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## **Principals' Perceptions of their Knowledge in Special Education**

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### Abstract:

With the *Every Student Succeeds Act* continuing to legislate accountability for special education and Hispanic students, the appropriate content in principal preparation programs relevant to successful leadership of special education programs is vital. This mixed methods study analyzed the survey responses of 84 principals in South Texas from predominantly Hispanic schools to determine the principals' perceptions regarding their legal, foundational, and contextual knowledge of special education and their suggested topics for inclusion in curriculum content of principal preparation programs to provide the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively implement and supervise special education programs. Results indicated that the principals' greatest need was in knowledge to design curriculum for students with disabilities, however, the most frequent recommendation for inclusion in principal preparation was additional content in special education laws, *Section 504*, and Response to Intervention. Recommendations for principal preparation were based on the lowest areas of knowledge indicated by the responses.

Keywords: Special education administration, principal preparation, educational leadership, principal concerns

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The significance of principal leadership is second only to that of a teacher's in its impact on student learning (Seashore Louis, Leithwood, Wahlstrom, & Anderson, 2010). By inspiring the campus vision and their teachers' attitudes, principals promoting a caring learning environment by guiding teacher mindsets (Furney, Aiken, Hasazi, & Clark/Keefe, 2005). Principals model ethical and legal expectations in school, highlighting the need for superior knowledge in effective supervision of regular and special education programs. Praisner (2003) determined principals with positive attitudes in serving students with special needs were those who took a variety of special education courses in their preparation program. In addition, the role of the principal has changed from being the school disciplinarian and supervisor of the building and physical plant, to one of instructional leader responsible for implementing the *Individuals*

with *Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) and the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). Consequently, principals have a vital role in the education and lives of special needs students (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013).

Principals, nevertheless, are not prepared to supervise special education programs because they are inadequately prepared in their knowledge of special education policy, and more importantly, the characteristics of how these disorders or disabilities affect the student (Lynch, 2012). Principals are even less prepared to serve Hispanic students with disabilities due to the paucity of research on this student group, in spite of the high number of Hispanic children with disabilities.

This study examines the perceptions of principals of predominantly Hispanic schools on their knowledge in special education to determine how to better prepare principals to implement and supervise special education programs. The study specifically addressed legal, foundational, and contextual knowledge in special education, and their suggestions for content in principal preparation curriculum. The findings indicated respondents' high levels of satisfaction with their knowledge of the *IDEA* and revealed their lowest level of knowledge in designing curriculum for students with disabilities. The respondents also suggested principal preparation programs include more content on special education laws, *Section 504*, and Response to Intervention. The remainder of the discussion in this paper is organized into the following sections: (1) purpose of the study, (2) literature review, (3) methods and data sources, (4) results, (5) recommendations, (6) significance and limitations of the study, and (7) summary.

#### **Purpose of the Study**

To determine how to improve principal preparation programs in preparing effective special education leaders, the researchers examined and analyzed responses of South Texas principals of predominantly Hispanic schools to determine their perceptions of their knowledge in three special education topics; specifically, legal, foundational, and contextual knowledge and to gather their suggestions for curriculum content to incorporate into current principal preparation. The researchers hope the findings can be utilized by principal preparation programs to prepare all school leaders to serve the needs of special education students, especially Hispanic special education students, especially Hispanic special education students, thereby increasing the academic success of all students with disabilities.

#### **Literature Review**

To understand the context and results of the study, the first section of the literature review expounds on the growth of the intersection of two groups, students with disabilities and Hispanics. It continues by presenting the obstacles these students encounter as second language learners and as members of families who are economically disadvantaged. The review also discusses topics crucial to principals in their accountability for the performance of all students, including students with disabilities. Finally, it elaborates on the topics covered in the data collection survey and on the themes resulting from the open-ended question in the survey.

#### **Demographic Terms**

Before continuing the literature review, the following clarification should be provided regarding terms used throughout this paper. The term "Hispanic" is used to reflect the term used in state accountability reports in Texas and in federal education accountability reports in the U.S. However, the student population in this study is overwhelmingly (97.5%) Mexican or Mexican American due to the geographic location along the Texas-Mexico border. The reader must also be cognizant of the terms "special education students" and "students with disabilities." The terms will be used interchangeably throughout the paper, although Texas and U. S. accountability

reports refer to this student group as “special education” students. The following section provides a glimpse into the education of Hispanics and students with disabilities.

### Students with Disabilities and Hispanic

Approximately 13% of students enrolled in the United States (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2016) and 8.7% of students enrolled in Texas (Texas Education Agency, 2016) have been identified as needing special education services. In addition, approximately 1.5 million (1/4) of the 2014 U.S. students identified with disabilities were Hispanic. Students with disabilities and Hispanics are two student groups highly at risk of dropping out of school due to a conglomeration of factors, resulting in their inclusion in accountability measures in the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA). Table 1 provides a summary count of the most recent number of students with disabilities enrolled in the United States (U.S.), Texas, and the region of study.

Table 1:

*Number of students in Special Education in Region, Texas, and U.S. Public Schools*

Special Education Services	Region (2016)	Texas (2016)	United States (2014)
Orthopedic Impairment	359	3,806	56,489
Auditory Impairment	501	7,046	76,632
Visual Impairment	315	3,967	28,106
Deaf / Blind	5	229	1,468
Intellectual Disability	3,416	46,329	425,447
<i>Emotional</i> Disturbance	1,603	26,725	363,859
Learning Disability	12,808	159,503	2,264,148
Speech Impairment	4,438	91,917	1,333,839
Autism	3,574	54,098	538,015
Developmental Delay	<5	51	409,932
Traumatic Brain Injury	61	1,325	26,396
Non-categorical Early Childhood	389	5,475	N/A
Other Health Impairment	4,971	62,714	817,443
TOTALS	32,440	463,185	6,464,215

Sources:

Texas Education Agency. (2016). *2015-2016 Special education reports*. Retrieved from: <https://rptsvr1.tea.texas.gov/adhocrpt/adser.html>

NCES. (2016). *Condition of education: Children and youth with disabilities*. Retrieved from [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d15/tables/dt15\\_204.50.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d15/tables/dt15_204.50.asp)

### Low Student Success

Although the number of students in the Special Education program comprises a large percentage of the entire student population, statistics paint a dismal picture of student performance for this group. For example, fourteen percent (14%) received an alternative certificate rather than a regular high school diploma, and nineteen percent (19%) dropped out of school in 2014 (NCES, 2016). The numbers speak for themselves, informing us schools are not providing the appropriate services to prepare these students for successful transition to post-secondary education and the job force. Parents of students with disabilities, too, are dissatisfied with the level of support the schools are providing their children as evidenced by the high degree of litigation in this area (Osborne & Russo, 2014). Their concerns are not hard to understand when one reads federal reports on the status of racial/ethnic disproportionality in special

education. For example, the report titled "Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Special Education (United States Department of Education, 2016)" finds that 100% of the states have one or more districts exhibiting some disproportionality in serving minority students with disabilities. Almost half of the 17,371 school districts in the U. S. were found to exhibit disproportionate rates of ethnic or racial placement, setting, or identification of minority students with disabilities for three consecutive years. The following section elaborates on the circumstances of Hispanics in the public education system.

### **Hispanic Education**

In Texas, where Hispanic students comprise slightly more than half of the total state enrollment (TEA, 2016), educators must also consider the incongruence of the school and classroom culture with the Hispanic culture as they identify and serve Hispanic students with disabilities (Harry & Klingner, 2007). Hispanics are the largest group of English language learners in the U.S. (NCES, 2016). Identification as English language learners, which many Hispanics are, immediately places a student at risk of dropping out of school before graduation due to a language barrier. Exhibiting a learning disability may further exacerbate student frustration in the classroom, thereby increasing Hispanic special education students' risk of dropping out of school. In addition, support at home may be minimal if the parents speak little or no academic English or they lack reading and math literacy due to educational or economic disadvantage (Gandara, 2010). For examples, families of Mexican origin comprise the largest Hispanic group and have the lowest level of education in the United States (United States Census Bureau, 2011), and important factor in Texas, where more than half the state's school enrollment is Hispanic. Finally, because the culture encourages respect of school leaders and educators, parents believe school personnel know best in school matters, and may not complain if services do not meet their children's needs. The result is that ultimate responsibility for the *appropriate* placement and provision of services for students with disabilities defaults to school administrators, specifically, the school principal, which leads to the following discussion on the principal's responsibilities in accountability issues.

### **School Principal Accountability**

The school principal must have the knowledge and skills to advocate for appropriate placement and services of all students enrolled in their schools as mandated by federal and state legislation. The latest federal legislation is the *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)*, establishes accountability for economically disadvantaged students, students from major racial and ethnic groups, children with disabilities, and English language learners in all public school systems receiving federal funds. As noted, two of the targeted groups are the special education group and the Hispanic group. In addition, principals must adhere to all components of the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)*, legislation with specific legal requirements relating to identification, placement, appropriate services, and discipline of students with disabilities. However, school leaders do not innately possess the capacity to effectively supervise special education programs. It is the responsibility of the principal preparation programs to provide the necessary curriculum content and to develop the necessary knowledge and skills of future principals in preparation for their roles as advocates for the free and appropriate education of all students. Critical knowledge and skills for effective instructional and campus leaders are provided next.

### **Knowledge and Skills Needed by Principals**

The school principal's knowledge and skills are crucial to meeting the provisions of *IDEA* and the legalities of special education program implementation. Special education presents

a major challenge for school administrators (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). Principals' everyday routines include effectively and efficiently meeting the requirements of state and federal legislation, which include a mandate for accountability (Schechter & Feldman, 2013). However, school principals are not adequately equipped to oversee special education services due to the deficiency of special education courses in the curriculum and internship of their university preparation program (Bays, 2004). Research by Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, and Ahlgrim-Delzell (2006), suggests that school principals are deficient in abilities that are essential to create and maintain educational support teams to address special education's issues.

DiPaola, Tschanen-Moran, and Walther-Thomas (2004) noted that most principals do not have the adequate academic instruction or field-based experience from their preparation programs to effectively administer all aspects of a special education program, including legal compliance of the program. Contrasting a principal with expertise in special education and a general school principal, there is little to no research on the detailed proficiencies that are essential for principals to be effective special education leaders. "The question about what makes the administration of special education special has not been explicitly addressed, there is indeed something special about the way educators trained in the administration of special education deliver services to students who have disabilities and support staff" (Boscardin, 2007, p. 189). Boscardin added that leadership is very important, particularly when overseeing the mechanisms of special education law. Yet in some states, campus leaders can simply take a test to obtain principal certification through alternative certification routes. The National Association of Secondary School Principals (2016) writes, "Most of these initiatives seek to attract candidates from outside of the education profession on the premise that anyone with a background in business or management is a quality candidate for the principalship." These principals can walk onto a campus with no formal training in instructional leadership at all, much less leadership of special education programs or national initiatives, for example, the federally legislated Response to Intervention.

### **Response to Intervention**

Response to Intervention (RtI) is a multi-tiered approach for early identification and support of students with learning and behavior needs. *IDEA* legislation disallowed the "discrepancy" model previously used to qualify students for special education services. In the discrepancy model, a student's ability and their actual achievement were calculated and compared. If a significant discrepancy was noted, the student qualified for service through special education. *IDEA* now requires a tiered system of instruction with various levels of support and intervention based on student response to research-based instruction before the students are considered for referral to special education. The tiers begin with quality first instruction for all students, followed by small group and individual targeted instruction for those students who were not successful initially. The process terminates with referral for instruction from a special education teacher if additional support is required (USDE, 2015). Research-based instructional strategies must, monitored, and documented as the student progresses through the tiers of intervention (USDE, 2015). This process connects the teacher's capacity to appraise all students thoroughly to recognize those who need additional support and to frequently monitor the students' progress (Walker et al., 2015). This is a systemic approach to identify students who are at risk of failure, which allows for intervention before referral and evaluation into the special education program. Specific knowledge and skills are indispensable to properly administer RtI; for example, knowledge of research-based instructional strategies and knowledge of data collection and assessment skills to support proper monitoring of special education students.

Vincent L. Farrandino, former director of the National Association of Elementary School Principals, states that “informed leadership is critical to the success of your school’s special education program” (Patterson, 2001, p. 8). This knowledge can be obtained through coursework in university preparation programs that include special education theory and special education law classes, and include field-based experiences in special education departments.

DiPaola, Tschanen-Moran, and Walther-Thomas (2004) concluded principals must be academically knowledgeable of all areas in special education. Much of the knowledge needed stems from the legal requirements mandated by state and federal law, such as the RtI component of *IDEA*. However, special education knowledge can be divided into three categories as in the survey used for this study: legal, foundational, and contextual. The following paragraphs provide an overview of the three sections of the survey: legal knowledge, foundational knowledge, context knowledge, and of general leadership knowledge to assist the reader in understanding the results of the study.

### **Knowledge and Skills Measured by Survey**

In a handbook to assist principals in the administration of special education programs, Patterson (2001) identifies a multitude of principal’s responsibilities which require specific knowledge of special education topics. In the legal area, she identifies such topics as: 1) eligibility under *IDEA*, 2) identification and evaluation, 3) free and appropriate public education, 4) least restrictive environment, 5) related services, 6) procedural protections, 7) IEP planning, and 8) *Section 504* of the Rehabilitation Act.

Foundational knowledge consists of “activities related to ensuring an effective model of service provision to students with disabilities” (Frost and Kersten, 2011, p. 8). More specifically, knowledge is needed in: 1) collaboration between regular and special education, 2) meeting inclusion requirements, 3) impact of school- based decision-making on special education, 4) communication with parents, 5) staffing issues, 6) professional development to support inclusive schools, and 7) the principal as a change agent (Patterson, 2001).

Contextual knowledge is described by Frost and Kersten (2011) as “research or evidence-based curriculum that aligns with state standards and is appropriate to individual student needs” (p. 8). Patterson (2001) identified the following areas of knowledge in this category: 1) best practices in general and special education, 2) effects of inclusion on students with and without disabilities, 3) development of IEPs, and 4) accommodations versus modifications, 5) classroom management strategies, and 6) supervision and evaluation of teachers, support professionals, and paraprofessionals.

This section of the literature review was included to assist in understanding the three sections of the survey for interpretation of the data. The following section of the literature review discusses general knowledge and skills content in traditional university-based principal preparation curriculum in preparation for discussion of the fourth question of the survey.

### **Principal Preparation Curriculum**

When one looks at the courses in the curriculum for principal preparation, the coursework is very similar at most university-based programs, although studies show that what is occurring in these programs is not always what real principals experience on their jobs (Wallace Foundation, 2016). Most states’ principal standards are guided by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards (Brown, Squires, Connors-Tadros, & Horowitz, 2014). Texas standards are also similar to ISLLC standards. Universities in Texas must include curriculum in principal preparation programs in six areas: (1) school culture, (2) leading learning, (3) human capital, (4) executive leadership, (5) strategic operations, and (6) ethics,

equity and diversity. How the content is delivered or how the courses are structured is left up to each university to decide. Familiar courses are: Instructional Leadership, Curriculum and Instruction, Community Leadership, Organizational Leadership, School Law, Introduction to Research, Technology, Managing Personnel, Budgeting, and Teacher Evaluation. By reading these titles, courses appear to be focused on management more than on implementing and supervising instruction, especially instruction in a special education program. In addition, no specific guidance is provided on what the practicum activities should entail.

To summarize, although principals' responsibilities include developing and implementing a vision of a quality education for all students and allocating the necessary resources in personnel, budget, time, facilities, and leadership to achieve that vision, there is no specific reference in the ISLLC or the Texas standards requiring specific knowledge and skills to be an effective leader in the implementation and supervision of special education programs. This study will shed some light on what practicing principals in South Texas feel would benefit them in becoming better leaders of special education programs. The following section provides details on the data collection conducted for this study.

### **Methods and Data Sources**

#### **Respondents**

The researchers emailed surveys through the university server to 456 principals in 37 school districts in South Texas, of which 84 responded, resulting in an 18% response rate. The names and contact information were obtained from the state database through the state website. It is important to note the South Texas region is predominantly Hispanic and school districts are situated within minutes or immediately along the Texas-Mexico border. The researchers were specifically interested in this area's responses to address the issue locally. Respondents were elementary, middle, and high school principals from predominantly Hispanic schools. Thirty-seven participants had 1-4 years' experience as principals, twenty-three had 5-8 years' experience, nine had 9-12 years' experience, six had 13-16 years' experience, and nine had more than 17 years' experience. Eleven participants had special education teacher certification and 73 did not.

Ten principals supervised schools with less than 300 students, thirty-one principals supervised schools with 301-600 students, forty-two principals served schools with more than 600 students, and one participant did not respond to the enrollment question. The number of students with IEPs served at the participants' campuses ranged from 0 to 381. None of the principals reported having special education administrative resource personnel on their campus. The number of special education teachers supervised by the principals of the study ranged from 0 to 95.

Seventy-two participants' highest level of education was a master's degree, five had earned a certificate of advanced study, and five had earned a doctorate degree. The largest number of respondents (41) graduated from the local university's principal preparation program. The next largest number of respondents (12) reported graduating from another local South Texas university accounting for 63% of the total principals' responses. The remaining respondents (31) indicated attending one of ten other Texas universities or a regional service center. The demographics of the respondents and their schools represented the demographics of the local region well. Table 2, below, provides some of the information available from the survey in an easier-to-read format.

Table 2  
*Demographics of Respondents to Special Education Survey n=84*

Gender	Male	Female			
	32	52			
Experience	1-4 years	5-8 years	9-12 years	13-16 years	17+ years
	37	23	9	6	9
Sp Ed Certification	Yes	No			
	11	73			
Education Level	Certificate	Masters	Doctorate		
	5	72	5		
Enrollment	<300	301-600	>600	NA	
	10	31	42	1	
University Program	Local	Local #2	Alternative	Outside area	
	41	12	1	30	

## Survey

The survey instrument used to collect data from the participants was the *Role of Principals with Special Education Teacher Survey*, with permission from its developers Frost and Kersten (2011). The survey was composed of special education questions and used a yes or no structure and an open-ended question section. The instrument was composed of five sections. Section I solicited demographic information from the participants. Section II requested the principal's perception of having adequate knowledge of special education in three areas: legal, foundational, and contextual. Foundational knowledge was described by Frost and Kersten as "activities related to ensuring an effective model of service provision to students with disabilities" (p. 8). Contextual knowledge was described as "research or evidence-based curriculum that aligns with state standards and is appropriate to individual student needs" (p. 8). Section III measured the frequency that principals said they engaged in specific instructional leadership behaviors with special education teachers. Section IV contained open-ended questions requesting principals' perception of their roles with special education teachers. Section V contained open-ended questions asking for principals' suggestions to improve principal preparation programs for future school administrators. Only the Knowledge section and the open-ended question asking for principals' suggestions for improving principal preparation programs are used in this study. No changes were made to the original survey, negating the need to re-validate the survey.

Data was entered into SPSS for descriptive analysis. Frequency counts were used to determine the highest number of principals' perceptions in the topics covered in the survey. The authors reviewed the results from the open-ended questions and manually coded to search for themes. Once coded, the researchers grouped all responses with similar content to identify the most frequently occurring themes. The themes were noted and compared to the results of the survey portion of the study. The following section describes the results of the data analysis.

## Results

Only the Knowledge Section of the survey and one open ended question are the focus of this discussion. The knowledge section was composed of three knowledge areas: legal, foundational, and contextual. Six topics composed each of the three knowledge sections, for a total of eighteen topics. Results of the survey ranged from 65.4% to 100% of the participants indicating sufficient knowledge in the eighteen topics of the survey. The least number of principals (65.4%) perceived themselves with adequate knowledge in designing curriculum to



serve their students with disabilities and the highest number (100%) perceived themselves as having adequate knowledge in *The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)* as noted in Table 2. The most frequent response to the open-ended question was the suggestion to include more content in principal preparation that concentrates on the topics of special education laws, Section 504, and Response to Intervention (RtI). Results of the study are presented in four sections below based on four questions of the survey: legal knowledge, foundational knowledge, contextual knowledge, and suggested content for curriculum in principal preparation programs.

### **Legal Knowledge**

The first question of the study asked respondents if they perceived themselves as having adequate legal knowledge for effective leadership of special education programs. This section of the survey addressed six legal topics: *IDEA*, *NCLB* (now *ESSA*), *Section 504*, *American with Disabilities Act (ADA)*, Texas Administrative Code, and Response to Intervention (RtI). Overall, an average of 94.7% of the respondents felt adequately knowledgeable in this section of the survey. Knowledge of the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)* scored the highest, with 100% of the principal responding positively on this topic. Ninety-five percent (95.1%) felt adequately knowledgeable in *Section 504*, *NCLB* (Now *ESSA*), and RtI, with a slightly smaller percentage (93.8%) indicating knowledgeable in the *American with Disabilities Act (ADA)*. The lowest area of knowledge was in Special education rules and regulations contained in the Texas Administrative Code (88.9%). This section of the survey, Legal Knowledge, had the highest level of positive responses indicating sufficient knowledge of the necessary content to address the education of students with disabilities.

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### **Foundational Knowledge**

The second question of the study asked respondents to indicate if they felt they perceived themselves with adequate foundational knowledge in special education to effectively serve students with disabilities. This section of the survey included six topics: accommodation in least restrictive environment, parental involvement in IEP, district's placement continuum, district's placement procedures, district's disciplinary services, and the district's related services model. Overall, an average of 93.8% of the respondents felt knowledgeable in this section of the survey. Knowledge of the participant district's educational placement procedures for special education was the highest, with 97.5% of the respondents indicating adequate knowledge, followed by 96.3% on two topics, the district's placement continuum and the district's discipline supports and interventions. How to accommodate for least restrictive environment received 93.8% positive

responses, and 92.6% felt adequately prepared in the knowledge of their district's related services. The lowest area of knowledge was in understanding the parent's role in developing Individualized Education Plans (86.4%). This section of the survey, Foundational Knowledge, averaged the second highest score in responses indicating sufficient knowledge of its topics to serve students with disabilities.

Table 3  
*Principal Responses to Knowledge Questions*

<i>Do you feel you have sufficient knowledge of the following topics to properly serve your students?</i>	<b>%</b>	
	Yes	No
<b>Legal</b>		
<i>Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)</i>	100	0
<i>Special education provisions in the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB)</i>	95.1	4.9
<i>Components of the Rehabilitation Act (Section 504) that effect public schools</i>	95.1	4.9
<i>Components of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) that effect public schools</i>	93.8	6.2
<i>Special education rules and regulations contained in the Texas Administrative Code</i>	88.9	11.1
<i>Your district's Response to Intervention (RtI) plan</i>	95.0	5.0
<b>Foundation</b>		
<i>How to accommodate for the academic needs for students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment</i>	93.8	6.2
<i>Parents' role in developing Individualized Education Plans</i>	86.4	13.6
<i>Your district's special education continuum from least to most restrictive</i>	96.3	3.7
<i>Your district's educational placement procedure for special education</i>	97.5	2.5
<i>Your district's disciplinary interventions and supports for students with disabilities</i>	96.3	3.7
<i>Your district's related services delivery model (social work, speech, etc.)</i>	92.6	7.4
<b>Context</b>		
<i>State learning standards for students with disabilities</i>	97.5	2.5
<i>Most effective instructional practices for students with disabilities</i>	90.1	9.9
<i>Academic assessments for students with disabilities</i>	96.3	3.7
<i>How to design curriculum for students with disabilities</i>	65.4	34.6
<i>How to develop a plan for program improvement in special education</i>	77.8	22.2
<i>How student Individualized Education Plans are evaluated by staff in your school</i>	92.6	7.4

**Contextual Knowledge**

The third question of the study asked participants to indicate if they perceived themselves with adequate contextual knowledge in special education to serve students with disabilities. This section queried responses on six topics: state learning standards, effective instructional practices, academic assessments, designing curriculum for students with disabilities, developing program improvement plans, and evaluation of IEPs by staff. Overall, this section showed the lowest percentages of the survey, with an average of 86.6% of the respondents indicating adequate contextual knowledge of special education. Knowledge of the state learning standards for students with disabilities was the highest (97.5%) in this section of the survey. The next highest area (96.3%) was knowledge of academic assessments for students with disabilities, followed by evaluation of IEPs by staff (92.6%), effective instructional practices (90.1%), and development of program improvement plan (77.8%). The lowest area of contextual knowledge was in designing curriculum for students with disabilities (65.4%). This section of the survey,

Contextual Knowledge, averaged the lowest percentage of respondents stating they had adequate knowledge of special education to effectively serve students with disabilities. Table 3 details each individual section of the survey with the corresponding percentage of respondents perceiving adequacy in knowledge in each component. After the table, the results continue with a summary of the respondents' suggestions for content to include in the curriculum of principal preparation programs.

### **Principals Recommendations for Principal Preparation Programs**

The last section of the survey queried the principals on their suggestions for content to include in principal preparation curriculum to prepare campus leaders to effectively implement and supervise special education programs. The responses generated various themes, with the largest number of responses (41%) indicating a need for more content in special education laws, such as the provisions of *IDEA* and *Section 504*. The second largest theme, with 25.7% of the respondents suggesting it, was content on meeting the requirements for Response to Intervention (RTI), including documentation. The third largest theme was suggested by 17.1% of the respondents. These respondents suggested content to assist principals in working with aggressive and disruptive behaviors and disorders. The fourth largest group of respondents (11%) asked for content to help them conduct Annual, Review, and Dismissal (ARD) meetings. A fifth group (10%) suggested that principal practicum students be mentored by a special education supervisor or diagnostician to acquire specific knowledge and procedures of the special education program.

The results of the open-ended question section were rather disconcerting, as no low-scoring topics in contextual knowledge were addressed in the responses, yet those areas are the most crucial for the success of students with disabilities, especially Hispanic students. Surprisingly, the content they requested more of in principal preparation programs, was that which they already felt adequately knowledgeable in to effectively supervise a special education program. Finally, it was disturbing to note that not one single principal requested content in providing special education services to the Hispanic students at their schools.

### **Recommendations**

Principals continue to struggle with the various issues in the supervision of regular and special education programs (Campbell-Whatley & Lyons, 2013). However, students with disabilities have specific legal rights through *IDEA* and principals have the moral and legal obligation to provide appropriate services for these students. In addition, if students with disabilities are Hispanic, the principal must also address this issue in providing services. This section will present authors' recommendations based on the results of the study and current research-based practices.

### **IDEA and RtI**

Further instruction in special education law, *Section 504*, and *ADA* was suggested by practicing principals of this study; therefore, one recommendation is that specific topics in special education law be studied more deeply in the School Law course in principal preparation programs. Knowledge of the specific provisions in federal legislation is critical for principals, as they run the risk of litigation due to non-compliance. More importantly, though, is that students with disabilities may suffer the consequences of the principal's lack of knowledge in this area. RtI was another area of concern for the principals. RtI is an important component of *IDEA*, the largest piece of legislation developed specifically to ensure students with disabilities will receive a free and appropriate education. RtI was suggested in *IDEA* for the specific purpose of avoiding overrepresentation of minority groups in special education, as current statistics show is occurring throughout the United States (NCES, 2014). The multi-tiered approach to address student

learning problems is one process to ensure every child is monitored for difficulty in the classroom and is provided research-based instruction before being considered for special education. Because *Section 504* and *ADA* are also specific federal legislation, they too should receive more in-depth coverage in the school law class. The following section presents suggestions to address the lowest area of perceived adequacy on contextual knowledge.

### **Designing Curriculum for Students with Disabilities**

Teaching and learning are what school is all about, so the first thing a principal should be concerned with is whether a student is learning when a teacher is teaching. If learning is not occurring, the principal must intervene to determine why and remedy the problem to confirm appropriate instruction is provided for the student. To accomplish this goal, a principal must know how to develop or assist with the design of curriculum for all students, including special education students and Hispanic special education students. Therefore, a second recommendation is that principal preparation programs consider integrating knowledge of the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in their curriculum courses. Universal Design for Learning is a concept for making curriculum accessible to all students, including those in special education programs (National Center on Universal Design for Learning [NCUDL], 2016). The center identifies three principles of UDL: (1) Provide multiple means of representation, (2) provide multiple means of action and expression, and (3) provide multiple means of engagement. One example of using UDL is in the preparation of written materials, such as a syllabus. A font that is easy to read by everyone must be used and captions must be provided for pictures and graphics so readers with visual impairments can use their technology to call out what is on the paper. During class, a video would require captions for those who are hard of hearing. By being proactive and anticipating possible issues with accessibility, a teacher will be able to reach all students and allow them to learn based on their needs.

### **Multicultural Education**

A final recommendation is that principal preparation programs include multicultural education as part of their Special Populations course content. The researchers of this study cannot comprehend why a need for providing services for Hispanic students with disabilities did not surface in the responses. Perhaps because the region is approximately 97% Hispanic and most area educators are also Hispanic, the respondents considered themselves already adept in addressing the challenges Hispanic students with disabilities face in the classroom. However, this assumption does not align with the finding that the Hispanic student group is one ethnic group consistently exhibiting a high risk of misidentification, improper placement, or inappropriate instructional setting based on a previously mentioned report (United States Department of Education [USDE], 2016). One method to address the needs of Hispanics and English language learners with disabilities is through multicultural education.

In multicultural education, educators integrate instruction and experiences relevant to a student's culture, language, family background, and a multitude of other experiences which promote multiculturalism (Grant & Sleeter, 2011). Multicultural special education can help improve student achievement as it promotes acceptance of diversity (Yellin & Mokhtari, 2010). Incorporating bilingual and ESL instruction into this model will solidify the multicultural classroom and provide a risk-free environment for Hispanic students with disabilities in need of language and opportunity support.

While principals do not have to be specialists in special education disabilities, they must possess essential knowledge and skills critical to accomplishing the challenges involved in special education leadership (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003), including basic knowledge of

federal legislation such as IDEA, Section 504, and RtI. Leaders must advocate for fair access to appropriate curriculum and education for all students and model a commitment to ensuring special education programs are effectively implemented. In addition, these programs must be continually evaluated for effectiveness in promoting student achievement. Inclusive in this statement is commitment to promoting knowledge of multicultural and bilingual/ESL education support for Hispanic students with disabilities, groups currently underperforming in the classroom. This results will provide feedback for principal preparation programs to improve in meeting these goals. The significance of this study follows, in conjunction with the limitations.

### **Significance and Limitations of the Study**

Universities prepare the majority of certified school principals for our public schools. Federal and state legislation dictate educational mandates, such as *IDEA* and *ESSA*, to ensure the free and appropriate education for every student in those schools. Current national statistics depicting a disparate education for students with disabilities, in addition to ethnic disproportionalities are evidence that current principal preparation programs are lacking in effectively preparing their graduates in providing effective supervision of special education programs. By reaching out to practitioners, principal preparation programs can determine which program content is relevant and necessary to include to prepare candidates for the real world of regular and special education leadership. Once identified, the topics can be incorporated into the current curriculum of principal preparation programs. The results are sound educational strategies and collaboration among all the school's educators can create effective, purposeful, planned instruction to assist all diverse students as required for effective learning (American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education, 2010), the ultimate goal of all principal preparation programs and their graduates.

However, this study was conducted with leaders of predominately Hispanic schools in the South Texas region along the Texas-Mexico border, which may limit its transferability to schools with dissimilar demographics of students and faculty. With the increasing numbers of Hispanic students in the public school system, though, the results may still be applicable to many schools and districts throughout the U. S. In addition, the low response rate may have resulted in skewed results of the study, albeit the researchers felt the response sample was fairly representative of the educators of the region. The final segment of the paper follows and summarizes the study.

### **Summary**

To determine how to better prepare principals for effective leadership of special education programs, the researchers appealed to practicing principals for their assistance. The researchers identified three knowledge and skills areas to incorporate into principal preparation curriculum based on the results. The lowest level of knowledge was in designing curriculum for students with disabilities and the most frequent recommendation for inclusion in principal preparation was instruction in special education laws, *Section 504*, and RtI. The perfect response to this dilemma would be a course specifically designed as a Special Education Leadership course. However, such a course would take time to be accepted and implemented. Therefore, to address the findings the researchers suggest incorporating in-depth study of the provisions of *IDEA*, *Section 504*, and RtI into the School Law course, integrating Universal Design for Learning into a Curriculum and Instruction course, and incorporating Multicultural Education into a special populations course to address the needs of Hispanic students with disabilities. By adding purposeful content to the curriculum, program participant will have the opportunity to acquire essential knowledge and skills to implement and supervise an effective special education

program for the success of all students with disabilities, including Hispanic and English language learners with disabilities.

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