measurable annual goals consistent with baseline data; identification of special education and related services, accommodations, and modifications; identification of least restrictive environment (LRE); following applicable procedures for revising students IEPs following student disciplinary actions; post-secondary considerations, including the development of measurable post-secondary goals and transition services; completion of prior written notice (PWN), and consideration of all relevant special factors.

For many years, various researchers have examined the preparation of school administrators in special education leadership. The overwhelming trend consistently reveals that school administrators have not been adequately prepared during educational administration licensure programs (e.g. see D. Bateman, Gervais, Wysocki, & Cline, 2017; Mary Lynn Boscardin, Weir, & Kusek, 2010; DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; DiPaola et al., 2004; Haar, Robicheau, & Palladino, 2008). Furthermore, school administrators themselves report the need for special education information and training (Christensen, Williamson, Roberston, & Hunter, 2013).

Christensen et al. (2013) interviewed and surveyed school leaders on the preparation of educational administrators for special education success from a principal's perspective. In this study, the participants were already credentialed and practicing school administrators. Christensen's et al. (2013) study revealed that principals emphasized the need for better training in matters related to special education, specifically in the areas of



curriculum modification, discipline guidelines, state testing options and accommodations, knowledge of applicable laws, creating an inclusive culture, and mentoring new special educators. Today, school administrators continue to be concerned about the same areas of special education leadership.

Another aspect of special education that previous researchers have considered is how school administrators make sense of the law regarding the LRE. Sumbera, Pazez, and Lashley (2014) conducted a study to determine how school principals made sense of free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. Their findings suggest that if school leaders are to fulfill their responsibilities effectively, additional training in special education is essential because school administrators are frequently required to fulfill the role of the authorized LEA Representative during IEP meetings.

What developmental path, if any, do secondary school administrators follow to make legally and ethically defensible decisions? Schulze and Boscardin's (2018) study on leadership perceptions of principals with and without special education backgrounds discussed that as administrators mature and their knowledge and skills continue to grow, most are likely to follow a developmental continuum rather than being limited to a specific role/position. "Because behavior change is slow and relies on opportunities for practice and reinforcement, leadership preparation, professional development, and mentoring are mechanisms for facilitating movement along the leadership continuum" (Schulze & Boscardin, 2018, p. 24). The findings of this study suggest that as school administrators gain experience, their knowledge will evolve, which is consistent with research previously conducted (see, e.g., Garand, 2014; Mosley, Boscardin, & Wells, 2014; Tudryn, Boscardin, & Wells, 2016).

The research that I am proposing would assist in determining how school administrators are prepared, with or without, being adequately trained through university preparation programs. This research would review characteristics and competencies effective school administrators of special education possess, how they make sense of the law with regard to what is an *appropriate* education for students with disabilities, and how the school administrators' knowledge was developed over time.

While there is a plethora of research that principal leadership is vital to creating and sustaining inclusive schooling practices that work for all students, based on the literature review undertaken, it is clear there is a stunning dearth of “acquisition” of, particularly, special education leadership knowledge and skills along the “developmental continuum” including college and university administrator licensure programs, first-year administration training programs, professional development, on-the-job-training, and self-teaching practices.

Since these programs may not be adequately preparing school administrators to be effective leaders of special education, and there is limited literature stating how principals *are* prepared for this lofty task, this research will fill a much-needed gap determining how secondary school administrators are prepared to lead their schools in the area of special education with adequate knowledge to make legally and ethically defensible decisions while serving as the authorized LEA representative.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This research study will be conducted using two primary theoretical frameworks. The first theory is self-determination, a key component of which is “sensemaking”: Sumbera's et al. (2014) research reported that leadership preparation and training programs “need to place a greater emphasis on helping future and current principals

discover and analyze their own and others' internal forces and the potential impact they may have on their own sensemaking process" (p. 318). The second theory is based on guiding ethical leadership and decision-making in education (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016, p. 4). Together these theories will guide the effort to answer how secondary assistant principals are prepared and continue to develop their skills and knowledge about special education.

### **Self-Determination Theory**

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) may provide an avenue for understanding and explaining this phenomenon (Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT offers an underexplored framework for investigating the leadership of special education and provides a lens with which to view how school administrators make sense of the laws, policies, and procedures and why some leaders are more knowledgeable and successful leading inclusive schools than others.

### **Ethical Leadership and Decision-Making**

The second framework is based on guiding ethical leadership and decision-making in education (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016, p. 4) which is applied to dilemmas faced by school principals as they responded to the realigned imperatives of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and the No Child Left Behind Act. According to Stockall and Dennis (2015), decision-making models specifically designed for special education teachers and school leaders are lacking in current special education literature. School administrators are frequently faced with making legal and ethical decisions while in their position. Bateman and Bateman (2015) explain this dilemma by stating, "Principals may make decisions regarding whether a change in placement that

would normally be permitted according to the school's disciplinary procedures should occur and is appropriate for students with disabilities on a case-by-case basis (34 C.F.R. § 300.530[g])” (p. 115).

Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) have applied theoretical perspectives to complex dilemmas and developed an ethical leadership and decision-making guide for educators, which may provide an avenue for preparing school administrators to make legally and ethically defensible decisions when dealing with special education matters. The authors use four viewpoints to guide in the decision-making process: 1) ethic of justice 2) ethic of critique 3) ethic of care, and 4) ethic of the profession.

Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) view the teaching of ethics as an “ever-evolving process” for all and that reflections as well as conversations between colleagues are key components. Although Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) do not use SDT as a part of their decision-making model, the link between SDT and ethical decision-making could be helpful for leaders in preparation for special education issues.

### **Situated Knowledge and Related Assumptions**

Dwyer & Buckle (2009, p. 55) define an insider as someone who shares the characteristics, role, experience understudy, and the participants. As an insider, I frequently serve as the authorized LEA representative during IEP meetings, and I understand the importance of the role and the process. Thus, during data collection and analysis, I will at times need to set aside my insider perspective and focus on understanding how the LEA representative explains their perspective so that my own subjectivity and positionality will not skew my data.

Additionally, Dwyer & Buckle (2009, p. 55) refer to the outsider when there is a commonality shared by participants, the personhood of the researcher, including his or

her membership status in relation to those participating in the research. As an outsider, I must pay particular attention to the fact that I do not know what knowledge or training the school administrator has received. I cannot judge them based on my knowledge of this topic because they may not have had similar training and experiences that I have been privileged to have enjoyed thus far. I am not the student or the special education teacher, so I am not privy to the information that the LEA representative may need to know and be aware of to successfully make legally and ethically defensible decisions.

During data collection, I will need to pay particular attention to my subjectivity and positionality as I collect data. When conducting a preliminary observation of an LEA representative participation in an IEP meeting at a middle school, I found that it was harder than I expected to separate my special education background and knowledge of the process from interfering with my objectivity. Initially, I did not fully realize that I was so judgmental until I started reading the interpretive statements from my field notes. My subjectivity and positionality will undoubtedly be something that I have to be mindful of when collecting data and then reflect on throughout the data collection process.

Because ensuring that school administrators are prepared to make legally and ethically defensible decisions as an LEA representative, I may struggle to separate my feelings about this topic with the actual knowledge and training of the LEA representative that I am interviewing. The attitude of the school administrator filling this role may tend to impact my view of them professionally as an effective LEA representative; therefore, I must remain cognizant of separating myself from the practitioner to the researcher.

I cannot make assumptions that just because a school leader has a secondary administrator credential that they have been adequately prepared to make legally and ethically defensible decisions as the authorized LEA representative. As a special education teacher and current high school assistant principal of instruction, I have witnessed that this is less often the case. In my experience, I have worked with few secondary school administrators that fully understood their role as the LEA representative. These administrators trust that the special education teachers conclusively know the law and therefore, they are protected and do not necessarily need to know the ins and outs of special education. They appear to be content with allowing the special education teacher the latitude to be the expert in this field.

### **Methodology**

This research study will be conducted using a qualitative interview methodology. An individual interview provides an opportunity to gather data that promotes understanding of the participant perspectives and addresses the research questions (Merriam, 1998). Specifically, the interviews are the primary data collection instrument and will be used to examine how secondary school administrators are prepared to make legally and ethically defensible decisions as the authorized LEA representative. This research study will use an inductive strategy by collecting data from interviews and document analysis. An inductive approach "aims to generate meanings from the data set collected to identify patterns and relationships to build a theory" (2019). A coding analysis of patterns or common themes will be used to make sense of the data collected.

An interview study was primarily chosen because the researcher is striving to understand and make meaning about a particular situation or phenomenon (i.e., preparation of secondary school administrators). Additionally, the other types of

qualitative research methods do not adequately apply to the phenomenon that is being studied.

An interview study methodology will guide this research project. This method was chosen to determine how to make meaning of the problem of how secondary school administrators are prepared to make legally and ethically defensible decisions when serving as the authorized LEA representative. This methodology will use an inductive strategy by collecting data from interviews and document analysis. A coding analysis of patterns or common themes will be used to make sense of the data collected.

Table 1.1 provides a brief overview of the terms that will be frequently used in this study.

**Table 1.1**

***Definition of Terms***

<b>Term</b>	<b>Meaning</b>
<b>Ethical Dilemma</b>	Paul, French, and Cranston-Gingras (2001) defined an ethical dilemma as “a situation in which an individual or team is faced with a difficult choice while fully aware of the nature of that choice and the affecting outcomes for good or ill.”
<b>Indicator 13</b>	“The intent of Indicator 13 is to provide LEAs and states a way to measure how effective their IEP Teams are at addressing the transition from high school to post-secondary life. The transition process facilitates a student’s movements towards attaining the student’s post-secondary goals” (2018)
<b>Individualized Education Plan (IEP)</b>	An IEP is more than just a written legal document (or “plan”). It’s a map that lays out the program of special education instruction, supports, and services kids need to make progress and succeed in school.

<b>Local Education Agency (LEA)</b>	A public board of education or other public authority legally constituted within a State for either administrative control or direction of, or to perform a service function for, public elementary or secondary schools in a city, county, township, school district, or other political subdivision of a State, or for a combination of school districts or counties as are recognized in a State as an administrative agency for its public elementary schools or secondary schools” (Ed 1102.03(o); 34 CFR 300.28).
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Table 1.2 provides a brief overview of the special education laws that ensure disability rights are protected for students and individuals with disabilities.

**Table 1.2**

***Special Education Laws***

Law	Purpose
Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA)	The ADA is a civil rights law that prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in all areas of public life, including jobs, schools, transportation, and all public and private places that are open to the general public. The purpose of the law is to establish that, legally, people with disabilities have the same rights and opportunities as everyone else and make sure that those rights are observed. The ADA gives civil rights protections to individuals with disabilities similar to those provided to individuals on the basis of race, color, sex, national origin, age, and religion. It guarantees equal opportunity for individuals with disabilities in public accommodations, employment, transportation, state and local government services, and telecommunications. The ADA is divided into five titles (or sections) that relate to different areas of public life (1990)
Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)	Without explicitly addressing the needs of students with disabilities, ESSA demands that states improve student performance and prepare all students for college and careers by building better accountability, developing effective teachers and leaders, and increasing learner access to effective instructional practices (Ibogle, 2016)



Free Appropriate Education at Public Expense (FAPE)	Consists of special education and related services that are provided at public expense, under public supervision and direction, without charge, and which meet the standard of the State Educational Agency, and are provided in conformity with the individualized educational program required under the Act. 20 U.S.C.A. §1401(9); Ed 1102.01(s). School districts must provide a free, appropriate public education to children with disabilities who are between the ages of 3 and 21, and who have not yet received a regular high school diploma. See e.g., Ed 1102.01(r).
Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)	IDEA is the primary law governing the educational rights of eligible students with disabilities in school. According to federal law, every child with a disability is entitled to a free appropriate public education (FAPE) (2004).
Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)	The LRE is the requirement in federal law that students with disabilities receive their education, to the maximum extent appropriate, with nondisabled peers and that special education students are not removed from regular classes unless, even with supplemental aids and services, education in regular classes cannot be achieved satisfactorily. [20 United States Code (U.S.C.) Sec. 1412(a)(5)(A); 34 Code of Federal Regulations (C.F.R.) Sec. 300.114.]
Related Services	The term “Related Services” means transportation and such developmental, corrective and other supportive services required to assist a child with a disability to benefit from special education. 20 U.S.C.A. §1401(26); Ed 11002.04(q). Related services include the early identification and assessment of disabling conditions in children, but do not include medical devices that are surgically implanted or the replacement of such devices.
Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act	Section 504’s intent is to protect student’s civil rights, ensuring equal access and preventing discrimination. “No otherwise qualified individual with a disability in the United States... shall, solely because of her or his disability, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance. (29 U.S.C. § 794[a]) p. 23)

## **Conclusion**

This first chapter established the context and theoretical model for a basic interview qualitative research study. It also introduced the rationale for conducting a study of how secondary school administrators are prepared to make legally and ethically defensible decisions when serving as the authorized LEA representative. In this instance, the methodology is a basic interview study. In the next chapter, a literature review will be conducted to see what previous research reveals about how secondary school leaders are prepared formally or informally, what developmental path school administrators followed, and the development of knowledge and skills in the area of special education.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Introduction**

The population of students with disabilities is growing, and expectations regarding inclusive practices (Bon, 2012) have increased the responsibilities of school leaders (Crockett et al., 2009). As Crockett et al. (2009) assert, school administrators need to be prepared to lead inclusive schools in response to legislative and social priorities regarding the inclusion of and outcomes for students with disabilities. In part, due to the focus on inclusive educational placements, students with disabilities are no longer separated from the general school population. According to the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), students with disabilities are, to the maximum extent appropriate, to be placed in the least restrictive environment with non-disabled peers, and special education students are not to be removed from regular classes unless, even with supplemental aids and services, education in regular classes cannot be achieved satisfactorily [20 United States Code (U.S.C.) Sec. 1412(a)(5)(A); 34 Code of Federal Regulations (C.F.R.) Sec. 300.114.].

In addition to the least restrictive environment (LRE) mandate, many disability rights organizations interpreted the LRE principle as requiring full inclusion. As a result of these divergent perspectives, misunderstandings and conflicts between school administrators and parents are likely. Furthermore, many secondary administrators are ill-

prepared to make legally or educationally sound decisions for students with disabilities because they have been inadequately trained (Crockett et al., 2009).

During the last decade, scholars in the leadership and special education field (e.g. see Bon & Bigbee, 2011; Sider, Maich, & Morvan, 2017) have focused on the need to provide special education training for school administrators. Research suggests that many principals are underprepared and some lack any background from coursework and field experience which may be required to exert strong leadership in special education (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; DiPaola et al., 2004). With the number of students who receive special services increasing (Salem, 2018), it is not surprising that there is an increase in the number of legal and ethical dilemmas that school administrators are facing.

### **LEA Responsibilities**

In many South Carolina school districts, school administrators are frequently expected to serve as the authorized Local Education Agency (LEA) representative for students with disabilities. Eggert and Minutelli (2012, p. 5) define the term “Local Educational Agency” as “a public board of education or other public authority legally constituted within a State for either administrative control or direction of, or to perform a service function for, public elementary or secondary schools in a city, county, township, school district, or other political subdivision of a State, or for a combination of school districts or counties as are recognized in a State as an administrative agency for its public elementary schools or secondary schools” (Ed 1102.03(o); 34 CFR 300.28).

The LEA representative is responsible for ensuring that the school and district comply with the IDEA on a local level. More specifically, the LEA “representative” is an essential member of the IEP team and is responsible for ensuring that the school and

district are complying with the procedural and substantive requirements of the IDEA and that students are receiving a FAPE. IDEA requires an LEA representative who is qualified to provide or supervise the provision of, specially designed instruction, knowledgeable of the general education curriculum, and knowledgeable about the availability of resources of the public agency (34 C.F.R. 300.321). The LEA representative must also have the authority to commit district resources and be able to guarantee that the district will provide all the services specified in the IEP (See Fed. Reg. Vol 71, No. 156 at 46670). To be effective in their role as an LEA representative, secondary school administrators must be knowledgeable of the law, policies, and procedures that guide special education in order to be prepared to make legally and ethically defensible decisions.

### **Laws Governing Special Education**

Secondary school administrators must be well informed of the laws that protect students with disabilities. This is not an easy task given the complex education and disability laws, as well as ongoing litigation. As previously noted, Table 1.2 introduced the foundational special-education laws that ensure disability rights are protected for students and individuals with disabilities. Every revision of the laws continues to impact all stakeholders and creates a challenge for the LEA representative to remain current in their knowledge of the law.

Sumbera et al. (2014) conducted a study to determine how building principals make sense of the law when determining how to effectively provide a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) for students with disabilities. According to this study, a school administrator's understanding or sensemaking of special education law and policy guides their decision

making role throughout the process of developing each student's IEP (Sumbera et al., 2014). In addition to their role with ensuring that the school and district are complying with the procedural and substantive requirements of IDEA and that students are receiving FAPE, they must be able to allocate resources that are required by special education laws. The study results indicate that if school administrators are to fulfill their responsibilities for the performance of all students effectively, additional training in special education is essential (i.e., leadership preparation programs and ongoing professional development).

School administrators are expected to make legitimate decisions based on ethical and legal principles. Above all and according to the law, administrators are responsible legally for implementing and following school board policy as well as the law. According to Strike (2007), school leaders are often expected to be “democratic leaders and to create democratic communities in their schools” (p. 92), but they must adhere to state and federal legislative mandates. The legislative mandates set the base level of performance; however, it is the ethical perspective that further guides school leader's actions (Bon & Bigbee, 2011). The role of school administrators is to follow the laws that govern special education while being aware of the possibilities that an ethical dilemma will contradict the law. School administrators must be prepared to make both legally and ethically defensible decisions as an LEA representative.

### **Litigation Potential**

Pazey and Cole's (2013) research study revealed that special education has emerged as one of the most litigious issues that school leaders must confront daily in their schools. Nevertheless, as previously noted, content related to special education has been a long-neglected area within administrator preparation programs at the college and university level. Although we know that formal preparation is absent, we have also

demonstrated that there are other ways to gain knowledge and understanding of special education laws, practices, and procedures. How principals interpret what they perceive to be the purpose of FAPE and LRE can have a direct influence on how they choose to implement and deliver educational services to students with disabilities in their schools (Praisner, 2003; Riehl, 2008).

Special education preparation and training are vital if school administrators are going to be effective in their role as LEA representatives as well as credible with parents. Yell, Conroy, Katsiyannis, and Conroy, (2009) also noted a lack of training and preparation for educators is a common source of parental concern and potential litigation and can lead to school-level problems such as failing to follow the IEP or telling a parent incorrectly that something can or cannot be done (p. 61). Based on the data obtained from the SCDE IDEA Part B Program Monitoring reports, it is understandable why parents may be concerned in South Carolina. Overwhelmingly, the compliance reports compiled by the SCDE revealed that school districts in SC are struggling to comply with the law regarding policies, procedures, and forms, special education staffing, IEP development, and IEP implementation. (See SC IDEA Program Monitoring Reports spreadsheet)

School administrators must be knowledgeable of special education laws, policies, and procedures in order to make sense of the laws. Sumbera et al. (2014) conducted a meta-analysis of twelve research studies to determine how building principals make sense of FAPE. In their study, they analyzed research studies which contained qualitative data about principals' perceptions of federal policy mandates (IDEA, 2004; NCLB, 2002) relevant to FAPE and LRE. Across all 12 studies evaluated, one or more principal articulated a higher level of concern pertinent to being compliant with access and

opportunity to learn issues related to the LRE mandate of IDEA (2004). The major takeaway from this meta-analysis is that significant substantive errors in IEP development that result in a student not receiving educational benefits from his or her transition program violate the IDEA and would likely result in a hearing officer or judge ruling that a school district denied FAPE. Thus, developing legally correct and educationally appropriate IEPs that satisfy the transition services requirements of IDEA continue to be a challenge for special education administrators and IEP team members (Etscheidt, 2006; Petcu, Yell, Cholewicki, & Plotner, 2014; Prince, Katsiyannis, & Farmer, 2013).

### **School Administrator Licensing Standards**

The National Conference of State Legislators (NCSL) reports “historically licensure requirements have focused on ‘inputs’—the number of courses taken, previous experience as a teacher, etc.—rather than on performance as a school leader” (Best, 2006, p. 10). This is changing. Now, “states are attempting to move toward a performance-based system by creating standards and requiring administrators to demonstrate knowledge and skills in order to be licensed or for license renewal” (Best, 2006, p. 10). Moreover, while there is a plethora of research that explains what school administrators need to know in order to lead successful inclusive schools, the literature providing information and an avenue for preparing school leaders with the skills and knowledge for this challenging task is scarce. Based on the literature reviewed, school administrators are not formally trained and prepared in the area of special education during licensure programs. Further, these educational leadership programs do not specifically address special education competencies in the professional standards that guide them; therefore,



college and university programs have not adequately included knowledge and skills in special education as a part of their program requirements.

In order to obtain a school educational leadership credential, educators are required to complete an accredited program at a college or university. Several guiding bodies govern these programs and purport to ensure that school leaders are adequately prepared for their position in school administration. These organizations function to produce effective school administrators. According to the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (2015), there are several reasons that standards are necessary for school administrators.

The global economy is transforming jobs and the 21st-century workplace for which schools prepare students. Technologies are advancing faster than ever. The conditions and characteristics of children, in terms of demographics, family structures and more, are changing. On the education front, the politics and shifts of control make the headlines daily. Cuts in school funding loom everywhere, even as schools are being subjected to increasingly competitive market pressures and held to higher levels of accountability for student achievement (p. 7).

Given these changes taking place in the field of education and the demands of the job, school administrators require standards to guide their practice in ways that will be productive and beneficial to all stakeholders.

### **Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO)**

The Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) is a “nonpartisan, nationwide, nonprofit organization of public officials who head departments of elementary and secondary education in the states, the District of Columbia, the

Department of Defense Education Activity, the Bureau of Indian Education and the five U.S. extra-state jurisdictions” (2018). As an organization, they claim to be committed to ensuring that all students participating in our public education system, regardless of background, graduate prepared for college, careers, and life.

### **Interstate School Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) policy standards**

One of the most well-known and widespread attempts to prepare educational leaders to act ethically by scaffolding instruction and experience is based on ISLLC standards (Storey & Beeman, 2009, p. 12). ISLLC standards provide guidance to state and district leaders on what school administrators should know and be able to do in their leadership role. The standards describe what all school administrators, regardless of grade level or context, can do to strengthen organizations, support teachers, lead instruction, and advance student learning.

However, Christensen, Robertson, Williamson, & Hunter (2013) reveal that these current standards are not up to par when addressing special education. “Regrettably, both the original and updated versions of the ISLLC standards and performance indicators made no specific mention of special education knowledge needed by principals” (p.104). While it may seem likely that college and university programs should infer that special education is embedded in these standards, the standards themselves remain lacking a direct indication that the standards are meant to include those with disabilities.

### **Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL)**

The Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) provide guiding standards that will help school administrators make a difference in the learning and well-being of students. According to the PSEL, the standards are grounded in current research

and the real-life experiences of educational leaders. This organization outlines foundational principles of leadership to guide the practice of educational leaders so they can improve student achievement and create more equitable outcomes. These standards are designed to ensure that educational leaders are ready to meet the challenges of the job today and in the future; which is the focus of RQ1. Yet, these standards do not specifically address special education any more than the previous ISLLC standards did (2015).

### **National Educator Leadership Preparation (NELP)**

The National Education Leadership Preparation (NELP) standards serve a distinct purpose in that they provide specificity around performance expectations for beginning level building and district leaders. These standards may guide the interpretation of the responses to RQ2. The “NELP standards specify what novice leaders and program graduates should know and be able to do as a result of completing a high-quality educational leadership preparation program” (2015). These standards address the building-level leaders’ responsibility for the well-being of students and staff as well as their role in working with others to create a supportive and inclusive school culture. Although these standards do not specifically address students with disabilities, it is implied in the term “inclusive.”

### **Role of the Principal in Special Education**

There is limited research on principals as leaders of special education; most literature is on leadership for inclusive schools (McLeskey, Waldron, & Redd, 2014; Pierson & Howell, 2013; Shogren, McCart, Lyon, & Sailor, 2015). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) and the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015) set high

expectations for principals and other school leaders to ensure that all students, including those with disabilities, meet state expectations. School administrators are responsible for being knowledgeable and also for complying with complex special education law requirements, staffing, and general accountability throughout the process for each student from the inception of the identification process until a student graduates from high school or is dismissed from special services. Billingsley, McLeskey, and Crockett (2014) conducted a study that reported a lack of attention with regards to special education training despite a clear emphasis on the importance of preparing school leaders to meet the needs of every student through standards that guide the development and approval of most leadership preparation programs.

Despite the lack of attention to inclusion of special education students in leadership preparation standards, the literature is clear that leadership, specifically principal leadership, is central to creating and sustaining inclusive schooling practices that work for all students (Burrello et al., 1992; Capper et al., 2000; Riehl, 2008; Stainback et al., 1989; Theoharis & Causton-Theoharis, 2008). Riehl's (2008) review of normative, empirical, and critical literature found that inclusive administrative practice is rooted in school administrators' value systems of equity and social justice and suggests that principals are key agents in framing new understandings of what it means to lead inclusive schools. Theoharis and Causton-Theoharis (2008) confirmed this assertion in their qualitative study on critical dispositions for preparing inclusive school leaders by stating that "inclusion is really about social justice and creating equity for all students" (p. 236). While the literature indeed suggests that principal leadership is crucial to

leading inclusive schools, it does not address how school administrators are adequately prepared for this challenging task.

Just as the landscape of special education has changed due to more inclusive practices for students with disabilities, the role of the principal has changed throughout the years as well. Today's school leaders must possess the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively lead special education programs in their schools in addition to ensuring the general education curriculum is viable for all students. Capper's et al. (2000) research discusses meeting the needs of students of "ALL" abilities by shifting from implementing programs to providing services and states that the school administrator "acts as a radar for inequities" (p. 42). In order for leaders to be able to effectively create an inclusive culture and determine inequities in their schools, they must possess the knowledge and skills to do so.

Haar et al. (2008) conducted a qualitative study to determine how general education administrators can become more engaged and empowered in the special education decision-making process as well as other special education leadership issues. Haar's et al. (2008) findings suggested that principals must understand the core special education legal foundation as well as how to effectively match instruction to the learning characteristics of students with disabilities. Principals must know how to meaningfully include students with disabilities into the general education setting by creating school-wide conditions that effectively support special education.

There are certain aspects of special education that school administrators must know to be effective in their role as an inclusive school leader. Poetter, Everington, and Jetty (2001) conducted a qualitative research study using Curriculum Deliberation:

Framework for Curriculum Planning using a foundational study group and inquiry method to address the “most critical knowledge that administrators needed” (p. 173). Poetter’s et al. (2001) findings suggest that school administrators reported that the legal requirements that guide the IEP process (i.e., IEP's, 504 plans, and special education identification and evaluation processes) are the most essential knowledge required to lead special education programs effectively. Although IDEA does not require school administrators to participate on IEP teams, Bateman and Bateman’s (2015) research reported that it is essential for principals to understand the IEP process. Because the IEP team must include a representative of the local education agency (LEA; i.e., school district or school) who has the authority to commit funds, principals often do participate on IEP teams.

One of the principal's responsibilities is to ensure that school staff members have the aids, services and supports they need to include and assist students with disabilities in all school environments, including special education. Federal law (IDEA) requires that students with disabilities be educated in the least restrictive environment with non-disabled peers to the maximum extent appropriate ([20 United States Code (U.S.C.) Sec. 1412(a)(5)(A); 34 Code of Federal Regulations (C.F.R.) Sec. 300.114.]. School administrators are also responsible for educating staff, ensuring the availability of supplementary aids and services, providing time for planning, meetings, in-service training, conferences, and demonstrating commitment. For many school leaders, mainstreaming students with disabilities has proven difficult (Ngwokabuenui, 2013). To guide and support teaching and learning for all, principals should have an understanding of instructional leadership and the relationship among teaching, learning, and curriculum.

School administrators must also know how to establish and nurture a school culture of acceptance, inclusion, and achievement for all students.

Knowing the laws, policies, and procedures of special education may not be enough to ensure success. School administrators must also have the capacity to make sense of these items. Sumbera et al. (2014) conducted a qualitative meta-analysis study to determine the sensemaking progress by which principals adapt and transform policy in their schools. The study examined specific patterns that emerged from the data, and their findings suggest that internal forces have a significant influence on their actions and understanding of LRE and FAPE. “Sensemaking is not merely about interpreting; it involves authorship of interpretation” (Weick, 1995). “Understanding how a leader makes sense of inclusive policy highlights that leader’s beliefs, values, and paradigms that surround the inclusive police as well as whom it was meant to serve” (p. 307).

Based on the coding categories that emerged (e.g., the fallacy of centrality, identity, retrospective, plausibility, environment, social, ongoing, and cues), the authors recommended examining how school administrators are currently being prepared to meet the diverse needs of a changing student population. They also recommended that leadership preparation and training programs should place a greater emphasis on principals analyzing their internal forces as well as the potential impact they may have on their sensemaking by understanding the internal forces – the school leader’s belief system, existing paradigms, and attitudes that influence school administrators’ sensemaking processes is critical as they seek to generate positive outcomes for all students.

## **Developmental Path of Administrators in Special Education**

Schulze and Boscardin (2018) study on leadership and special education knowledge revealed there is some evidence that leadership is dependent upon experience. Mumford, Marks, Connelly, Zaccaro, and Reiter-Palmon (2000) confirmed the assertion by revealing that as leaders rose in positions of responsibility and gained more experience, they concurrently gained more skills in a progressive systematic fashion, implying that growth as a leader requires time to learn the necessary competencies. Leaders develop over time through trial and error, reflection on experiences, and observation of other leaders (Reichard & Johnson, 2011). Having prior leadership experience, especially highly relevant experience is a strong predictor of a leader's effectiveness (Avery, Tonidandel, Griffith, & Quiñones, 2003).

Schulze and Boscardin (2018) conducted a mixed-methods study on leadership perceptions of principals with and without special education backgrounds. In this study, the researchers discussed that as administrators mature, knowledge and skills continue to grow, most likely to follow a developmental continuum rather than being limited to a specific role/position. “Because behavior change is slow and relies on opportunities for practice and reinforcement, leadership preparation, professional development, and mentoring are mechanisms for facilitating movement along the leadership continuum” (p. 24).

While it seems evident that school administrators must be trained in special education knowledge, Schulze and Boscardin's (2018) data analysis using both quantitative and qualitative components determined that the ability of school administrators to effectively problem solve and advocate for students who receive special services may depend on both knowledge and an understanding of leadership approaches



within organizational structures. The researchers stated, “through varied opportunities, role expertise evolves and matures” (p. 24). The finding of this study suggests that as school administrators gain experience, their knowledge evolves, which is consistent with research previously conducted (e.g., see Garand, 2014; Mosley et al., 2014; Tudryn et al., 2016).

The results of Schulze and Boscardin’s (2018) study suggests that principals with and without special education backgrounds follow a developmental path. Hersey, Blanchard, and Johnson (2012) and Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, and Cohen (2007) support this data in that leaders grow as they gain experience and that born leaders are rare. As leaders mature, knowledge and skills continue to grow, increasing range and repertoire (Hersey et al., 2012). Research has shown that the acquisition of leadership skills is dynamic and most likely to follow a developmental continuum rather than being limited to a specific role/position (Garand, 2014; Mosley et al., 2014; Tudryn et al., 2016). Because leadership is developmental, it is not surprising that age is related to leaders' approach to their work (Schulze & Boscardin, 2018; Vecchio & Boatwright, 2002).

There are several paths that secondary school administrators potentially follow in developing their knowledge and skills in special education leadership. Several avenues will be considered in this literature review: 1) Administrator licensure programs; 2) Professional development (i.e., district-level professional development/training, professional conferences, etc.); 3) First-year school administrator training programs; 4) Learning on the job; and 5) Self-taught knowledge

## **Administrator Licensure Programs**

It is vital that principals not only provide effective leadership that focuses on general education programs but also possess the knowledge and skills that are necessary for them to lead special education programs at the school level effectively. Haar et al. (2008) acknowledge that principal preparation programs should be equipping aspiring principals with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to provide strong leadership in special education. The findings from the data collected as well as from issues identified in the research demonstrate a need for preparation programs to address the leadership demands associated with principal leadership and special education. Unfortunately, educational leadership and administration programs have not adequately trained principals to oversee special education programs (see, e.g., Angelle & Bilton, 2009; Hirth & Valesky, 1990; Lynch, 2012).

Crockett, Becker, & Quinn (2009) reviewed the knowledge base of special education leadership and administration programs from 1970-2009 by conducting a literature sample large enough to identify themes and analyze historical trends. Based on their findings, educational leadership programs are lacking specialized training in the area of special education. Numerous other applicable studies also indicate that school administrators may not possess adequate knowledge regarding best practices in the education of students with disabilities (see, e.g., Lasky & Karge, 2006; Lynch, 2012; Pazey & Cole, 2013).

The literature suggests that most principals lack any background from coursework and field experience which may be required to exert strong leadership in special education (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; DiPaola et al., 2004). According to

Poetter et al. (2001), graduate preparation programs and certification requirements for school administrators have been slow to respond to this increasing need. In order to adequately address the issues and meet the needs of students with disabilities, principals need initial preparation and ongoing professional development in special education (Lasky & Karge, 2006; Salisbury, 2006; Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, & Ahlgrim-Dezell, 2006).

The majority of evidence indicates that principals are not well prepared to address the needs of students with disabilities and others who struggle in school (Billingsley et al., 2014; DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; Pazez & Cole, 2013). “The primary factor that leads to this lack of knowledge and ownership is the absence of content related to disability and special education in principal preparation programs” (Billingsley et al., 2014). The literature reviewed continues to indicate that principal preparation course work may not target special education leadership and responsibilities (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003). Bertrand, Roberts, & Dalton (2009) reveal that further studies, such as work done by Lasky and Karge (2006), examined principal preparation programs and found the need for increased training in the area of special education during the preservice phase. Based on research, it is evident that administrator licensing programs lack sufficient training in special education.

### **Professional Development**

For many years, educators have focused on the professional development needs of teachers. Although this is essential, it is equally important to attend to the ongoing learning needs of school administrators. Research suggests that effective professional development needs to be ongoing, embedded in practice, linked to school reform

initiatives and problem-based. The professional learning opportunities also need to build on the needs of leaders regarding the skills they have yet to acquire (2019). Special education is an evolving and rapidly changing field; therefore, continued professional development is an essential aspect of being informed. Sumbera et al. (2014) reported that in order for principals to fulfill their responsibilities for the performance of all students, additional training in special education for principals in both leadership preparation programs and professional development are necessary. (Tucker, Young, & Koschoreck, 2012) research address the issue of continuing development for more experienced principals. In their view, the foundation for this development should be ensuring that time is available for “reflection, growth, and renewal” (p. 11).

In 2013, Christensen, Robertson, Williamson, & Hunter conducted a quantitative research study on preparing educational administrators for special education success from a practicing principal's' perspective. In this study, the participants were already credentialed and practicing school administrators. Christensen et al. (2013) used a survey to answer the question of what practicing principals believe should be included in administrator licensure programs regarding special education. The results indicated curriculum modification, discipline guidelines, state testing options and accommodations, knowledge of applicable laws, creating an inclusive culture, and mentoring new special educators are of great importance to school administrators. The results of this study are consistent with the findings of other researchers in this area (Bowlby, Peters, & Mackinnon, 2001; Zaretsky, 2003).

Christensen's et al. (2013) study also revealed that principals emphasized the need for better training in matters related to special education. Most (88.9%) of the

principals surveyed expressed that there is a great need to know how to modify and adapt the general curriculum to meet the needs of diverse learners, and 87% indicated a need for knowledge of legal guidelines for disciplining students with disabilities. Eggert & Minutelli (2012) define the LEA representative as “an integral member of the IEP Team. The LEA Representative is responsible for ensuring—at a local level—that the District is complying with the procedural and substantive requirements of the IDEA, and that students are receiving a FAPE” (p. 5). From these studies, we can see that practicing school administrators must continue to seek professional development opportunities to enhance their knowledge base and skills in special education in order to remain current and knowledgeable in their role as the LEA representative if they are to make legally and ethically defensible decisions.

### **Professional Development Conferences**

As school administrators develop along the continuum, there are many professional development conferences that they can attend to enhance their skills and knowledge base in special education (i.e., Council for Exceptional Children Conference, World Congress on Special Needs Education, International Association of Special Education, Division on Autism and Developmental Disabilities, Pacific Northwest Institute on Special Education and the Law, Special Education Conference, South Carolina Research to Practice Institute, etc.). These conferences seek to provide relevant information to school administrators to ensure effective leadership in the area of special education.

## **First Year Administration Training Programs**

A report from *Leadership Matters* (Bartoletti & Connelly, 2013), revealed that although new school administrators in some districts or states have a well-developed support system, others still have to fly by the seat of their pants and feel that the culture is unsupportive. As Mitgang and Gill (2012) pointed out, “Getting pre-service principal training right is essential. However, equally important is the training and support school leaders receive after they are hired” (p. 24). School administrators in South Carolina are required to participate in a principal induction program their first year in the position. Although the program is a “rigorous research-based curriculum provides substantive, ongoing professional development that new principals will deem helpful in their first year as newly appointed building administrators,” it may not specifically address the need for instructional leadership in the area of special education.

While South Carolina requires first-year principals to participate in additional training, professional development for first-year assistant principals is lacking and not required by the state. The Center for Executive Educational Leadership (CEEL) provides numerous opportunities to receive additional training for school administrators, both new and veteran, but the programs are costly (approximately \$250.00 per one day class), and participants must travel to Columbia, SC at their own expense. Further, special education is not a part of the curriculum offered through these programs.

## **Learning on the Job**

Because school building administrators are often inexperienced in dealing with the complexity of special education issues, they may fail to offer sufficient direction to special educators. Bays & Crockett (2007) explain that a vital source of guidance and

support for special educators are likely to come from a colleague—notably, the special education leader, which may not be the school administrator. Lasky & Karge (2006) added, “Learning on the job is still the main way that principals gain knowledge about special education” (Samuels, 2018). There are multiple paths school administrators may take to gain a greater understanding of this subject without formal training (i.e., research, relying on special educators/directors, dialogue with other school administrators, etc.) but the extent to which these leaders learn is based on their self-determination to be effective leaders of special education.

### **Self-Taught Knowledge**

In today’s society, information is readily available via the internet. With the stroke of a few keys, individuals can learn almost anything that they want to know. There are many books and other resources available to provide and teach the information they are interested in learning more about in any field. Specifically, in the area of special education and leading inclusive schools, the information available is limitless. Therefore, if the school administrator is willing to seek out the knowledge and spend time learning the material, the administrator will attain knowledge about special education and inclusion practices available.

### **Self-Determination Theory**

Sumbera’s et al. (2014) research reported that leadership preparation and training programs “need to place a greater emphasis on helping future and current principals discover and analyze their and others’ internal forces and the potential impact they may have on their own sensemaking process” (p. 318). Self-Determination Theory (SDT) may provide an avenue for understanding and explaining this phenomenon.

Deci and Ryan initially developed SDT. It is primarily concerned with supporting our natural or intrinsic tendencies to behave in effective and healthy ways.

SDT represents a broad framework for the study of human motivation and personality. SDT articulates a meta-theory for framing motivational studies, a formal theory that defines intrinsic and varied extrinsic sources of motivation, and a description of the respective roles of intrinsic and types of extrinsic motivation in cognitive and social development and individual differences. (2018)

The term self-determination is frequently used in special education; however, educators are usually discussing this theory in the context of student's self-determination and self-advocacy skills. While there is research in this area surrounding students (Wehmeyer, Abery, Mithaug, & Stancliffe, 2003), there is limited, if any, literature that determines how SDT is used to assist school administrators in their knowledge and skills as leaders of special education.

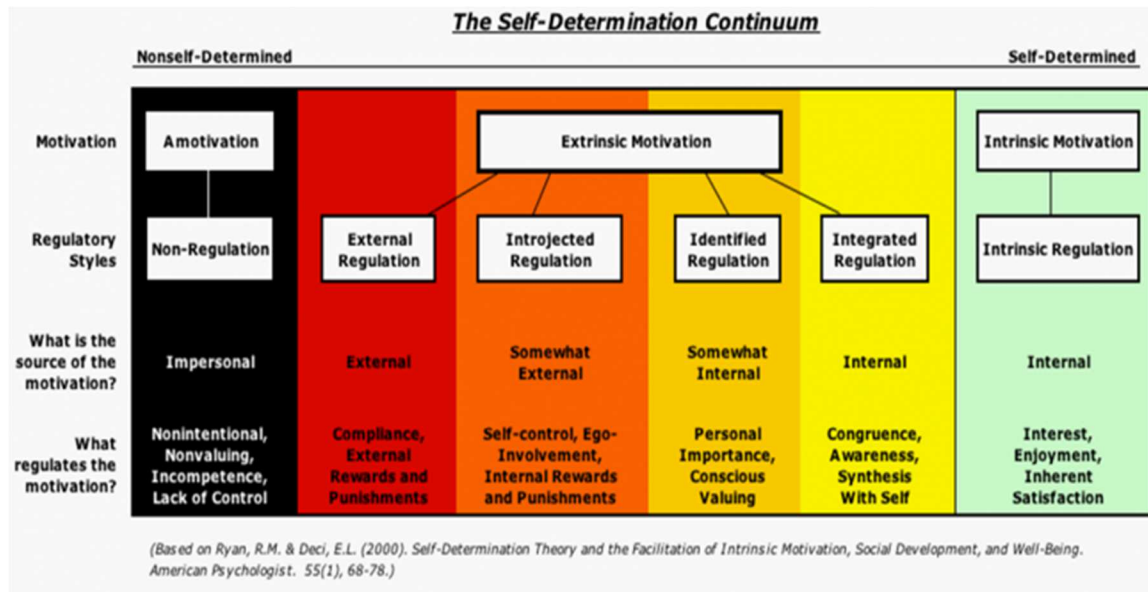
Beenen, Pichler, and Levy (2017) study contribute to our understanding as well “because SDT regards autonomy as a necessary condition for self-regulated behavior.” According to the authors, “SDT posits that three organismic needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness contribute to self-determined motivation and provide “nutriments” for individual tasks of engagement, learning, performance, vitality, and well-being (Ryan & Deci, 2000; Sheldon, Ryan, & Reis, 1996).

Autonomy, a necessary condition for self-determined motivation, describes experiencing one’s actions as self-determined versus externally controlled. Competence is feeling effectual in one’s pursuits (i.e., self-efficacy) and is necessary for any motivation. Relatedness describes meaningful social connections with others. All three



organismic needs have been empirically validated across 15 cultures as instrumental to intrinsic goal pursuit and psychological satisfaction” (Grouzet et al., 2005; Sheldon, Elliot, Kim, & Kasser, 2001).

Figure 2.1 illustrates the self-determination continuum that individuals follow as this skill develops over time.



**Figure 2.1** *The Self-Determination Continuum*

The SDT offers an underexplored framework for investigating the leadership of special education and provides a lens with which to view how school administrators make sense of the laws, policies, and procedures and why some leaders are more knowledgeable and successful leading inclusive schools than others.

### **Ethics in Special Education Leadership**

Research conducted by Bon & Bigbee (2011) established that “Ensuring that special education leaders are informed by both legal and ethical principles is critical, given the increasing numbers of students identified as disabled (U.S. Department of Education, 2010), serious concerns about overrepresentation of minority students (Arnold

& Lassmann, 2003; *Larnj P. v. Riles*, 1972), and significant financial and emotional costs associated with poor leadership (Mueller, Singer, & Draper, 2008)” (p. 325). From as far back as 1992, Howe and Miramontes were concerned about the danger that ethical questions will be ignored in favor of legal ones. The pressure to identify and provide an appropriate education for children with disabilities has occupied the attention of special educators. It is regrettable that, in this context "special education training programs regarding collegial relationships, research projects, and policy-making processes have given only superficial attention to how we might best resolve our ethical problems" (Howe, Boelé, & Miramontes, 1992, p. xiii).

Paul et al. (2001) defined an ethical dilemma as “a situation in which an individual or team is faced with a difficult choice while fully aware of the nature of that choice and the affecting outcomes for good or ill” (p. 4). The task of an effective educational leader is extremely complex and requires a leader who is inherently guided by ethics and morals; what is good, what is right, and what ought to be done for the benefit of students. The decisions that school administrators make must be legitimate decisions that are well thought out and reasoned, based on objective facts rather than emotions. Strike (2007) expressed that ethical decisions must be based on “adequate evidence” and their reasons for decisions must not only be relevant, “they must be justified” (p. 126). Ciulla (2003) adds, “...feelings can impel one to action, and so can moral judgments; and in a particular case sympathy and morality may pull in opposite directions” (p. 82). School administrators need to be prepared and knowledgeable in the area of special education law, policy and procedures to ensure that they can separate their feelings about a particular situation from what is right and in the best interest for students.

To assist school administrators through this process, the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) has established a Code of Ethics (2015) for educators of students with exceptionalities. All members of the special education profession are expected to uphold these principles in their practice. Bigbee (2012) cited Fiedler and Van Haren's (2008) [13] claim that codes of ethics, such as the one established by the CEC are written in response to "numerous ethical dilemmas that arise in the field of special education on a routine basis" (p. 2).

According to Riehl's (2000) literature review, "If administrative practice is both moral and epistemological in nature, then the values that help administrators to compose their practice ought to be addressed in administrator preparation programs" (p.191). The Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (2015) established ethical and professional norms for effective leaders. Ethical standards for each group are listed in Table 2.1.

**Table 2.1**

***Ethical Standards***

CEC Code of Ethics (2015)	Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) (2015)
Special education professionals are committed to developing the highest educational and quality of life potential of individuals with exceptionalities.	Act ethically and professionally in personal conduct, relationships with others, decision -making, stewardship of the school's resources, and all aspects of school leadership.
Special education professionals promote and maintain a high level of competence and integrity in practicing their profession.	Act according to and promote the professional norms of integrity, fairness, transparency, trust, collaboration, perseverance, learning, and continuous improvement.

Special education professionals engage in professional activities that benefit individuals with exceptionalities, their families, other colleagues, students, or research subjects.	Place children at the center of education and accept responsibility for each student's academic success and well-being.
Special education professionals exercise objective professional judgment in the practice of their profession.	Safeguard and promote the values of democracy, individual freedom and responsibility, equity, social justice, community, and diversity.
Special education professionals strive to advance their knowledge and skills regarding the education of individuals with exceptionalities.	Lead with interpersonal and communication skill, social-emotional insight, and understanding of all students' and staff members' backgrounds and cultures.
Special education professionals work within the standards and policies of their profession.	Provide moral direction for the school and promote ethical and professional behavior among faculty and staff.
Special education professionals seek to uphold and improve where necessary the laws, regulations, and policies governing the delivery of special education and related services and the practice of their profession.	
Special education professionals do not condone or participate in unethical or illegal acts, nor violate professional standards adopted by the Delegate Assembly of CEC.	

According to the CEC,

Professional special educators are guided by the CEC professional ethical principles, practice standards, and professional policies in ways that respect the diverse characteristics and needs of individuals with exceptionalities and their families. They are committed to upholding and advancing these principles. (p. 1)

While the CEC standards were not written explicitly for school administrators, they are a useful guide for them to follow when making decisions for exceptional students.

However, the PSEL ethical standards were written to guide school leaders. Each of these codes is beneficial and provides guidance for school administrators when trying to make legally and ethically defensible decisions. Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2016) decision-making framework may also assist school leaders when determining how to navigate challenging legal and ethical dilemmas.

### **Ethical Leadership and Decision-Making in Education**

Demands for ethical leadership in education reflect, in part, a focus on the best interest of the child standard (J. Stefkovich & Begley, 2007). "Within the field of special education, in particular, this directive becomes a massive challenge given the complexity and significant demands placed on special education leaders" (Bigbee, 2012, Abstract). According to Stockall and Dennis (2015), decision-making models specifically designed for special education teachers and school leaders are lacking in current special education literature. School administrators are frequently faced with making legal and ethical decisions while in their position. Bateman and Bateman (2015) explain this dilemma by stating, "Principals may make decisions regarding whether a change in placement that would normally be permitted according to the school's disciplinary procedures should occur and is appropriate for students with disabilities on a case-by-case basis (34 C.F.R. § 300.530[g]) (p. 115).

"By their nature, ethical dilemmas defy easy solutions" (Glesne, 2016, p. 179). Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) have applied theoretical perspectives to complex dilemmas and developed an ethical leadership and decision-making guide for educators, which may provide an avenue for preparing school administrators to make legally and ethically defensible decisions when dealing with special education matters. The authors

use four viewpoints to guide in the decision-making process: 1) ethic of justice 2) ethic of critique 3) ethic of care, and 4) ethic of the profession.

### **Ethic of Justice**

“The ethic of justice focuses on rights and law and is part of a liberal democratic tradition that is characterized by incrementalism, faith in the legal system, and hope for progress” (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016, p. 11). It serves as a foundation for legal principles and ideas and considers questions such as: “Is there a law, right, or policy that relates to a particular case? If there is a law, right, or policy, should it be enforced? Moreover, if there is not a law, right, or policy, should there be one”?

Kohlberg (1981) shared that justice is not a set of rules, but a moral principle that we want all people to adopt in all situations. From this perspective, education is not “value-free”; instead, schools should teach principles such as justice, equity, and respect for liberty. Sergiovanni (1992) built on this premise as he called for the establishment of “virtuous schools.” He had a deep concern for the welfare of the school as a community which takes into account students, teachers, administrators, and families. He placed high importance on treating all individuals with the “same equality, dignity, and fair play” (p. 105-106), which goes to the very heart of providing specialized instruction that meets the needs of students with disabilities in an inclusive manner.

The ethic of justice also serves as the foundation for legal principles. Stefkovich & Guba (1998) discussed that court opinions frequently reflect the values of the education community as well as society at large. As previously noted by Yell et al. (2009), a lack of training and preparation for educators is a common source of parental concern and potential litigation and can lead to school-level problems such as failing to

follow the IEP or telling a parent incorrectly that something can or cannot be done (p. 61). Adequate preparation and training for school administrators will decrease the likelihood of possible ethical and legal implications.

### **Ethic of Critique**

Shapiro & Stefkovich (2016) state, “The Ethic of Critique is based on critical theory, which has, at its heart, an analysis of social class and its inequalities” (p. 14). Critical theorists are frequently concerned with “making known the voices of those typically silenced” (p. 14). The ethic of critique asks the questions, “Who makes the laws? Who benefits from the law, rule, or policy? Who has the power? Who are the silenced voices” (p. 15)?

By paying attention to the inequities in society, specifically schools, administrators could deal with the hard questions regarding race, gender and so on. The ethic of critique approach to ethical dilemmas suggests for educators to examine their practices that cause inequities which may lead to the development of inclusive practices. I would argue that school administrator preparation and training should be considered as part of an ethic of critique; specifically, special education to ensure that students with disabilities voices are heard. Because school leaders must be knowledgeable of special education laws, policies and procedures if they are to make legally and ethically defensible decisions when serving as the authorized LEA representative, it is vital for them to understand how an ethic of critique may influence their decision-making ability.

### **Ethic of Care**

An ethic of care is an essential aspect of providing the proper atmosphere conducive for student learning. It is vitally important to show others they are cared for

because students (people in general) do not care how much you know until they know how much you care. Noddings (2002) states, “An ethic of care is thoroughly relational.” “Ethical caring requires reflection and self-understanding” (p. 14-15) “...students must believe that the adults in their schools and communities care about them, that their well-being and growth matter” (p. 26).

To adequately address the needs of students with disabilities, school administrators must ensure that IEPs meet the individual needs of the student in the least restrictive environment. Considering an ethic of care when developing the IEP ensures the student's academic, behavioral, and emotional needs can be met in an inclusive environment. Training school leaders in the area of special education and preparing them to make legally and ethically defensible decisions provides a safeguard to protect individuals who may be unable to protect themselves.

Shapiro & Stefkovich (2016) discuss the importance of viewing ethical dilemmas through an ethic of care to determine how educators, specifically school administrators, may assist student's needs and desires. Empathy and compassion are a part of this paradigm and should be included. Taking this approach will reflect solutions while showing concern for the students as part of the decision-making process.

### **Ethic of the Profession**

According to Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016), educational leaders should be provided an opportunity to develop their code of ethics in order to understand themselves as well as others, although they recognize that there may be clashes between an individual's personal and professional code of ethics. The ethic of the profession asks questions such as: “What would the profession expect me to do? What does the



community expect me to do? And what should I do based on the best interests of the students, who may be diverse in their composition and their needs” (p. 27)? Bigbee’s (2012) research describes that educational leaders form their values and use professional ethical codes in order to do what’s in the best interest of the child.

Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) view the teaching of ethics as an evolving process that includes reflection as well as conversations between colleagues. Bigbee (2012) emphasized that

... in the moment of conflict, theoretical frameworks alone are not enough to support the demands that are placed on the decision-maker without an awareness of practical application and understanding. Education leaders who do not engage in this reflexive, language-developing process may continue to be at the mercy of ambiguous terms and concepts and may have a diminished awareness of how their values and professional codes interact in moments of decision making. (p. 46)

Although Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) do not use SDT as a part of their decision-making model, the link between SDT and ethical decision-making may be helpful for leaders in preparation for special education issues.

### **Conclusion**

While there is a plethora of research that principal leadership is vital to creating and sustaining inclusive schooling practices that work for all students, based on the literature review undertaken, it is clear there is a stunning dearth of literature with regards to the “acquisition” of special education leadership knowledge and skills along the “developmental continuum” including college and university administrator licensure programs, first-year administration training programs, professional development, on-the-job-training, and self-teaching practices.

Since these programs may not be adequately preparing school administrators to be effective leaders of special education, and there is limited literature stating how principals *are* prepared for this lofty task, my research will fill a much-needed gap determining how secondary school administrators are prepared to lead their schools in the area of special education with adequate knowledge to make legally and ethically defensible decisions while serving as the authorized LEA representative. In the next chapter, the methodology for determining how secondary school leaders are prepared will be established.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Patton (2015) describes qualitative research as a useful method because it cultivates the capacity to learn. Throughout the process of qualitative research, the activities incorporated (i.e., collecting and analyzing data, developing and modifying theory, elaborating or refocusing on the research questions, and identifying and addressing validity threats) are happening simultaneously while each component influences the others. As the process unfolds, the researcher gains new knowledge of the phenomenon studied. Maxwell (2013) describes the qualitative method as a "research design that should be a reflexive process operating through every stage of the project" (p. 2) in order to gain a deeper understanding.

The process of qualitative research is not linear, instead, it includes multiple components that are focused on gaining "valuable insights into how people construct meaning in various social settings" (Neuman, 2011, p. 308). To gain a deeper understanding of how secondary school leaders are prepared to be effective in their role as an LEA representative, an interview study will be conducted. Creswell (2007) states that a qualitative study is appropriate when "a problem or issue needs to be explored" (p. 39). Based on previous research, special education continues to be a challenging area; specifically, regarding the role of the LEA representative. The primary research questions that will guide the scope and sequence of this research are:

**RQ1.** How are master's programs in educational leadership, including principal licensure/certification programs, preparing assistant principals to make legally and ethically defensible decisions as authorized LEA representatives?

**RQ2.** What developmental path do secondary school administrators follow to make legally and ethically defensible decisions?

### **Design and Methodology**

In an effort to ensure alignment of the research questions, literature review, and interview questions, I created a Research Alignment Chart (Table 3.1). This chart specifically identifies the questions and literature resources that correspond to each of the research questions.

### **Research Design**

During the research process, the researcher should "...inquire into, reflect upon, and responsibly convey their emotions to the readers of their work, so that they better understand the ground you stand on and how and why your interpretations were formed" (Glesne, 2016, p. 150).

Data will be collected using semi-structured interviews with secondary school assistant principals. A semi-structured interview defined by Glesne (2016) refers to interviews where "questions often emerge in the course of fieldwork and may add or replace pre-established ones" (p. 96). The semi-structured interview format gives preference to the participants' voices and perceptions and will be used to investigate how school administrators describe their training and preparation, both formally and informally, to make legally and ethically defensible decisions as the authorized LEA representative during IEP meetings. Assistant principals at the various experience and

**Table 3.1**

***Research Alignment Chart***

Research Questions	Interview Protocol	Literature Review
RQ1. How are master’s programs in educational leadership, including principal licensure/ certification programs, preparing assistant principals to make legally and ethically defensible decisions as authorized LEA representatives?	<p>1. What training have you received to make legally and ethically defensible decisions as the LEA Representative at an IEP meeting?</p> <p>a. “Licensure program” at the university level?</p> <p>b. Do you feel like these training experiences are enough?</p> <p>2. If you received training, who provided it and was it effective? Why or why not?</p> <p>3. What additional training/PD do you feel would help you be better prepared to serve as an LEA Representative?</p>	<p>1. Salem (2018) - The population of special education students is growing and landscape of leadership is changing (p. 1). “Inclusion”<sup>7</sup></p> <p>2. Scholars (e.g. DiPaola &amp; Tschannen-Moran, 2003; DiPaola et al., 2004) in the leadership and special education field have focused on the need to provide special education training for school administrators.</p> <p>3. Pazey &amp; Cole (2013) – Special education has emerged as one of the most litigious issues school leaders confront.</p> <p>4. Sumbera et al. (2014) –Found that if school administrators are to effectively fulfill their responsibilities, additional training is essential in leadership programs and ongoing professional development.</p> <p>5. School leaders are not formally trained and prepared.</p> <p>a. Standards that guide school administrators.</p> <p>6. Billingsley, McLeskey &amp; Crockett (2014) – Study that reported lack of attention with regards to sped training.</p> <p>7. Haar et al. (2008) – Findings suggested that principals</p>

RQ 2: What developmental path do secondary school administrators follow to make legally and ethically defensible decisions?

1. What have you learned on your own about special education? How? Where?

a. Why did you feel this was necessary?

b. What materials have you read to develop knowledge in the area of special education?

2. Discuss a time when you were challenged to make a decision that met the legal requirements but you struggled ethically with that decision.

3. Is there anything that would help you be better prepared in your role as an LEA Representative?

must understand the core sped legal foundation.

8. Poetter et al.(2001) – Graduate prep programs are slow to respond to the increasing need for coursework and field experience in sped.

9. Christensen et al. (2013) – Study revealed that principals emphasized the need for better training in matters related to sped.

1. Sumbera et al. (2014) – study to determine how principals made sense of FAPE in the LRE.

a. Found that if school administrators are to effectively fulfill their responsibilities, additional training is essential in leadership programs and ongoing professional development.

b. The study examined specific patterns and findings suggest that internal forces have a significant influence on school admin actions and understandings of LRE & FAPE.

c. Recommended that leadership prep and training programs place a greater emphasis on principals analyzing their own internal forces.

2. Schulze & Boscardin (2018) – As administrators mature, knowledge and skills continue to grow, and most likely follow a developmental continuum.

3. Vecchio & Boatwright (2002) – Leadership is

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developmental and shown to be related to leaders approach to their work.

4. Paths administrators potentially follow (i.e., licensure programs, professional development, training programs, on-the-job learning, & self-taught knowledge).

a. Professional development conferences

5. Bays & Crockett (2007) – An important source of guidance and support for sped may likely come from a colleague.

6. Lasky & Karge (2006) – Learning on the job is still the main way that principals gain knowledge about sped.

7. There are multiple paths that school leaders may take to gain a greater understanding of sped without formal training.

8. Self-Determination Theory

9. Beenen et al. (2017) – Study contributes to our understanding...SDT regards autonomy as a necessary condition for self-regulated behavior.

10. Shapiro & Stefkovich (2016) view the teaching of ethics as an “ever-evolving process” for all and that reflections, as well as conversations between colleagues, are key components.

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educational levels with and without special education backgrounds will be interviewed. Ideally, a minimum of twelve school leaders will be interviewed (e.g., three assistant principals from each of the four regions in South Carolina across five school districts). Assistant principals will be interviewed because they routinely serve as the authorized LEA representative. Additional interviews may be required to reach saturation.

All interviews will be recorded to ensure the accuracy of the data if consent from the participant is provided. Additionally, field notes will be taken during the interview to make sure that observational data (i.e., setting, appearance, acts, events, processes, talk, visuals, and artifacts) are collected (Glesne, 2016, p. 91). After the interview is complete, it will be transcribed by the researcher. Ives (1995) states, "Like it or not, the ideal person to transcribe an interview is you" (p. 75). The transcription process allows the researcher to immerse themselves in the interview by providing the opportunity to listen again to what is said, and not only to reflect on the topic, but also on the interview process itself (Glesne, 2016).

Memos will also be used as part of the data collection process. According to Maxwell (2013), memos are one of the most important techniques available for developing and understanding your ideas. The memos are a way for you to understand your topic, setting, and study as writing is thinking on paper (Howard & Barton, 1988). The memos and field notes will allow the researcher to make sense of and engage in the data by engaging in "serious reflection, analysis, and self-critique, rather than just mechanically recording thoughts and events" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 20).



## Site Selection, Criteria, and Justification

Purposeful sampling is a widely used method in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest (Palinkas et al., 2015) describe. Although there are multiple purposeful sampling strategies, criterion sampling appears to be used most commonly in implementation research. For purposes of this study, data will be collected from a variety of assistant principals across school districts in South Carolina where assistant principals frequently serve as the authorized LEA representative. South Carolina has four regions (i.e., Upstate, Midlands, Low County, and Pee Dee) and each area will be included in this study.

After deciding to sample using the geographical boundaries of South Carolina's four regions, the researcher identified five school districts to use as part of the study. The five districts were identified after examining the IDEA Part B Progress Monitoring reports from 64 school districts across South Carolina. These reports were obtained as part of the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) from the South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE). The reports revealed that the vast majority of school districts had high levels of concern and areas of noncompliance based on systems each district currently had in place at the time of the evaluation. Each of the monitoring reports included district-wide information in the following areas: 1) Policies, procedures, and forms 2) special education staffing 3) IEP development 4) IEP implementation, and 5) Indicator 13. For clarification, "the intent of Indicator 13 is to provide LEAs and states a way to measure how effective their IEP Teams are at addressing the transition from high school to post-secondary life" (2018). After sorting through the information and

compiling similarities and differences among commendations and areas of noncompliance, five school districts emerged with high levels of compliance.

While the primary focus is on how school administrators describe their training and preparation, both formally and informally, to make legally sound special education decisions, the secondary goal was to avoid using a deficit lens to examine the leaders who serve as the authorized LEA representative. Given these parameters and the information gleaned from the monitoring reports, I will contact secondary school assistant principals from the five high performing districts with respect to compliance. Compliance was determined by the South Carolina Department of Education, Office of Special Education Services (OSSES), in carrying out its roles of leadership, resource allocation, technical assistance, and general supervision are required to oversee the performance of Local Education Agencies (LEAs) and State-Operated Programs (SOPs) in the implementation of educational requirements under state and federal statutes and regulations relating to students with disabilities. The five districts include Bamberg One, Chester, Dillion Four, Lexington One, and Spartanburg Five. Thus, assistant principals in these school districts will be invited to participate in this study to determine how their secondary school leaders were adequately trained in the area of special education. The research will be collected in South Carolina public school districts only because other states do not have the same credentialing criteria for school administrator licensing.

### **Participant Selection, Criteria, and Justification**

Having identified the school districts, I selected participants for the study who are current assistant principals in the school districts listed above. Participants of the study will be chosen using criterion sampling. Based on information obtained during the

literature review and interview, it is vital to have a mixture of school leaders at various levels of experience and education to adequately determine if or how that information plays a role in their preparation in the field of special education. These participants will be purposefully selected because of their role during the time frame of the study. Only certified secondary school assistant principals with various experience and educational levels with and without special education backgrounds will be selected to participate in the interviews. The specific criteria that secondary school leaders must meet to participate in this study are as follows:

- Must have completed an administration and supervision certification program from an accredited college or university.
- Be certified in secondary administration.
- Hold a secondary assistant principal position at the middle or high school level for at least two years.
- Routinely participate in IEP meetings as the authorized LEA representative.

Because the literature review revealed there is no formalized special education preparation or training for school administrators during educational leadership programs, this study hypothesizes that school administrators likely follow a developmental path throughout their career to gain specific knowledge of special education. Therefore, this study will seek to include participants from across the state, who have at least two years of experience given to adequately determine how secondary school administrators are prepared in South Carolina to be the instructional leaders of their schools in the area of special education.

## **Data Collection**

The goal of data collection is to gather information from secondary school assistant principals who frequently serve as the authorized LEA representative. The data collection phase will span several months, beginning in June 2019. The data will be collected from assistant principal interviews conducted during the specified time frame. Throughout the study, field notes and memos will be used to explore factors that influence how the individuals are prepared to serve in the LEA representative capacity effectively.

## **Interviews**

An interview study methodology will guide this research project. The qualitative research interview seeks to describe the meaning of central themes in the life world of the subjects. Seidman (2013) characterizes interviewing as "a basic mode of inquiry" (p. 8). Kvale (1996) further simplifies interviewing as a way to understand the meaning of what the interviewees say. In this study, the primary interview questions will enable me to gain insight and understanding to determine how secondary school leaders are prepared to make legally and ethically defensible decisions when serving as the authorized LEA representative. Appendix D shows the question framework developed for the Interview Protocol to ensure consistency and completeness of the research.

Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions will be used as the main data-gathering tool as this method "is particularly good at enabling the researcher to learn, first hand, about people's perspectives on the subject chosen as the project focus" (Davies, 2007, p. 29). Interviews also permit the researcher to capture the depth and complexity of the participants' experiences. Merriam (1998) states that using highly

structured questions may limit the participant perspective, while semi-structured interviews may enable the researcher to gain insight into the values, preferences, attitudes, and beliefs of the interviewees. Further, interviews rely on open-ended questions to encourage participants to move beyond simple binary responses (yes or no), and thus result in rich in-depth data collection (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 1994).

Bogdan and Biklen (1998) elaborate on two specified paths for conducting interviews. Interviews may be the primary means for collecting data, or they may be combined "with participant observation, document analysis, or other techniques" (p. 94). An inductive interview method was chosen to determine how to make meaning of the problem of how secondary school administrators are prepared to make legally and ethically defensible decisions when serving as the authorized LEA representative. An inductive approach "aims to generate meanings from the data set collected to identify patterns and relationships to build a theory" (2019).

### **Field Notes**

Bogdan and Biklen (1998) define field notes as, "the written account of what the researcher hears, seeing, experiences, and thinks in the course of collecting and reflecting on the data in a qualitative study" (pp. 107-8). During each interview or immediately following, field notes and memos will be completed. These will include a description of the setting, interviewees' demeanor, interruptions, and any other information that may be relevant to the study. These notes will be coded and included as part of the interview data.

## **Data Analysis**

Analysis of the data collected during the study will incorporate various methods. Patton (2015) explains that data analysis "involves reducing the volume of raw information, sifting trivia from significance, identifying significant patterns, and constructing a framework for communicating the essence of what the data reveal" (p. 432). The primary analysis of data will be conducted by coding to determine patterns, themes, and categories.

### **Coding**

A coding analysis of patterns or common themes will be used to make sense of the data collected. Coding and concept building as described by Neuman (2011) is used to "organize specific details into a coherent picture, model, or set of interlocked concepts" (p. 459). Data will then be made more compact by looking for "abstract concepts in concrete data" (p. 461). Codes reflecting similar ideas will be grouped to form more abstract categories, some codes being collapsed or re-labeled to better indicate the themes or issues that emerged. At all times during the analysis of data, I will attempt to remain aware of possible threats to quality that arise during the process of analysis as described by Saldaña (2016). Issues may include biased transcription and interpretation, inconsistent application concepts, and unwarranted generalizations. I will remain acutely aware that it is possible to produce partial and biased analyses.

Glesne (2016) defines coding in qualitative research to "...discern themes, patterns, and processes; to make comparisons, and to build theoretical explanations" (p. 195). The data from the interviews and field notes will be analyzed by hand-coding the raw data from the interview transcriptions and field notes. "The form of analysis you use

is linked to your methodology, research goals, data collection methods, and so on" (Glesne, 2016, p. 183). Until the coding process is complete, it is challenging to definitively state which type of organizational process will be used to help make sense of the data. However, there are several options to consider: 1) themes; 2) typologies based on the type of training that emerges; 3) steps in a process if the data reveals a developmental process was followed; 4) data types based on the information from each of the participants (e.g., interviews, focus groups, or observations); or 5) magnitude or importance could be used if the types of training emerges in order of importance. Most likely, a combination of approaches will be used to analyze and determine the findings of the data.

Maxwell (2013) emphasized that "reading and thinking about your interview transcripts and observation notes, writing memos, developing coding categories and applying these to your data, analyzing the narrative structure and contextual relationships, and creating matrices and other displays are all important forms of data analysis" (p. 105). While the data may reveal specific patterns, themes, or categories, a further reflection will be essential to ensuring that the data is valid and reliable. Wolcott (1994) provides assistance to help qualitative researchers move through this process (e.g., Allow the data to speak for itself, identify critical factors and their relationships, and develop an understanding or explanation).

### **Five-phased Cycle of Analytic Review**

Yin's (2016) five-phased cycle of analytic review will be used as the formal method to systematically complete the coding process. The five phases are compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding. The compiling phase "may be

likened to one of creating a database” (p. 190). The objective is to organize the data collected into a systematic fashion prior to the formal analysis process. During this process, the researcher will familiarize herself with the field notes completed during the participant interviews and organize them in a consistent format.

Phase two consists of looking back and looking forward. Looking back requires the researcher to review their research questions, check their notes for potentially new ideas, and peruse new or existing research studies. Looking forward allows the researcher to determine how they plan to go about the disseminating process. As Yin explained, “You will continually go back and forth between your initial ideas about how to disassemble the data and the actual data, potentially leading to new conjectures about your initial ideas” (p. 195). During this process, the researcher will record analytic memos to avoid losing ideas.

A schematic diagram will be used to code the data and can extend from the disassembling to the concluding phase of the analytic cycle. The most concrete concepts will be used during the *open coding* process (level one). Next, *category codes* (level two) will be used to combine two or more of the initial codes into beginning groups. *Themes* (level three) will reveal the potential interpretations based on more abstract and complex groups of categories. *Theoretical statements* will ultimately represent the significance of the interpretations and conclusions to additional studies and previous literature.

The reassembling phase will result in determining patterns, which may be broad or narrow. This process involves “playing with the data”, which may involve organizing the data by creating hierarchical arrays, designing matrices as arrays, and working with other types of arrays, including narrative arrays. Throughout the reassembling process,



the researcher must maintain a purely mechanistic approach. Because reassembling the data involves individual judgment, precautions should be taken to minimize or reveal biases. Yin (2016) identifies three precautions that assist in avoiding problems and can increase the accuracy and robustness of the work. These suggestions require the researcher to make constant comparisons, watch for negative cases, and engage in rival thinking.

### **Reliability and Validity**

In qualitative research, reliability addresses the consistency of the findings and validity refers to the accuracy of the data. Merriam (1998) states, "validity and reliability are concerns that can be approached through careful attention to a study's conceptualization and how the data are collected, analyzed, interpreted, and how the findings are presented" (pp. 199-200). To construct validity and reliability, Yin's (1994) three principles of data collection will be used as a guide (i.e., multiple sources of data, maintain an organized database to collect evidence, and establish a chain of evidence). Glesne (2016) adds that transformational validity "At its core...asks whether or not the inquiry 'advances a social agenda or offers cultural criticism" (p. 154). According to Eisenhart (2006), there are four ways in which transformational validity may be approached (i.e., deconstruction, moral commitments, multiple perspectives, and catalyst for political action. Within this research study, each of these areas of validity will be addressed. Maxwell (2013) cautions researchers that there are two important threats to the validity of qualitative conclusions: researcher bias and reactivity. These refer to the selection of data that fit the researcher's existing theory, goals, preconceptions, and the

selection of data that "stand out" to the researcher (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 263; Shweder, 1980).

### **Role of the Researcher**

As a special education teacher and current secondary assistant principal of instruction, I have significant concerns regarding the preparation and training of school administrators relative to special education. I was well prepared in my role as a teacher at the university level when I completed my Bachelor of Arts degree in special education. However, I was only provided a small portion (less than 10% or approximately one day) of one school law class regarding training in special education in the licensure program for educational leadership while obtaining my Masters in Education (M.Ed). There is much more information that school administrators need to know to be adequately prepared to make legally and ethically defensible decisions when serving as the authorized LEA representative.

Ball and Green (2014) research revealed that there is a negative correlation between training and experience, and attitudes of school leaders. The results of Ball and Green's study strongly emphasized the need for quality training and experience for pre-service and practicing school leaders. While there is an assumption that school districts are providing a full continuum of services, the scenarios above may indicate reality is entirely different. The IDEA Part B Process Monitoring reports suggest that school leaders who are expected to carry out these responsibilities may not be adequately trained or have the experience to implement the processes necessary to comply with the law. The lack of knowledge and training of school administrators concerns me greatly personally and professionally.

## **Insider vs. Outsider**

In their exploration of membership roles for those conducting qualitative research, Dwyer and Buckle (2009) suggest that researchers can "occupy the position of both insider and outsider rather than insider or outsider" (p. 54). In this study, I will be in a position of both insider and outsider because my formal teaching and leadership experiences are likely quite similar to the participants. In other words, I am an insider based on my previous role as a special education teacher for eight years, during which I developed IEP's and taught students with disabilities at both the elementary and high school levels. In addition, I have been an assistant principal for three years and regularly served as an LEA representative. I am also in the role of an outsider because I am not employed in any of the identified school districts and I have not been involved in their training experiences or the professional development activities they have completed in order to gain knowledge about special education. Finally, I do not know how these participants might explain their perceptions and attitudes about serving in the role of an LEA representative.

Although I will make every effort to reduce personal bias based on my race and gender, I cannot divorce myself from societal structures that are often ingrained with bias related to race and gender. As such, race and gender may influence my perspective as well as the perspectives of participants. A high percentage of teachers are white females as am I. I anticipate that my awareness will assist in minimizing the impact of the potential influence of these factors on the study. An ABC News report entitled, Student Diversity Is Up But Teachers Are Mostly White, states, "The racial and ethnic makeup of the teaching profession doesn't reflect that shift. While more diverse teachers have

entered the profession in recent years, their numbers have not kept pace with the PK–12 population shift, the AACTE study said. An analysis of the National Center for Education Statistics (2012) data showed that students of color made up more than 45% of the PK–12 population, whereas teachers of color made up only 17.5% of the educator workforce" (Deruy, 2013).

My relationship with participants in this study will be limited to our similarities as a result of our educational roles. I intend to observe and interview participants who work in different school districts than where I presently work. Therefore, I will not know them directly to eliminate any power over the participants. However, as a doctoral student, the participants may see me as an expert in the field, which may influence what they say and how they interact with me during the process. I desire that the participants will see me as a colleague who has an interest in ensuring adequate training and knowledge for all school administrators in the area of special education so that they are adequately prepared to make legally and ethically defensible decisions when serving as the authorized LEA representative.

This research study may be strengthened because of my knowledge and experience of special education. On the other hand, it could be limited because I am the researcher for precisely the same reason. I have had years of experience with the process from start to finish and have certain personal non-negotiables about the process. Pink (2007) describes the importance of understanding the researcher's subjectivity.

Our informants tell and show us what they do because they are in a research situation

with us as individuals; this encounter and the knowledge produced through it can never be objective. Therefore it is essential that we attempt to understand the subjectivities through which our research materials are produced. (p. 367)

It will be essential for me to separate my own experiences and beliefs of special education as a practitioner to gain new knowledge from others in the field.

### **Subjectivity and Positionality**

"It is not indifference, but care, concern, and involvement that sustains a continuous discourse with people and prepares the ground for the legitimacy of an inquiry" (Savyasaachi, 1998, p. 110). I intend to monitor the impact of my subjectivity and positionality primarily using two strategies (i.e., member checking and field notes). The use of member checking will ensure that the participant's thoughts, ideas, and beliefs are shared accurately and without bias. I will also maintain field notes that separate descriptive notes from my interpretations of data using a t-chart style system of note-taking. This will allow me to easily separate any assumptions that I may have from the details collected. These strategies will ensure that each of my participant's perspectives has been effectively shared in the research study and that I have not allowed my subjectivity and positionality to influence the outcome and results.

### **Study Implications**

This research study is of great importance because based on the literature reviews previously cited in Chapter 2 and the SC IDEA Part B Program Monitoring reports, too many school administrators are concerned that they are not adequately prepared to make legal and ethical defensible decisions as school administrators of special education students. Many school administrators don't know what they don't know. This research

could assist in determining how secondary school administrators are prepared to be effective in their role as the authorized LEA representative. The results may propel new policies or requirements to be enacted for secondary school leaders, albeit during the pre-service training phase or after they have obtained the assistant principal position.

This research will review the characteristics and competencies of school administrators who are responsible for creating an inclusive culture through their role as LEA representatives. In particular, this study seeks to understand how they make sense of the law and what an appropriate education is for students with disabilities, and how their knowledge as school leaders developed over time. Understanding the development process is related not only to self-determination theory (SDT) but also to the growth mindset, which is marked by a desire to grow and learn (Dweck, 2006).

Dweck (2006) explains the *growth mindset* as a “belief that your basic qualities are a thing you can cultivate through your efforts, your strategies, and help from others” (p. 7). An essential component of a growth mindset is that “everyone can change and grow through application and experience” (p. 7). As such, the growth mindset is closely connected to the theoretical framework, SDT, which is guiding this study. This research will provide much-needed information regarding how assistant principals have been trained during pre-service training or through an individual developmental path in hopes to avoid the more traditional “trial by fire” approach.

As demonstrated, licensure programs are not adequately preparing school administrators to be effective leaders of special education, and there is limited literature stating how principals are (ought to be) prepared for this lofty task, this research will fill a much-needed gap determining how to ensure secondary school administrators are

prepared to lead their schools in the area of special education with adequate knowledge to make legally and ethically defensible decisions while serving as the authorized LEA representative.

### **Limitations/Considerations**

According to Glesne (2016) limitations are defined as aspects that limited the research in some way but were beyond your control or perceived only in hindsight (p. 214). By detailing the limiting circumstances, the readers will be able to understand the nature of the data better. The following primary limitations will be considered.

Firstly, my personal experience and prior knowledge may contribute to a built-in bias that could potentially influence the study. As previously stated, I will need to pay particular attention to my personal beliefs about the teaching and learning of students with disabilities. I will need to look at the data objectively through the lens of a researcher and be open to whatever the data reveals. Secondly, there is limited literature addressing how secondary school administrators are prepared to make legally and ethically defensible decisions as the authorized LEA representative. As discussed in Chapter 2, the literature review reveals that pre-service training for school administrators is nearly non-existent during certification programs.

Thirdly, there is a plethora of research regarding how school leaders must be instructional leaders in the area of special education; specifically principals. However, there is little to no research regarding how assistant principals are prepared for this challenging task. Although the training for all school administrators is the same, assistant principals routinely serve as the LEA representative. Finally, because this is a qualitative research study, the results are not generalizable to other districts or states. In other

words, the results of this study are unique to the participants and their school settings and thus will be limited in application “to other individuals, settings, times, or institutions than those directly studied” (Polit & Beck, 2009, p. 540).

Another limit on generalizability emerges given the focus on a single state. In other words, states establish their own training requirements and may not be the same as South Carolina, which limits the generalizability of this research study to other states. Further, individual school districts in South Carolina establish their own internal training protocols, including but not limited to special education. Because each district develops its own policies, procedures, and professional development opportunities for secondary assistant principals, some school districts may be more effective in preparing their assistant principals to be the authorized LEA representative.

### **Significance/Contributions**

Past research has affirmed that principal leadership is vital to creating and sustaining inclusive schooling practices that work for all students (Sider et al., 2017). Yet, an extensive literature review revealed there is a limited understanding of how special education leadership knowledge and skills are gained across the "developmental continuum." This continuum includes college and university administrator licensure programs, first-year administration training programs, professional development, and on-the-job-training. Given the limited research on how assistant principals develop professionally to fulfill their critical special education leadership roles, this study offers a significant contribution to the educational field and has the potential to increase understanding about what works with respect to training and professional development.



The literature review revealed that current licensure programs are not adequately preparing school administrators to be effective leaders of special education. Further, there is limited literature stating how principals are prepared for this lofty task. While there is a plethora of literature that addresses the principal's role in leading inclusive schools, there is limited research that determines the assistant principal's position. Because assistant principals primarily fill the LEA representative role, my research will fill a much-needed gap: determining how to ensure secondary school administrators are prepared to lead their schools in the area of special education with adequate knowledge to make legally and ethically defensible decisions while serving as the authorized LEA representative.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical issues are important to consider when conducting qualitative research because the researcher is dealing with human subjects. In the case of this particular research study, a vulnerable population of students is involved (e.g., special education), however, students are not participating and the subjects, assistant principals, are not a vulnerable population. To address any possible ethical considerations, the researcher will receive approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) before data collection. Privacy and confidentiality will be respected and ensured throughout the data collection process and subsequent analysis by providing pseudonyms for all participants and for the participants' school districts.

According to Glesne (2016) "potential research participants should be informed about the research purposes, the procedures, and the expected ways of sharing the research results and that their participation should be voluntary" (p. 160). Throughout the

process of data collection, participants will be informed about the methods as described above. All participants will be invited to volunteer to be a part of the study; and will be free to refuse to participate at any time during the study.

### **Summary**

Chapter 3 discusses the methods and research design for this study to determine how secondary school administrators are prepared to make legally and ethically defensible decisions as the authorized LEA representative at IEP meetings. The qualitative interview design facilitates an in-depth exploration of the types of training and what developmental paths secondary school administrators have taken to prepare them for their role in special education.

Discussion in this chapter included the rationale for conducting qualitative research and why an interview study design is an appropriate method to examine this phenomenon. The selection of the study site and participants were discussed as well as interview procedures. Further, the role of the researcher was addressed, and measures to develop trustworthiness and ethical consideration for the interview participants were included as part of the study design.

In Chapter 4, research findings will be presented for this qualitative study. The data will be organized according to the two main research questions and will also be examined to reveal the types of training school administrators identified as helping them fulfill their roles as authorized LEA representatives. Furthermore, the data from interviews and field notes will be organized and analyzed for patterns, categories, and themes.

## CHAPTER 4:

### FINDINGS

#### **Introduction**

In Chapter 4, research findings will be presented for this qualitative interview study. The data were organized according to the two main research questions and analyzed to determine the types of training school administrators identified as helping them fulfill their roles as authorized LEA representatives. One-on-one interviews with assistant principals were conducted in all four regions of South Carolina across five counties: Bamberg One, Chester, Dillon Four, Richland Two, and Spartanburg Five. Assistant principals in these school districts were invited to participate in this study to determine how they were prepared or trained to serve as secondary school leaders with responsibilities in the area of special education. The research focused on South Carolina public school districts based on the availability of participants as well as the researcher's desire to contribute knowledge that might positively impact special education services in districts across South Carolina. The data from all interviews, field notes, and memos were transcribed, coded, organized, and then analyzed to answer the two primary research questions.

This chapter presents demographic details for the 13 assistant principals who participated in individual interviews. An in-depth overview of the research site will provide a deeper understanding of the context and setting where the study was conducted.

Finally, themes and findings will be discussed in detail to provide the basis of the interpretation.

### **Description of the School Districts**

School districts were identified and included based on two primary factors. First, school districts were selected in order to have representation across the geographical boundaries of South Carolina's four regions. South Carolina has four regions (i.e., Upstate, Midlands, Low County, and Pee Dee), and at least one school district from each area was included in this study. Second, the decision about which districts to include from each of these four regions was based on the review of the IDEA Part B Progress Monitoring reports. As previously stated, the reports were available from 64 school districts across South Carolina.

The monitoring reports revealed that the vast majority of school districts had high levels of concern and areas of noncompliance based on systems each district currently had in place at the time of the evaluation. If the district had a high rate of compliance on the SC IDEA Part B Progress Monitoring reports, it was considered for inclusion in the study. These reports were obtained through a Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) request to the South Carolina Department of Education. The rationale behind the selection of high performing school districts, as indicated by the SC IDEA compliance reports, was based on the goal of learning about the assistant principals who worked in these high performing districts. In other words, rather than using a deficit approach to understand why schools performed poorly with respect to special education compliance, a strengths-based approach guided the study.

While the primary focus was on how school administrators describe their preparation, both formally and informally, to make legally sound special education

decisions, the secondary goal was to examine how the leaders who serve as authorized LEA representatives continued to develop their skills and knowledge about special education. In other words, the participants were asked to identify the types of training or professional development that helped them fulfill their roles as authorized LEA representatives.

Given these parameters and the information gleaned from the monitoring reports, I contacted secondary school assistant principals from five high performing districts with respect to compliance. The districts included: Bamberg One, Chester, Dillion Four, Lexington One, and Spartanburg Five. Unfortunately, I was unsuccessful in securing approval from Lexington One School District. Richland Two was chosen to replace Lexington One based on the established criteria.

Table 4.1 provides a breakdown of the demographics for each school district. The data consists of the number of students in each school district, the percentage of students who are on free or reduced lunch, percentage of students who are classified as disabled, and the number of students each district has based on ethnicity. As you can see from the data chart, the school districts range in size, socio-economic status and ethnicity.

### **Description of Participants**

Assistant principals were selected as participants based on their employment status in selected school districts in South Carolina. The assistant principals were considered for inclusion if they served as the authorized LEA representative in the identified districts. Three assistant principals from each of the five districts were chosen

**Table 4.1*****School Districts Demographic Information***

School District	# of Students	% of Free/ Reduced Lunch	% of Special Education Students	African American Population	Caucasian Population	Other Population
Bamberg 1	1,396	48.5	8.7	55.4	40.5	4.1
Chester	5,270	88.0	9.2	46.7	47.6	5.7
Dillon 4	4,205	100.0	13.7	58.9	28.4	12.7
Richland 2	27,802	48.5	8.6	59.0	23.5	17.5
Spartanburg 5	8,223	51.1	6.5	18.4	64.4	27.2

Source: SC Department of Education.

using criterion sampling in an effort to have a mixture of school leaders with varying levels of experience and education. The participants were purposefully selected because of their role as an assistant principal during the time frame of the study. Only certified secondary school assistant principals with various experience and educational levels with and without special education backgrounds were selected to participate in the interviews. Each assistant principal interview met the criteria previously discussed in Chapter 3.

To recruit the participants in the study, I sent an informal email, introducing myself, my research focus, and the purpose of this study. This email was sent to middle and high school assistant principals in the four regions of South Carolina, who were employed in the targeted school districts. Given the lack of response from any of the potential participants, I reached out to Dr. Angie Slatton, Director of Special Services in School District Five of Lexington & Richland Counties, for assistance. She sent an email to all of her colleagues in each of the school districts requesting assistance. One lead resulted from this contact. Finally, I reached out to former contacts around the state to see if they were willing to provide names of assistant principals who would be willing to participate. Ultimately, all of the individuals who participated in the study were found as a result of personal or professional contacts (i.e., former Chief of Human Resources in Spartanburg One School District, USC doctoral colleagues, colleagues participating in other doctoral programs, etc.) Special attention was paid to ensure that each assistant principal willing to participate in the study met the selection criteria, understood the study, and signed a letter of intent to participate.

A diverse group of assistant principals participated in the study. Although the target number of participants was 15, only 13 assistant principals participated in the

study. Bamberg One School District has only one secondary assistant principal in the district; therefore, conducting 3 participant interviews was not possible.

Table 4.2 provides the participants' demographic breakdowns by race and years of experience. The years of experience is based on the number of years the participant has been in a school administrator position. Of the thirteen interviews conducted, there were ten males and three females; eight were African-American, and five were Caucasian; ten high school assistant principals and three middle school assistant principals. Of all the assistant principals interviewed, none were previously special education teachers. Their educational teaching backgrounds were quite diverse. The breakdown is as follows: eight core content area teachers (two English-language arts, five math, and one science) and five elective teachers (one band, one physical education, one computer science, one guidance counselor, and one business education).

The age range and years of experience amongst the assistant principals varied. This wide age range also corresponded to a wider range across their years of experience as well and similarly resulted in a variety of perspectives across the assistant principals. There were six assistant principals between the ages of 30 - 35, three between ages 36 - 40, three were 51 - 59, and one was 65 years old. Five of the school leaders had 2 years of experience, two had 3 years of experience, one had 4 years of experience, two had 5 years of experience, one had 6 years of experience, one had 9 years of experience, and one had more than 30 years of experience in school administration. All of the participating assistant principals reported that their degrees were earned from educational leadership programs. Six of the participants completed their degrees at colleges or



universities in South Carolina, two reported degrees from North Carolina, and five completed online programs at institutions outside of North and South Carolina.

**Table 4.2**

***Assistant principal demographic information***

Participant	Race	Years of Experience
1	African-American	2
2	African-American	6
3	African-American	2
4	White	5
5	White	9
6	White	5
7	African-American	3
8	African-American	33
9	White	2
10	African-American	3
11	White	4
12	African-American	2
13	African-American	2

**Data Collection**

**Interviews**

An interview study methodology was used to guide this research project. In this study, the primary interview questions enabled me to gain insight and understanding

about how secondary school leaders are prepared to make legally and ethically defensible decisions when serving as authorized LEA representatives. Semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions were used as the primary data-gathering tool as this method "is particularly good at enabling the researcher to learn, first hand, about people's perspectives on the subject chosen as the project focus" (Davies, 2007, p. 29). Each interview lasted between 30-45 minutes and followed an interview protocol, which was developed to ensure that the research questions could consistently be addressed during the interviews with assistant principals. (See Appendix D)

After receiving permission from each participant, the interview was recorded to ensure accuracy. I created a Google Form that provided an effective way to capture the participant responses in an organized manner. By using this method, I was able to download the responses directly into a spreadsheet and sort the data in different ways. Upon completion of the interviews, I immediately transcribed the data before I conducted the next interview. Additional field notes were then created based on new knowledge gained during the transcription process.

### **Field Notes**

Bogdan and Biklen (1998) define field notes as, "the written account of what the researcher hears, seeing, experiences, and thinks in the course of collecting and reflecting on the data in a qualitative study" (pp. 107-108). During each interview or immediately following, field notes and memos were completed. These included a description of the setting, interviewee's demeanor, interruptions, and any other information that may be relevant to the study. These notes were coded and included as part of the interview data.

During the transcription and coding process, additional field notes and memos were created as new information and ideas emerged. These notes were added and later analyzed to ensure that this documentation was included and addressed as part of the process. The field notes were used as a mechanism for sensemaking of the participant responses to determine categories that aided in the developing themes during the data analysis process.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis process required the researcher to view the data analytically without getting overly emotional about the subject matter. By acknowledging and understanding my own subjective I's, I was able to limit my personal bias that may impact or skew data collection or data analysis. To that end, I was always vigilant to separate myself from the practitioner in order to maintain my role as the researcher.

Yin's (2016) five-phased cycle of analytic review was used as the formal method to complete the data analysis and coding process systematically. As previously noted in Chapter 3, the five phases are compiling, disassembling, reassembling, interpreting, and concluding. The objective was to organize the data collected into a systematic fashion before the formal analysis process by creating a database. During the compiling phase, large charts were created to address all parts of the interview questions. As the transcriptions were coded, data were also examined to ascertain how participants' responses answered the research questions. Specifically, the responses were matched to the interview questions and written on sticky notes that were then placed on the chart to assist in organizing the data (e.g., see Appendix E). Notes were made to easily identify the participant and the transcript page number to easily find key statements that aligned with the research questions.

Phase two, or disassembling, consisted of looking back and looking forward. Looking back requires the researcher to review research questions, check notes for potentially new ideas, and peruse new or existing research studies. Looking forward, I carefully planned how the data was disseminated. During this process, the research questions were reviewed. Additional memos were created on the interview transcripts as well as charts with sticky notes to ensure that additional key information, such as important quotes, field notes, or other data that could inform thematic development would not be missed.

A schematic diagram was used to code the data and to visually represent and document how I went through the compiling and disassembling phases of the analytic cycle. Prevalent concrete concepts were examined during the *open coding* process (level one). Next, *category codes* (level two) were used to combine two or more of the initial codes into beginning groups. The schematic chart presented developed in Table 4.3 presents the concepts that emerged during level one and two of the data analysis process. As part of the reassembling phase, *themes* (level three) began to emerge as concepts were chunked together to reveal interpretations based on more abstract and complex groups of categories. This process consisted of "playing with the data," which involved organizing and reorganizing the data in a variety of ways (Yin, 2016). The process was systematic and provided an avenue for the themes to emerge directly from the data itself.

The coding analysis of patterns or themes was used to make sense of the data collected. The data from the interviews and field notes was analyzed by hand-coding the raw data from the interview transcriptions and field notes. Coding and concept building as described by Neuman (2011) was used to "organize specific details into a coherent

picture, model, or set of interlocked concepts" (p. 459). The data was then made more compact by looking for "abstract concepts in concrete data" (p. 461). Codes reflecting similar ideas were grouped to form more abstract categories, some codes being collapsed or re-labeled to better indicate the themes or issues that emerged.

### **Thematic Development**

Through the use of Yin's (2016) five-phased cycle of analytic review, the compiled participant interview responses were organized through a methodical process of disassembling, reassembling, and interpreting the data to determine themes. Throughout the interpretation process, similarities in the participant responses were noted and where appropriate, key ideas were chunked together to support the development of themes.

While many assistant principals highlighted similar ideas during their interviews, there was much information to sort through to determine how the information related back to the research questions. By developing a system to organize the data and maintain a database of the information collected, the interpretation process began to take shape.

*Theoretical statements* ultimately represented the significance of the interpretations and conclusions to additional studies and previous literature. The schematic diagram below presents the concepts that emerged during level one and two of the data analysis process and leads to thematic development. The following section identifies and explains the four themes that emerged after concluding the five-phase data analysis (Yin, 2016). These themes are organized according to the two primary research questions and presented in table 4.4.

Table 4.3

*Schematic diagram: Level 1 and 2 Coding*

Schematic Diagram	
How are master's programs in educational leadership, including principal licensure/certification programs, preparing assistant principals to make legally and ethically defensible decisions as authorized LEA representatives?	What developmental path do secondary school administrators follow to make legally and ethically defensible decisions?
<p><b>Open coding process (level one)</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited coursework in SPED</li> <li>• School law class</li> <li>• Ethics class</li> <li>• Critical thinking skills</li> <li>• General leadership skills</li> <li>• Common practices</li> <li>• Overview of SPED laws</li> <li>• NO discussion of LEA responsibilities</li> </ul>	<p>Licensure Programs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• School law class</li> <li>• Ethics class</li> </ul> <p>Districts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Instructional fairs</li> <li>• Little professional development (typically at the beginning of the year) - Not in every district</li> <li>• Colleagues - training by word of mouth</li> <li>• Resources - Enrich, procedural safeguards, SPED handbook (1 district), standardized forms (2 districts)</li> </ul> <p>On their own</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collaboration with others (SPED department chair, SPED teachers, SPED director, veteran AP's, etc.</li> <li>• Internet (professional journals, internet searches</li> <li>• Professional Organizations (CEEL, APPLE, ILAA)</li> </ul>

**Category codes (level two) were used to combine two or more of the initial codes into beginning groups.**

Coursework

- School law
- Ethics
- SPED Overview

- Licensure program @ university level
- District professional development
- Collaboration with colleagues
- Internet searches
- Professional organization professional development opportunities

The developmental path begins at the college/university level (i.e., coursework).

AP position - some PD, but primarily in the form of collaboration with colleagues.

Search for information on the internet to gain knowledge. At times, PD via professional organizations.

**Table 4.4**

***Themes***

RQ 1. How are master's programs in educational leadership, including principal licensure/certification programs, preparing assistant principals to make legally and ethically defensible decisions as authorized LEA representatives?	RQ 2. What developmental path do secondary school administrators follow to make legally and ethically defensible decisions?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <b>One-Size-Fits-All Programs</b></li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Inconsistent Developmental Paths</li><li>• Experience Matters</li><li>• Veteran Knowledge Transfer</li></ul>

**One-Size-Fits-All Programs**

One theme emerged from RQ 1: college and university licensure programs deliver coursework from a one-size-fits-all program that is generally comprehensive, but also broad in terms of coverage. During the level one and level two analysis process for RQ1, each category that emerged as a possible theme were all components of every school administrator licensure certification program. As such, this one-size-fits-all educational leadership perspective typically omits an in-depth focus on any one area.

Overwhelmingly, the participants shared similar beliefs as to how college and university programs should prepare them as school leaders. Participant 4 shared their perspective on the leadership program they completed.

I think you must understand that a master's coursework done for a leadership role is not going to include everything. If you take what you did learn and then apply it, you are at a good start.



Taking the knowledge gained during the program and applying it to their position as an educational leader was a repeatedly stated expectation of the interviewees. Participant 10 surmised, “I wouldn’t say it gave me the nuts and bolts or the ins and outs of what you should do as an LEA representative, but it (university leadership program) did prepare me for leadership.” Participant 3 shared a similar perspective. The program “sharpened the leadership skills that I had and just provided me with a more in-depth look at leadership in general that I’ve used to carry over with special education.”

Based on the participant responses, colleges and university educational leadership credentialing programs are taught from a high-level overview of educational leadership. Participant 4 summed it up by stating, “more than likely most programs prepare you to be a critical thinker and to make legally and ethically defensible decisions.” To that end, the assistant principals interviewed ultimately did not feel that it is the responsibility of the college and university licensure programs to prepare them in any one specific area of educational leadership.

Assistant principals overwhelmingly responded in a similar fashion when asked how their master's in education program (i.e., principal licensure/certification) prepared them to make legally and ethically defensible decisions as the authorized LEA representative. The interview participants reiterated several times that it is challenging for college and university educational leadership licensure programs to adequately prepare them for special education because everything is specialized and individualized when determining the appropriate educational programs and services for students with disabilities.

Participant 4 shared that many situations they have encountered as the authorized LEA representative could not be taught at the college and university level because the procedures to address situations are specific to the buildings or districts in which they work. While the participants readily admitted there is a gap and more specialized training in the area of special education would be helpful, they acknowledged that this is difficult to address in one-size-fits-all programs.

Most assistant principal's recognized that college and university licensure programs do a good job of training future administrators to be critical thinkers and to consider what is legal and ethical. The data obtained from the interviews reveal that school leaders do not expect college and university licensure programs to provide specialized training in a specific area of leadership. However, the participants also expressed their beliefs that educational leadership programs do provide extensive training in school law as well as ethical decision-making for future school administrators. Participant 6 explained, "The experiences that I had with my university involved learning to make rational decisions that best fit students..." The participant went on to share that they felt they had developed a general knowledge of what is legally and ethically correct after they completed the licensure program.

Every assistant principal interview indicated that they were required to take a course in school law during their administration certification program. Many stated that the course was beneficial as it focused on teaching them how to read, understand, and decipher the law. That being said, they all agreed that special education law was minimally addressed as part of this class. As school leaders, they each recognized the importance of having a greater understanding and knowledge of special law as it is an

essential aspect of their current position. Because the school law class taught them how to make sense of laws, they acknowledged that the information taught during their coursework does assist them when making legally and ethically defensible decisions as an LEA representative.

Every assistant principal also stated that an ethical leadership class was a required course during their licensure program. They agreed that the ethical leadership course was beneficial and taught them how to make ethical decisions based on what is in the best interest of students. Interestingly, when discussing ethical leadership, each participant stated that they were very comfortable with their ability to make ethically defensible decisions in isolation. Furthermore, when they were asked during the interview to describe a time when they were required to make a decision that met the legal requirements, but they struggled ethically with their decision, every participant was able to provide at least one detailed example that demonstrated that this dilemma frequently happens when serving as the authorized LEA representative. A few examples are provided in Table 4.5.

Based on the responses of the participants, it is evident that assistant principals are faced with legal and ethical dilemmas frequently. Every interviewee had at least one story about a time when they struggled ethically with their decision that met the legal special education requirements. Interestingly, every assistant principal stated that they would adhere to the law even though they were ethically challenged. Administrator certification

**Table 4.5**

***Legal and Ethical Conundrum Examples in Special Education***

Description of the Situation	Legal Requirement	Ethical Dilemma
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<b>The student was in a rage because they did not want to be at school.</b>	Must be at school by law and receive instruction. Providing what is legally required.	Not the best placement, but limited options available in the district.
<b>Parents abuse the law in order to get accommodations that will provide an advantage for their child on a standardized test (i.e., extended time, small group testing, etc.)</b>	Accommodations are provided.	Knowing that the student is capable and not impacted by their disability to the extent that parents argue.
<b>The student has extreme behavior issues that involve lashing out and outbursts. These cause major classroom disruptions regularly.</b>	Behavior Intervention Plan (BIP) is in place to assist the student. Law states the student must be placed in the LRE.	Although this student was protected under the law, every other student in the class was subjected to his inappropriate behavior in the classroom, which disrupts the teacher's ability to teach and the student's right to learn.
<b>Conducting an IEP meeting when a parent is unable to attend.</b>	Policies and procedures indicate that you can have an IEP meeting without the parent present if you have made several attempts to invite them.	Just because the parent is unable to attend the IEP meeting does not mean that they do not care. Some parents really struggle just to keep bread on the table and cannot afford to leave their job to attend.

programs should consider adding this aspect to their coursework so that school leaders can more easily recognize these dilemmas when they present themselves. By addressing this conundrum, school administrators would have a greater understanding of how to navigate these precarious situations when faced with them generally and as an authorized LEA representative.

### **Inconsistent Developmental Path**

Based on the participants' responses, college and university licensure programs effectively prepare school administrators to transfer of knowledge from theoretical concepts to practical experience when making legally and ethically defensible decisions. However, participant responses indicate that they have not prepared school administrators, specifically in the area of special education. The general consensus among assistant principals interviewed is that there is always room for more training, improvement, and knowledge. Their responses indicate that most districts are generally reactive instead of proactive when training school administrators in the area of special education. Further, this may be due to specific situations that have not been adequately adhered to or addressed in special education situations that may be challenging and specific to the needs of the student.

### **Lack of Consistency Across SC School Districts**

Lack of consistency across SC school districts emerged as a theme when considering what developmental path school administrators follow to make legally and ethically defensible decisions as the authorized LEA representative. When asked during the interview whether or not the participants felt like school and district professional development training experience(s) are enough, the responses varied based on the districts in which the participants are employed. Four assistant principals stated that the specialized training in special education provided by the school and district is not enough; three agreed that the training provided is enough, and six more stated that additional training would be helpful in their role as an authorized LEA representative.

Based on the responses of the assistant principal's interviewed, it is typical for school districts to provide some type of in-service training for special education at the beginning of the school year, but additional training or updates rarely happen throughout. School districts have the autonomy to decide when and how they are going to train their employees on special education policies and procedures. The amount of training is dependent entirely on the district and the procedures they have in place. Participant 7 shared their perspective about the lack of training provided by the school district:

There is always more training that you can do. It's just like teaching...no matter how good you are as a teacher, there's always room for improvement. There are always things that you can do to better your instruction, delivery, and instructional practices...

The response of Participant 7 is an excellent example of why it is crucial to ensure that school leaders are provided effective and on-going professional development. Because special education laws rapidly change, it is even more critical for school districts to consider embedding ample training for their school administrators.

Two of the five school districts have more formal systems in place to serve assistant principals in their role as an authorized LEA representative. One of the school districts has established precise guidelines and procedures to ensure that their assistant principals know what is expected of them in this role. This district has established a very systematic way to provide useful and meaningful training for their administrative staff. Participant 11 explained how the school district in which they work has established a systematic approach across the district:

The district has tried to really standardize the process across all of the sites and in doing so, that has eliminated many opportunities for oversight or making mistakes. They've standardized roles and provided templates for documentation. This participant was also able to effectively describe their role as an LEA representative as a result of the districts training procedures. Participant 7, from a different district, shared a similar experience:

We have a handbook that's provided by the director and it pretty much walks over everything as it relates to special education in our district. So, it's kinda like a framework if you want to say...special education 101. It kinda gives you a framework for making sure that you're following the rules and procedures for special education.

As an authorized LEA representative in this school district, they are also provided and LEA checklist that establishes a step by step process in order to follow the guidelines set forth by the school district as well as maintaining compliance with the law. This district has clearly developed effective and efficient protocols and training programs to ensure that their school leaders are adequately prepared for their role as leaders in special education.

The examples provided by these two participants were not the norm in the other school districts who participated in this study. The responses of the participants varied significantly based on the school districts in which they are employed. As I have stated previously, school districts have the autonomy to determine their instructional goals and priorities. To that end, school district leaders can determine what and how they will provide professional development in all areas, including special education.

Providing materials to assist school administrators in their role as an authorized LEA representative may also benefit them. Unfortunately, the interview responses indicate that few materials are provided to assist assistant principals in their role as an LEA representative. However, there are two consistent resources among all the school districts that participated in the study; these include Enrich as a data management system and procedural safeguards that are provided to students in special education and their parents annually.

In the state of South Carolina, all school districts have access to Enrich to manage student data, including special education. Although none of the participants interviewed had been provided formal training on how to effectively use Enrich, they were all familiar with the basics of the program. However, just because school leaders have access and basic knowledge does not mean they know how to utilize it effectively as a resource. It would be beneficial for school districts to provide training on this program for school leaders because there is a wealth of knowledge stored in this program, which could assist LEA representatives when making legal and ethical decisions regarding a student with special needs. Enrich provides vital information regarding the student's academic history as well as documentation of their history in special education.

Procedurals safeguards also serve as a valuable resource. This resource is typically provided to parents so that they understand their legal rights as the parent as well as the rights of their child who has a disability. Procedurals safeguards also give families and school districts a mechanism to resolve any disputes that may arise. This document provides valuable information for school leaders as well. It presents legal



information that is beneficial for all school administrators to know when making legally and ethically defensible decisions as the authorized LEA representative.

### **Veteran Knowledge Transfer**

The importance of relationships with colleagues emerged as a significant theme across all participant interviews. In this context, relationships are in the form of colleagues whom you would go to answer questions or gain knowledge about a particular topic. According to all assistant principals, the most valuable asset available to assist them in their role is in the form of veteran colleagues who have served as an authorized LEA representative for several years. Every assistant principal interviewed discussed the importance of relationships with others in the learning process. Based on the participants' responses, the data revealed that learning overwhelming happens as a direct result of relationships with a variety of individuals. Every participant shared examples that emphasized the importance of mentors, fellow administrators, colleagues, district-level personnel, and special education teachers. Specifically, participants described how these mentors helped them grow in their capacities as authorized LEA representatives and overall leaders of special education. Several participant responses provided evidence regarding the benefit of these relationships that have had in their special education training.

All thirteen of the participants interviewed stated that relationships are vital and are the primary form of learning. Relationships in this context refer to collegial relationships where one school administrator is seeking information from another school administrator about a given topic. Of most importance to the assistant principals serving as the LEA representative are special education teachers, principals, special education

directors, other administrators in the school. Every assistant principal stated that the majority of their special education knowledge has been gained through vital relationships, especially during their first year or two in the position. For example, according to participant 3:

I think there's a great benefit in seeking out the experts and working with them. Again, she (Principal) has been in the field a long time...she's a veteran. So, going to her as opposed to signing up for conferences or signing up for extra classes, I think, there is a great benefit in having people that are...that have been in...and that's what you are going to get.

Similar responses from other participants affirmed how invaluable the relationships were to their professional growth as leaders. Participant 5 stated, “Good, knowledgeable people...they’ll help you.”

The emphatic response from participant 6 further confirmed that relationships with others are vital for leadership in the special education area. She summed up this theme quite thoroughly:

I’m all about relationships. So, I believe that no job is complete without having good relationships with people that you are directly and indirectly involved with; especially at the school level. It’s so huge. There are so many decisions to be made. You need to make sure you know as many people as possible. So, I have built a fantastic relationship with our director of special ed. So, there has never been an opportunity that I’ve not been able to pick up the phone and call her or text her and ask her for some advice on specific issues. I feel like I have the world’s best coaching on hand when it’s needed. So, and she’s very open. She’s

always available and always provides very sound advice on how to move next according to the students.

As revealed in this quote from participant 6, important decisions about the needs of students with disabilities cannot be made without the input of trusted colleagues.

Two of the other participants shared similarly intense feelings about the importance of building relationships in order to learn and grow from others who have direct experience and knowledge in the special education and leadership field. Participant 10 observed, “Your best knowledge comes from someone who you trust who has been in the fight... who's seen a lot of IEP meetings go wrong...who's seen a lot of them go right. You need to find a good mentor....” Participant 12 identified specific individuals that he/she consulted when making decisions, including the school psychologist, special education teachers, and colleagues in general.

Thirteen out of thirteen participants stated that their special education director is a great asset. Not only did every interviewee state this individual is crucial to assist them when working with a challenging situation, but they also added that the special education director was consistently accessible and willing to assist when needed. All interviewees stated that they recognize that their district special education director will attend meetings that may be contentious between parents and the school whenever necessary to provide adequate support and to ensure that the IEP team can come to a consensus that is in the best interest of the student. In these situations, the special education director may act as a mediator.

As revealed in the quotes and discussion of participants’ responses, relationships with key individuals are a vital component of gaining knowledge in the area of special

education. While there is no formal training that takes place during the course of these relationships, veteran colleagues provide training through their words, and deeds. These colleagues continuously impart knowledge as they answer questions, model expectations, and share their own personal experiences as an LEA representative.

### **Experience Matters**

Accounting for an assistant principal's years of experience emerged as an important theme across all participant interviews. During the course of their careers, assistant principals gain knowledge and skills in special education and their role as an authorized LEA representative. Knowledge is obtained over time and through on-the-job training experiences. These on-the-job experiences may naturally occur through conversations with veteran colleagues, researching specific topics through online resources or academic journals, and participating in professional development provided through outside sources.

“If you wait for the district to provide professional development, you will never grow,” according to one assistant principal. Yet, few of the school leaders interviewed stated that they spend time learning about special education on their own unless it was to answer a specific question they were faced with during their role as the LEA representative. While they all agreed that having a solid knowledge base of special education was critical to effectively serving these vulnerable students, gaining knowledge on their own was limited. Every single participant indicated that they rely heavily on the knowledge of others as previously addressed, especially when newly hired in this role.

When considering what developmental path school administrators followed to gain their knowledge in special education, years of experience in the position seemed to

be the greatest common denominator. Knowledge gained through experiences on the job as they occur is an important aspect to consider. Most assistant principals revealed that they rely merely on the knowledge of others to learn what they needed to know to be efficient in their role as an authorized LEA representative. At times, each participant shared that they have spent time researching specific information on the internet. However, one assistant principal stated, "It's simply faster to ask someone else for the answer instead of taking time to look it up on your own."

After learning from veteran colleagues, accessing online resources was another primary avenue the assistant principals relied upon to increase their knowledge of special education. Several participants shared that reading professional journals and peer-reviewed articles were highly beneficial methods of gaining information about how to make legally and ethically defensible decisions as the authorized LEA representative. However, researching the topic was not the preferred way of gaining knowledge about a specific issue they may be facing, but it was an avenue for gaining knowledge when necessary.

Professional organizations provide frequent legal updates (SCEA, PSTA, etc.). These updates include special education laws but are not specific to special education. However, most of the assistant principals reviewed these documents to gain knowledge of school law, but they did not look at these exclusively to gain knowledge about special education law.

Participating in professional development opportunities through the State Department of Education was referenced in 50% of the interviews. These programs are designed for assistant principals to help them grow in their capacity as a school leader.

Specifically, such programs as Instructional Leaders Academy (ILA) or South Carolina Association of School Administrators (SCASA) classes through the Center for Executive Education Leadership (CEEL) seemed to be highly beneficial to increasing knowledge of special education when offered, although they are typically a one-day session dedicated to preparing and training assistant principals on this topic.

While these programs are not required for all assistant principals, the participants shared that they have been beneficial to help them gain knowledge and understanding of their role as a school leader, including special education. Further, they indicated in their interview responses that their knowledge of special education law and their role as the authorized LEA representative increased due to their participation in these programs. Participant 1 shared with me during her one-on-one interview that, “A representative from the state department came to speak to her ILA cohort and discussed a lot of hot topics as it related to special education regulations.” Participant 3 had a similar experience during a SCASA CEEL class: “I do remember attending a session just on special ed that was last school year all day, and that definitely helped.” This participant went on to describe resources that SCASA provides to all of its members via their website.

Although none of the interviewees stated they have specifically attended professional conferences to increase their knowledge base in special education, there are many options available if they choose to attend conferences. In South Carolina, many school leaders attend the SCASA Summer Institute Conference held annually in Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. In the summer of 2019, many special education sessions were offered as part of this conference for school leaders, including The Role of the LEA

which I attended. None of the assistant principals interviewed stated they have attended these sessions to increase their knowledge of special education.

### **Theoretical Framework Discussion**

This research study was conducted using two primary theoretical frameworks. The first theory used was self-determination, a key component of which is sensemaking. The second theory was based on guiding ethical leadership and decision-making in education (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016). Together these theories guided my efforts to answer how secondary assistant principals have been prepared and continue to develop their skills and knowledge about special education.

#### **Self-Determination Theory**

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) was proposed as a possible avenue for understanding and explaining (Ryan & Deci, 2000) why some secondary school leaders may be more knowledgeable of their roles in special education, specifically given their responsibilities as LEA representatives. I was hopeful that SDT might offer a framework to view how school administrators make sense of the laws, policies, and procedures and why some leaders are more knowledgeable and successful in leading inclusive schools than others.

Consistent with the Self-Determination Continuum presented in Chapter 2, this study affirms that assistant principals tended to be motivated more extrinsically than intrinsically. In other words, external regulation played a significant role in motivation according to the participants who expressed concerns about compliance with the laws that govern special education. Many of the participants indicated that they were concerned about the liability of making decisions that may not meet legal requirements in special

education due to their ignorance of the law and a lack of training. As their years of experience increased, so did the assistant principals' knowledge of special education, but the data did not clearly reveal a connection to their intrinsic motivation. Compliance with special education law remained the primary motivating factor influencing the interviewees to gain knowledge and understanding of special education law, policies, and procedures as the authorized LEA representative.

Assistant principals do progress along the Self-Determination Continuum. The participant responses indicated that they are somewhat internally motivated (i.e., identified regulation) as each of them shared that they have a strong belief in doing what is in the best interest of the child. The interviewees shared that they need to ensure that they meet the needs of all students and the value that every child is provided an appropriate education.

Self-determination is based on intrinsic motivation and regulation. It is an internal process that is based on interest, enjoyment, and inherent satisfaction. Based on the responses of the interview participants, their motivation for gaining knowledge of special education, specifically in their role as the authorized LEA representative, was not based on anything more than compliance and their desire to do what is in the best interest of the student, all of which are a part of extrinsic motivation. Therefore, SDT was not able to be adequately determined based on the interview data collected during this study.

There is a certain level of self-motivation that secondary school leaders must have if they are going to be effective in the position. As Participant 4 stated, "I feel like as an assistant principal, you have to be self-motivated, and you're not going to get everything spoon-fed to you." This was simply their expectation of having a school leadership



position. Even if formal training is not provided, Participant 3 expressed the important role that a school leader has in creating an inclusive environment for students with disabilities.

Our teachers depend on us to be the experts in a lot of categories and a lot of areas, and so if I can't advise my teachers correctly as it relates to special ed or any area or field, I'm doing them and my students a disservice. Secondly, there is a lot of legality and liability that is tied to special education, and in an effort to keep myself and my colleagues out of trouble as well as the district, I need to make sure I have the necessary information to do that.

While these assistant principals understand the importance of gaining knowledge, they are not necessarily self-motivated based on SDT. In order to be self-determined, you must be intrinsically motivated based on enjoyment for satisfaction. Based on these participant's responses as well as others, there is no significant evidence that self-determination is directly related to the success and effectiveness of secondary school leaders in the area of special education. While all of the interviewees were somewhere in the self-determination continuum, it remains that their responses indicate that they were more extrinsically motivated. While this underexplored theory may still provide a lens with which to determine why some leaders are more knowledgeable in their role, this study was unable to successfully link SDT to secondary assistant principal's knowledge of special education together.

### **Ethical Leadership and Decision-Making**

The second framework is based on guiding ethical leadership and decision-making in education (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016) which is applied to dilemmas faced by

school principals as they responded to the realigned imperatives of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and the No Child Left Behind Act. School administrators are frequently faced with making legal and ethical decisions, especially when the rights of students with disabilities are implicated.

Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) have applied theoretical perspectives to complex dilemmas and developed an ethical leadership and decision-making guide for educators, which may provide an avenue for preparing school administrators to make legally and ethically defensible decisions when dealing with special education matters as the authorized LEA representative. The authors use four viewpoints to guide in the decision-making process: 1) ethic of justice, 2) ethic of critique, 3) ethic of care, and 4) ethic of the profession.

### **Ethic of Justice**

Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) explained that "[t]he ethic of justice focuses on rights and law and is part of a liberal democratic tradition that is characterized by incrementalism, faith in the legal system, and hope for progress" (p. 11). The participants indicated an overall black and white viewpoint regarding legal aspects. It was not until I started asking particular questions about their concerns that they began sharing that they do, in fact, have concerns about the decisions they are required to make as an authorized LEA representative. Participant 2 expressed concerns about their role as an LEA representative regarding their legal responsibilities:

Special ed laws are continually changing. Legal issues could just come in the form of ignorance...of me just not knowing. Now, I've got myself in this legal issue or matter because of my lack of knowledge or because of my ignorance.

Participant 4 shared a similar concern, “There are things that I don't know, and in the unknown, you can tread into dangerous territory.” Participant 10 reiterated the previous response by stating, “Every decision I make, I'm always concerned about the ethics and the legal. It needs always to be a constant concern. If it's, you are borderline dangerous.” Their responses indicate that while they may have good intentions of following what is legal and what is ethical, without having enough information or following the process correctly, they could inadvertently be making a decision that could be illegal or unethical. Every participant expressed concern about the potential legal exposure they could face in their role as an LEA representative.

Decisions could potentially have legal ramifications that we are unaware of as participant 13 explained: “I don't know all the legal ramifications for making the wrong decisions or saying the wrong thing. So, I'm always very cautious about what I say during IEP meetings.” The assistant principal continued to discuss how they try to avoid being in a situation that could have legal implications.

If it's something that I know I will have questions about, I get with the school psychologist before we even walk in the meeting so we can have a better understanding. But if I don't understand or if I don't know, I'm not gonna be one of those that ask forgiveness. So, I'm going to tell them I'm not sure and I'll find out and get back to you.

The ethic of justice considers questions such as whether or not the law, right, or policy is related to the case and should it be enforced. While the participants' responses did not specifically address these questions, assistant principals clearly expressed their concerns

about being knowledgeable of special education laws. In particular, they were especially concerned about making legally defensible decisions as authorized LEA representatives.

### **Ethic of Critique**

Shapiro & Stefkovich (2016) state, "The Ethic of Critique is based on critical theory, which has, at its heart, an analysis of social class and its inequalities" (p. 14). By paying attention to the inequities in society, specifically schools, administrators could deal with the hard questions regarding race, gender, and so on. The ethic of critique approach is to consider ethical dilemmas for educators and to examine their practices that cause inequities, which may lead to the development of inclusive practices. Participant 13 expressed his concerns regarding the lack of knowledge that school leaders may have when making decisions for our vulnerable special education population of students:

That's always ethically challenging for me because I would much rather keep them in school and try to enforce some type of intervention strategies because I feel like their outcomes would be much better keeping them here than potentially separating them for the remainder of the school year from their education.

The ethic of critique attempts to question who makes the laws, who benefits from them, who has power, and who the silenced voices are. The assistant principals interviewed shared their concerns that special education laws are meant to protect a vulnerable population, but they are also concerned about how their decisions to keep students with disabilities at school may impact all other students they are also responsible for protecting and ensuring an appropriate education. The ethic of critique is an essential aspect of providing the proper atmosphere conducive for student learning and must be considered when decisions as made by the authorized LEA representative.

## **Ethic of Care**

An ethic of care is an essential aspect of providing the proper atmosphere conducive for student learning. It is vitally important to show others they are cared for because students (people in general) do not care how much you know until they know how much you care. To adequately address the needs of students with disabilities, school administrators must ensure that IEP's meet the individual needs of the student in the least restrictive environment. Considering an ethic of care when developing the IEP ensures the student's academic, behavioral, and emotional needs can be met in an inclusive environment. Training school leaders in the area of special education and preparing them to make legally and ethically defensible decisions provides a safeguard to protect individuals who may be unable to protect themselves. Participant 4 shared how she demonstrates an ethic of care by ensuring that students with disabilities in her building are provided a substitute that can meet their needs when the teacher is absent. She explains that she feels an obligation "to handpick who comes in as their sub." She went on to discuss how this can be vital to a child's day because as soon as the student arrives on campus, "they know that face...they feel safe." By performing this simple act, students "can come in this building and continue their routine even if it's not their certified teacher." She summed it up by sharing:

I think those are important things that we do for students because if I were a parent, I would want to feel like somebody was taking good care of my child and serving them in appropriate ways. And I just...I feel like it's not an obligation; it's just what we need to do for them.

The ethic of care resonated in the responses from many of the participants. During the interviews, assistant principals expressed concerns about how to best meet the student's needs in an inclusive environment without disrupting the learning environment of other students in the classroom. Each interviewee expressed empathy and compassion when sharing their experiences when serving as the authorized LEA representative. It was evident that an ethic of care was at the forefront of every decision.

### **Ethic of the Profession**

According to Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016), educational leaders should be provided an opportunity to develop their code of ethics in order to understand themselves as well as others, although they recognize that there may be clashes between an individual's personal and professional code of ethics. As an LEA representative, you have the authority to provide whatever resources the student may need. Participant 4 explained that he sometimes struggles with making certain decisions regarding what a child can or cannot have because it would mean making financial decisions for the school or district.

The parents were asking for a shadow. I don't feel that my current role as assistant principal allows me to make hires...that I get to say something about an additional 30-40-50 thousand dollar role in our district.

This assistant principal had a legitimate concern. He went on to say, "The statement that came back to me is that if you're the LEA in the room, you need to be able to make those decisions." Many of the interviewees shared similar concerns as to what resources they are actually allowed to provide for students, even though their role as an LEA representative allows them to make such decisions.

“What does the profession expect me to do?” and “How can I ensure what is in the best interest of students?” are questions that must be answered as part of the ethic of the profession. The participant's interview responses indicate that this is frequently a challenging and daunting task. Yet, it was evident during their face-to-face interviews that they recognize that this is an aspect of the decision-making process that must be considered because it is vitally important to them to ensure that their students with disabilities are provided a free and appropriate education that the IDEA law requires.

Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) view the teaching of ethics as an evolving process that includes reflection as well as conversations between colleagues. While every one of the assistant principals interviewed stated that conversations between colleagues are critical to their success as an authorized LEA representative, reflection is also vital. By considering the four viewpoints presented by Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016), it is evident that this ethical leadership and decision-making guide may be useful in assisting school leaders when making decisions as the authorized LEA representative.

Overall, the participant responses revealed how especially challenging it was for the assistant principals to make decisions that were both legally and ethically defensible. As previously addressed in Chapter 4, every assistant principal stated that they were required to take an ethical leadership class in their licensure program and that it was beneficial because it taught them how to make ethical decisions based on what is in the best interest of students. However, their interview responses revealed that they were frequently faced with ethical dilemmas where they were required to make a decision that met the legal requirements, but they struggled ethically with their decision. Based on the evidence presented in the study, Shapiro & Stefkovich's (2016) Ethical Leadership and

Decision-Making Guide have proven to be a useful framework in which assistant principals may find guidance when making legally and ethically defensible decisions as an authorized LEA representative.

### **Summary**

Based on the interviews conducted, the consensus of the participants was that college and university administration preparation programs focus on providing an overarching approach to educational leadership and strive to prepare school leaders to transfer the theoretical concepts learned in their programs to practical experiences and application once they have obtained an administrator position. The perceived expectations of the participants regarding leadership licensure programs are for school leaders to transfer their knowledge of leadership to special education as well as all other aspects of school leadership.

My own bias when beginning this process is that college and university programs have failed to adequately prepare school administrators to lead special education. Based on the participants' feedback, it appears that the licensure programs accomplish the broad goal of preparing educational leaders, however, it is likely beyond the scope of licensure programs to prepare school leaders specifically to serve as LEA representatives in the area of special education. Yet, the facts remain that approximately 13% of all public school children receive special services, and it is typically an assistant principal who serves as the LEA representative. Thus, public schools and school systems need knowledgeable school leaders who are prepared and competent to support and advocate for this vulnerable population (Salem, 2018).

While there is a developmental path that assistant principals seem to follow to gain knowledge of their role as an LEA representative, overwhelmingly it comes down to



years of experience and a transfer of knowledge from colleague to colleague. District special education training, internet searches, and professional development are also primary avenues for gaining knowledge, but these are obtained through time, relationships, and on the job experiences. The ability to make legally and ethically defensible decisions is learned much in the same manner.

Chapter 5 will explain how the findings of this study connect and satisfy the two research questions. It will also address the implications the findings of the study have on both research and practice recommendations.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

### **Introduction**

In this qualitative study, interviews were conducted with secondary school administrators in order to determine how they are prepared to make legally and ethically defensible decisions as authorized LEA representatives. Chapter One, Introduction, identified the rationale, context, and theoretical model for this qualitative research study. The literature review presented in Chapter Two provided an overview of previous research about special education preparation for school leaders and revealed gaps that this research study sought to address. Chapter Three described the methodology used for answering the research questions that guided this study, determining how secondary school leaders are prepared while paying attention to the reliability and validity of the study. Chapter Four, Findings, provided my interpretation of the data based on the analytic review. Chapter Five, Discussion and Implications, will explain how the findings of this study connect and answer the two research questions. This chapter will also address implications of the study, particularly related to the need for future research that is aligned with efforts to improve special education practice and leadership.

### **Research Questions**

In order to understand how secondary school administrators have been prepared to make competent decisions for students who receive special services, the following research questions were addressed:

**RQ1.** How are master's programs in educational leadership, including principal licensure/certification programs, preparing assistant principals to make legally and ethically defensible decisions as authorized LEA representatives?

**RQ2.** What developmental path do secondary school administrators follow to make legally and ethically defensible decisions?

These two research questions guided the study overall and established the parameters for the interview questions posed to the assistant principals. Specifically, RQ1 focused on understanding pre-service preparation and training, while RQ2 strived to determine the extent of training after the participant already holds the assistant principal position. To determine the answers to the research questions, a synopsis of the data collection and interpretation is provided.

**How are master's programs in educational leadership, including principal licensure/certification programs, preparing assistant principals to make legally and ethically defensible decisions as authorized LEA representatives?**

Based on the interview data of thirteen assistant principal's in South Carolina, educational leadership programs do not specifically prepare school administrators to make legally and ethically defensible decisions as authorized LEA representatives. While every assistant principal interviewed indicated that they were required to take a school law and ethics class at the college or university they attended, most felt that their administrator licensure program lacked specific training in the area of special education. Every participant interviewed reported that their preparation program failed to discuss their role as an LEA representative, although they had been provided a general overview of special education law, as evidenced in Chapter 4.

## **What developmental path do secondary school administrators follow to make legally and ethically defensible decisions?**

Based on the data shared in Chapter 4, the developmental path that school administrators follow is related directly to their years of experience in the assistant principal position and a transfer of knowledge gained through relationships with veteran colleagues. Collectively, and based on the data collected during the interviews, the assistant principals with more than five years of experience were far more comfortable in the LEA representative role. Each year, their knowledge of special education laws and their understanding of students with disabilities grew as a result of training provided by the district, colleagues who shared their knowledge, professional development opportunities, and online resources. While every participant stated directly that more training should be provided to assistant principals who are new to the role, they do follow the developmental path above.

### **Limitations**

According to Glesne (2016), limitations are defined as aspects that limited the research in some way but were beyond the researcher's control or perceived only in hindsight (p. 214). The following primary limitations are acknowledged: potential bias based on my personal role as the researcher, limited availability of existing research, narrow sample of participants and schools in a single state, and possible inconsistencies across the school systems in South Carolina.

First, my personal experience and prior knowledge may contribute to a built-in bias that could have potentially influenced the study. I had to pay particular attention to my personal beliefs about the teaching and learning of students with disabilities. I was well prepared in my role as a teacher at the university level when I completed my

Bachelor of Arts degree in special education. Upon graduating, I obtain a special education teacher position for eight years, during which I developed IEPs and taught students with disabilities at both the elementary and high school levels in two different school districts (i.e., Spartanburg County School District One and School District Five of Lexington & Richland Counties). However, I was only provided a small portion (less than 10% or approximately one day) of one school law class regarding training in special education in the licensure program for educational leadership while obtaining my Masters in Education (M.Ed) at Southern Wesleyan University. Most recently, I have been an assistant principal for three years and frequently served as an LEA representative.

This research study may have been strengthened because of my knowledge and experience of special education. On the other hand, it could have been limited because I am the researcher for precisely the same reason. I have had years of experience with the process from start to finish and have certain personal non-negotiables about the process. It was be essential for me to separate my own experiences and beliefs of special education as a practitioner to gain new knowledge from others in the field. Because I am an advocate for special education, this process required me to look at the data objectively through the lens of a researcher and be open to whatever the data revealed.

Second, there was limited literature addressing how secondary school administrators are prepared to make legally and ethically defensible decisions as the authorized LEA representative. To that end, I had to be open to wherever the data took me as I did not want to have any preconceived ideas about where I thought training should have occurred. I did have a preconceived notion before beginning this study as to where and how training school has been provided to the assistant principals. However,

because I was aware of my own biases, I was able to separate what I thought I knew and believed before the study and able to gain a new and different understanding based on the data collected.

Third, there has previously been a plethora of research regarding how school leaders, specifically principals, must be instructional leaders in the area of special education. However, there has been little to no research regarding how assistant principals have been prepared for this challenging task. Although the training for all school administrators remains the same, the role routinely falls to the assistant principals to serve as the LEA representative. What I found during the data analysis phase was that training for all administrators is not, in fact, all the same. Not only from the college university level, but it varies by the school district as well.

Finally, because this is a qualitative research study, the results may not be generalizable to other districts or states given the focus on a single state. In other words, states have established their training requirements and may not be the same as South Carolina, which limits the generalizability of this research study to other states. However, participant 10 completed his program through an out-of-state university, which provided a slightly different perspective:

IDEA is federal law. I'm assuming that the process looks...fairly similar, but my licensure program...it was very practical, and I liked that because it gave a lot of generalities and common practices and good practices based on what you should do theoretically.

Further, individual school districts in South Carolina establish their internal training protocols, including but not limited to special education. Because each district has

developed its policies, procedures, and professional development opportunities for secondary assistant principals, some school districts were more effective in preparing their assistant principals to be the authorized LEA representative. Based on the data gathered from each school district, the training and resources provided significantly varied. Some districts provided compliance forms, training, and handbooks, while others provided almost nothing to assist their school leaders.

Acknowledging the limitations of this research study is important to consider as we move forward and consider participant and researcher recommendations. These recommendations enhance the study and provide further insights of the participants as well as the researcher's interpretation of the data.

### **Participant Recommendations**

Based on the participant responses during the interviews, there is still the old training mentality. Participant 12 stated, "We don't put new teachers out by themselves" as school districts are now legally required by the state to provide new teachers a mentor for at least one year. Yet, that is exactly what we do to first-year school administrators. Participant 3 went on to say, "Not only are you dealing with a vulnerable population, but there are many potential legal and ethical ramifications to consider." Overwhelmingly, every assistant principal with under five years of experience shared this concern and their interview responses suggest that if districts would provide more frequent and adequate training, the process would not only improve, but they would be better prepared to make legally and ethically defensible decisions in the role as an LEA representative.

Every assistant principal interviewed offered an array of suggestions to improve the process. Overwhelmingly, the assistant principals felt like additional training from the district level would be the most beneficial to them in their roles as LEA representatives.

In the end, Participant 2 clearly summarized what several other assistant principals alluded to during their interviews:

And when you think about all the legality and all the lawsuits that are related to special ed, you would think that districts would want to be more proactive in making sure that their administrators are well aware and very knowledgeable about what their roles are and how to keep districts out of the news and how to keep districts out of lawsuits. I think...if the money was used more towards training...I think more money would be saved on the backend versus paying out lawsuits. And then at the same time, you would be better serving your students because your administrators would be better trained.

Assistant principals articulated clearly they need to be trained in the area of special education and, from their perspective, it is each individual district's responsibility to provide this training.

### **Researcher Recommendations**

Before collecting data, I believed that college and university licensure programs are failing to prepare school administrators to make legally and ethically defensible decisions when serving as the authorized LEA representative. While college and university programs should continue teaching a school law and ethical decision-making class, training school administrators to be the authorized LEA representative is not the responsibility of licensure programs. There are school districts in South Carolina that do not require their school administrators to serve in this capacity; therefore, this would not need to be a primary focus as they do not need to know the ins and outs of this role. Further, each of the five school districts that participated in this study all had different special education policies and procedures in place for their district. Based on the data



collected through the participant responses, it was evident that administrator licensure programs are preparing school administrators to think critically and to make legally and ethically defensible decisions by providing an overview of leadership competencies and responsibilities.

Although college and universities are responsible for preparing educational leaders generally, school districts have a responsibility to ensure that the school administrators that have been hired receive the appropriate professional development and support. School districts should implement mandatory training for all school administrators who will be required to serve as an authorized LEA representative as a responsibility of their position. School districts across South Carolina have different policies and procedures in place to serve their special education population. The interview data revealed that veteran assistant principals are not nearly as concerned about training in special education as the assistant principals who have held the position for less than 5 years. Participant 4, who has five years of experience as an assistant principal, shared that having a mentor made a huge difference to her during their couple of years as an AP. An assistant principal with 9 years of experience (Participant 5), said multiple times that he had no concerns about his role as an LEA representative. However, he did say:

If I was still in my first or second year, I would probably say yes (regarding concerns), but the only way you are ever going to learn everything you need to know is sitting in that meeting and going through it. All the training in the world...all the book training in the world is not going to help you.

His statement speaks to the very essence of why sufficient training for new assistant principals is vital. They are expected to make legally and ethically defensible decisions as the authorized LEA representative with little knowledge and limited experience in the field of special education.

The South Carolina Department of Education (SCDE) should consider an assistant principal induction program similar to what is required for 1st-year principals. I also suggest that new assistant principals be provided a veteran mentor to help prepare and train them. Ultimately, this would be a more proactive approach and likely ensure that their school leaders are more effective in their position. As educational school leaders, we have an obligation to all students to ensure that they are provided an adequate education in an inclusive environment. This cannot be achieved effectively if we do not seek to prepare our assistant principals more effectively.

The SCDE should also consider developing modules that school districts could use for ongoing professional development in special education. The modules could be designed so that school administrators do not have to follow a specific sequence but could meet the individual needs of school administrators and/or the school districts in which they serve. Ideas included, but are not limited to, the role of an LEA representative, behavior intervention plans, manifestation determination meetings, special education discipline laws, etc.

### **Additional Research Recommendations**

There are several areas of research that were not addressed as part of this study, but would be beneficial as an extension of this work. First, special education training modules should be developed to assist school districts with this lofty task of providing

ongoing professional development in the ever-changing area of special education. Second, establishing a mentor program for 1<sup>st</sup> year school leaders and/or how the mentor role impacts the development of school leaders. Finally, a systematic approach should be established at the SCDE for all school districts to follow in order to minimize disparity in knowledge and training of special education across South Carolina.

### **Summary**

This research study filled a unique void. Previous research reveals limited literature stating how principals are prepared for the lofty task of being special education leaders. While there has been a plethora of literature that addresses the principal's role in leading inclusive schools, there has been limited research that determined the assistant principal's position. While the literature review suggested that current licensure programs are not adequately preparing school administrators to be effective leaders of special education, the participants in this study disagreed generally. In other words, they asserted that colleges and universities are adequately preparing school administrators to make legally and ethically defensible decisions. Even though they are not adequately addressing special education in their leadership programs, they are providing information to prepare administrators on how to be educational leaders. This knowledge can be transferred to the area of special education.

As I began this study, I thought of special education as a completely separate entity as it relates to school leadership. I only considered how school administrators were trained specifically in the area of special education. After analyzing the data, I realize that separate special education knowledge is only one part of the whole school community. Because educational leadership programs at the college and university level offer a one-size-fits-all approach, it is nearly impossible to place too much emphasis on

one particular aspect of the program as this is not what these programs are designed to do. Although it is vital for school administrators to be adequately trained as authorized LEA representatives with the knowledge and skills to make legally and ethically defensible decisions, this task cannot be done entirely in isolation. In other words, decisions that are made frequently impact the general population of students. Students with disabilities are required by IDEA to receive an education in the least restrictive environment, which means they are required spend as much time as possible with their non-disabled peers. To that end, decisions that are made to protect the student with a disability can impact other students in the class, particularly if behavioral concerns are related to the disability.

Past research has previously affirmed that principal leadership is vital to creating and sustaining inclusive schooling practices that work for all students. Yet, an extensive literature review revealed there is a limited understanding of how special education leadership knowledge and skills are gained across the developmental continuum. This continuum includes college and university administrator licensure programs, first-year administration training programs, professional development, and on-the-job-training.

Given the limited research on how assistant principals have developed professionally to fulfill their critical special education leadership roles, this study had the potential to offer a significant contribution to the educational field and has the potential to increase understanding about what works for training and preparation. Unfortunately, the data gathered via individual interviews was insufficient to fully identify SDT as the pathway to improved decision-making for the LEA representatives. Thus, questions

remain, such as who is responsible for ensuring secondary school leaders are prepared to make legally and ethically defensible decisions in their role as an LEA representative.

Because assistant principals primarily fill the LEA special education representative role, this research intended to fill a much-needed gap: determining how to ensure secondary school administrators are prepared to lead their schools in the area of special education, particularly seeking to determine whether they have adequate knowledge to make legally and ethically defensible decisions while serving as the authorized LEA representative. While all the participants reported they did feel prepared to make legally and ethically defensible decisions, they did not specifically relate this knowledge to special education, nor their role as an authorized LEA representative.

The goal of this study was to discover how secondary school leaders are prepared to make legally and ethically defensible decisions as the authorized LEA representative and determine how to ensure school leaders should be prepared going forward. Based on the data, school districts serve an important and critical role in providing school administrators, especially assistant principals, with the necessary training to serve as authorized LEA representatives.

One of the challenges with this district-by-district approach is the lack of consistency from district to district. Thus, I recommend that the State Department of Education develop a systematic approach for school districts to adopt in order to ensure school administrators have adequate training when they are going to serve as authorized LEA representatives. All participants indicated that they rely heavily on the special education director and internal school district policies and procedures. Yet, the materials that districts provide (i.e., handbooks, forms, etc.) to assist school leaders when they are

serving as the LEA representative are vastly disparate. Policies and procedures for special education also vary significantly from district to district. The data revealed that there is a considerable gap across districts across South Carolina regarding how their school administrators are trained as LEA representatives, which needs to be rectified. We can and should do better as we owe it to the vulnerable children we serve.

The data collected via individual interviews with assistant principals, revealed that colleagues are the primary resource and form of training secondary school leaders receive in the area of special education, specifically in their role as an LEA representative. According to assistant principals interviewed, many individuals play a role in the training process (i.e., special education teachers, principals, district-level special education directors, school psychologists, veteran assistant principals, etc.). To whom assistant principals serving as LEA representatives went for assistance depends entirely on the nature of the issue and who was available to help them at the time. In every participating district, the special education director was always easily accessible and willing to help. This provided a significant level of comfort for all of the interviewees.

We don't know what we don't know; none of us do (Luft & Ingham, 1955). As people, we all grow and develop along a continuum. As professionals in the field of education, we may assume that we are really adept at constantly developing and growing. Nonetheless, many of the assistant principals expressed genuine concerns about their role as authorized LEA representatives, who regularly have to make legally and ethically defensible decisions. Overwhelmingly, the assistant principals revealed that they do not want to fail the students they are responsible for serving.

In fact, they strive to ensure that all students are receiving the best possible education that they can receive and that they serve them well. Although the assistant principals who participated in this study, generally reported they felt prepared to make legally and ethically defensible decisions, I remain concerned about the inconsistent levels of training, ongoing professional development, and district support that assistant principals are receiving. However, I am encouraged to find that overwhelmingly, the participating assistant principals were able to point to and rely on a trusted colleague for guidance and support when faced with difficult decisions about the special education needs of students with disabilities. More research needs to be conducted to ensure that secondary school leaders are adequately prepared to make legally and ethically defensible decisions as the authorized LEA representative.

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## APPENDIX A:

### RICHLAND SCHOOL DISTRICT TWO APPROVAL



June 24, 2019

Chastity Evans  
chaevans@richland2.org

Re: Research Request

Ms. Evans,

I approve your application to conduct research in Richland School District Two. You are authorized to conduct the requested research examining how secondary school administrators are prepared to make legally and ethically defensible decisions. Participants must provide written consent to participate in this research. Their participation will be voluntary and at their own discretion.

The Richland School District Two research committee reserves the right to terminate the study at any time if circumstances change or the members feel it is in the best interest of our staff. You must complete all research activities in the district on or before December 31, 2019. If you need to conduct research activities beyond that date, you must ask the Richland Two Research Committee for an extension. Finally, you must submit a copy of all final reports, dissertations, or publications based on this research to me upon completion of your study.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "John G. Arnold".

John G. Arnold, Ph.D.  
Director of Accountability and Assessment



APPENDIX B:  
IRB APPROVAL LETTER



Office of Research compliance

**INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD FOR HUMAN RESEARCH  
APPROVAL LETTER for EXEMPT REVIEW**

Chastity Evans  
3301 Overcreek Road  
Columbia, SC 29206 USA

Re: **Pro00089174**

Dear Mrs. Chastity Evans:

This is to certify that the research study **SECONDARY SCHOOL ADMINISTRATOR PREPARATION AS AN LEA REPRESENTATIVE IN SOUTH CAROLINA** was reviewed in accordance with 45 CFR 46.104(d)(2) and 45 CFR 46.111(a)(7), the study received an exemption from Human Research Subject Regulations on **5/22/2019**. No further action or Institutional Review Board (IRB) oversight is required, as long as the study remains the same. However, the Principal Investigator must inform the Office of Research Compliance of any changes in procedures involving human subjects. Changes to the current research study could result in a reclassification of the study and further review by the IRB.

Because this study was determined to be exempt from further IRB oversight, consent document(s), if applicable, are not stamped with an expiration date.

All research related records are to be retained for at least three (3) years after termination of the study.

The Office of Research Compliance is an administrative office that supports the University of South Carolina Institutional Review Board (USC IRB). If you have questions, contact Lisa Johnson at [lisaj@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:lisaj@mailbox.sc.edu) or (803) 777-6670.

Sincerely,



Lisa M. Johnson  
ORC Assistant Director and IRB Manager

## APPENDIX C:

### INVITATION LETTER FOR EXEMPT RESEARCH

#### Invitation Letter for Exempt Research

#### UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH CAROLINA

#### Secondary School Administer Preparation as an LEA Representative in South Carolina

Dear \_\_\_\_\_,

My name is Chastity Evans. I am a doctoral candidate in the Education Department at the University of South Carolina. I am conducting a research study as part of the requirements of my degree in Ph.D. in Educational Leadership and I would like to invite you to participate.

The purpose of this study is to understand how secondary school administrators are prepared to make legally and ethically defensible decisions as the authorized LEA representative. This study will examine whether policies and training currently exist at the local education agency (LEA) or state education agency (SEA) or whether school administrators primarily gain knowledge of special education laws, policies, and procedures on their own. If you decide to participate, you will be asked to meet with me for an interview about how you were trained and prepared to fulfill your role as an authorized LEA representative.

In particular, you will be asked questions about your preparation, training, and role as an LEA representative either during your licensure program or since you obtained an assistant principal position at the secondary level. You may feel uncomfortable answering some of the questions. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer. The meeting will take place at a mutually agreed upon time and place, and should last about 30 minutes. The interview will be audio recorded so that I can accurately transcribe what is discussed. The digital copy will only be reviewed by members of the research team and destroyed upon completion of the study.

Participation is confidential. Study information will be kept in a secure location at the University of South Carolina. The results of the study may be published or presented at professional meetings, but your identity will not be revealed.

We will be happy to answer any questions you have about the study. You may contact me at (864) 542-6049 or [cbevans@email.sc.edu](mailto:cbevans@email.sc.edu) or my faculty advisor, Dr. Susan Bon at (419) 606-1343 or via email at [BONS@mailbox.sc.edu](mailto:BONS@mailbox.sc.edu). If you have additional questions or concerns, you may contact the Office of Research Compliance (ORC) at 1600 Hampton Street, Suite 414 Columbia, SC 29208 or [https://sc.edu/about/offices\\_and\\_divisions/research\\_compliance/irb/](https://sc.edu/about/offices_and_divisions/research_compliance/irb/).

Thank you for your consideration. If you would like to participate, please contact me at the number listed below to discuss participating.

With kind regards,

*Chastity B. Evans*

Chastity B. Evans  
3301 Overcreek Road  
Columbia, SC 29206  
(864) 542-6049  
[cbevans@email.sc.edu](mailto:cbevans@email.sc.edu)

APPENDIX D:  
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

**Major Research Question(s)**

In order to understand how secondary school administrators are prepared to make competent decisions for students who receive special services, the following research questions will be addressed:

**RQ1.** How did your master's in education program (i.e., principal licensure/certification), prepare you to make legally and ethically defensible decisions as the authorized LEA representative?

**RQ2.** What developmental path do secondary school administrators follow to make legally and ethically defensible decisions?

1. (RQ 1) What experience(s) have you had in special education?
2. (RQ 1) What are your responsibilities as an LEA representative?
3. (RQ 1) What training have you received to make legally and ethically defensible decisions at the LEA representative?
  - a. "Licensure program" at the **university** level?
    - i. Where did you obtain your administration licensing degree?
    - ii. Describe how your licensing program prepared you to lead special education.

- iii. How did your licensing program prepare you to be an LEA representative?
  - b. “Position” at the **district/school** level? (RQ2)
    - i. Who do you go to when you have questions about special education? Why?
    - ii. Do you feel like school and/or district professional development training experience(s) are enough?
    - iii. Tell me more about that...
    - iv. What materials are provided by your school and/or district to assist? (i.e., handbooks, policy manuals, etc.)
  - c. (RQ 1) If you received training during your Master of Education program to make legally and ethically defensible decisions as the LEA representative, was it effective? Why or why not?
  - d. (RQ 2) Learned on your own?
    - i. How?
    - ii. Where?
    - iii. Why did you feel it was necessary?
    - iv. What materials have you read to develop your knowledge base in the area of special education (i.e., legal and ethical)?
4. (RQ 1) What concerns do you have about your role as an LEA representative?
  - a. Are they related to legal and ethical responsibilities? Explain.
  - b. Are they related to insufficient special education training?

5. (RQ 2) Discuss a time when you were challenged to make a decision that met the legal requirements but you struggled ethically with that decision.
6. (RQ 2) What additional training/PD do you feel would help you be better prepared to serve as the LEA representative?
7. (RQ 2) Is there anything that would help you be better prepared in your role as the LEA representative?
8. Is there any other relevant information that you would like to share that I have not addressed?

**Demographic Questions:**

1. Years of Experience
2. Special Education Background
3. Gender
4. Race
5. Age
6. School Community
  - a. Free/Reduced Lunch
  - b. Distribution Language/Race/Etc.

APPENDIX E:

ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL RESPONSE CHART TO DETERMINE PATTERNS AND THEMES

Admin Licensure Program	School & District Professional Development	Material Provided by School/ District	Learned on Your Own (How?)	Why? (Goes back to SDT)	Concerns with Training	Concerns with LEA Role	Legal Decisions with Ethical Implications	Recommendations
Limited Coursework (JS-2)	Instructional Fairs (CC)	Enrich; no formal training	Books; ordered from Amazon (JS-14)	Be able to share information with teachers	Sped is complex (MM-4)	Stabilization of career when making decisions (HJ-7)	Oral admin for ACT exam pushed for by coach (JS-7)	Need more training (MM-4) on how to deal with parents
Court cases related to sped (LC-3)	Non-Existent	PowerSchool	Collaboration with others	Trying to do the right thing	All the book training in the world won't help you (CP-5)	OCR complaints (WJ-2)	Providing consequences even though the behavior is a manifestation of the disability (LC-8)	Have sped director explain expectations; what to do/what not to do (JS-9); and areas of authority
Sharpened leadership skills in general (JS-3)	Districts are reactive instead of proactive (KW-2) due to something that has not been followed.	Special Education Director	Trial by Fire (JS-2)	Lack of training = students lose (LC-7)	Teacher Shortage; international teachers need assistance (JS-7)	Liability	No appropriate placement options based on students' needs (LC-8)	Increased PD (LC-2)
M.Ed. provided some; None in licensure program (KW-2)	Attorneys	Lawyers	Professional reading	Ability to advise teachers; they expect us to be experts (KW-4)	Sped laws are constantly changing (KW-4)	Knowledge of sped	Providing access for parents in rural areas to participate in IEP meeting	Provide feedback to strengthen how to handle sped situations (LC-9)

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							(JS-19)	
Textbooks (law...mainly legal class)	PD at the beginning of the year and throughout (MM-2)	Frequent law review for admin (CP-4)	Actively engaged in the process (MM-10)	Legal liability (KW-4)	Enrich...just because information is accessible doesn't mean you know how to use it (KW-5)	There are things I don't know (VF-10)	Holding IEP meetings without the parent (JS-18)	Sped add-on; like R2s (MM-8)
Law class was good (CP-2)	Very little district PD (CP-3)	Special education updates (CP-4)	Sped Department Chair (JS-4)	To better serve students (LC-7)	Legal could come in the form of ignorance...simply not knowing (KW-8)	Misunderstanding something; laws are tricky (KW-7)	Parents who want certain accommodations for their student just to give them an advantage of standardized tests (KW-9)	Create a sped handbook/handout (LC-9)
Cannot include everything; many things are specific to the building you are in (VF-8)	There is always room for training and improvement (MM-7)	Legal flyer (CP-4)	Principal (JS-4)	Ability to answer questions (KW-6)	State issue...not enough training. Not enough provided from the state to the district to the school (HJ-8)	Making decisions about what a child can or cannot have...resources (VF-10)	Mentally unwell student protected by IEP no matter the consequences to other students (HJ-8)	Provide seminars & workshops during the school year
Trained you to be a critical thinker & to consider what is legal and ethical	No district opportunities exists (HJ-4)	Electronic copy of Procedural Safeguards (VF-6)	Director of Sped (JS-4)	Required as part of testing responsibilities (KW-6)	Need better understanding of the IEP as well as general sped policies	Appropriate placement decisions (VF-10)	Student who steals; discipline is worthless (CP-6)	Be proactive instead of reactive...would save money (KW-11)

(VF-8)					(HJ-9)			
Special education is federal; similar across states (JS-8)	If you wait on district PD, you will never grow (HJ-6)	Enrich with no formal training (VF-6)	State Department (JS-4)	You are the leader in the building; information should be accurate (KW-7)	Hands are often tied (HJ-9)	Didn't really understand role as a new AP (JS-3)	Checking out a textbook to a student who wasn't supposed to get one; resource teacher kept copy (JS-16)	Specialized training in sped from district (KW-11)
Lots of generalities & common practices; prepared you for leadership (JS-8)	Sped Director does training at all levels (JS-13)	Sped director steps in for contentious meetings (JS-7)	SCASA downloadable information	You never want to harm a child in any way (CP-5_)	Need to be more knowledgeable	Don't know how to determine what's in the best interest of the child at times (HJ-7)	Girl pushed a boy student off a brick wall. No consequences could not be provided until mental health counselor had to be consulted first (VF-11)	Training in compassion (CP-7); and empathy
Educational law (WJ-3)	PD provided at least twice each year by this district's sped director (JS-5)	Publication from the SC Admin Board (VF-9)	Webinars	Make intelligent decisions (CP-5)	Misunderstandings can occur	Lawsuits (WJ-6)	Student who graduated at 21 but was not mentally ready (WJ-11)	State dept. training & modeling (JS-9)
Licensure program did not prepare for sped at all (CP-2)	Just because you have access to Enrich doesn't mean you know how to use it.	No materials provided (HJ-5)	Peer-reviewed articles (VF-8)	Stay out of trouble (CP-5)	Laws & policies can be tricky	Process is not practical; people will circumvent the system (JS-3)	Behaviors that are hurtful towards others (RR-7)	One admin per building specializes in sped (JS-3)

Prepared you to get facts and help you find information (CP-4)	Training by word of mouth (MM-2)	Sped director is hands-on; shows up at your school when needed (JS-12)	Internet searches (VF-8)	Loves to learn (VF-5)	Need more training	If legal & ethical is not a constant concern, you are borderline dangerous (HS-17)	Student (hunter) had a gun in his vehicle on campus (MM-9)	Keep an open mind to the fact that we constantly need to learn (VF-5)
Limited Coursework; not a prominent factor (VF-3)	Training was mostly about how to fill out the forms required by the district (MM-5)	Procedural Safeguards Manual (JS-12); admitted that he has not read it	Talking with sped teachers (VF-8)	Remember everything is vital to a child's by; we need to serve them in appropriate ways (VF-6)	Lack of knowledge	Documentation (MM-6)		Need more training to have a better understanding of IEP's and BIP's
No real coursework; learned to make rational decisions (HJ-3)	4 = Not Enough; 2 = Yes, enough provided by school/district; 7 = additional training could be helpful	State Dept PD (JS-12)	Seeking out experts and working with them (JS-6)	Know the evidence and help communicate to stakeholders (VF-8)	Wants to be confident that you are doing the right things and in compliance	Uncomfortable making decisions at times		More and better communication
Vast generalities; gonna get more specific on the job (JS-11)		District PD; Do's & Don'ts (JS-12)	CEEL Program (JS)	As an AP, you must be self-motivated (VF-9)	Need more training about the specific disabilities and how they impact students academically and behavioral (BR-7)	Can cripple of your career		Local PD

General knowledge of what is legally and ethically correct (HJ-3)		District Sped Handbook (WJ-5)	State Department of Ed Website (LC-6)	Serving students appropriately		Lack of knowledge may cause you to unintentionally make illegal or unethical decisions		Ongoing training
Need more emphasis on sped (LC-3)		District Sped Committee (WJ-5)	Internet searches (HJ-5)	Self-motivation		Concerned with the legal ramifications of decisions (BR-9)		Provide workshops
Did not retain information (LC-6)		Policy Manual (W-5)	Professional articles (HJ-5)	Everything cannot be spoon fed				Roundtable opportunities
Collaboration in university cohort was extremely helpful (MM-9)		Principal (Former Sped Teacher) (MM-5)	Professional Journals (HJ-5)	Grow professionally				Frequent law updates
Everyone has a vague understanding of the laws & definitions		Sped Director	Reading...a lot (HJ-5)	Success for all students				Provide access to IEP meetings for rural parents due to lack of transportation or access to a phone
Challenging because special ed is situational and individualized based on the needs of the students.		APPLE Program (Barbara Drayton) (MM-2)	Mentors	Desire to want to help kids learn (RR-6)				Annual refresher (RR-7)

General overview of sped laws; very little discussion of role as an LEA		Sped Handbook (MM-2)	ILAA (LC-2)	Conversations - A quicker resource than researching (MM-7)				Need more qualified people or people with a better work ethic (RR-8)
Special education elective class		LEA Checklist (MM-2)	Asking questions	I'm an advocate for students (BR-6)				Better curriculum (RR-8)
Law class & ethics class (BR-2)		Webinars	Mentoring (JS-5)					Mentor (like for 1st year teachers) (MM-9)
		District has standardized the process (RR-4)	Talking to someone whose been in the fight (JS-5)					
		Enrich	Networking					
		Standardized templates (RR-5)	APPLE Program					
		District forms (MM-5)	Collaboration with others (WJ-9)					
			Good, knowledgeable people					
			Good sped teacher; most valuable resource (JS-10)					
			On the job training (KW-3)					

			Mentor (VF-4)					
			Principal (VF-4)					
			Sped Director (VF-4)					
			Asking a lot of questions (VF-8)					
			Talking to stakeholders (VF-8)					
			Relationships with others at school and district level (HJ-4)					
			Sped director (JS-10)					
			Principal (JS-10)					
			Sped teachers (JS-10)					
			Other admin in district (JS-10)					
			Reading (WJ-8)					
			State director of PEC (WJ-4)					
			Reading Books (MM-9)					

			Legal Updates form PSTA and SCEA (HJ-6)					
			Research					
			Listening					
			On the job training					
			People are very valuable resources; primary form of learning					
			Conversations with other people (RR-6)					
			Internet (court cases) (RR-6)					
			Best training: talking to others (MM-6)					
			DSM Manual					