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Building-Level Administrators and Collaborative Special Education IEP Meetings: Addressing Barriers to Active and Inclusive Participation

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Building-Level Administrators and Collaborative Special Education IEP Meetings:
Addressing Barriers to Active and Inclusive Participation

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to identify the factors serving as barriers to effective building-level administrator participation in special education individualized education program (IEP) meetings. For the purposes of this study, research was conducted in the multidisciplinary areas of social cognitive theory and self-efficacy, along with an examination of school-building administrators as instructional leaders, the role(s) of building-level leadership in special education and building administrator knowledge and understanding of special education policies and practices. A qualitative research approach was used to examine local building-level administrator participation in the special education IEP process. Building Level Administrators, in the district were surveyed via Qualtrics and interviewed in a one-on-one format using Zoom.

The research questions used were:

1. What perceptions do building-level administrators' have of their role(s) in IEP meetings?
2. What potential obstacles impact building-level administrators' participation in special education IEP meetings?
3. What specific procedural and/or professional practices would improve building-level administrators' active and inclusive involvement in IEP meetings?

The data gathered from this research was used to discover common themes in barriers to building administrator participation in special education IEP meetings, so that recommendations could be made to help building administrators in this area.

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Dedication

First and foremost, this is all dedicated to my wife and best friend Amanda, along with our two children Miles and Amelia. Amanda, your words of encouragement and support during this entire process have been so appreciated. I couldn't have done it without you. While this experience has been extremely rewarding, it also requires sacrifice on the part of the whole family. Kids, thank you for being understanding and patient while dad has been working during this process. I hope that through this experience you are both gaining an understanding of what you can accomplish through hard work and perseverance. The sky is the limit. This is also dedicated to my parents Russ and Barb, along with my sister Alyson. Mom and Dad, thank you both for being examples of strong work ethic and for instilling in us the value of education. We wouldn't be where we are today, had it not been for your sacrifice and support through the years. Thank you for always being our biggest fans. I love you all.

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CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to identify the factors impacting building-level administrator participation and facilitation of special education IEP meetings. The belief is that active participation and focused engagement by building-level administrators in special education IEP meetings is inconsistent within the district and could be negatively impacting special education practices across the district. Harper (2018) explains, the majority of building level leaders do not receive adequate training or experience in the area of special education in their university classes and further details that IDEA itself is a substantially large document, leaving principals very little time to read and understand it. “Effective leadership depends upon acquired knowledge and understanding that a principal has for laws, policies, and regulations governing the system as well as a responsiveness that meets the needs of the entire organization” (Davidson & Algozzine, 2002, p. 47). Building level administrators have a powerful, significant impact on the effectiveness of any school district. According to Quinn (2002), “...higher levels of Active learning/Active teaching occur in schools where the principal serves as an instructional resource” (p. 461). Therefore, a lack of knowledge, minimal participation, or follow through with the IEP process by building administrators could be negatively impacting students who may be struggling.

This issue occurs among both novice and veteran administrators and could be argued is a nation-wide concern. As a special services coordinator, the researcher is an active participant in many team meetings across the district related to special education. Inconsistencies of active participation in meetings by administrators has been directly observed. Some administrators have also shared their own perceived deficiencies in their understanding of special education. There

have also been mishandled situations by the IEP teams, which would have led to parent complaints had they not been corrected immediately. It is also possible that if the building administrator present had a greater understanding of special education, those incidents could have been prevented altogether.

The expansive and diverse nature of building administrators means they are often presented with difficult situations that may be a distraction during IEP meetings. Distractions such as having to deal with misbehaviors by students, transportation concerns, field trips, parent meetings, and various other possibilities. Unfortunately, these distractions could also be a reason building administrators are unable to actively engage in IEP meetings at times.

Problem Statement

Inconsistent participation in special education IEP meetings by building administrators could be occurring for any numbers of reasons such as a shortage of special education knowledge or a misconceived sense of non-responsibility regarding IEP meetings. A low level of engagement could be negatively impacting the academic performance of student receiving special education services.

Focus on Instructional and/or Systemic Issues

This problem of practice could have a profound significance on instructional practices across the district. Research shows that building administrators' knowledge and leadership abilities can have an enormous impact, both positive or negative, on the schools and district in which they work. According to Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, and Ahlgrim-DeLzell (2006), "Principals do have a direct and indirect effect on student achievement through the setting of expectations, the establishment of school climate, and the demonstration of leadership to stakeholders" (pgs. 153-154). In IEP meetings, building administrators act on behalf of the

Local Education Agency (LEA). As the LEA, they are the leading authority during the meeting and can overrule team decisions to ensure compliance with IDEA and Section 504. As part of this authority, the LEA has the responsibility to ensure that students with special needs are receiving the academic and behavioral supports they need to be successful, including appropriate classroom placement and services. The belief is that there are barriers that could exist causing some building administrators to not be actively involved in all special education IEP meetings leading to very little input or guidance to the team in the writing or implementation of students' IEPs.

Building administrators are the change makers that impact effective instruction in their buildings through ongoing feedback with teachers to help them provide the appropriate teaching strategies to maximize student success. As a group, building level administrators can have an immense impact on the overall system of a school district. The school district is like one organism and each building has a different function and focus. Special education is a common part of each separate entity, so any changes to it may have far reaching effects on the overall system. In the 2017-2018 school year 79% of students with disabilities scored in the level 1 category on Kansas state assessments in English Language Arts compared to the state average of 63%. For the 2018-2019 school year in ELA, the district had 76% of students with disabilities score at Level 1, compared to the state average of 64%. In the area of math for the 2017-2018 school year, 75% of students with disabilities scored in the level 1 category, compared to the state average of 62%. For the 2018-2019 school year in Math, 77% students with disabilities scored at level 1, compared to the state average of 61%. Level 1 is the lowest category a student can score. According to the Kansas State Department of Education, Level 1 indicates that a student shows a limited ability to understand and use the knowledge needed for college and

career readiness (ksde.org). Also, on MAP testing in both ELA and Math, beginning in 5th grade, the majority of students with special needs are not meeting their projected growth goals, which would directly correlate with low state assessment scores that were previously discussed. In the recent court case of *Andrew F. vs the Douglas County School district*, the court determined that students with special needs should be making measurable progress. Failure of students receiving special education services in making progress, according to the courts, can now be considered a failure to provide FAPE (Sayeski, Bateman, & Yell, 2019). This of course could lead to litigation related to IDEA for school districts, if there is question as to whether FAPE is being appropriately provided and students are not progressing academically. Roberts & Guerra (2017) believe, “The school principal’s knowledge and skills are crucial to meeting the provisions of IDEA and the legalities of special education program implementation” (p. 4).

Is Directly Observable

A quick glance at the list of formal complaints that have been made to the state of Kansas regarding special education practices and services shows for the 2018-2019 school year alone there were 36 complaints or complaint appeal reviews. For the 2017-2018 school year there were 27 complaints or complaint appeal reviews, and in the 2016-2017 school year there were 15 complaints or complaint appeal reviews (ksde.org). The number of complaints, a majority of which had at least one or more of the issues in each case substantiated by investigators, provides a clear indication that there is a general lack of understanding in the areas of special education by school officials regarding what constitutes a free and appropriate public education and a student’s right to learn in their least restrictive environment. Had these cases not been handled through the complaint process, they could have easily moved on to actual court litigation.

“For School administrators, it is impossible to ignore the pressures and responsibilities of facilitating special education programs within their schools” (Pazey & Cole, 2013, p. 244). All complaints stem from lack of follow through regarding special education services, placement, goals, accommodations, modifications, etc. All of the decision making involving these issues happens during IEP meetings. The main person responsible for ensuring the fulfilment of the IEP is happening in a building is the building administrator who, as instructional leader, can follow up with team members on the services being implemented to ensure accountability. However, if there is a lack of leadership during the meeting or priority is not being given to the moment, it is likely that information could get missed and not followed through with.

As a district special services coordinator, the researcher interacts with administrators in all buildings. The researcher participates in IEP meetings throughout the district and reviews and discusses due process documents submitted to the special services office for state reporting. This allows for direct and indirect observation of knowledge gaps within buildings at the administrative level. The researcher also has access to all district wide academic data, which allows them to observe students’ growth trends. In the district, there is a limited amount of special education professional development in place specifically for building level administration. However, there are additional opportunities for outside professional development provided by the district, along with access to special services administrators who are available to meet with and advise building level administrators.

Is Actionable

The proposed research would provide data to support the creation or expansion of professional development to address the specific needs of building administrators in the district. The district follows a cohort model of teacher driven professional development. Professional

development is provided based off the needs of the cohort, and over the course of the school year professional learning cohorts focus on those specific areas of need. This is a strength of the district, and it may be possible for the special services department to lead a learning cohort geared towards school administrators, as well those who may be aspiring leaders in education. This cohort could discuss specific areas of need within our district and provide opportunities for open discussion, playing out situational scenarios in special education, and how to be an effective leader in special education, as well as remain compliant to special education law.

The data, obtained through this research, would provide insight into the disconnect between building administrator actions and the need for oversight of the special education program. Where barriers to building administrator involvement are identified, a professional development program could be created to address knowledge and skill deficits. The major goal would be that through the problem of practice, including the research and interventions, that student achievement across all sub-groups would improve. The data collected would be used to make immediate changes in practices, which would then be tracked to gain further insight into where the shortcomings may be. Ongoing research will be completed to accurately determine success or failure of the interventions that are tried. The specific training for administrators and aspiring leaders would be part of an overall professional development plan.

Connects to Broader Strategy of Improvement

The concerns raised by the problem of practice directly relate to the school district's philosophies listed below which are a guide to everything the school district does, including the five-year strategic plan:

District Mission

- Achieving success by expecting the best from everyone.

District Vision

- The school district will be recognized as a collective community that demonstrates continuous growth, expects excellence, and empowers every individual.

District Beliefs

- Student come first
- Require high expectations for all
- Nurture a safe and caring environment
- Understand, accept, and appreciate diversity
- Embrace change with persistence
- Recognize and celebrate achievement

In reviewing these philosophies and relating them to the problem statement, it is an expectation that each building administrator should be an active participant in IEP meetings, under the belief that students come first. Regardless of distractions, there should be a focus on students and what is most appropriate for them and their education. If there is a district requirement of high expectations for all, we also expect excellence from our building level administrators, related to being actively involved in IEP meetings. When such a large percentage of our students with special needs fail to make adequate educational growth and progress, that is a major concern. It is written in the district's beliefs that we will appreciate diversity. A failure to actively participate in IEP meetings is an encroachment on that belief and should change. IEP meetings are our chance to map out individualized learning for our students to close the learning gap as much as possible and get them on track to achieving success, which is part of the district's mission statement. Every unsuccessfully run, misinformed IEP meeting is a lost opportunity for our students who have the most needs to get the help they deserve and legally have the right to

receive. Every lost opportunity leads to students potentially falling further behind and making it more difficult to close the learning gap. This is why it is so important that we have building level administrators truly engaged and actively involved in the planning and decision making that takes place during IEP meetings.

Is High Leverage

The potential for a significant impact is high in that special education is an important part of the district. Creating consistency in knowledge, understanding, and expectations for building level administrators regarding special education could be very beneficial to the overall achievement of all students. “If principals are the key figures in providing appropriate support and education to teachers, they must receive preparation in appropriate instructional approaches for students with disabilities” (Lasky & Karge, 2006, p. 22). The desire is to help solve this problem of practice and help educational administrators make well informed decisions that ultimately lead to the most appropriate learning environments possible for special needs students, which will result in academic growth. It is anticipated that through this research student achievement across all subgroups will increase, due to a better understanding of the causes of the problem so that interventions can be put in place specifically for administrators and aspiring leaders. This problem of practice will be investigated by searching for answers to the following research questions:

1. What perceptions do building-level administrators’ have of their role(s) in IEP meetings?
2. What potential obstacles impact building-level administrators’ participation in special education IEP meetings?
3. What specific procedural and/or professional practices would improve building-level administrators’ active and inclusive involvement in IEP meetings?

Overview of Methodology

The process will be using a qualitative research approach. According to Creswell (2014), “Qualitative researchers collect data themselves through examining documents, observing behavior, or interviewing participants” (p. 185). Following this process, one-on-one interviews with building administrators, as well as anonymous surveys, were conducted in order to perform the research and collect data that was analyzed to determine trends, attitudes, and specific areas of need amongst participants.

For this study all surveys and interviews were completed electronically (Qualtrics and Zoom). All sixteen building level administrators at the elementary, middle school, and high school levels were asked to be part of this study, including those with the title of principal, assistant principal, and associate principal. These individuals consisted of five high school administrators, three middle school administrators, one sixth grade academy administrator, and six elementary administrators. Of these sixteen individuals, eight of them are lead principals and the remaining eight have the title of associate or assistant principal. One principal chose to not participate, so the total number of participants was 15 administrators. It is believed that through this process information came to light that can be used to make necessary improvements. While the researcher is entered into this research process with an open mind, as far as specific data relating to the current context, it is important to mention the researcher did believe there were barriers in place preventing building level administrators from fully engaging in the special education processes. In considering this assumption, the belief was that it is important to better understand building administrators’ perceptions of their roles in special education and, through the research, discover ways to overcome real or perceived obstacles.

Positionality

As a special services coordinator for the school district, the researcher is involved with every school and building administrator at all levels (PreK-12). Consistent communication with district personnel allows an understanding from a more systemic perspective. In this role, the researcher interacts with special education teachers at every level within the district. For the purposes of this research, the researcher took into consideration any biases that were held, being someone who is actively involved with each school, as well as with building administrators. It is important that the researcher did not let their own opinions, regarding personnel and programming, impact the data or distort the research. It was possible that any biases the researcher held affected the research results, so it is necessary that they understood these possible biases and found ways to ensure collected data and results were valid. Ultimately, the goal was to use the results to make positive change.

Researcher's Role

The researcher has been working in the district since 2015 as a special services coordinator, and prior to that, was a building-level administrator in a different school district. As a special services coordinator, the researcher is an active participant in multiple special education and IEP meetings throughout the school year in all buildings and at all levels. Due to participating in multiple meetings in multiple settings, the researcher gets the unique opportunity of being able to see the engagement and participation by building level administrators in the process. The researcher also serves as an advisor to building level administrators in special education matters, including placement and services of students, along with any personnel matters regarding special education staff members. The researcher has multiple degrees and experiences in the field of education, which includes a master's degree in building level

leadership, as well as special education. A specialist in education degree (Ed. S.) in district level leadership was obtained in 2018 and they are presently pursuing a doctorate in education degree at the University of Arkansas. The researcher also recently took and passed the district level licensure exam. The researcher relied heavily on qualitative research data collection through interviews and surveys with building level administrators (i.e., principals and assistant principals). The focus of the data collection was on barriers that prevent building administrators from actively leading and participating in special education IEP meetings.

Assumptions

As stated previously, it was important that the researcher was aware of the impact their assumptions or biases could have on the study. First, the assumptions were that every building administrator wants to understand and be an active participant in the special education process, so that they can be active leaders and participants in the process. If there was a lack of desire to improve in the area of special education, it could negatively impact any interventions that may be tried were an area of need identified. Second, the assumption was that all building level administrators were completely truthful and honest with their answers during the data collection process. If this assumption was incorrect, participants may not have been candid in their responses, due to the researchers position as a district administrator in the special services department. Administrators may have been unwilling to fully share any negative thoughts or feelings about special education processes or personnel. If this occurred, the data will not be an accurate reflection.

Definition of Key Terms

The following terms with definitions were used for the purposes of this study and in the context for which the data and information was observed and collected:

Individualized Education Program (IEP)-an education plan written for specific students to provide specialized instruction based off current present levels of academic and functional performance, according to guidelines set forth by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

Special Education-specialized instruction provided for students with a disability that also effects their ability to learn. The students' educational rights are protected under IDEA, as well as Section 504.

Building Administrator-a person currently serving in a certified role within the district with the title of principal, associate principal, or assistant principal. These persons serve as the leaders within their own individual buildings and must have obtained building level administrator licensures in accordance with state statutes and the Kansas State Department of Education.

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)-the educational setting most closely associated with the general classroom that also allows the student to adequately be provided an education with their same age peers.

Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)-the right of students with disabilities to receive educational services appropriate for them and at no cost.

Special Services Coordinator-a individual certified in building level leadership that oversees special education practices within a school district to help maintain compliance with special education law.

Special Education Process- refers to the process of evaluation and identification of students with special needs who require specialized instruction. Part of this process is that an IEP be written and reviewed annually, as well as that a re-evaluation be completed every three years.

Engagement-active participation in a meeting, event, or conversation by providing input, asking questions, and actively listening.

Organization of the Dissertation

This research proposal is divided into three separate chapters. The first chapter provides an introduction to the study, a statement of the problem of practice, research questions, as well as identifies the key terms and definitions. Chapter One also briefly reviews the researcher's positionality, role, and assumptions.

Chapter Two serves as a review of the literature directly related to the topic of study and focused in the areas of building administrator involvement in the IEP meeting, as well as special education processes. Additionally, the role building administrators play in special education, along with their impact on student performance and achievement, was explored.

Chapter Three focuses on the design of the study, as well as rationale and purposes behind the methods used to collect data for the purposes of better understanding the obstacles to building administrator involvement in the IEP process. The limitations and delimitations are also explored as part of Chapter Three.

CHAPTER TWO – LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to identify factors effecting building administrator active involvement in special education IEP meetings. For the purposes of researching this problem, Google Scholar, ProQuest, ERIC, EBSCO, along with other scholarly resources were utilized. The research was based on the knowledge and understanding that building administrators play an important role in the academic success of all students and that their leadership can have a direct impact on students. “Pre-eminent in the principal’s role as an instructional leader is the ability to motivate and inspire teachers with the end-goal impacting instructional practice and ultimately student achievement” (Quinn, 2002, p. 451). Building administrators are leaders in schools and can affect student achievement. Not only do they affect student learning in general education settings, but they can also have just as much of a direct impact on the academic success of students receiving special education services. This idea, coupled with the perceived problem of inconsistencies in building administrator’s involvement in IEP meetings, shaped the focus for this research.

In the investigation of the literature available, it became clear that there has been little research attention given to the possible impact of building level administrator leadership and active engagement in special education IEP meetings. According to Pazey & Cole (2013), “The amount of literature pertaining to special education and special education law within educational leadership is relatively sparse” (p. 247). However, the federal law (IDEA) clearly indicates that the IEP process should be both collaborative and inclusive. IDEA mandates that the IEP team should include at least one general education teacher, at least one special education teacher, the parents of the child a with a disability, and a representative of the local education agency (IDEA,

2004, 118 Statute). On the other hand, there is much research that discusses the importance of building level administrators as effective leaders and the impact they can have on teachers, students, and the school. Therefore, the research for the purpose of this study was focused on what effective building level administrator leadership should look like and the impact it has on the success of all students, particularly with special needs. “Furthermore, effective administrators seek to enhance the public’s trust and confidence in the profession of special education...” (Fiedler & Van Haren, 2009, p. 171). The hope is that the research and ideas provide insights into what successful leadership looks like, so that it could then be translated into building level administrator leadership in IEP meetings and special education in general. To better understand the problem of practice, the following topics were reviewed and explored, as they were often reoccurring themes within the literature: social-cognitive theory, self-efficacy, building level administrators as instructional leaders, leadership in special education, and building administrator knowledge and understanding of special education.

This problem of practice was investigated by searching for answers to the following questions:

1. What perceptions do building-level administrators’ have of their role(s) in IEP meetings?
2. What potential obstacles impact building-level administrators’ participation in special education IEP meetings?
3. What specific procedural and/or professional practices would improve building-level administrators’ active and inclusive involvement in IEP meetings?

Social Cognitive Theory

For the purposes of this study, social cognitive theory was an area of the literature reviewed to understand obstacles that prevent building administrators from being actively involved in IEP meetings. As Cook and Artino (2016) describe:

Social-Cognitive theory is most generally a theory of learning. It contends that people learn through reciprocal interactions with their environment and by observing others, rather than simply through direct reinforcement of behaviours (as proposed by behaviourist theories of learning). As regards motivation, the theory emphasizes that humans are not thoughtless actors responding involuntarily to rewards and punishments, but that cognition governs how individuals interpret their environment and self-regulate their thoughts, feelings and actions (p.1005).

In other words, behaviors are learned as individuals become aware of and better understand the results of their own actions and the actions of others. As this idea relates to building administrator engagement in special education, it is possible that building administrators' experiences have affected their willingness to actively engage in IEP meetings.

In referencing self-reflectiveness as it relates to social cognitive theory Bandura (2001) explains that, "...through reflective, self-consciousness, people evaluate their motivation, values, and the meaning of their life pursuits. It is at this higher level of self-reflectiveness that individuals address conflicts in motivational inducements and choose to act in favor of one over another" (p. 10). During the process of self-reflection, people determine how they should behave in a given situation based on how their actions will affect them in their current and future situations. This could affect the way a building administrator chooses to behave within IEP meetings, both positively or negatively, and in the process affect the implementation of the IEP itself which would directly impact the student. If building administrators are struggling with their own competency and confidence levels in effective special education professional practices, they may even avoid participating in the conversations at all.

According to Bussey in reference to Social-Cognitive theory (2015), "...different individuals who experience the same environment may develop different judgmental aspects of the self-regulatory processes depending on their experiences and how these experiences are synthesized" (p. 940). As a result, most people's responses to experiences are highly individualized. In relating this idea to building-level administrators' interactions in IEP meetings, it may possibly help explain why building administrators react in such a myriad of different ways. While some building-level administrators appear to be active participants, others seem to be disengaged. In many instances, individuals who have received identical or similar professional development training in a specific area of special education react and adapt differently. What people think about themselves and their abilities matter. Their own self-perceptions are their reality.

Self-Efficacy

Bandura (2012) states:

People's beliefs in their efficacy influence whether they think pessimistically or optimistically, in self-enabling or self-debilitating ways. Self-efficacy beliefs influence how well people motivate themselves and persevere in the face of difficulties through goals they set for themselves, their outcome expectations, and casual attributions for their success and failures (p. 13).

As this statement relates to building administrators and IEP meetings, building administrators' self-efficacy could determine whether, and to what level, they choose to participate in the IEP process. If they perceive themselves as knowledgeable and have something to contribute, they may be willing to be actively involved. However, if they doubt their knowledge and abilities, that may decrease their motivation to be actively involved and they may disengage from the conversations and decision-making. "If educators' realities are filtered through the belief that they can do very little to influence student achievement, then it is very

likely these beliefs will be manifested in their practice” (Donohoo, 2017, p. 7). Building administrators might even choose to simply avoid the meeting altogether, for fear of failure. Lack of self-efficacy of a building administrator would lend itself to diminished confidence and hesitation to freely engage in the process.

“Individuals high in self-efficacy imagine success scenarios, anticipate potential outcomes of diverse strategies, and take the initiative to try and adopt a new behavior. Those with less self-efficacy, on the other hand, imagine failure scenarios, harbor self-doubts, and procrastinate” (Schwartz & Renner, 2000, p. 488). That is to say, our mindset effects our reactions to situations. For example, if a person thinks that something negative is going to happen, they may try to avoid that situation out of fear of failure or negative repercussions. Conversely, if a person’s thoughts are positive, they may be more likely to actively engage in a situation, since they are comfortable in their abilities and feel confident that the outcomes will be positive. These ideas directly relate to building administrator involvement in IEP meetings. Confidence in special education knowledge and experiences or the lack of it, may directly affect building administrators’ decisions to actively engage in IEP meetings.

Versland & Erickson (2017):

Principals self-efficacy describes a set of beliefs that enable a principal to enact policies and procedures that promote the effectiveness of a school. Principals self-efficacy beliefs are also important because they guide the leader’s actions and behaviors that affect expectations for students as well as teachers’ motivation and school improvement processes (p. 1).

This statement reinforces what other sources have said about the impact of self-efficacy on building administrators’ actions (Bandura 2001; Bandura, 2012; Bussey, 2015; Donohoo, 2017; Schwartz & Renner, 2000). However, it takes the concept a step further and relates it to how building administrator self-efficacy also affects students, teachers, and schools as a whole,

which is also referred to as collective self-efficacy. In other words, a building administrator's self-efficacy does not only affect the way he or she makes decisions. It also has additional consequences which occur because of those decisions. According to McCormick (2001), "Through his or her behaviors, the individual in the leadership role actively attempts to influence the processes of the task-performing group and the larger social context in which the group must function (i.e., a company, a school, a community) in order to facilitate group success" (p. 28). This shows a strong connection between a leader's self-assurance and confidence as a leader, which also effects the way individuals within the organization feel and behave. The way building administrators might interact with teachers and students and the expectations they put in place, based on their self-efficacy, will positively or negatively impact teachers, students, and the school. Since we know the self-assurance and actions of people in leadership positions affects the way others feel and behave, building administrators' engagement in IEP meetings will affect the thoughts and decisions of teachers, parents, and students in the meeting. These decisions will have a lasting impact on the overall IEP and implementation. Thus, it is very important that building administrators actively engage and help others understand the importance of the meeting and establish the expectations that there is team accountability to the student's plan. According to Anderson & Decker (1993), "One of the major reasons for the principal to conduct evaluation or IEP meetings is to ensure that an appropriate affective climate is created and maintained. A cooperative and positive atmosphere can enhance the decisions and recommendations made concerning the pupil's program" (pgs. 4-5).

Building-Level Administrators as Instructional Leaders

Gülcan (2012) provides five different roles a building administrator must fill to be a successful instructional leader: identify the mission and vision, program and administer

education, staff development, monitor and assess the teaching process, and create and develop a positive school climate. Blase & Blase (2000) explain that their research shows there are two key areas that promote positive instructional leadership. The first is talking to teachers, which includes making suggestions, giving feedback, modeling, using inquiry and soliciting advice and opinions, and giving praise. The second key area, according to Blase & Blase, is promoting professional growth, which includes emphasizing the study of teaching and learning; supporting collaboration efforts among educators; encouraging and supporting redesign of programs; applying the principles of adult learning, growth, and development to all phases of staff development; and implementing action research to inform instructional decision making.

According to Shaked (2018), “Principals who act as instructional leaders are intensely involved in curricular and instructional issues that directly affect student achievement” (p. 520). Shaked goes on to explain that, “The effect of instructional leadership on student outcomes was found to be three to four time as great as that of transformational leadership” (p. 520). However, Shaked explains that even though there is an understanding that instructional leadership is invaluable, there is a still a disparity amongst building administrators in the area of instructional leadership.

Thompson (2017) explains, “Student achievement inclusive of ALL students is going to be necessary for a school to achieve and for the principal to be considered an effective leader” (p. 35). Thompson further explains, “Leaders having knowledge and experience in special education may be helpful; however, being an excellent school leader may supersede this specific knowledge on special education” (p. 37). In other words, we know that the instructional leadership of building administrators is highly impactful on the academic achievement of all students. However, it appears that not all building administrators are consistent in this area.

Grissom, Loeb, & Master's (2013) research shows that 12.7% of building administrators' time was spent in the area of instructional leadership activities. The research of Horng, Klasik, & Loeb (2010) indicates, "About 40 percent of principals' time was spent away from the school office in locations around campus including hallways, playgrounds, and classrooms" (p. 9). In conjunction, Horng et al go on to say that, overall, building administrators only spend approximately 8% of their time in classrooms. The research of May & Supovitz (2011), shows that "Principals in this study spent an average of 8% of their instructional time on instructional leadership activities" (p. 344). May & Supovitz go on to explain that in their study, over a two-year period, building administrators on average only spent 3 to 5 hours per week on activities concerned with instructional leadership. In knowing that instructional leadership is such an important aspect of building administrators' role, the research reviewed indicates a small portion of school leaders' time is being devoted to it.

Impact(s) of Building-Level Leadership in Special Education

According to Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is clear concerning the composition of the IEP team. "A representative of the local educational agency who is qualified to provide, or supervise the provision of, specially designed instruction to meet the unique needs of children with disabilities; is knowledgeable about the general education curriculum; and is knowledgeable about the availability of resources of the local educational agency" (IDEA, 2004, 118 Statute 2709-2710), is a required participant in each IEP meeting. The local educational agency is regularly referred to as the local educational agency (LEA) and is the position most often filled by a principal, assistant principal, or special education administrator associated with the student whose IEP is being reviewed (Bateman & Bateman, 2014).

It is essential to understand the importance of the LEA's purpose in meetings. As the LEA, building administrators need to be knowledgeable of the IEP, including the services that are being recommended such as transportation, counseling, accommodations, modifications, etc. It is then the responsibility of the building administrator to keep the IEP team accountable to those services by monitoring its implementation (Bateman & Bateman, 2014). According to Samuels (2018), "Principals who effectively manage special education in their schools have to be one part lawyer, one part counselor—and a little bit fearless" (para.1). If there is a failure to understanding the IEP, including the allocated resources and responsibilities agreed upon by the IEP team, it would be challenging for a building administrator to ensure accountability by the school staff and district. A misstep in implementing the IEP correctly, would violate a student's right to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE), put the district at risk for state complaints and litigation, as well as have a negative impact on the student's academic and behavioral progress. Bateman & Cline (2019) explain, "The LEA Representative is responsible for ensuring – at a local level– that the district is compliant with the procedural and substantive requirements of the IDEA, and that students are receiving FAPE" (p. 26). Therefore, active, focused involvement in IEP meetings on the part of building administrators is imperative. Bertrand, Roberts, & Dalton (2009) explain that building administrators should be familiar with students receiving special education, as well as with their IEP's and services. The authors propose that building administrators are responsible to manage the implementation of the document across all settings.

Lentz (2012) states, "Each IEP team needs a transformational leader who is committed to a belief in individual student achievement. A leader is one who sees the IEP team meeting as a specific and ongoing planning meeting—one in which participants are prepared, the team knows

what its job is, the members are equally engaged, and the end of the meeting is really the beginning of actions agreed upon by the entire IEP team”(p. 20). The point being leadership in IEP meetings matters. The action that occurs after the meeting is of equal importance. The IEP meeting is simply the discussion and planning phase for putting the ideas into action to assure students receive FAPE in the LRE.

In referencing Senge (1990), Lentz (2012) explains that there are three main characteristics comprising a transformational leader. They need to be designers, teachers, and servants. In a leadership style encompassing these characteristics, the leader appreciates the importance and input of all team members, while at the same time keeps the focus student-centered. Because of this leadership, it is not just about getting the IEP completed. Rather, the IEP is an ongoing process that effectively meets the student’s needs. Crockett, Billingsly, & Boscardin (2018) states that, “School leaders are held accountable for student learning, so it is important to consider how to provide leadership that will improve student outcomes for all students, including students with disabilities” (p. 5).

DiPaola et al (2004) explains that, building administrator leadership affects the attitudes of teachers, as well as the teaching practices they are using for students with special needs. The overall culture and climate of a building is heavily influenced by how a building administrator interacts and shows supports for teachers and directly relates to teachers’ belief in their own abilities to positively impact their students’ academics. This same attitude also translates into the area of teachers using practices based in good research. Building administrators who are supportive of their staff working with students with special needs, have high expectations, and put in place constant professional development for teachers will often see improvements for their students with special needs. In addition, it is vital that building administrators stay abreast of

current research-based practices for students with special needs, as well as have a well-rounded understanding of students with disabilities and the requirements under IDEA. This information indicates that building administrators must make conscious decisions to be proactive in their work to positively impact students with special needs. Building administrators should work to maintain high expectations for teachers, while at the same time providing appropriate and continuing professional development. This idea also translates into the IEP meetings as well. Building administrators expectations for the meetings, as well as implementation of the plan using research-based practices, will have an impact on the academic achievement of students. On the other hand, failure to provide teacher expectations or to make sure research-based practices are being used could have an adverse effect on the academic achievement of students with special needs. According to Rubin (2017), “The district’s professionals on the IEP team are expected to have expertise in their particular fields by virtue of their professional education, state certification and hands on experience” (p. 228).

Patterson et al (2000) echoed the importance of building administrator involvement in special education practices stating that, “Special education program development often hinged on the role, support, interest, and expertise of the principal, which varied considerably from school to school. Special education teachers invariably expressed that the support of the principal was crucial to their efforts” (pgs. 15-6). This reinforces previous research that building administrator involvement in special education practices and implementation is crucial to the success of teachers and ultimately the success of students with special needs. The special education process begins with the IEP meeting, which steers the entire student plan for goals, services, and placement. Thus, active building administrator engagement in the IEP meetings is imperative to

successful special education practices, so that students in need receive the services they require in the most appropriate setting for their specific needs.

Building Administrator Knowledge and Understanding of Special Education

According to Diliberto and Brewer (2014), “Communication and planning are the driving forces behind successful IEP meetings. Communication is the foundation which provides a basis for building a successful and effectively implemented IEP” (p. 129). Building-level administrators should be advocates for students with special needs and must have the specific knowledge and skills to be able to help get students their appropriate placement and services (Roberts & Guerra, 2017). Part of being a school leader is understanding the building administrator’s responsibility overseeing the organization and structure of the IEP meeting. While the building administrator may not be the case manager leading the team through the IEP, the building administrator facilitates and establishes expectations concerning how meetings should be run. Communication between team members, including the parents and student, is vital to a successful meeting and, ultimately, a successfully implemented IEP. It takes planning with a specific purpose and timeline in mind to successfully navigate special education guidelines. This includes communicating with related service providers, transportation staff, medical personnel, teaching staff, etc. Frost & Kersten (2011) expound:

It is the role of the school principal to be the instructional leader to both general and special education teachers. Research indicates that although principals are not necessarily prepared to be the instructional leader to special education teachers, in the wake of legislation and school reform, it is critical that they assume the responsibility to ensure program effectiveness and student achievement” (p. 6).

Inclusion is another important factor that should be considered during IEP meetings and building administrators need to be knowledgeable of the laws and, “That, to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other

care facilities, are to be educated with children who are nondisabled” (Bateman & Bateman, 2014, p. 79). Children should be with their general education peers as much as is appropriately possible for each individual student, and research shows that it benefits both those with and those without disabilities (Bateman & Bateman, 2002). Under the leadership and direction of the LEA, the IEP should be built around this premise and then implemented appropriately, as the team maintains accountability. “An effective principal in the area of special education understands issues surrounding access to the general education curriculum” (Duncan, 2010, p. 26).

Unfortunately, many building administrators are not prepared for their role as a leader in special education and are lacking the basic knowledge and understanding of IDEA and special education law, including best practices for facilitating a successful IEP team meeting. According to Frick et al (2013), “The omission or marginalization of special education–focused coursework in administrator preparation programs has far-reaching implications for school leaders” (p. 210).

They continue:

Failure to provide adequate pre-service and ongoing professional development in the education and inclusion of students with disabilities, within the general education environment, has the potential to detrimentally affect principals’ ability to effectively lead special education programs and services and thus work in the best interest of students with special educational needs (p. 211).

The literature explicitly supports the idea that a lack of preparation or training for building administrators in the area of special education can potentially have adverse effects on students with special needs (Frost & Kersten, 2011; McHatton, Boyer, Shaunessy, Terry, & Farmer 2010; Patterson et al, 2000; Rubin, 2017; Zaretsky, Moreau, & Faircloth, 2008).

According to a study completed by Eberwein (2008), “The results from this study confirm the premise that school law knowledge among secondary school principals is unacceptably low” (p. 183). Eberwein (2008) goes on to explain that in his study, composed of

492 secondary principals, they scored only 58.71% of the 34 true and false questions correctly. These questions were focused on “student rights and teacher liability and rights” (p. 183). Furthermore, the study shows that a majority of the survey participants, when asked about their training in school law, believe it has been effective. However, the data shows their knowledge is lacking and that a large percentage of them shared that they had not participated in any ongoing professional development related to school law, since becoming administrators. (Eberwein, 2008). “The principal is disabled by the lack of systemic on-going training and support programs, hard-to-find resources, and limited time” (Eberwein, 2008, p. 190). An additional research study related to principals’ knowledge of school law was conducted. The results of the study showed that less experienced administrators who had received their school law training three to four years prior averaged 52.32% correct answers on a 76 true/false survey related to school law, compared to an average score of 68.84% by more experienced administrators who had received their law training 10 or more years before (Smith, 2010). “One might conclude that the higher scores earned by principals who received their school law training 10 or more years before the study was actually an effect of administrative experience, rather than the number of years since they were trained” (Smith, 2010, p. 149). Zaretsky et al (2008) makes clear that:

In order for school leaders to facilitate the development and maintenance of inclusive educational environments, and the provision of educational and other supporting services for all students, including those with disabilities and other special education needs, they must be adequately trained to assume leadership for special education programs, services, and personnel (p. 162).

This can be challenging, given the tasks that many building administrators are asked to perform. Building administrators need expertise in multiple areas of academics, behavioral management, finance, social emotional needs, ethnic diversity, interpreting data, and so on, while at the same time be able to effectively manage people and keep a building operating successfully. That is a

difficult task and can prove challenging, if they are not adequately prepared to take on the role.

Christensen et al (2013) details:

It is clear that school leaders must be equipped with an in-depth, specialized knowledge of students with special education needs or the twin specters of assessment based accountability and mandated inclusive practice may not produce desirable results for the most important component of the equation—the students (p. 96).

McHatton et al (2010) explain, leadership programs have failed to keep pace with the changes and needs within the areas of special education. The leadership programs have become so heavily based in theory that they have lost touch with the reality of the daily tasks and demands associated with the role a building administrator has within a school. McHatton et al go on to explain that building administrators' roles have changed over the years having moved away from management focus to instructional leadership. They are expected to be experts in all facets of the job; special education is one of the facets. Inclusion of students with special needs in the general education setting has become more important and many building administrators are not equipped with the knowledge or practice to successfully lead in that area. There needs to be a more distinct connection between theory and practice as it relates to special education implementation and practices. "Principals are faced with new demands, more complex decisions and additional responsibilities than ever before" (Mestry, 2017, p. 258).

To combat the lack of perceived knowledge in building administrators, Cusson (2010, pgs. 130-134) explains that administrators should receive specific training in the areas of: relationship building and communication, leadership and vision, budget and capital, laws and policies, curriculum and instruction, personnel, evaluation of data, programs, students, and teachers, collaboration and consultation, special education programming, organization, professional development, and advocacy. In regard to this specific study, the areas of Special Education Programming, Leadership and Vision, and Laws and Policies are of particular interest.

Hallinger (2005) says, “There is no question that through more explicit socialization into this role principals increasingly see themselves as accountable for instructional leadership, regardless of whether or not they feel competent to perform it” (p. 237).

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework will be built around the central problem of practice, which is, to identify the barriers to active building administrator involvement in the special education IEP process. This study will be guided by relating the areas of social-cognitive theory and self-efficacy theory and how they relate to and affect building administrators’ understanding and involvement in special education practices, specifically in relation to IEP meetings. Based off the literature reviewed, the self-efficacy of building administrators plays a very strong role in their decision making, including how they choose to engage or not engage in any given situation. When this idea is related directly to engagement in IEP meetings, in particular, we can assume that these same principles also guide building administrators in how they interact during an IEP meeting. In other words, building administrators’ past experiences regarding special education, along with their confidence level of their own knowledge, experiences, and ability to lead in the area of special education will all have an enormous impact on their willingness and ability to actively engage in IEP meetings. By the same token, we can assume that a negative self-efficacy would negatively impact their willingness to actively engage in IEP meetings, based off the principles of social cognitive theory. The conceptual framework will be built around these theories and research findings to better understand what barriers may be preventing building administrators from actively engaging in IEP meetings, as well as why some building administrators appear to be more involved than others and actively engaged in IEP meetings.

The literature reviewed has shown that building administrators have a very profound and far-reaching effect on the schools in which they work. This impact can be for good or bad, depending on the actions of the building administrator. The research shows that the actions of individuals, both positive and negative, directly relates back to their confidence and comfort levels. Confidence and comfort levels, in large part, are affected by people’s thoughts based off their experiences. A large portion of building administrators do not have experience in special education both in their college level coursework or in their professional experiences (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). A lack of knowledge and experience by building-level administrators could be negatively impacting the academic achievement of those students with special needs, since “the strength of the relationship between leadership and classroom experiences is associated with student achievement” (Ostemeyer, 2012, p. 14).

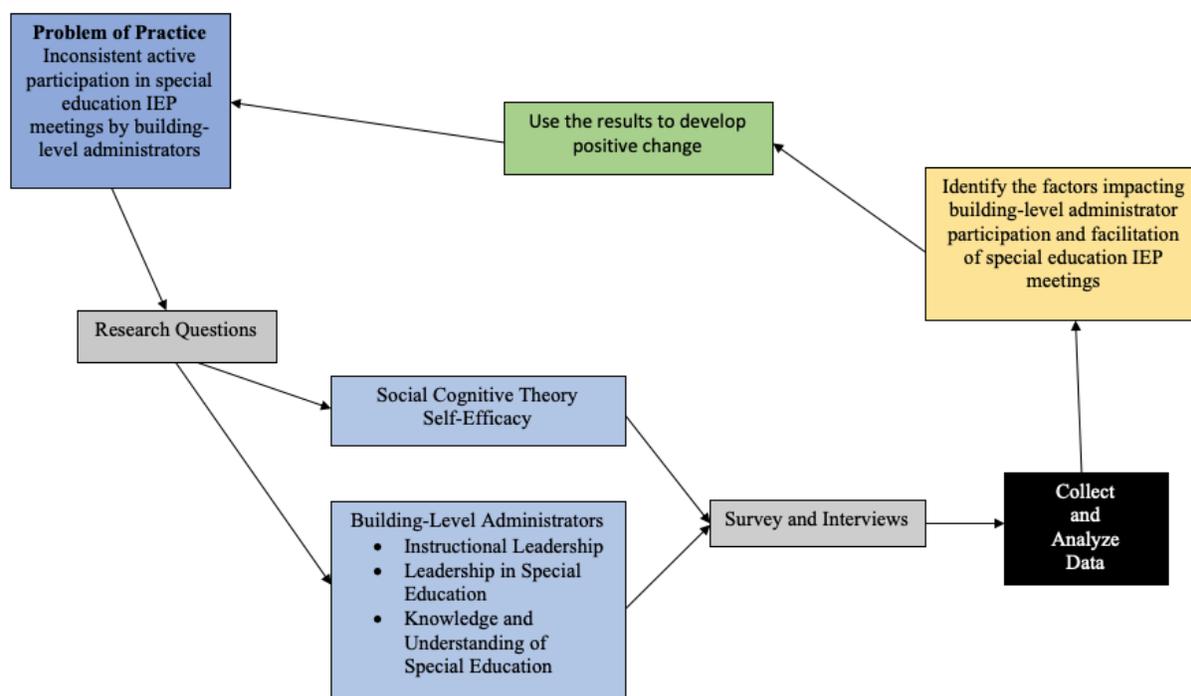


Figure 2.1

Chapter Summary

For the purposes of this study a thorough, in-depth review of the literature was conducted to gain a better understanding of the problem of practice. The concepts that developed from this extensive research were social-cognitive theory, self-efficacy theory, as well as building administrators as instructional leaders, building administrator leadership in special education and building administrator knowledge and understanding of special education. The theories and concepts coupled together helped shape the conceptual framework that guided this study to gain an understanding of the barriers that may be preventing building administrators from actively engaging in IEP meetings, as well as how their thoughts and beliefs also shape the way they make decisions regarding special education including how they interact with other team members.

Chapter 3 describes the methodology that was used for this study to fully answer the research questions and better understand what barriers there are, so that positive change can take place. The research conducted was based in qualitative data collection practices through the use of surveys, as well as individual one-on-one in interviews. The purpose of the surveys and interviews were to better understand what barriers there are for building administrators to actively engage in IEP meetings, as well how they perceive their role as a building administrator should be in the IEP process. It is the belief that through the findings of this study it provides insight into building administrators' perceptions of their roles in IEP meeting, as well as what is preventing them from being active participants.

CHAPTER THREE – METHODOLOGY

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to determine what possible obstacles are preventing building level administrators from fully engaging in the special education IEP process. For the purposes of this study, the researcher used a qualitative research method and approach to collect and analyze data, which encompassed interviews of individuals, along with surveys. To better understand what possible obstacles are preventing building level administrators from fully engaging in the special education IEP process, survey and interview questions were developed to gather data focused upon details, regarding the following three research questions:

1. What perceptions do building-level administrators' have of their role(s) in IEP meetings?
2. What potential obstacles impact building-level administrators' participation in special education IEP meetings?
3. What specific procedural and/or professional practices would improve building-level administrators' active and inclusive involvement in IEP meetings?

The steps and processes that were used to gather the needed data, along with the specifics about the participants, are described in the below sections. Anonymity was used to preserve the individual contributor's privacy.

Rationale

A qualitative research approach was used. Through this process, interviews and surveys were conducted in order to perform the research and collect data that was analyzed to determine trends or specific areas of need. Kolb (2012) believes, "The process of interviewing during a qualitative study allows the researcher the opportunity to gain the perspectives of other individual" (p. 84). A qualitative research approach allows for numerous opportunities to review

and analyze the data collected at multiple levels, such as by individual or larger groups, as well as incorporates interviews and observations using purposeful documentation methods (Creswell & Creswell, 2017; Kolb, 2012, Bickman & Rog, 2008).

It is the hope that through this research information has come to light that can be used to make necessary improvements. In considering this assumption, it is extremely important to better understand principals' perceptions of their roles in special education, and through the research discover ways to overcome and break down any real or perceived obstacles, thus these being a specific area of focus of the research questions.

Problem Setting/Context

The researcher currently works in a large urban school district as a special services coordinator. As part of this role, they get the unique experience of being in every building in the district, which includes one high school, an alternative high school, a middle school, a sixth-grade academy, as well as four elementary buildings. The researcher also has the opportunity to participate in many different special education meetings, which includes all building administrators in some capacity. Within the last 5 years, there have been multiple administrative changes, whether that be brand new administrators taking on leadership role, experienced leaders coming into the district, or administrators changing leadership roles within the district. In fact, in the researcher's first year of work in the district there was a large turn over in administration. As a new superintendent took the reins, many building administrators were new as well.

“Effective leadership depends upon acquired knowledge and understanding that a principal has for laws, policies, and regulations governing the system as well as a responsiveness that meets the needs of the entire organization” (Davidson & Algozzine, 2002, p. 47). With all the changes that have taken place, and also taking into account the large number of new

administrators with varying ranges of experience over the last few years, it is easy to see how this could all possibly play a role in the problem of practice. The interview questions that were used dove deeper into some of these areas and brought out some more specific thoughts, experiences, and perceptions of building administrators involved, to gain a fuller understanding of what may be causing a lack of involvement and leadership in special education by building administrators.

Research Sample and Data Sources

For the purposes of this study, the researcher collected interview and survey data from all building level administrators at all levels K-12, including head principals and assistant principals. The purpose of choosing this specific group of individuals is to better understand what is causing a perceived reluctance on the part of building level administrators to actively participate in the special education processes. One concern was that potentially participants may be unwilling to provide completely open and honest answers. Since, the researcher is an administrator within the special services department and works directly with other special services staff, participants in the study may not have wanted to share thoughts or opinions that could be perceived as negative regarding the special services department or individuals within the department. For this reason, it was extremely important that positive rapport with the research participants was quickly established to help promote open, honest dialogue, so that the data gathered was as accurate and reliable as possible. To maintain anonymity of the participants their names, specific positions, and settings were not shared, regarding the individual interviews. Also, all surveys conducted were completed anonymously.

Data Collection Methods

Through the use of both surveys and interview questions, perception data was collected from head building principals, along with assistant or associate principals. No distinguishable information was shared, resulting from the data collected, that would allow for anyone to be identified. Therefore, participants were able to be involved in the study without any fear or anxiety of personal information, including their shared thoughts or opinions, from being connected to them. For the survey, please refer to Appendix A for the questions that were used. For the interview protocol that was used, please refer to Appendix B. Questions in the survey were used to provide basic demographic data such as what their specific roles are in the district, how many years that have been in their current role, and what prior experience if any they have had. The survey also includes questions based in the literature involving social cognitive theory and self-efficacy and how that may or may not impact their leadership in the area of special education, as it related specifically to IEP meetings. Some questions were also focused to help expose possible obstacles to active involvement by them in IEP meetings. The interview questions, much more so, focused in the area of trying to learn more about barriers to principals' active involvement in IEP meetings and also includes questions regarding their perceptions. The survey was disseminated using Qualtrics, and the interviews were completed next in a one-on-one setting via Zoom with each principal or assistant/associate principal.

Data Analysis Methods

To analyze the data collected, the method referred to as coding was used. As Seidman (2013) explains, the researcher will need to read through the interviewee responses from both the survey and interviews to look for patterns in the data. As information came to light through multiple readings of the data, the researcher labeled and categorized the data to gain an

understanding of what the information showed. Through this exploration of the data, possible answers to the research questions were developed. Saldana (2016), refers to this process as first cycle coding and second cycle coding methods. According to Saldana (2016), “Rarely will anyone get coding right the first time. Qualitative inquiry demands meticulous attention to language and images, and deep reflection on the emergent patterns and meanings of human experience” (p. 11). It will likely take multiple codings of the data, to expose the patterns and effectively answer the research questions.

Trustworthiness and the Identification of Ethical Issues and Safeguards

According to Ravitch and Carl (2016, p. 187), “the concept of developing valid and trustworthy studies is paramount in qualitative research”. In order to maintain validity and trustworthiness it is important to fully understand any possible issues and put in place, if possible, safeguards to protect the study. For this study, a possible issue to consider that may cause potential problems would be a disunity of questioning during the surveys and interviews that will take place, meaning there is potential for the data to be skewed if different questions were asked to different participants. To counteract this potential problem and maintain uniformity of purpose, identical questions for both the interview portion and survey, will be used for each participant. This will allow for homogeneity and consistency throughout the data collection, as well as provide additional validity to the data that is collected, since all participants will be provided the same opportunities to answer without any kind of steering of responses. All answers from participants were compared to the exact same questions in the survey. Regarding one-on-one interview questions, the initial questions to the participant were identical as well. However, based off their responses in order to gather additional information or clarification, the

interviewer had available additional questions as needed, without leading the participant to a specific answer or response.

Another potential problematic area was that participants could be unwilling to provide completely accurate responses due to the sensitive topics that were discussed. There was a potential for answers obtaining negative responses about specific departments, people, and so on. Individuals may not have wanted to be completely honest in their responses for fear of their replies being used against them in a retaliatory method or effective others' perceptions of them. In addition, the researcher serves as a special services coordinator in the district, which could have caused participants to feel uneasy in giving accurate responses for fear that their answers may not remain anonymous. To minimize this possible perception and provide confidence to the participant, a confidentiality agreement was reviewed and agreed upon guaranteeing that their responses would remain completely anonymous. In addition, completion of the individual interviews took place virtually via Zoom, which also assisted in maintaining anonymity and privacy. It was also of utmost importance that a positive relationship with the participants was built and maintained, regardless of personal opinions regarding information or perspectives shared.

Limitations and Delimitations

A limitation of this study is that the number of participants was initially limited to 16 building level leaders within the district, which means the sample size is quite small. After one administrator chose not to participate, the total number of participants ended up being 15. Also, the fact that the study only took place in the context of the district, could allow for potential biases or perceptions that may not be present otherwise. Every district has its own unique culture and climate, which may not always be a reflection of a problem that may exist across

multiple organizations. The participant numbers are a low amount, which could easily skew the data if there are any outliers within the data. As part of this study, only building administrators participated and did not include teachers or district administrators input, regarding the possible barriers to building administrators participation in the special education IEP process. Omitting all those who are not building level administrators from the study was a purposeful decision, believing that providing other input may taint the data and not provide information specifically from the building administrators' contexts and perceptions. While the opinions and input of teachers and district administration could be useful, the purposes of this study were to focus solely on the perspectives of the building principals regarding their roles in special education IEP meetings.

Summary

The study collected data using the qualitative methods of surveys and interviews. All surveys and interviews were conducted electronically (Qualtrics and Zoom). First Cycle and Second Cycle coding methods patterns for coding the data were used to fully understand the data to help effectively answer the research questions by exploring the areas of social cognitive theory, self-efficacy, principal leadership in special education, and principal knowledge and understanding of special education. These areas discussed extensively in the literature were used to help better understand principals' perceptions of their role in IEP meetings, as well as what possible obstacles may be in place that could be preventing principals from fully and actively participating in IEP meetings.

CHAPTER FOUR – RESULTS AND FINDINGS

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to determine what possible obstacles are preventing building level administrators from fully engaging in the special education IEP process. For the purposes of this study and using a qualitative research approach, survey and interview questions were specifically selected to assist in identifying possible obstacles. Fifteen out of a total of 16 possible participants took part in this study. Participants consisted of all building level administrators at the elementary, middle school, and high school levels. These individuals hold the titles of head principal, assistant principal, and associate principal. The individuals who participated consisted of five high school administrators, three middle school administrators, one sixth grade academy administrator, and six elementary administrators. Refer to Table 4.1 for participant demographics. One administrator at the elementary level chose not to participate. Surveys were conducted anonymously using Qualtrics, and the interviews were conducted using a one-on-one format via Zoom. This research was conducted for the purposes of answering the following research questions:

1. What perceptions do building-level administrators' have of their role(s) in IEP meetings?
2. What potential obstacles impact building-level administrators' participation in special education IEP meetings?
3. What specific procedural and/or professional practices would improve building-level administrators' active and inclusive involvement in IEP meetings?

What follows are the results, findings, and analysis of both the survey and interview questions. Included is a description of the participants answers, along with a summation of the results, all being tied back to the research questions.

Table 4.1
Demographics of Participants

Participant	Level	Years in Current Role	Total Years in a certified position
P1	Secondary (6-12)	3-5	10 or more
P2	Elementary (PK-5)	6-9	10 or more
P3	Secondary (6-12)	3-5	10 or more
P4	Secondary (6-12)	10 or more	10 or more
P5	Elementary (PK-5)	3-5	10 or more
P6	Secondary (6-12)	3-5	3-5
P7	Secondary (6-12)	3-5	6-9
P8	Elementary (PK-5)	1-2	10 or more
P9	Elementary (PK-5)	3-5	10 or more
P10	Secondary (6-12)	3-5	10 or more
P11	Secondary (6-12)	6-9	10 or more
P12	Elementary (PK-5)	3-5	10 or more
P13	Secondary (6-12)	1-2	10 or more
P14	Secondary (6-12)	3-5	10 or more
P15	Elementary (PK-5)	1-2	10 or more

Survey Results

Background. The Survey (Appendix A) was conducted using Qualtrics and consisted of 11 questions. All participants were asked to complete these survey questions. 15 out of 16 building level administrators completed the survey resulting in a response rate of 94%. Survey participants were all building level administrators. For a summary of these individuals, their

roles, and the overall percentages by level and position see Table 4.2. Table 4.3 provides a breakdown of survey participants by their years of experience in their current roles, and Table 4.4 shows survey participants total years of experience in a certified position. Table 4.5 provides insight to the survey participants' leadership experience, if any, prior to their current role.

Participants were provided the opportunity to select more than one response for this question.

There was also an "other" option for which the responses were head athletic coach, and athletic director.

Findings.

Table 4.2

Survey: Distribution by Position

Please select the role that best describes your current position:	n	%
Secondary Principal (6-12)	4	26.67
Secondary Assistant Principal (6-12)	5	33.33
Elementary Principal (Prek-5)	3	20.00
Elementary Assistant Principal (Prek-5)	3	20.00

Note. N=15

Table 4.3

Survey: Total Number of Years in Current Role

Please select the total number of years you have been in your current role as an administrator:	n	%
1-2 Years	3	20.00
3-5 Years	8	53.33
6-9 Years	2	13.33
10 or more years	2	13.33

Note. N=15

Table 4.4
Survey: Total Number of Years in Any Certified Position

Please select your total years of experience in any certified position:	n	%
1-2 Years	0	0.00
3-5 Years	1	6.67
6-9 Years	1	6.67
10 or more years	13	86.67

Note. N=15

Table 4.5
Survey: Previous Leadership Experience

Prior to your current administrative role, how would you describe your previous leadership experience? (Please select all that apply):	n	%
None	0	0.00
Head Principal	3	20.00
Assistant Principal	7	46.67
District Administrator	1	6.67
Instructional Coach	6	40.00
Lead Teacher	2	13.33
Other (Please provide a comment):	2	13.33

Note. N=21. N is greater than 15 and the percentages exceed 100 because there was an option to make multiple selections.

The responses to the “Other” roles or positions were:

- Head athletic coach
- Athletic director

The responses to these questions provide an accurate picture of the building level administrators’ years of experience, current roles, and previous roles, which allowed the

researcher to also compare these factors with the interview responses to determine if there may be factors stemming from these items that could directly or indirectly create obstacles to active involvement by building level administrators in IEP meetings. In other words, how might years of experience, previous experience, and level of experience impact administrator involvement in IEP meetings?

The next three survey questions allowed for the survey participants to share their own perceptions of their knowledge and abilities in the area of special education, along with some possible areas they feel may be keeping them from actively participating in IEP meetings. Table 4.6 indicates that a vast majority of the building administrators describe their knowledge in the area of special education as “pretty confident” with 86.67% selecting this option. Only two out of the 15 participants selected “limited”, accounting for only 13.33% of the group. No one selected the “none” option or the “expert” option, indicating there are varying levels of knowledge in the area of special education but that most participants feel pretty confident in what knowledge they do have currently. Table 4.7 asked participants to describe their participation in IEP meetings. Of the participants, 66.67% said that they actively listen in IEP meetings and share their input with the team. 33.33% of the group said that they actively listen but for the most part do not say anything during IEP meetings. None of the other options were selected. For barriers to active involvement in IEP meetings for administrators, refer to Table 4.8. This survey question allowed for multiple selections, as well as an “other” option in the case administrators had additional barriers to share. Almost half of the participants (46.67%) said there were too many distractions outside of the meeting coming from staff or students. An equal number of participants, 26.67%, selected a barrier as lack of confidence in special education knowledge, as well as don’t want to say or do something wrong. Only one person indicated that

they don't feel it is their responsibility (6.76%). 33.33% chose the "other" option which provided varying answers.

Table 4.6

Survey: Knowledge of Special Education

How would you describe your knowledge in the area of special education?:	n	%
None	0	0.00
Limited	2	13.33
Pretty Confident	13	86.67
Expert	0	0.00

Note. N=15

Table 4.7

Survey: IEP Participation

How would you describe your participation in most IEP meetings?:	n	%
I am not involved in any discussions or decision making	0	0.00
Passively listen but very little involvement	0	0.00
Actively listen but for the most part do not say anything	5	33.33
Actively listen as well as discuss and share input to the meeting	10	66.67
Other (Please provide a comment)	0	0.00

Note. N=15

Table 4.8
Survey: Barriers to Active Involvement in IEP Meetings

When/If you do not actively participate in an IEP meeting, what barriers may be preventing you from being actively involved? (Please select all that apply):	n	%
Don't feel it is my responsibility	1	6.67
Lack of confidence in special education knowledge	4	26.67
Don't want to say or do something wrong	4	26.67
Uncomfortable leading the team	0	0.00
Too many distractions outside the meeting coming from staff or students	7	46.67
Other (Please provide a comment):	5	33.33

Note. N=21. N is greater than 15 and the percentages exceed 100 because there was an option to make multiple selections. One individual skipped the question.

The responses to the "Other" selection were:

- Not in the meeting and LEA assigned to someone else
- Prefer to let the SPED educators lead and share
- Don't want to go against the team
- Lack of knowledge of certain handicapping condition
- Respect for LEA from another building

The next survey question focused on what administrators believe has helped prepare them for their role as a leader in IEP meetings (Table 4.9). For this question, administrators were also allowed to select multiple responses. The three most selected responses were time and learning opportunities on the job (93.33%), district professional development (73.33%),

and classroom experience as a teacher (66.67%). Four participants also chose college course work (26.67%), while 2 participants chose to provide a comment on the “other” selection.

Table 4.9

Survey: Prepared for Leadership in IEP Meetings

Regarding your leadership in IEP meetings, what would you say	n	%
has helped prepare you for this role? (Please select all that apply):		
College course work	4	26.67
Classroom experience as a teacher	10	66.67
District professional development	11	73.33
Time and learning opportunities on the job as a principal	14	93.33
Other (Please provide a comment)	2	13.33

Note. N=41. N is greater than 15 and the percentages exceed 100 because there was an option to make multiple selections.

The responses to the “Other” selection were:

- Attending the SPED Law Conference was eye-opening!
- Previous teacher in learning center classroom.

Table 4.10 shows what administrators believe is their biggest area of need as a leader in IEP meetings. Overwhelmingly, with almost 93.33% participants selecting it, was district professional development. The next most selected item was time and learning opportunities on the job at 40%.

Table 4.10
Survey: Areas of Need for Leadership in IEP Meetings

Regarding your leadership in IEP meetings, what would you say are the biggest areas of need in helping you be successful? (Please select all that apply):	n	%
College course work	0	0.00
Classroom experience as a teacher	2	13.33
District professional development	14	93.33
Time and learning opportunities on the job as a principal	6	40.00
Other (Please provide a comment)	1	6.67

Note. N=23. N is greater than 15 and the percentages exceed 100 because there was an option to make multiple selections.

The responses to the “Other” selection were:

- Taking time to review IEPs before meetings

Table 4.11 shows how administrators responded when asked to rate themselves on their involvement in IEP meetings. Of the participants, 73.33 % rated themselves as pretty effective, while only 13.33 % rated themselves somewhat effective and only 13.33 % rated themselves as very effective. No one selected not effective.

Table 4.11
Survey: Involvement in IEP Meetings

How effective would you rate yourself, regarding your involvement in IEP meetings?:	n	%
Not effective	0	0.00
Somewhat effective	2	13.33
Pretty effective	11	73.33
Very effective	2	13.33

Note. N=15

The final survey question regarded the impact that COVID-19 has had on IEP meetings (Table 4.12). No one selected that it had significantly affected their IEP meetings. However, for not all, somewhat, and moderately participants choices were equal at 33.33% for each, which means that 2/3 of the group believes that COVID-19 impacted IEP meetings not at all or only somewhat, compared to 1/3 of the group believing that it moderately affected IEP meetings.

Table 4.13 provides a quick review of the leading emerging themes from the survey.

Table 4.12
Survey: COVID-19 Crisis Impact

At what level has the COVID-19 crisis impacted your ability to participate in IEP meetings?:	n	%
Not at all	5	33.33
Somewhat	5	33.33
Moderately	5	33.33
Significantly	0	0.00

Note. N=15

Table 4.13
Survey: Leading Emerging Themes

Leading Emerging Themes:	n	%
3-5 years in current administrative role	8	53.33
10+ Years in a Certified Position	13	86.67
Assistant Principal prior to current role	7	46.67
Instructional Coach prior to current role	6	40
Marked “pretty confident “in the Area of Special Education	13	86.67
Actively listens as well as shares input in IEP meetings	10	66.67
Marked distractions from outside of the meeting act as a barriers to participation in IEP meetings	7	46.67
Time and learning opportunities on the job have helped prepare them for their role as a leader in IEP meetings	14	93.33
District professional development have helped prepare them for their role as a leader in IEP meetings	11	73.33
District professional development is biggest area of need in helping them be successful as a leader in an IEP meeting	14	93.33
Marked “pretty effective”, regarding involvement in IEP meetings	11	73.33

Note. N=114. N is greater than 15 because this table is a culmination of multiple survey questions.

Interview Results

Background. For the purposes of this study one-on-one interviews were completed with the same building level administrators who were asked to complete the surveys. Once again, 15 out of 16 building administrators participated. The interviews were completed in an online format via Zoom, due to the COVID 19 pandemic. Interviews were conducted in a private setting, which kept the conversations confidential, so that participants had confidence in knowing that they could be open and honest in the discussions. Interviews were conducted over a 3-week time period in May and June of 2020. The informed consent document was reviewed with each participant, prior to beginning the interviews and participants were reminded that their input was completely voluntary and that they could choose not to participate at any time. For the purposes of this study, interview questions and prompts (Appendix B) were developed to find answers to the following research questions:

1. What perceptions do building-level administrators' have of their role(s) in IEP meetings?
2. What potential obstacles impact building-level administrators' participation in special education IEP meetings?
3. What specific procedural and/or professional practices would improve building-level administrators' active and inclusive involvement in IEP meetings?

The interview questions and prompts focused specifically on IEP meetings, special education, and the role, responsibilities, and knowledge of building administration as part of those meetings, including building administrators' perceptions of their roles, responsibilities, and abilities. Administrators were also asked questions or provided prompts regarding their perceptions of possible obstacles to their active involvement in IEP meetings, including specific possible areas of need associated with this to help increase their active involvement.

Research Question 1

Findings. The surveys consisted of 13 questions and prompts aligned with the research questions for the purposes of identifying the possible barriers that prevent building level administrators from actively participating in IEP meetings. In reviewing the participants' interview transcriptions, first cycle coding was used to understand individual's thoughts, opinions, perceptions, and ideas about the various questions posed. Secondary cycle coding methods were then used to discover recurring topics among participants' responses. To aid in answering research Question One, the following interview questions were used: What perceptions do building-level administrators' have of their role(s) in IEP meetings?

- In your building, what role does a building administrator typically play in IEP meetings?
- In your opinion, what are the ideal behaviors and characteristics of an actively participating principal in an IEP meeting?
- Describe the perfect IEP meeting, as if no barriers existed, and everything was executed exactly how it needed to be done.
- What is the most gratifying or enjoyable part of an IEP meeting?

This interview question was intentionally directed towards the participants' perceptions and understanding of what an administrator's role is in IEP meetings: *In your building, what role does a building administrator typically play in IEP meetings?* There were three specific areas in which the majority of participants shared common thoughts. One area was that they see building administrators as more of a moderator/facilitator of the IEP meeting, rather than leading it, and are there to make sure the agenda is followed and that the meeting stays on track. Administrators reported that, as part of the moderator/facilitator role, they are often the note takers during the IEP meeting as well. Another common theme was that participants see the building administrator

as being in the meeting to answer any important questions that arise. A third theme from participants was that they are there to make sure that legal processes are followed.

In reference to the first common theme of the principal being a moderator/facilitator, one principal (P8) explained, “I am always the note taker, that way it takes the burden off of the case manager, and it helps me, again, along with the agenda, helps...I am a very kinesthetic learner, so when taking those notes, it helps me make sure that we’ve covered all the bases.” Another comment shared by a participant (P2) was, “I would say passive, not necessarily the leader of the IEP. I really leave that to the case manager or the school psych, if it happened to be an evaluation. So, really more of a participant.” Another principal (P14) shared:

The building administrator is the LEA for that IEP meeting and oversees to make sure that IEP...we have all the...If we don’t have a regular ed teacher there, then we make sure that we have one. We get up and we make sure that we do that, and then we just add any pertinent information we might have.

One participant (P7) shared, “I think our role is to make sure that the meeting is on track, and we make sure that everything is civil and constructive.” In addition, another participant (P12) said: “Sometimes we take notes. Honestly, that’s a good thing for us to make sure that we’re being thorough in the notes, and it helps us make sure that we’re making sure everything’s covered and written.”

For the second common theme, administrators shared that they see the building administrator’s role is to answer questions that arise. One principal (P9) explained, “But typically I’m the one taking notes and just kind of piping in with answering questions or just to piggy-back or support whatever the teachers are sharing with the parents as well.” Along the same lines one participant (P6) said “...introductions, take notes, answer any big questions, give input on certain items, especially if it’s a kid with some behavior issues.” Another participant (P13) agreed, “Occasionally, there might be a question where they look to me to answer, and if I

can answer it, I do.” Furthermore, a principal (P3) shared, “There’s just not a lot of input maybe that we can give, but I think we’re there to answer questions for parents...”

The third common theme among respondents, pertaining to their role in IEP meetings, was that they are there to make sure that legal processes are followed. One participant (P7) explained “...if something controversial comes up, we can be there to be a mediator or help make a final decision on something and also make sure that the IEP is something that is feasible and something that we can do as a school or district.” Another participant (P1) said, “Setting the expectations for the meeting and making sure we keep it productive, making sure we follow all of the legal requirements...” Still another principal (P15) echoed those thoughts:

That everything that we are required to do gets done. Like if they forgot to offer parents’ rights, it’s my job to remember that they need to do that, and then, I would step in and offer them as well. Or if there was a step missed, then I’m there as well to kind of facilitate and oversee it.

To gather additional information regarding building level administrators’ perceptions of their roles in IEP meetings, the following question was used: *In your opinion, what are the ideal behaviors and characteristics of an actively participating principal in an IEP meeting?* Among participant responses, three common themes emerged. The first common response was that principals should not be on their phones or computers during IEP meetings. The second common response among respondents was that building administrators need to be knowledgeable of the student and the IEP, as well as in the area of special education. The third area of commonality among participants’ responses was that administrators need to be good communicators.

For the first common theme among participants, which was principals should not be on their phones or computers during IEP meeting, one respondent (P14) replied, “Be engaged in the meeting, not be on your phone texting or doing other things.” Another principal (P6) shared:

Not on your phone, not cruising the internet for other stuff. I think if I'm taking notes and I'm also shopping on Amazon and checking my Gmail as I'm taking notes, and they're talking about a kid who's on an IEP... I think that's really insensitive. So just attentive, and I always make a point to mention that my computer's open, but I've got the IEP on there, so when the case manager will ask if I need a copy of the IEP, I'll just kind of turn my computer to show to them, but also to the parent like, "I have the IEP here. I'm not doing personal stuff." So just attentive...

The second common response among respondents was that building administrators need to be knowledgeable of the student and the IEP, as well as in the area of special education. One principal (P15) explained:

I think it is someone who is educated and well-informed on the individual student's IEP. They need to have looked at it and understand it...asked any questions ahead of time. They also need to be well-informed on Sped law overall.

Another participant (P12) said, "Knowledgeable of the process, again, know the kid." A different administrator (P11) replied, "You know that kid before they sit down at the table. So, the first time that they're actually talking about their progress isn't in front of you for the first time." An additional respondent (P4) agreed saying:

Well, if I have done my due diligence to meet with the case manager and to read the IEP and to take the time to get to know this student, instead of just knowing them on paper...but, I like taking time to know who they are. I should be able to go into the IEP meeting with confidence, knowing that what plan we are recommending is what's best for this kid. I should never go in with a million questions, because I should have had those all done before that meeting ever happened.

Another principal (P5) echoed similar thoughts, "I think they need to know the student. They need to have at least looked over the IEP and the goals."

The third area of commonality among participants' responses was that administrators need to be good communicators. One principal (P3) explained:

So, I think just your body language and that is an important piece. I think whether you know the student really well or not, it's just kind of that customer service/community relations piece that the parents and the students need to feel in that process or whatever. So, just kind of having those interactions.

Another participant (P2) shared:

I would say that being an active listener and communicator is important, because I think it's important to ask questions in the IEP. And there have been times that I've not maybe understood something completely and said, "Now help me understand what you're doing to collect this" or "Tell me what's going on". I also think it's important, if you feel the need to kind of bridge that gap with communication between a parent and...in case the case manager is looking at their IEP and kind of going through the motions, it can be overwhelming.

An additional principal (P8) said:

Yeah, and we really try to do that. But I just think making eye contact with the families and all those non-verbals to let them know that, "Yes, I am listening to the case manager, and yes I am taking notes." But, inviting the family to participate as well.

The next interview prompt was asked to gain a better understanding of building administrators' perceptions of their roles in IEP meeting, as well as gauge their knowledge of the process of IEP meetings: *Describe the perfect IEP meeting, as if no barriers existed, and everything was executed exactly how it needed to be done.* There were three common themes that emerged from participant responses. The first common theme that emerged was that the basic process of the IEP meeting being followed is very important. Participants mentioned the importance of having the right personnel present, paperwork completed, following an agenda, which includes introductions, purpose of the meeting, and then a step-by-step process of what will be covered during the IEP meeting. A second commonality among the majority of respondents was the importance of input among all team members during an IEP meeting, especially parents. The third common theme was that the meetings be completed in a timely manner and that they remain on topic.

Once again, the first common theme that emerged from the interview prompt was that following the IEP process is very important. An administrator (P9) shared:

So, we make sure that the introductions are made, because I just put myself in the position of a parent and making sure that they feel comfortable and knowing who

everyone is and why they're there basically. And then after that, the case managers do a really good job of presenting the agenda, offering parents' rights, and just...again, especially if it's a parent's first IEP meeting, making sure they understand the process and their rights as a parent, and kind of just laying out what's going to be happening. And then after that, the case manager just goes through each step and talks about present levels, where the student is, and the progress they've made...

Another participant (P11) echoed similar thoughts:

The perfect IEP meeting would have an invite that invited all the right people. We would have an agenda. The case manager would start the meeting off with introductions, the purpose of the meeting...we would start in the present levels and then go through the IEP.

In addition, a respondent (P3) shared:

The perfect IEP meeting, A, is one where the initial paperwork is all set, ready to go, and we've had a notice of meeting signed at that point too, so we have some of the initial pieces set up. And then from there, it's again, to me is meant to be a kind of re-evaluation, but also a celebration of who the student is and where they've been, where they're going kind of thing. Making sure that there's introductions involved. Making sure that there's an agenda, so we're not just hopping all over the place. Making sure all the right people are involved in the process.

Showing like-mindedness, another principal (P6) explained:

When they have it already set up. And so, parent gets greeted by everybody when they come in, we sit down, case manager has agendas ready, paper agendas that they can hand out to everybody. They go through the agenda. We do introductions, everybody's cordial...

The second common theme among building administrators' responses was the importance of input among all team members during an IEP meeting, including parents. In response the prompt one administrator (P15) explained, "It would also, you know, finding ways to make sure that parents are comfortable and are participating maybe a little bit more in the IEPs. In a perfect world, I would like to see more parent participation." A similar response was given by another principal (P12):

I think, an ideal IEP for me...the icing on the cake, is having a parent that knows their child's abilities and can contribute to what they think their child is capable of...and

everyone is involved. That's ideal to me...not just one person talking and one person listening. It's a collaborative thing.

Another participant (P7) replied, "We come in. Everyone says their piece. We review the document itself...and the team has a great discussion..." An additional administrator (P1) agreed:

We'd have the agenda and, as we're going through, we're talking not only about the present levels and what's happening at school. There's a back-and-forth conversation about how the parents are supporting that at home and what kinds of things and challenges that are going on there...and then we talk about how we can support them, and it becomes very much a team effort all the way through.

Another participant (P3) explained, "And then, ultimately, not only having all the right people involved, but making sure all the people have an opportunity for input."

The third common theme among participants' answers was that the meetings be completed in a timely manner and that the IEP meeting staying on track and on topic was an important factor in that taking place. A participant (P2) shared:

I definitely like that our district has kind of adopted that an agenda be made. Even though it's kind of generic, I feel like it keeps us on task. Because the last thing we want to do is waste anybody's time, whether it's the classroom teacher, or the parents, or the administrator.

Another administrator (P8) replied, "We follow that agenda, and it's over and done within 45 minutes to an hour, because I think that's a totally appropriate time to go through what we need to go through and still address parent concerns." This was echoed by another principal (P14) who stated, "You should be able to have a good IEP meeting within 30 minutes, if people aren't getting on task and ranting and raving and doing other things." Similar to previous responses, another participant (P11) shared, "...the perfect IEP meeting is going to be an hour. It's not going to end in 10 minutes. It's going to be a conversation..."

The next interview question was purposefully chosen to garner further information about building administrators' perceptions of their role in IEP meetings, as well as delve into what they might individually gain from being actively involved in the process: *What is the most gratifying or enjoyable part of an IEP meeting?* There were three common responses among the participants. The first theme was that they enjoyed seeing student success and growth. Secondly, building administrators like it when parents are part of the process and are happy with how their child is performing. Thirdly, they appreciate seeing the IEP team working together and being successful.

In reference to the first theme, building administrators agreed that they enjoy seeing student success and growth. One participant (P8) detailed, "It is really amazing to hear the growth that kids make, because when we're looking at data as a building, typically, we do see the students who receive special services...They're on the low end of those common assessments." Another participant (P9) shared, "I love hearing how much progress the kiddos have made, as well as just hearing the parents share their kiddos strength too." An additional participant (P1) said:

Seeing the success and hearing about the successes kids are having, and not necessarily like, "Hey they're doing great in math class", which is always good to hear. It's the...over time, we're making progress towards these goals. We're making progress towards graduation.

The second area of common responses among participants was that building administrators like it when parents are part of the process and are happy with how their child is performing. One principal (P2) explained:

I love it when a parent is able to look at the teacher and say, "Thank you so much. They've learned so much", or "They can read now." So, it's kind of just hearing those successes that maybe we might not always hear in special education.

Another principal (P15) shared a similar sentiment:

It's typically the interaction with the parents. It's just another opportunity to build another connection with them, get to talk with them, and I enjoy that I can give the perspective as a parent as well cause I now know that those meetings sometimes are hard for parents, so I'm going to be a support system for them as well.

Furthermore, a participant (P6) shared, "But I think probably more than anything, like when parents thank everybody for the work they're doing with their kid, if it's a really challenging kid or if we've seen a really big turnaround."

The third common theme among building administrators' responses was that they appreciate seeing the IEP team working together and being successful. One participant (P11) shared, "When we walk out of a meeting and we have a plan for a student, and I know they're going to be successful...". Likewise, a principal (P4) detailed:

Knowing that we are coming out with a Rockstar plan that is good and successful. I mean, there is nothing better than coming out of a meeting and going, "Wow, I am hopeful" and not... You know, I feel hopeful and not hopeless.

Summary of Findings: Research Question One

The first research question for the purposes of this study was "What perceptions do building-level administrators' have of their role(s) in IEP meetings?" There were four interview questions used to explore this topic. The results of the responses from interview questions or prompts asked of building administrators were:

1. In your building, what role does a building administrator typically play in IEP meetings?
 - Principals see building administrators as more of a moderator/facilitator of the IEP meeting, rather than leading it, and are there to keep make sure the agenda is followed and that the meeting stays on track.
 - Participants see building administrators as being in the meeting to answer any important questions that arise.

- Building administrators believe they are there to make sure that legal processes are followed.

2. In your opinion, what are the ideal behaviors and characteristics of an actively participating principal in an IEP meeting?

- Principals strongly believe they should not be on their phones or computers during IEP meetings.
- Respondents agree that building administrators need to be knowledgeable of the student and the IEP, as well as in the area of special education.
- Participants believe that administrators need to be good communicators in IEP meetings.

3. Describe the perfect IEP meeting, as if no barriers existed, and everything was executed exactly how it needed to be done.

- Building administrators shared the basic process of the IEP meeting being followed is very important. A majority of participants mentioned the importance of having the right personnel present, paperwork is completed, and their being an agenda that is followed.
- Administrators believe in the importance of input among all team members during an IEP meeting, including parents.
- Principals said IEP meetings should be completed in a timely manner. An important factor in completing meetings in a timely manner is assuring that they remain on track and on topic.

4. What is the most gratifying or enjoyable part of an IEP meeting?

- Administrators enjoy seeing student success and growth.
- Building administrators appreciate it when parents are part of the process and are happy with how their child is performing.

- Principals like seeing the IEP team working together and being successful.

Research Question Two

Findings. The surveys consisted of 13 questions and prompts aligned with the research questions for the purposes of investigating the possible barriers that could keep building level administrators from actively participating in IEP meetings. In reviewing the participants' interview transcriptions, an analysis of the responses used first cycle coding methods to understand individual's thoughts, opinions, perceptions, and ideas about the various questions posed. Secondary cycle coding methods were then used to discover reoccurring topics among participants' responses. To aid in answering research Question Two, the following interview questions were used: What potential obstacles impact building-level administrators' participation in special education IEP meetings?

- Keeping in mind your ideal behavior and characteristics of an actively participating principal in an IEP meeting, what barriers may be occurring that are preventing this from taking place?
- Keeping your idea of a perfect IEP meeting in mind, what are the barriers occurring that prevent it from happening?
- What is the most challenging element of an IEP meeting?
- Are you more active in some IEP meetings compared to other meetings? Why or why not? Explain.

This interview question was used to explore potential obstacles that could be acting as barriers to administrators' participation in IEP meetings: *Keeping in mind your ideal behavior and characteristics of an actively participating principal in an IEP meeting, what barriers may be occurring that are preventing this from taking place?* For the responses obtained there were

several areas of commonality among the participants. The first common theme was there being a lack of time to review IEP documents before the meeting. A second common theme that developed was that building administrators are often distracted or interrupted during the meeting by events happening in the building (i.e., fights, angry parents, etc.). A third common response shared by participants was that a lack of knowledge in special education effects their confidence and keeps them from participating in IEP meetings at times.

The first common theme was there being a lack of time to review IEP documents before the meeting. Administrators shared that time constraints keep them from being fully prepared for meetings. One principal (P12) elaborated:

If I don't have time to review the IEP, and I'm sitting down and seeing the IEP... Usually if I come to an IEP and I haven't had a chance to look at the IEP, the first thing I do while there's introductions and while everything's getting organized, is I start scanning that IEP and looking for critical things...

Another participant (P5) shared, "Time constraints. Being in a meeting when you have 500 other things going on in the building can sometimes be a barrier..." This same thought was echoed by a different principal (P1), "I think a lot of it goes back to the time..." An additional administrator (P14) shared:

I think there are a lot of day-to-day things that come up, and they come up here a lot. You say, "Okay, before this meeting I'm going to sit down, and I'm going to review some things, look at the paperwork, make sure it's going to work... But, then you have three fights that break out at lunch, and you're spending all day dealing with discipline. And so, then you go into the meeting and you didn't get the things done that you needed to get done.

A second common theme that developed was that building administrators are often distracted or interrupted during the meeting by events happening in the building. A respondent (P6) stated:

So, anything that's occurring outside of the IEP, but in our building that has drawn my attention. So, examples would be like if there's a large incident at the buses. Let's say we have a fight at the buses. I'm dealing with the fight, but I'm also needing to come back and get into an IEP meeting. If I've got an angry parent that's come up at the end of the

day that I need to talk to about a situation. I'm really needing to handle that, but I need to be in the IEP... Whether I'm physically there or just mentally still in that situation, that's certainly a barrier to me being the best I could be.

Another administrator (P3) replied:

I think it's just kind of getting busy in the day and trying to juggle different things. And again, it's that hard part of when you go into an IEP meeting, or any meeting really. The rest of your job doesn't stop or whatever. And, unfortunately, there are certain things that are going to interfere with an IEP meeting, whether we want to admit it or not.

A different participant (P1) shared, "Sometimes, we are unfortunately pulled in two different directions. Or if something happens on a bus, as we're going to the meeting trying to be on time..."

The final area of commonality among participant responses was that a lack of knowledge in special education affects their confidence and keeps them from participating in IEP meetings at times. One administrator (P9) answered:

I guess, kind of what we already talked about, just being more... I don't know if this is answering but even being more reserved and just not as forward, or aggressive, or confident.... And just being comfortable enough to question what's going on..."

Another principal (P6) said, "Lack of knowledge sometimes... and so any of those specific maybe goals that we're looking at for a kid that I don't have a lot of knowledge, I can kind of... Like I mentioned earlier, I can feel vulnerable..." The same principal went on to explain that:

...I found myself just being a spectator a lot, and especially when we've got 15 people at an IEP meeting, and it's super... a high stakes IEP, I don't want to say anything that could compromise what we're trying to do, and so that's definitely a barrier.

An additional respondent (P10) detailed:

I just think the confidence in knowing what comes next. The confidence in knowing what the laws are. The confidence in knowing what you can and cannot provide to a student. Confidence in knowing what you can and cannot say. There's so much in there that it's like if you don't feel okay with what's going on you're not going to be engaged, because I don't want to say the wrong thing.

One other administrator (P2) shared:

I think it's just having an understanding of sped law and the role that sped plays in a school building, because there's so much to it. And if your background wasn't sped, even before you were an administrator, then you have that kind of learning curve on top of it.

The next interview question was purposefully chosen to gather a better understanding of building administrators' perceptions of what some barriers to a successful IEP meeting may be:

Keeping your idea of a perfect IEP meeting in mind, what are the barriers occurring that prevent it from happening? There were three common themes among the responses provided by the interviewees. The first hinged around IEP team members being organized and prepared, as well as the IEP meeting staying on task. A second area of commonality among interview participants responses was the effects of the relationship between the parent and the school on IEP meetings. The last area of agreement among those interviewed was that time and school distractions effect building administrators involvement in IEP meetings.

The first common theme from respondents was that team members being organized and prepared, as well as the IEP meeting staying on task, can be a barrier to a successful IEP meeting. One respondent (P4) shared:

The IEP not being filled out completely, certain support services not having their information in, or if not being correct. Data not being collected, when we said we would collect data for additional supports, like behavior intervention plans or any data that we need to collect to create a plan. People showing up late, people not showing up at all, dissention, people not being organized, not having an agenda.

Another respondent (P7) had similar thoughts saying, "Lack of organization on any one member's part, apathy on any one or multiple members' part." A different principal (P5) attributed this barrier specifically to case managers and explained:

Well, the case manager not being prepared and not having all of the paperwork there that needs to be there. I think it's very frustrating for me when we get to signatures and the paperwork's not there, and somebody has to leave the meeting and go print copies.

Another principal (P6) agreed and shared:

For us, it would be our case managers being unorganized for an IEP. So, paperwork's unprepared and it's probably, to me, I notice it more than a parent would, because I sit through so many teachers that are really organized. When I sit in on one that looks really poor, it's very glaring to me, and most of the time parents don't pick up on it. But that seems to be the biggest barrier when teachers don't have stuff prepared to give present levels and we're off of old stuff that's not really helping move forward at all. So, that's the biggest barrier in ours.

The second area of commonality among interview participants, regarding barriers to a successful IEP meeting, responses was the effects of the relationship between the parent and the school on IEP meetings. A principal (P15) replied:

I think sometimes our other staff don't get quite as much interaction with parents or, when they do, sometimes it is just informal and they're going down the checklist, so I think it's important. I think I would like to see maybe my case managers reach out to parents a little bit more via phone calls or personal conversation, so that when they get in that room it's not quite so formal...

Another administrator (P1) explained:

Definitely building that relationship and trust...but anything that happened in the years before is something the parents bring, and we're not always losing...The relationship my teachers have, and we have, with parents isn't always damaged by us. It could be something from somewhere else where they moved in from XYZ district and they didn't live up to it, or they were rude or...It's incredibly difficult to hear that your child's not doing well, and the plans that are put in place are...They're not perfect. So, sometimes that idea that you got to go back and do it again. So, I guess it's building that relationship.

A different principal (P11) explained:

I think sometimes parents are caught off guard by their student's progress...For instance, if you've got a child that is in out resource classes and they think that their child is going to go to college and be a lawyer...So I think some of those barriers are, it's hard as an administrator and to look at a parent and say, "Okay, I understand you want your child to be a lawyer. Your child wants to be a lawyer. Your child is reading right now at a second-grade level." And then building from that. So, it's much easier to just go, "Okay your child wants to be a lawyer. Let's keep going on. What's next?" And I think that happens a lot, because everyone's afraid to tell someone they can't instead of working with them...

An additional respondent (P12) said, “Again, sometimes it’s just us talking to parents, and there’s not a lot of conversation.”

The last area of agreement among many of those interviewed was that time and school distractions effect building administrators involvement in IEP meetings. One administrator (P3) said, “When we’d get out at 3:10 and the sports games would start at 3:30, it was always a really big challenge to trying to cover one thing, and then making sure that you’re at an IEP meeting and different things like that.” A separate principal (P2) explained:

In my building, I would say there’s a larger sped caseload, and so there are a lot of meetings. And as an administrator, of course, you’re pulled in every different direction. For me, a barrier sometimes can be that I’m overbooked, or I’m back-to-back booked, or I’m the only administrator in the building, and there’s an emergency situation that I need to be part of. And so sometimes it’s hard. Even if I’m not pulled from the meeting, my mind might not be in the meeting cause I’m worried about what’s happening outside of those doors.

Additionally, another respondent (P8) replied, “The time is always a factor. The time, getting things done ahead of time, so that we can preview the IEP.”

The next question was asked to better understand the building administrators’ perceptions of what it is that makes an IEP meeting challenging: *What is the most challenging element of an IEP meeting?* There were several areas of common responses among participants. The first was case managers who are not prepared for the meeting. A second common response among participants was they do not understand the data being shared or there is an inadequate amount of data. Thirdly, a common response among the building administrators that is a challenging element of an IEP meeting was when there are disagreements between the parents and the school. A final common response among participants was that IEP meeting are challenging when the student has not made growth.

In reference to case managers not being prepared for IEP meetings, one participant (P11) explained:

I think the most challenging part of an IEP meeting is when the case manager is not prepared. They haven't had enough parent contact to know what's going on with the student or enough contact with the students. They don't know the student, and I think that we've remedied some of that because we've got some IEP plans and we're giving that time for them to go out and observe the students...so making sure they take advantage of that. Because, if you don't know the kid or the family, that's when things start to go wonky.

Another building administrator (P3) agreed:

So, certainly the most frustrating piece is when you...especially, since we don't really have full control over the actual IEP, it's very frustrating when you show up and things are kind of halfway done or not done correctly or not done at all kind of thing.

An additional participant (P8) shared about case manager preparation specifically regarding grammatical errors, "And what is very frustrating, as an administrator, is that I'm looking at that draft IEP in the meeting, but I see grammatical errors." The participant (P8) elaborated, "...I know it's a draft, and I know that parents are providing input, but for the most part we should have the skeleton pieced together."

The second common responses among participants that makes IEP meetings a challenge was that they don't understand the data being shared, or there is an inadequate amount of data. A principal (P2) expounded:

I would say challenging would be, for me personally, is making sure I understand all of the data that was collected, because with kids that range from not even in preschool yet to a life skills student that might be supposed to be in sixth grade, there's a lot of data that's gathered for a lot of different things. So, for me, I like... I'm just listening, collecting that information I'm hearing, and making sure that I think it's valid information.

Another principal (P9) echoed those same ideas about data, specifically in regard to IEP goals setting, saying:

Making sure we have enough data to support the goals...and making sure those goals are being adjusted too, if they need to be prior to the following year too. So, challenging-

wise, I think, yeah, just making sure the goals are meeting the needs of the kiddo, and we have the data to support where they are.

A different participant (P10) explained, “I guess, on my end, I don’t understand or know what data the sped teacher always uses to come up with those goals.”

The next area of commonality of building administrators’ responses, in reference to what makes an IEP meetings challenging, is when there are disagreements between the parents and the school. One participant (P7) expounded on the idea:

I would say the biggest challenge is when the family and school do not agree on a course of action or a support for a kid. Just from an administrator’s point of view, I think that’s the most challenging during a meeting. Like if the parents are adamant that a certain support needs to be put in place, but it’s something the school does not or cannot provide.

A different respondent (P1) shared, “When there’s not a partnership between parents and the school. Where it’s very much a blame game, or when they think that we’re not implementing the right way, but we really are.” Another principal (P4) said, “When we’re not on the same page. The team, the parent, the kid...it doesn’t matter. If one person has a little bit of dissent, for whatever reason, I feel it.” Along the same lines, an additional participant (P5) shared:

What I’ve had experience with being difficult is maybe when if the parent doesn’t agree with something that’s in the IEP or that we’re wanting to add. We had one parent that I can think of two years ago that wanted a lot of services in the IEP, but the data didn’t support it and the student was doing really well...and so that can be difficult. But, I think that’s the importance of building the relationship and having communication with the parent throughout the year and not just one time when you meet for the IEP.

A final common response among participants was that IEP meetings are challenging when the student is not making growth. One principal (P14) explained, “When things aren’t going well. When kids aren’t making growth. When they’re struggling, and the parents aren’t sure what to do.” Another respondent (P12) replied, “I mean, it’s challenging whenever the kid is maybe not making the growth that you want, and you’re trying...” Furthermore, another building administrator’s (P7) response was, “In terms of frustrating things from a student standpoint, if a

student is...what's the word I'm looking for? Just doesn't want to do anything...that's always frustrating.”

The next interview question was also used to explore potential obstacles that are barriers to administrators' participation in IEP meetings: *Are you more active in some IEP meetings compared to other meetings? Why or why not? Explain.* There were three areas of commonality among participants responses. The first was that building administrators are more likely to be involved in complex or high stakes meetings (i.e., high needs student receiving many different services, when there are disagreements between school and parent and a meeting has been called, placement changes, etc.). The second area of commonality among respondent answers was they are more likely to be involved in a meeting regarding a student with significant behavior concerns. The third common theme that emerged for interview question 10 was that building administrators are more active in IEP meetings involving students and families who they know or are familiar with.

The first area of commonality among respondents' answers was that building administrators are more likely to be involved in complex or high stakes meetings. One administrator (P1) shared, “The ones where parents are being difficult...So, it's more about behaviors and things like that or placement type situations.” Another principal (P7) explained, “I would say the ones where there are disagreements...” One administrator (P2) shared, “If it were a life skills IEP and there were five or six different service providers there, I know that we've really got to stick with the plan...” A different participant (P3) replied:

I think a lot of times going into the IEP meeting we kind of know whether something's going to be a sticky issue or something like that. And so, I think in those situations you just try to be involved or interject a little bit more just to help the situation or ease the situation and stuff.

An additional administrator (P5) explained:

Then there are the difficult meetings that we've had to have with parents. You always have one or two parents, it seems like every year, that just aren't happy no matter what you do, and in those meetings, you have to know what's going on.

The second area of commonality among respondent answers was they are more likely to be involved in an IEP meeting regarding a student with significant behavior concerns. One participant (P12) replied, "If I know a kid and I'm engaged with the kid a lot, especially behavior kids that I'm around all the time, and I feel like I have more to contribute with them..." A different principal (P10) explained, "It depends on behavior. Any student that has an IEP that is also receiving behavior referrals, I am much more active in that IEP meeting..." Another respondent (P6) said, "Yeah, so if I am physically one-on-one working with them. Having them in my office, in their classroom supporting their teacher due to...mainly due to behaviors..."

The third common theme that emerged for interview question 10 was that building administrators are more active in IEP meetings involving students and families who they know or are familiar with. One principal (P14) shared, "The answer is definitely yes. And again, it's because of the level of relationship and knowledge I have of the student's condition." Another administrator (P13) explained, "By the second and third time you're sitting on an IEP meeting, you have a good relationship. Not always, but you know the parent that you're sitting across from, and you can have a better relationship." A different principal (P11) replied, "I would say that, yes, there are meetings that I'm much more active in, and it's generally families I know, kids I know real well." Additionally, a participant (P15) described, "When I already have a relationship built with that parent, I do probably participate more so than a parent that I haven't had a whole lot of communication with."

Summary of Findings: Research Question Two

The second research question for the purposes of this study was “What potential obstacles impact building-level administrators’ participation in special education IEP meetings?” There were four interview questions used to explore this topic. The results of the responses from interview questions or prompts asked of building administrators were:

1. Keeping in mind your ideal behavior and characteristics of an actively participating principal in an IEP meeting, what barriers may be occurring that are preventing this from taking place?

- Building administrators agreed there is a lack of time to review IEP documents before IEP meetings.
- Building administrators are often distracted or interrupted during IEP meeting by events happening in the building.
- Participants shared that a lack of knowledge in special education effects their confidence and keeps them from participating in IEP meetings at times.

2. Keeping your idea of a perfect IEP meeting in mind, what are the barriers occurring that prevent it from happening?

- Building administrators shared that IEP team members being organized and prepared, as well as the IEP meeting staying on task is a barrier.
- Participants agree the relationship between the parent and the school can act as a barrier in IEP meetings.
- Respondents said that time and school distractions effect building administrators involvement in IEP meetings.

3. What is the most challenging element of an IEP meeting?

- Administrators said IEP meetings are challenging when the case managers are not prepared for the meeting.
- Participants shared another challenge is when they don't understand the data being shared or there is an inadequate amount of data.
- Building administrators said that another challenging element of an IEP meeting was when there are disagreements between the parents and the school.
- Respondent also agreed that IEP meeting are challenging when the student is not making growth.

4. Are you more active in some IEP meetings compared to other meetings? Why or why not?

Explain.

- Building administrators shared they are more likely to be involved in complex or high stakes meetings.
- Respondents answered they are more likely to be involved in a meeting regarding a student with significant behavior concerns.
- Administrators believe they are more active in IEP meetings involving students and families who they already know or are familiar with.

Research Question Three

Findings. The surveys consisted of 13 questions and prompts aligned with the research questions for the purposes of diving into the possible barriers that could keep building level administrators from actively participating in IEP meetings. In reviewing the participants interview transcriptions, an analysis of the responses used first cycle coding methods to understand individual's thoughts, opinions, perceptions, and ideas about the various questions posed. Secondary cycle coding methods were then used to discover reoccurring topics among

participants' responses. To aid in answering research Question Three, the following interview questions were used: What specific procedural and/or professional practices would improve building-level administrators' active and inclusive involvement in IEP meetings?

- What has most helped prepare you for your role in the area of special education and IEP meetings?
- Reflecting back on all of our previous conversation, how could the district support you best with your role in future IEP meetings?
- What is the biggest challenge in preparing for your role in the area of special education and IEP meetings?
- Typically, how are IEP meetings in your building set up and scheduled? What process is used to ensure administrators are included, as scheduling takes place?
- What is the process of a typical IEP meeting in your building? How is it structured and who participates?

This interview question was asked to explore possible areas of needed improvement in procedural or professional practices, regarding building administrators' involvement in IEP meetings: *What has most helped prepare you for your role in the area of special education and IEP meetings?* There were three common themes that came to light after reviewing participants' responses. Areas of commonality shared among interviewees was time and experience on the job, the role of professional development in their success, and being able to talk to and learn from seasoned administrators or other experts in the field of special education.

For the first area of commonality shared among a majority of interviewees., which was time and experience on the job, one principal (P5) explained, "Number one, experience,

obviously. The more meetings you're in, and the more experiences that you have in multiple districts... think it helps." A different administrator (P6) said:

Experience. I wouldn't say that any of my schooling prepared me the most. Some of it did. I knew a decent amount, but I also...when I was a gen ed teacher, I tried to sit on as many IEPs as I could, because I've always been interested in special education.

Another principal (P3) explained, "I think just experience. I guess, live and learn kind of stuff."

An additional respondent (P10) detailed:

I think just time in. Just doing it over and over and over. I think about my first year as an administrator and there were so many mistakes made that I didn't even know I was making, because I just didn't know.

A separate principal (P13) echoed similar thoughts, "It's, honestly, just living and going through the actual meeting itself." Another participant (P14) stated, "Time. Just the fact that I have done it year, after year, after year."

The next common theme among participants' responses in what has helped most prepare them for their role in special education was professional development. A principal (P9) said, "I think just having the district provide those trainings we were just mentioning...and going to conferences and things of that nature." Another participant (P1) shared, "So, I didn't get a great deal of it in my administrative programs, but I did get a lot in my last district in professional development." A different interviewee (P2) explained, "I also am very appreciative that I've been able to attend the sped law conference, so I think it would be the PD." The same participant continued, "I feel like the PD that the district offers, or maybe I sought out that they offered to support, has definitely made me feel more comfortable."

The last common answers among participants pertained to being able to talk to and learn from seasoned administrators or other experts in the field of special education. One administrator (P4) elaborated, "And then to be able to actually have colleagues who are friends who are in that

specialty area...and they've allowed me to call them whenever I need to ask questions." Another principal (P8) shared, "There are several people in the district that I feel comfortable calling, if I have any questions, so I'm grateful that we have that support system." The same administrator went on to explain, "It was also nice in preparation, when I was getting my admin hours, to go and observe in a building where the principal was strong in special education..." A different participant (P12) said:

Honestly, it's a lot more just like if you sit in an IEP with someone that really knows what they're talking about, and they're very thorough. You remember that, and then you kind of copy the same thing. So, it's like a good model, a good mentor, somebody that leads an IEP very thoroughly.

The next interview question was also used in order to examine possible areas of needed improvement in procedural or professional practices, regarding building administrators' involvement in IEP meetings: *Reflecting back on all of our previous conversation, how could the district support you best with your role in future IEP meetings?* The first common theme among respondents was that building administrators still feel they could benefit from additional professional development, whether that be district provided or attending training outside the district. The other commonality among participants' answers was that they would like to see ongoing opportunities, within the district, throughout the school year to review, reflect, and discuss special education laws and practices.

In reference to the first common theme among respondents, which was building administrators feel they could benefit from additional professional development whether that be district provided or attending training outside the district, one principal (P6) said, "Moving forward, I think it'd be a good idea that...sped, a lot of conferences is one of the best things I've done in my professional development." Another principal (P5) shared:

I think it would be helpful maybe to have some more special education PD. We always had, in all the district that I've been in, as an administrator, we always had our legal team come into admin and do a legal thing for special ed with all the updated cases. Things that we needed to be aware of. I know that we get that, but it seems like we get it one time a year and then you forget.

A different administrator (P15) explained, "I think PD would go a long way for me, because I'd be more active and more comfortable the more knowledge I have on the matter." Another participant (P9) replied, "Gosh, I just honestly would say continue training."

The other commonality among participants' answers was that they would like to see ongoing opportunities, within the district, throughout the school year to review, reflect, and discuss special education laws and practices. One participant (P8) shared:

Just refreshers, annual refreshers about expectations and maybe some tips and tricks that are going well in other buildings that people are seeing. Time to reflect... When I say time to reflect, not me finding time, but as a leadership team.

Another principal (P14) said, "If you have someone who's a first-year administrator, like we do with the teachers, there needs to be ongoing training with what the expectations are and what those things look like." A different respondent (P13) explained, "I just think when things change, which we went through this last quarter, just making sure we're all aware, and if it's training that needs to occur."

The next interview question was used to explore possible areas of needed improvement in procedural or professional practices, regarding building administrators' involvement in IEP meetings: *What is the biggest challenge in preparing for your role in the area of special education and IEP meetings?* From this question two common themes among participants were apparent. The first being that time is a huge factor in building administrators feeling prepared for IEP meetings. Almost all of the participants listed this as a barrier. The other major theme that emerged among participants' responses was that a lack of knowledge in the area of special

education and practices was a big deterrent keeping them from feeling fully prepared for IEP meetings.

In reference to the first common theme of time being a huge factor in building administrators feeling prepared for IEP meetings, one participant (P2) explained:

Time, honestly. I feel like it's time. For the most part, I feel like our team does a good job of getting information in the IEP. We do a good job of making sure that everyone knows it's a draft, so, if we have mistakes or need to make corrections, we can. But in a perfect world, I would have more of an opportunity to look through IEPs well before the meeting started.

A different principal (P14) said, "Again probably the thing is that, if I don't have time to review the documents the way that I need to, that would be the biggest thing." Another administrator (P13) added:

If I'm able to preview the IEP and then actually see the kid working, whether it's in a general classroom or in the sped classroom, it'd give me a little better background, and I feel a little more prepared going in. It's my own lack of intentionality, because there might be that moment where I sit down and I'm like, "Okay, I'm going to watch this" and then something happens.

An additional participant (P15) communicated:

Time. Sometimes I have every intent to look at it the night before or a couple of days before, and then the day explodes, and it just gets away from you. And I'm not going to lie. There are times I pull it up before I walk into the meeting and look at it, and I don't like that feeling.

A different participant (P5) said:

I think just making sure all of the paperwork, and date, and timelines are correct. You don't ever want to miss one of those timelines. And again, looking through that IEP paperwork and making sure that it's done like it's supposed to be done, and that you haven't missed something or that the teacher hasn't missed something. That's always the hardest...hardest part for me is finding the time to sit down and go through all of that.

The other major theme that emerged among participants' responses was that a lack of knowledge in the area of special education and practices was a big deterrent, keeping them from feeling fully prepared for IEP meetings. One administrator (P10) shared:

I think my biggest challenge...So, if it's an easy IEP, I feel fine. I feel confident. I know what I need to do, but if there's something like...If we feel like a parent is going to want to rescind services, I don't feel confident in knowing what to say and what to do in that situation. If there is a parent that is wanting a new evaluation, I don't feel confident in what I should say or what I can say, in regard to evaluating students. I don't feel well-versed in knowing always what we can and cannot do.

Another participant (P1) explained, "Just having the knowledge of the laws and expectations..." A different principal (P9) said, "Just making sure I'm keeping up on new things...What am I trying to say? New...the more training I can get the better, I think." One administrator (P6) explained:

It's uncomfortable at first to ask for help, cause you feel like then you're showing that you don't know what you're doing...and especially when you're brand new to a job, you don't want that. You want everybody to think you know your stuff.

The next interview question asked: *Typically, how are IEP meetings in your building set up and scheduled? What process is used to ensure administrators are included, as scheduling takes place?* The building administrators' responses focused on the key areas of case managers setting up the meetings, technology being a key factor (Shared Outlook Calendar, Email, etc.), administrator availability, avoiding PLC times, and identifying blocks of time when meetings should not be scheduled. All respondents indicated that similar procedures are in place to ensure that administrators attend meetings.

The first area of focus was that it is the case manager's responsibility to set up meetings and ensure that an administrator is able to attend. All of building administrators made mention of this expectation. One participant (P14) explained, "IEP meetings are set up by whoever the case manager is." Supporting that same expectation another participant (P10) stated, "So, the teacher in charge or the case manager for each individual student sets up all the meetings." A third principal (P2) said, "So case managers would set up all IEP meetings."

The next key area of focus shared by a majority of the participants, regarding question one, was the important role that technology plays in the process of ensuring that IEP meetings are scheduled. A comment shared by one participant (P8) was, “There’s a shared calendar that everyone in the SPED Department has access to so they just go on and sign-up for a time, and then...Typically, I keep them on my calendar.” The same procedure was shared by another participant (P12), “We also have a calendar for special ed through Outlook, so they can put it in there so that they’re not double dipping and trying to get us to have two IEP’s at the same time, which happens occasionally, just accidentally but typically.” Another participant (P9) explained:

...they’ll reach out and make sure that we can have maybe a meeting prior or before the invite’s even sent. They send a group email, just kind of to gauge everyone’s availability based upon a deadline or what not. And then once we communicate via email, we just ensure it’s good to go. The formal invite’s sent.

Going hand in hand with the importance of the use of technology in organizing the meetings, building administrators expressed the need for case managers to ensure administrators’ availability for meetings and that a failure to do so can cause issues. A principal (P5) explained:

Usually depending on who the case manager is, they’ll check my schedule first, so I shared my calendar with them. They can see what openings I have and then they’ll check a couple of times with me before contacting the parent, or vice versa, they’ll contact the parent, see what times and days work best for them, and then check my calendar.

Another principal (P6) echoed the importance, including negative ramifications for failing to follow the process:

I think some people kind of get confused, and people that aren’t tech savvy can sometimes screw that up. We ask them to schedule...at least get them on the schedule a couple of weeks in advance, and hopefully they’re putting them on our shared special education calendar, so they can see if there are other IEPs. We run into problems with availability of administrators when people don’t do that. And then like the week of, there’s three IEPs on a day, and we’re kind of scrambling. So as long as they do it ahead of time...as long as they look at the shared calendar, we’re good.

Another common theme among participants' answers hinged around having specific times meetings could or could not be held. The majority of participants make it an expectation that meetings are not held during PLC times. One principal (P9) said, "We try to avoid our PLC meetings just because those are kind of the sacred time that we can meet with the whole fifth grade team, or whatnot, throughout the week, so we do ask them to avoid those times." Another principal (P2) concurred, "The only time we've requested to not have an IEP is during our PLC meetings, and those are only held two days a week. So, we kind of have a... We do have those times set aside that we prefer not to have an IEP." Furthermore, principals went on to express they prefer meetings be held before or after school for various reasons but are also as flexible as possible to accommodate the parents. However, other principals shared that these times could carry their own set of problems as well. One principal (P6) explained:

I would say, certainly, my preference would be for teachers to avoid conferences that are right in the morning. When our kids are arriving, if we have a 7:00 AM IEP, that really sucks for us because we've got a lot of supervisor roles on the morning, so for one of us to be pulled in there...it's tough, but we've not blocked off times necessarily.

Another principal (P13) shared, "We've done them as early as 7:30 in the morning to maybe starting them when school's over at 3:30. It's just kind of whatever worked best for parents." In addition, a principal (P11) stated, "I talk a lot to staff when they're setting up a meeting that I need to attend because occasionally we have parents that need to come in the middle of the day or in an off time in the evening..." One principal explained:

We typically schedule everything after school at 2:30 PM on, so more teachers can be there. So, we schedule between 7:00 AM and 7:30 AM and 2:00 PM and 2:30 PM, primarily. Anything that is outside of that kind of norm, they typically come ask us if we're available and do a little bit more in person than just scheduling and putting it on the calendar.

Another principal (P9) said, “A lot of times they find that, you know, it works better for parents to schedule late in the day...more towards the end of the day, so I feel like a lot of our meetings are more towards the end of the school day.”

The last interview asked: *What is the process of a typical IEP meeting in your building? How is it structured and who participates?* For this question, common responses by participants showed an understanding of the individuals who should be present during IEP meetings, depending on the purpose of the meeting (i.e., LEA, General Education Teacher, Special Education Teacher, Related Service providers, School Psychologist, Parents, and Student). The other common theme among participants was the mention of the varying responsibilities of IEP team members, especially the case manager as the main leader of the meeting.

The first response area in common among participant was that they all showed a basic understanding of the individuals who should be present during IEP meetings. One principal (P3) shared:

Alright, so typically, obviously you have the parent and family involvement. It just kind of varies on whether the kid is there or not...Obviously, a building administrator, the case manager. If it's the three-year re-eval, then the school psych is involved, and then basically any other case managers for it. So, the Sped teacher, if the social worker's involved, if speech pathology is involved, all of those different things.

A principal (P13) explained the varying roles:

In attendance, it's always a Sped teacher, myself as an LEA, and then we always openly invite any of that student's classroom teachers....And then more often than not our school psych is present, especially if it's a re-eval. And then our social worker is present, if applicable. And then the speech teacher, again, if it's applicable.

Another principal (P8) said, “...the case manager, the classroom teacher, and admin, and then parents. And of course, if we have support services, they're invited too...”

The second common theme among participants' responses was the mention of the varying responsibilities of IEP team members, especially the case manager as the main leader of

the meeting. An individual (P10) shared, “So really the case manager seems to, for the most part, always be the lead in getting the meeting started, having that agenda ready. They kind of just take over that lead role of conducting the meeting.” Another principal (P12) explained,

...if it’s just an average IEP, then typically the special education teacher leads it, and everybody just participates throughout whenever it’s appropriate and gives ideas and suggestions and explanations. If it’s an initial, a lot of times, what I try or I like to do depends on if my school psych does it or not...is I like to explain, “Okay, now that he is qualified, this is what an IEP...He or she is qualified. This is what an IEP is. This is what it does. This is its purpose.” But that’s only if it’s an initial.

In addition, a participant (P7) detailed their understanding of IEP meeting participants expectations:

Well, I think anybody who’s invited is expected to participate in some capacity. There’s an agenda that’s given by the case manager at the beginning of each IEP meeting, and they introduce themselves, and they talk about their kid’s current performance in the school setting. Yeah, I think it’s the expectation that everyone that comes to a meeting is participating.

One individual (P14) mapped out their thoughts on roles and responsibilities during an IEP meeting:

So, the general typical process is generally the case manager handles introductions, and then talks about the purpose of the meeting, and then each teacher typically goes around and talk about how the student is doing in their perspective classes. And then if there’s any other speech...Anybody else that might have pertinent information also talks about their goals and things. If it’s a three-year re-eval, then our school psych participates with her information.

Summary of Findings: Research Question Three

The third research question for the purposes of this study was “What specific procedural and/or professional practices would improve building-level administrators’ active and inclusive involvement in IEP meetings?” There were five interview questions used to explore this topic. The results of the responses from interview questions or prompts asked of building administrators were:

1. What has most helped prepare you for your role in the area of special education and IEP meetings?

- Interviewees shared that time and experience on the job helped prepare them.
- Participants feel that professional development has also been a key factor in helping them be prepared for their role.
- Building administrators believe that being able to talk to and learn from seasoned administrators or other experts in the field of special education has helped prepare them.

2. Reflecting back on all of our previous conversation, how could the district support you best with your role in future IEP meetings?

- Building administrators feel they could benefit from additional professional development, whether that be district provided or attending training outside the district.
- Principals would like to have ongoing opportunities, within the school district, throughout the school year to review, reflect, and discuss special education laws and practices.

3. What is the biggest challenge in preparing for your role in the area of special education and IEP meetings?

- Time is a significant factor in building administrators feeling prepared for IEP meetings.
- Building administrators shared that a lack of knowledge in the area of special education and practices was a significant barrier to them feeling fully prepared for IEP meetings.

4. Typically, how are IEP meetings in your building set up and scheduled? What process is used to ensure administrators are included, as scheduling takes place?

- Building administrators shared that it is the case manager's responsibility to schedule meetings and ensure that an administrator is able to attend.

- Administrators shared the important role that technology plays in the process of ensuring that IEP meetings are scheduled.
- Respondents said they have specific times meetings can or cannot be held.

5. What is the process of a typical IEP meeting in your building? How is it structured and who participates?

- Participants showed an understanding of the individuals who should be present during IEP meetings, depending on the purpose of the meeting.
- Building administrators mentioned the varying responsibilities of IEP team members, especially the case manager as the main leader of the meeting.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to determine what possible obstacles are preventing building level administrators from fully engaging in the special education IEP process. For the purposes of this study, the researcher used a qualitative research method and approach to collect and analyze data, which encompassed interviews of individuals, along with surveys. To better understand what possible obstacles are preventing building level administrators from fully engaging in the special education IEP process, survey and interview questions were developed to gather data focused upon details, regarding the following three research questions:

1. What perceptions do building-level administrators' have of their role(s) in IEP meetings?
2. What potential obstacles impact building-level administrators' participation in special education IEP meetings?
3. What specific procedural and/or professional practices would improve building-level administrators' active and inclusive involvement in IEP meetings?

The common areas of need that emerged from the data are as follows and will be further examined in Chapter Five to explore the results and findings of the survey and interviews to provide suggestions and changes for future practice:

- Change building administrators' perception of their role in IEP meetings and increase their knowledge in the area of special education.
- Increase building administrators' collaboration opportunities and leadership meeting time.
- Increase building administrators organizational and time management skills.

CHAPTER FIVE – CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify obstacles that prevent building level administrators from fully engaging in the special education IEP process. For the purposes of this study and using a qualitative research approach, survey and interview questions were specifically selected to identify possible obstacles. Fifteen out of a total of 16 possible participants took part in this study. Participants consisted of all building level administrators at the elementary, middle school, and high school levels. These individuals hold the titles of head principal, assistant principal, and associate principal. The individuals who participated consisted of five high school administrators, three middle school administrators, one sixth grade academy administrator, and six elementary administrators. One administrator at the elementary level chose not to participate. Surveys were conducted anonymously using Qualtrics, and the interviews were conducted using a one-on-one format via Zoom. This research was conducted for the purposes of answering the following research questions:

1. What perceptions do building-level administrators' have of their role(s) in IEP meetings?
2. What potential obstacles impact building-level administrators' participation in special education IEP meetings?
3. What specific procedural and/or professional practices would improve building-level administrators' active and inclusive involvement in IEP meetings?

Summary of Results and Findings

The purpose of this qualitative study was to determine obstacles that prevent building level administrators from fully engaging and actively participating in the special education IEP process. For the purposes of this study and using a qualitative research approach, survey and

interview questions were specifically selected to assist in identifying possible obstacles. Fifteen out of a total of 16 administrators participated in this study. Participants consisted of all building level administrators at the elementary, middle school, and high school levels. These individuals hold the titles of head principal, assistant principal, and associate principal. Participants included five high school administrators, three middle school administrators, one sixth grade academy administrator, and six elementary administrators. Refer to Table 4.1 for participant demographics. One administrator at the elementary level chose not to participate.. Surveys were conducted anonymously using Qualtrics, and the interviews were conducted using a one-on-one format via Zoom.

Building administrators see their role as being moderators/facilitators of IEP meetings and are there to answer any questions that might arise from the discussions, ensure the agenda is followed, keep the meeting on task, and assure legal processes are followed. As part of the role of an administrator in an IEP meeting, principals understand that, even though it can be challenging, it is best for them to not be on their phones or computers during meetings, so that they can actively participate and effectively communicate with the team. They agree that a building administrator should be knowledgeable of the student, the IEP that is being reviewed, as well as in the laws and practices of special education. Administrators expressed the importance of the basic processes of an IEP meeting being followed (i.e., required personnel being present, paperwork completed, an agenda is followed). An area of emphasis among principals was that it is important that all team members provide input during an IEP meeting, including the parents. In addition, administrators believe it is essential that meetings stay on topic, on task, and on time. Watching the IEP team effectively working together and seeing students grow and be successful,

is the most enjoyable part of an IEP meeting for most administrators. They also really appreciate when parents are involved in the process and are happy with how their child is performing well.

Building administrators explained the major obstacles to their active involvement in IEP meetings is having inadequate time to fully be prepared, often times being interrupted by events happening in the building, incomplete understanding the data being reviewed, and a lack of knowledge of special education due process, which leads to lack of confidence. Principals went on shared that the relationship between the parent and the school can negatively affect the success of a meeting, especially when there are disagreements, or the child is not making growth. Respondents further explained that the failure on the part of any IEP team members to be organized and prepared, including having current data, can have a negative effect on the success of the IEP meeting. Administrators said they are much more likely to be an active participant in IEP meetings when it involves a student with significant behavior concerns, they know or are very familiar with the family, or the meeting is high stakes and complex (i.e., high needs student receiving many different services, disagreements between the school and parents, placement changes, etc.).

Administrators displayed a good understanding of which individuals should be present for a meeting, depending on the circumstances, along with the varying responsibilities. Leaders agreed that it is the case manager's responsibility to schedule meetings and that technology plays an important role in that process, since calendar invites, email, etc. are used. The vast majority of principals have set guidelines for when meetings can or cannot be held such as before school, after school, or PLC time. Building administrators overwhelmingly agree that time and experience on the job has helped prepare them for their role in IEP meetings. They also feel that professional development, along with talking to and learning from seasoned administrators or

other experts in special education has helped them. Principals did share that they could still benefit from additional professional development both within and outside the district. Ongoing opportunities, within the district, throughout the school year to review, reflect, and discuss special education laws and practices as an administrative team was another area participants felt could be very beneficial for their future success. They reiterated that insufficient time and lack of knowledge in special education effect their confidence and are barriers to their active involvement in IEP meetings.

Limitations

A limitation of this study was that the number of participants was limited to a single context with only 16 building level leaders within the district, which means the sample size is quite small. During the process of the research, one administrator chose not to participate, which lowered the number down to 15 participants. Also, the fact that the study only took place in the context of the district, may have been cause for potential biases or perceptions that may not be present in other contexts. Another possible limitation to this study was that it was completed during the COVID-19 pandemic, which meant that all interviews had to be conducted remotely via Zoom. The researcher is confident that the data is accurate and that participants provided thoughtful and meaningful responses and feedback. However, it is possible that the remote format may have been uncomfortable for some participants, which may have negatively affected their willingness to provide truly open and honest answers to interview questions and prompts. A third possible limitation to this study was that the researcher conducted the research in his own context, meaning that participants may have been less willing to provide completely open and honest answers to the interview questions and prompts, since there was a personal connection. To counteract this possibility, the researcher made efforts to provide assurances to participants

that all surveys and interviews were and will be kept completely anonymous and that no information would be tied back to them directly.

Delimitations

As part of this study, only building administrators participated and did not include teachers or district administrators input, regarding the possible barriers to building administrators participation in the special education IEP process. Omitting all those who are not building level administrators from the study was a purposeful decision, believing that providing other input may skew the data and not provide information specifically from the building administrators' contexts and perceptions. While the opinions and input of teachers and district administration could be useful, the purposes of this study were to focus solely on the perspectives of the building principals regarding special education IEP meetings.

Recommendations

Change building administrators' perception of their role in IEP meetings and increase their knowledge in the area of special education. Participants overwhelmingly reported that a barrier to their active involvement in IEP meetings is personal knowledge in the area of special education. One comment shared by an administrator (P2) was:

I think it's just having an understanding of sped law and the role that sped plays in a school building, because there's so much to it. And if your background wasn't sped, even before you were an administrator, then you have that kind of learning curve on top of it.

From the literature review completed in Chapter Two, the following information was shared, "Special education program development often hinged on the role, support, interest, and expertise of the principal, which varied considerably from school to school. Special education teachers invariably expressed that the support of the principal was crucial to their efforts" (Patterson et al, 2000, pgs. 15-6). Building administrators also shared the negative effects of a

lack of special education knowledge on their confidence level in IEP meeting participation. For example, one administrator (P10) stated:

I just think the confidence in knowing what comes next. The confidence in knowing what the laws are. The confidence in knowing what you can and cannot provide to a student. Confidence in knowing what you can and cannot say. There's so much in there that it's like if you don't feel okay with what's going on you're not going to be engaged, because I don't want to say the wrong thing.

This is also supported by research conducted in Chapter Two by Schwarter & Renner (2000) who said, "Individuals high in self-efficacy imagine success scenarios, anticipate potential outcomes of diverse strategies, and take the initiative to try and adopt a new behavior. Those with less self-efficacy, on the other hand, imagine failure scenarios, harbor self-doubts, and procrastinate" (p. 488). Answers provided by the leaders also show that they see their role in IEP meetings to be as more of a facilitator, rather than a fully involved and active participant. One administrator (P7) said, "I think our role is to make sure that the meeting is on track, and we make sure that everything is civil and constructive." Another principal (P2) explained, "I would say passive, not necessarily the leader of the IEP. I really leave that to the case manager or the school psych, if it happened to be an evaluation. So, really more of a participant." It is believed that the recommendations listed below will help change these perceptions, as well as increase building administrators' knowledge in the area of special education:

- Provide specific, ongoing special education training throughout the year for administrators in the following areas:
 - Discuss IEP scenarios, provide IEP role playing opportunities, review and process as an administrative leadership team
 - Training in evaluations (assessing, process, data reviews, scoring, etc.)

- Effectively facilitating and leading challenging IEP meetings through active participation, meetings with contentious parents, meetings where there are disagreements between team members, etc.
- Share with and encourage building administrator to seek out professional development opportunities outside of the district that is focused on special education.

Increase building administrators' collaboration opportunities and leadership meeting time.

Building administrators shared their desire to have opportunities to observe other, more seasoned administrators in action during IEP meetings, believing that doing so would allow them to gain ideas and insight that they could then take back and implement in their own context. One administrator (P12) shared:

Honestly, it's a lot more just like if you sit in an IEP with someone that really knows what they're talking about, and they're very thorough. You remember that, and then you kind of copy the same thing. So, it's like a good model, a good mentor, somebody that leads an IEP very thoroughly.

Dukess (2001) says, "...principals need to have someone available to provide emotional support as well as skills and knowledge" (p. 10). In addition, leaders agreed they believe it would be very beneficial to have the opportunity to meet more often as an administrative leadership group for the specific purpose of reviewing, reflecting, and discussing special education laws and practices as an administrative team. A participant (P8) explained:

Just refreshers, annual refreshers about expectations and maybe some tips and tricks that are going well in other buildings that people are seeing. Time to reflect... When I say time to reflect, not me finding time, but as a leadership team.

Recommendations to increase building administrators' collaboration opportunities and leadership meeting times are:

- Provide opportunities for administrators to shadow principals who are strong in the area of special education.

- Provide opportunities for administrators to shadow special education experts in IEP meetings.
- Review administrators' IEP roles and expectations at least quarterly, during leadership team meetings
- Increase opportunities for ongoing special education and IEP discussions, as a leadership team, during the school year. (discuss, review, provide feedback etc.)

Increase building administrators organizational and time management skills. The vast majority of participants shared that a major barrier to their active involvement in IEP meetings was having insufficient time to review the documents ahead of time, due to time constraints cause by events taking place in the school. One leader (P14) shared:

I think there are a lot of day-to-day things that come up, and they come up here a lot. You say, "Okay, before this meeting I'm going to sit down, and I'm going to review some things, look at the paperwork, make sure it's going to work...But, then you have three fights that break out at lunch, and you're spending all day dealing with discipline. And so, then you go into the meeting and you didn't get the things done that you needed to get done.

According to research shared in Chapter Two, "About 40 percent of principals' time was spent away from the school office in locations around campus including hallways, playgrounds, and classrooms" (Horng et al, 2010, p. 9). These distractions, of course, take away from the time that could be used to review and prepare for IEP meetings. Administrators also shared the impact that a lack of preparedness on the side of IEP team members, especially case managers, can have on the success of IEP meetings. An administrator (P5) explained:

Well, the case manager not being prepared and not having all of the paperwork there that needs to be there. I think it's very frustrating for me when we get to signatures and the paperwork's not there, and somebody has to leave the meeting and go print copies.

Recommendations to improve in this area are:

- Administrators should implement specific times each week into their schedules to review upcoming IEPs and meet with case managers.
- Provide professional development to principals on time management, successfully working through building distractions, prioritization, etc.
- Create a hierarchical list in each building of staff and processes to use when an administrator is in an IEP meeting or needs to prepare for a meeting, and there are situations occurring that need immediate attention.
- Implement the usage of pre-meetings for IEPs on a more frequent basis
- Continue Special Education New Teacher Induction meetings
 - For 1st and 2nd year special education staff or new the district
 - Share topics with all special education staff who could request to attend specific sessions they feel they could benefit from
- Include ongoing training for special education staff on topics regarding IEP meeting preparation and operations as part of the monthly special education PLC meetings (being prepared for meetings, getting accurate data, meeting timelines, technology, calendar invites, etc.)

Implications

Having served as a building administrator before, I have experienced first-hand the difficult, and often times, complicated intricacies of that role. As a building-level administrator you are tasked with effectively wearing several hats and carrying the load of those responsibilities. From maintaining a safe, productive learning environment in which students are making growth to filling in for lunch duty because an employee had to leave work due to being sick. There are multitude of responsibilities a principal must successfully complete. One of those

very important roles is being a leader in the area of special education. Much of the data brought to light by this study was not a surprise to me, given the fact that I have been in similar roles myself and have also had some of the same thoughts, feelings, and concerns first-hand. However, I enjoyed the process, and it was compelling to see many of my hypotheses fulfilled as part of this study. My deepest hope is that increased emphasis will be placed in the area of building-level administrators' roles in special education, including training and preparedness in their university courses as well as on the job, so that they can feel confident in their knowledge and abilities to help students be successful.

The themes that emerged as part of this study authenticated the impact on building level administrators' confidence in their abilities to actively participate in IEP meeting, based off their perceived level of knowledge of special education. While the survey showed that 87% of participants said they are pretty confident in the area of special education and 73% rated themselves as pretty effective regarding their involvement in IEP meetings, a majority of participants shared during the interview process that there are times during meetings that they aren't sure what to say or do, so they often times don't engage in the discussions or instead defer to others in the meeting who are involved in special education. The researcher's belief, gathered from the data, is that while confidence and perceived effectiveness appeared to be fairly high among participants overall, it also became apparent during the interviews that in high stakes, more complicated special education IEP meetings principals were much more likely to feel unsure of themselves. One principal (P6) explained:

...I found myself just being a spectator a lot, and especially when we've got 15 people at an IEP meeting, and it's super...a high stakes IEP, I don't want to say anything that could compromise what we're trying to do, and so that's definitely a barrier.

This is also supported by the fact that 93% of participants marked on the survey that district professional development is big area of need in helping them in their leadership for IEP meetings. In the more routine IEP meetings, participants shared during the interviews that they were much more confident in their ability level.

During interviews those less experienced administrators were much more likely to express uneasiness or discomfort in IEP meetings, especially those that were more complicated or involved. The researcher believes this can be directly correlated between administrators lacking as much experience compared to those more seasoned administrators. This is supported by the survey data in which 93% of participants reported that time and learning opportunities on the job as a principal helped prepare them for leadership roles in IEP meetings. One administrator (P10) responded:

I think just time in. Just doing it over and over and over. I think about my first year as an administrator and there were so many mistakes made that I didn't even know I was making, because I just didn't know.

A surprise during the process was the large impact that outside distractions have on building level administrators active participation in IEP meetings. On the survey, 47% of participants said there were too many distractions coming from outside of the meeting. Interview data provided some additional details (i.e. student behaviors, angry parent in the office, phone calls, emails, etc.). The researcher believed, prior to the study, that outside distractions were somewhat impactful but not to the level shared by participants. This impact also included the time periods leading up to the IEP meetings. Participants shared during the interviews that they are often bombarded throughout each day with various building, parent, staff, and student needs that keep them from feeling fully prepared for meetings. These distractions effected their time

management, and administrators reported wanting and planning to read special education documents ahead of time but often times being unable to do so, due to these outside distractions.

Future Research

This study was conducted in the researcher's context, being the current district of employment. Fifteen building level administrators participated in a survey, along with one-on-one interviews via Zoom. The purpose of the study was to determine obstacles that prevent administrators' active participation in IEP meetings and to then use the data to make real changes and implement needed supports to improve in this area. Recommendations for future practice are:

- Use the recommendations to make changes in the district of context. Then, track academic scores of the special education subgroup to examine how the changes impacted student growth and success.
- Complete the study on a broader scale (i.e., states, regions, nationally) to examine possible similar trends in other building level administrator groups or cohorts.
- Research building administrators' background experiences and years of experience to examine the effects they might have on active involvement in IEP meetings.
- Examine the same data using a multi-year study including the same participants to learn how their growth in knowledge and experiences over time effects their confidence levels and willingness to be actively involved in IEP meetings.
- Conduct similar research that expands to include special education teachers and related service professionals on their perceptions of building level administrators' roles and involvement in IEP meetings.

- Conduct research specifically on special education teachers and related services professionals' expertise and years of experience to examine what impact that might have on building level administrators and successful IEP meetings.
- Research districts with higher scores in their special education subgroups populations to conduct similar research, as was completed in this dissertation, to examine what impact building level administrators may have played in those successes.
- Research post-secondary programs in building leadership to examine the emphasis placed on building administrators' roles in special education laws and practices.
 - For further research in this area, follow up with graduates of the programs over the past 5-10 years to complete similar research as was carried out in this dissertation.

Summation

The purpose of this study was to examine why inconsistent participation in special education IEP meetings by building administrators could be occurring. During this process 15 building level principals completed a survey, as well as participated in one-on-one interviews. The following three research questions provided focus and steered the questions and prompts of both the survey and interviews:

1. What perceptions do building-level administrators' have of their role(s) in IEP meetings?
2. What potential obstacles impact building-level administrators' participation in special education IEP meetings?
3. What specific procedural and/or professional practices would improve building-level administrators' active and inclusive involvement in IEP meetings?

During the research process it became extremely apparent that building level administrators are very aware that they should play an important role in IEP meetings. However, it also became obvious from the discussions that there are several barriers preventing many administrators from fully embracing and effectively implementing their role. Based on survey and interview results, recommendations were made to overcome these barriers, by narrowing the specific needs down to the following three areas:

- Change building administrators' perception of their role in IEP meetings and increase their knowledge in the area of special education.
- Increase building administrators' collaboration opportunities and leadership meeting time.
- Increase building administrators organizational and time management skills.

Upon beginning the process of researching the topic and completing the literature review, it became obvious that there had not been much research completed regarding specifically the purpose and effects of building level administrators' participation in IEP meetings. My hope is that through this study a more in-depth conversation can begin across the field of education about the important role building administrators play in IEP meetings. While it is a legal obligation, according to IDEA, that an LEA be one of the participants in an IEP, even more important is the results of that IEP meeting and the implementation of the decisions made on behalf of the student. For this reason, it is extremely important that building administrators be adequately prepared and equipped to successfully assume this role. As was shared in previous chapters, Wakeman et al (2006) explain, "principals do have a direct and indirect effect on student achievement through the setting of expectations, the establishment of school climate, and the demonstration of leadership to stakeholders" (pgs. 153-154). Increasing building

administrator knowledge, abilities, and confidence in the area of special education is imperative to their success in IEP meetings and, ultimately, success in school for students with special needs.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A – Survey

The survey was given to all building level principals in the district, including head principals and those whose titles are assistant principal or associate principal. This group of individuals consisted of 15 administrators with varying backgrounds and years of experience. The data was collected to gather basic demographic data, along with the principals' perception of their roles in IEP meetings.

Survey Questions for the Role of Principals in IEP Meetings:

1. Please select the role that best describes your current position
 - a. Secondary Principal (6-12)
 - b. Secondary Assistant Principal (6-12)
 - c. Elementary Principal (Prek-5)
 - d. Elementary Assistant Principal (Prek-5)

2. Please select the total number of years you have been in your current role as an administrator
 - a. 1-2 years
 - b. 3-5 years
 - c. 6-9 years
 - d. 10 or more years

3. Please select your total years of experience in any certified position
 - a. 1-2 years
 - b. 3-5 years
 - c. 6-9 years
 - d. 10 or more years

4. Prior to your current administrative role, how would you describe your previous leadership experience? (Please select all that apply)
 - a. None
 - b. Head principal
 - c. Assistant Principal
 - d. District Administrator
 - e. Instructional Coach
 - f. Lead teacher
 - g. Other (Please provide a comment)

5. How would you describe your knowledge in the area of special education?
 - a. None
 - b. Limited
 - c. Pretty confident
 - d. Expert

6. How would you describe your participation in most IEP meetings?
 - a. I am not involved in any discussions or decision making
 - b. Passively listen but very little involvement
 - c. Actively listen but for the most part do not say anything
 - d. Actively listen, as well as discuss and share input to the meeting
 - e. Other (Please provide a comment)

7. When/If you do not actively participate in an IEP meeting, what barriers may be preventing you from being actively involved? (Please select all that apply)
 - a. Don't feel it's my responsibility
 - b. Lack of confidence in special education knowledge
 - c. Don't want to do or say something wrong
 - d. Uncomfortable leading the meeting
 - e. Too many distractions outside of the meeting coming from staff or students
 - f. Other (Please provide a comment)

8. Regarding your leadership in IEP meetings, what would you say has helped prepare you for this role? (Please select all that apply)
 - a. College course work
 - b. Classroom experiences as a teacher
 - c. District professional development
 - d. Time and learning opportunities on the job as a principal
 - e. Other (Please provide a comment)

9. Regarding your leadership in IEP meetings, what would you say are the biggest areas of need in helping you be successful? (Please select all that apply)
 - a. College course work
 - b. Classroom experiences as a teacher
 - c. District professional development
 - d. Time and learning opportunities on the job as a principal
 - e. Other (Please provide a comment)

10. How effective would rate yourself, regarding your involvement in IEP meetings?
 - a. Not effective
 - b. Somewhat effective
 - c. Pretty effective
 - d. Very effective

11. At what level has the COVID-19 crisis impacted your ability to participate in IEP meetings?
 - a. Not at all
 - b. Somewhat
 - c. Moderately
 - d. Significantly

Appendix B – Interview Protocol

15 principals were interviewed using the interview protocol below. For the purposes of exposing additional barriers to principals' active involvement in IEP meetings and their perceptions of their roles in the meetings, this protocol was developed.

Interview Questions:

1. Typically, how are IEP meetings in your building set up and scheduled? What process is used to ensure administrators are included, as scheduling takes place?
2. What is the process of a typical IEP meeting in your building? How is it structured and who participates?
3. In your building, what role does a building administrator typically play in IEP meetings?
4. What is the most gratifying or enjoyable part of an IEP meeting?
5. What is the most challenging element of an IEP meeting?
6. Describe the perfect IEP meeting, as if no barriers existed, and everything was executed exactly how it needed to be done.
7. Keeping your idea of a perfect IEP meeting in mind, what are the barriers occurring that prevent it from happening?
8. In your opinion, what are the ideal behaviors and characteristics of an actively participating principal in an IEP meeting?
9. Keeping in mind your ideal behavior and characteristics of an actively participating principal in an IEP meeting, what barriers may be occurring that are preventing this from taking place?
10. Are you more active in some IEP meetings compared to other meetings? Why or why not? Explain.

11. What is the biggest challenge in preparing for your role in the area of special education and IEP meetings?
12. What has most helped prepare you for your role in the area of special education and IEP meetings?
13. Reflecting back on all of our previous conversation, how could the district support you best with your role in future IEP meetings?

Appendix C – Institutional Review Board Approval



To: Trevor Addis
From: Douglas James Adams, Chair
IRB Expedited Review
Date: 05/22/2020
Action: **Exemption Granted**
Action Date: 05/22/2020
Protocol #: 2004265143
Study Title: Building-Level Administrators and Collaborative Special Education IEP Meetings:
Addressing Barriers to Active and Inclusive Participation

The above-referenced protocol has been determined to be exempt.

If you wish to make any modifications in the approved protocol that may affect the level of risk to your participants, you must seek approval prior to implementing those changes. All modifications must provide sufficient detail to assess the impact of the change.

If you have any questions or need any assistance from the IRB, please contact the IRB Coordinator at 109 MLKG Building, 5-2208, or irb@uark.edu.

cc: Kevin P Brady, Investigator

Appendix D – Informed Consent for Survey

Title of Study: *Building-Level Administrators and Collaborative Special Education IEP Meetings:*

Addressing Barriers to Active and Inclusive Participation

Researcher: Trevor Addis, Ed.S, Doctoral Student, University of Arkansas

The purpose of this study is to identify the barriers impacting building-level administrator participation and facilitation of special education IEP meetings. You are being invited to complete an online survey via Qualtrics for the purposes of this study. A total of 16 participants were invited to participate in this study. Your participation in the survey is voluntary, and if you decide not to participate or withdraw from the survey at any time, there will be no penalty. There will be no payment for participation in this study.

You can choose to leave any questions incomplete that you do not want to answer. The survey is estimated to take approximately 5-15 minutes to complete and includes 11 questions.

All data collected for the purposes of this study will not be individually identifiable. All data will be kept securely in the Qualtrics password protected database. The data collected in this study will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law and University of Arkansas policy.

The Institutional Review Board for Studies Involving Human Subjects at the University of Arkansas has reviewed this study and has approved its completion. If you have questions regarding this review process, you may contact the Institutional Review Board directly using the contact information below.

By clicking “I Consent” you are agreeing that you have read and understand the information provided, have had all your questions satisfactorily answered, and voluntarily agree to participate in this study. After you consent, you will be directed to the survey questions.

I Consent _____

I Do Not Consent _____

For further information or questions, please contact:

Trevor Addis, Researcher
taddis@uark.edu

Dr. Kevin P. Brady, Faculty Advisor
kbrady@uark.edu

For any questions about research study participants’ rights, please contact the University of Arkansas Institutional Review Board:
(479) 575-2208 or irb@uark.edu

Appendix E – Informed Consent for Interview

Title of Study: *Building-Level Administrators and Collaborative Special Education IEP Meetings:*

Addressing Barriers to Active and Inclusive Participation

Researcher: Trevor Addis, Ed.S, Doctoral Student, University of Arkansas

The purpose of this study is to identify the barriers impacting building-level administrator participation and facilitation of special education IEP meetings. You are being invited to take part in an individual interview for the purposes of this study. Your participation in the interview is voluntary and if you decide not to participate or withdraw from the interview at any time, there will be no penalty. There will be no payment for participation in this study.

You can choose to not answer any questions, which make you uncomfortable. The interview is estimated to take approximately 45 minutes to 1 hour. The interview will occur electronically via Zoom and will be recorded. The researcher will act as the interview facilitator and note-taker.

All data collected for the purposes of this study will not be individually identifiable; names will not be used in any written or verbal communication and writings. All data will be kept securely and password protected on the researcher's computer. After data has been collected and the study is complete, any identifiable records will be deleted to maintain confidentiality. The data collected in this study will be kept confidential to the extent allowed by law and University of Arkansas policy.

The Institutional Review Board for Studies Involving Human Subjects at the University of Arkansas has reviewed this study and has approved its completion. If you have questions regarding this review process, you may contact the Institutional Review Board directly using the contact information below.

By participating in this interview, you are agreeing that you have read and understand the information provided, have had all your questions satisfactorily answered, and voluntarily agree to have your answers in the interview used in this research.

For further information or questions, please contact:

Trevor Addis, Researcher
taddis@uark.edu

Dr. Kevin P. Brady, Faculty Advisor
kbrady@uark.edu

For any questions about research study participants' rights, please contact the University of Arkansas Institutional Review Board:

(479) 575-2208
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