Are Leaders Influenced by Advocates in Decisions on Special Education Eligibility?

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Abstract The purpose of this study was to investigate the influence of the opinions of private practitioners and educational advocates on instructional leaders' decision-making processes when making a recommendation for special education eligibility. School-based administrators ($n = 56$) with varying years of experience as special education administrators participated in this study. Using data from a series of vignettes and from structured interviews, results indicated that private practitioners and educational advocates significantly influence administrators' recommendations for special education eligibility.

Keywords Special education; Leadership; Multiple stakeholder; Decision-making; Power; Disabilities

Introduction

School systems are political environments in which politically-charged decisions are made (Tooms, Kretovics, & Smialek, 2007). One type of decision that must be made frequently and which is often controversial is whether a student is eligible for special education services. Special education eligibility decisions are made by a team of individuals, all of whom have a stake in the outcome. As such, all team members have legitimate power in the decision-making process (Ruppar & Gaffney, 2011). However, the format of this decision is subject to differences (real or perceived) in

expert power. To increase the likelihood that his/her interests are met, a stakeholder may solicit assistance from an external agency or individual in order to have greater influence over the other decision-makers and, thus, the decision itself (Frooman, 1999; Neville & Menguc, 2006; Rowley, 1997).

School-based administrators have to be both instructional leaders and political leaders for their respective schools (DiPaola, Tschannen-Moran, & Walther-Thomas, 2004; Rafoth & Foriska, 2006). As members of the decision-making team, administrators must balance the role of instructional leader and political leader by demonstrating the knowledge of and ability to interpret and apply special education laws, regulations, and procedures while making ethical decisions about students under the pressure of other stakeholder demands. As Scruggs and Mastropieri (2002) observe, "[s]uch judgments can be critical in identifying students who might otherwise 'fall through the cracks'" (p. 157). Research has shown, however, that there is great variability in procedures and practices as implemented in schools, which may result in misapplication of laws and regulations as well as resource inefficiencies.

The school-based administrator, as a stakeholder, is expected in his or her role as instructional leader to remain independent of stakeholder influences and to balance the demands of competing stakeholders when making school-based decisions. School-based administrators involved in special education eligibility decisions are in a pivotal position (Mellard, Deshler, & Barth, 2004), based on their instructional leadership role and expertise, to mediate the effects of external stakeholder influences. Existing literature has addressed the function of power in decision-making and has examined the influence of both stakeholders and social networks in decision-making, and some studies have focused on the decision-making practices of individual stakeholders, such as teachers and school psychologists, in regard to special education eligibility (see, for example, Etscheidt & Knesting, 2007; Martin, Marshall, & Sale, 2004; Ruppar & Gaffney, 2011). Using extant literature as a foundation and guide, this study examines the relationship between stakeholders and the special education eligibility decisions of school-based administrators.

The research regarding special education eligibility decision-making has been scant and has focused primarily on the parent, the teacher, and to a lesser extent, on the school psychologist (Abidin & Robinson, 2002; Algozzine & Ysseldyke, 1986; Della Toffalo & Pedersen, 2005). While the literature frequently identifies the participation of school-based administrators as an important factor in the effectiveness of team decision-making (Mellard, Deshler, & Barth, 2004; Rafoth & Foriska, 2006; Segall & Campbell, 2014), little research has focused on the decision-making processes of school-based administrators in regard to special education eligibility. Given that school-based administrators—as both team members and sources of balance and neutrality—are in a unique position to mediate the effects of external influences on special education eligibility decisions, investigation into the external influences on administrators' decision-making is warranted.

Purpose

The school-based administrator is responsible for using his/her vision, leadership, and authority to define and plan the implementation of special education (Lieber et al.,

2000) and to establish values for the educational community (Praisner, 2003). School-based administrators are seen as cornerstones of good schools and key agents in program effectiveness (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004). Success of special education programs is contingent in part upon their efficacy in carrying out their role as special education administrators, as well as upon their knowledge of special education (Patterson, Marshall, & Bowling, 2000).

The purpose of the present research is to examine the influence of external opinions—private practitioner diagnoses and educational advocates—on the school-based administrator's decision-making when making special education eligibility recommendations. The efficacy of the entire special education enterprise is contingent on a fair, unbiased, and well-informed eligibility decision process. Little is known about what kinds of information school leaders rely on in this process, or what influence external agents have on leaders' decision making.

This paper employed a mixed-methods design that investigated whether school administrators are influenced by stakeholders external to the special education eligibility process and what factors, if any, may mitigate such influences. Specifically, in this paper we present the quantitative analysis that examined whether a statistically significant difference exists in administrators' eligibility recommendations when evidence provided by an external stakeholder is present. The following research questions are addressed:

> What type of information is most important to school-based administrators when making a special education eligibility decision?

> Is there a difference in school-based administrators' special education eligibility recommendations with the inclusion of an external opinion?

Background

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004, or IDEA, not only requires an education for children with disabilities, but provides for specially trained teachers and an individualized education program tailored to the student's individual needs in the least restrictive environment (LRE) (Pardini, 2002). When a student is suspected of having an educational disability, a multidisciplinary, psychoeducational evaluation process is initiated and culminates in an eligibility meeting. During the eligibility meeting, a school-based multidisciplinary team, including the school-based administrator, reviews the assessment results and other relevant data (e.g., student grades, standardized test scores, doctors' reports) to determine if the student meets the specific criteria as a student with an educational disability and is thus eligible to receive special education services (Civic Impulse, 2016).

Special education eligibility decisions are made by a multidisciplinary team and are, by design, open to the influence of multiple stakeholders (Segall & Campbell, 2014). In a decision involving multiple stakeholders, individual stakeholders may seek opportunities to increase the probability that the decision will be made in their favor. One way to do this is to align themselves with an external stakeholder, a relationship that would increase their own decision-making power. In an effort to influence the

outcome of the special education eligibility decision in their children's favor, parents may seek assistance from a private practitioner or an educational advocate. The outcome of the special education eligibility decision leads to instructional and placement decisions for the student in question; these are the concern of school-based administrators, whose role it is to oversee the design, implementation, and evaluation of school programs. Administrators fulfill this role while bound by law, policy, and professional obligation to be concerned with equity and fairness in delivering appropriate educational programs that are high quality, research-based, and high in academic standards and expectations for all children (Crockett, 2002; DiPaola et al., 2004). Research has shown that the inclusion of external agents, such as an educational advocate and private practitioner opinions, impacts consensus decisions, since team members feel pressured to make a particular decision even if eligibility criteria are not met (Furlong & Yanagida, 1985; Shepard, Smith, & Vojir, 1983).

School systems have long been considered political systems, and like any other political system, officials in the school system must manage conflict between constituencies and make decisions that pivot on power. When decisions are made in large, complex organizations like a school system, a decision typically involves a number of interest groups referred to as stakeholders. Though there are numerous definitions of "stakeholder" in the research (Carroll, 1993; Hill & Jones, 1992; Alkhafaji, 1989), the present research uses the most commonly cited definition: "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives" (Freeman, 1994, p. 410). Stakeholders are identified by their possession of one or more of three salient characteristics: power, legitimacy, and urgency (Brazer & Keller, 2006). Because its focus is to examine the *influences* of external opinions on decision-making, the present research engages with the characteristic of power, which is derived from the group's or individual's position, relationships, access to resources, or a combination thereof, with regard to the organization. Social power, the potential for social influence and the use of available resources to bring about change (Pierro, Cicero, & Raven, 2008; Raven, 2008), is a central concept in understanding the relationships between individuals involved in multiple stakeholder decision-making and encompasses more than just the relationships between individuals and others in their social networks (Bourdieu, 1986).

French and Raven (1959) identified five bases of social power—reward, coercion, legitimate, expertise, and referent power—defined based on the relationship between the influencing agent and the target of that influence. In the context of the special education eligibility decision, the two bases of power that are most relevant are legitimate power and expert power—each member has a legitimate stake in the decision and each member has a different type of expertise in respect to the child in question. As the special education eligibility decision is a *consensus* decision, each stakeholder in the decision is assumed to have an equal say (Butler & Rothstein, 1987). One could infer, then, that members of the special education eligibility committee enter into the decision-making context with equal levels of legitimate power; however, they also enter the process with differing perspectives and values in relation to the child's needs (Hess, Molina, & Kozleski, 2006) and with inherently different

degrees of expert power, with school-based personnel presumed to have a higher degree of professional knowledge and expertise.

Multiple stakeholder and *social network* theories help describe the relationship between an external opinion and the school-based administrator's special education eligibility recommendation. Multiple stakeholder theory concerns itself with describing and predicting how organizations will operate under various conditions or stakeholder influences, whereas the (single) stakeholder perspective assumes that organizations are obligated to address the expectations of the stakeholders and will act accordingly (Rowley, 1997). Schools do not typically respond to stakeholders on an individual basis, but respond to multiple influences from a network of stakeholders (Brazer & Keller, 2006). Adding social network theory (SNT) to the conceptualization of stakeholder relationships changes the traditional dyadic perspective into a multidimensional view that reflects stakeholders' tendencies to form alliances when attempting to influence an organization; this more closely reflects the nature of the eligibility decision-making process.

The leader of an organization typically does not act alone when making organizational decisions, but gathers information and consults with advisors, who also have an interest in the decision, before proceeding, in order to ensure the optimal outcome for all involved (Brazer & Keller, 2006). School-based administrators, then, find themselves a part of a stakeholder web, in contrast to the typical chain-of-command configuration of decision-making: a network of influences in which the stakeholders likely all have relationships, direct or indirect, with one another (Rowley, 1997). Influence is a function of these relationships, and school-based administrators must organize stakeholder objectives into a hierarchy of importance, based on the level of influence of each stakeholder or group of stakeholders, when formulating his or her decision. The school-based administrator's position, then, is variable and subject to a variety of multiple stakeholder interactions, all of which have a degree of influence on him or her. The school-based administrator's position in his or her network is ultimately an important determinant in what and how his or her decision is made.

Social networks provide support and leverage for individuals or groups in order to "get ahead" or change opportunities (Munn-Joseph & Gavin-Evans, 2008). Parents seek justice in the form of equal opportunities to support their children's individual needs (Hess et al., 2006). They struggle to obtain for their children what they believe are the educational experiences and opportunities to which they are rightfully entitled—experiences and opportunities provided to children without disabilities—and they quickly learn that connecting with networks of other parents who have children with disabilities is crucial in gaining the collective strength, or power, to achieve their goals in special education (Zaretsky, 2004). Advocacy takes various forms, but most often parents find empowerment through family, friends, and others in their social networks (Hess et al., 2006; Munn-Joseph & Gavin-Evans, 2008).

Methodology

To answer the aforementioned research questions, data were collected from 56 principals and assistant principals who were their school's special education point-of-contact in a large, mid-Atlantic suburban school system. Respondents were asked

to rate the importance of a variety of information sources used in special education eligibility decisions, and then to read and respond to two case vignettes, in order for the researchers to examine the level of influence of the external opinions of private practitioners and educational advocates on the administrators' recommendations for special education eligibility. Each vignette included an introduction and a set of data related to the eligibility decision. A baseline vignette was used as a control, and a set of "treatment" vignettes were employed to determine leaders' decisions under one of three conditions: baseline data plus an advocate's opinion; baseline data plus an independent educational evaluation (IEE); and baseline opinion plus both an advocate's opinion and an IEE. For heuristic purposes, the following hypotheses were tested to answer the research questions:

H_1. School-based administrators credential a private practitioner's or an educational advocate's opinion as more important than other sources of information presented for consideration for special education eligibility.

H_2. There is a difference in school-based administrators' eligibility recommendations for special education eligibility based upon the presence of an external opinion.

Table 1: Gender, position, school level, and special education background of participants (n = 56)

Characteristics	n	Percentage
Gender		
Male	25	44.6
Female	31	55.4
Current position		
Assistant principal	45	80.3
Principal	10	17.9
School level		
Retired	1	< 1.0
Elementary school	37	66.1
Middle school	9	16.1
Special education background		
High school	10	17.8
Special education teacher	19	33.9
Special education certified	16	28.6
Special education degree	12	21.4

Participants

The participant pool for the present study included school-based administrators (principals and assistant principals) within a large suburban school system who served or had served at some point in their careers as their school's special education point-of-contact. The special education contacts are responsible for all matters pertaining to special education service and delivery in their respective schools, from the initial referral for evaluation through IEP development and implementation, inclusively. An initial interest email introducing the study was sent to 176 current school-based administrators. The email was sent to all of the district's administrators, principals, and assistant principals, whether or not they currently worked as special education contacts, in order to recruit as many eligible participants as possible. Administrators were asked to reply to the email only if they had an interest in participating in the study and were assured that their response to the initial email was not a commitment to participate but an indication that they were amenable to further contact via phone call or a face-to-face meeting, during which they would receive more detailed information about the study and the participation requirements. During the follow-up contact, 56 administrators verbally committed to participate in the study and scheduled a face-to-face meeting. Participants represented a mix of elementary, middle, and high school administrators with a relatively even distribution between males and females (see Table 1). The vast majority were assistant principals (80%). Only about a third of the respondents reported that they had been a special education teacher, and barely 30 percent were certified in special education. Around one in five reported that they had a special education degree.

Instruments

Demographic survey. The demographic survey included information on the participant's gender, current position, type of school for which they were an administrator (elementary, middle, or high), number of years as an educator, number of years as an administrator, and three brief questions about their experience with special education. Information from this survey was used to provide a description of the sample population. To maintain confidentiality, participants were not asked to disclose any information that would reveal their identity (e.g., name, school name). As part of the survey, the participants were also asked to answer the following:

> Please choose which piece of information you feel to be the most important *for you* when making an eligibility decision: (a) an advocate's opinion, (b) results of a private evaluation (e.g., IEE), or (c) other, please specify type of information (e.g., educational evaluation, grades, referral question, etc.).

The information the participants provided was meant to help determine if administrators credentialed private practitioner evaluations or educational advocate opinions over other sources of information.

Case vignettes. The study used four case vignettes that provided descriptive scenarios in which a student was being considered for special education eligibility. The infor-

mation was fictitious but based on information acquired from several actual cases. Each vignette described the student who was being considered for special education services as a student with a specific learning disability (SLD). Specific Learning Disability was the disability category chosen because it is the most commonly considered category and the most controversial, due to the disagreement among diagnostic professionals on its operating definition (Algozzine & Ysseldyke, 1986; McLoughlin & Lewis, 1994). The vignette for the control scenario (CON) described the case of a 13-year-old male student with a history of academic difficulty in reading. No advocate opinion or information from an independent educational evaluation was included. The vignette used for the other three scenarios described a very similar case of a 12-year-old female student with a history of academic difficulty in math. Data presented for all scenarios included the following categories:

1. Referral concern: the reason that a disability was suspected;
2. Family/social history and psychosocial stressors: any events or circumstances in the student's developmental history (e.g., parental divorce, family history of disabilities) that may have relevance or be a contributing factor in the student's academic difficulties;
3. Developmental history: illnesses or trauma at birth, adoption/foster care, delays in meeting developmental milestones, and so forth;
4. Medical history: illnesses or accidents sustained at any point from birth to the current age;
5. Education history: any information regarding preschools attended, school-generated academic data (e.g., grades, standardized test scores), discipline records, attendance records, and participation in extracurricular academic activities such as tutoring or other enrichment programs;
6. Prior evaluations: any evaluations—medical, psychological, psychiatric, educational—that the student may have had, conducted either by the school system or by outside practitioners;
7. Teacher evaluations: the student's current teachers' narrative descriptions of the student's academic strengths and weaknesses and analyses of the student's response to any intervention strategies that may have been implemented in the classroom;
8. Parent report: the parents' equivalent to the teacher evaluation;
9. Observational data: information provided by the diagnostic staff or non-teacher school-based specialists regarding their observations of the student's behavior in his or her instructional setting;
10. Current psychological and educational evaluations: diagnostic assessments of the student's cognitive processing, communication, and language, and his or her adaptive, social, emotional, behavioral, and academic functioning (reading, math, and written expression).

Separate vignettes (treatment conditions) included the additional information of an independent educational evaluation (IEE), an educational advocate's opinion (ADV), or both (BOTH).

Prior to using the vignettes for the study, an expert review was conducted. Three school psychologists and two educational diagnosticians performed an expert review to verify that the scenarios aligned with the type of information that is typically presented and reviewed for a special education eligibility decision. Information was reviewed for accuracy, completeness, and the extent to which it mirrored reality, to ensure the reliability of the case vignettes. The final vignettes reflected the feedback received from the reviewers.

In addition, prior to surveying the participants, the researcher conducted a pilot study to determine the realism of the case vignette scenarios and to determine whether the information provided was sufficient to make an eligibility determination. Five school psychologists and educational diagnosticians who did not take part in the expert review participated in this pilot study. They followed procedures similar to those that were used in the actual study and answered questions regarding the realism of the referral concerns, whether the amount of information in each of the data categories was sufficient and typical for making the eligibility decision, and the frequency of the inclusion of an IEE or an advocate. Participants' feedback was used to identify vulnerabilities in the case vignette process, and vignettes were modified accordingly to ensure the integrity of the formal study procedures.

Data collection procedures

Meetings were scheduled to collect data from participants based on their assessment of the case vignettes. At meetings, each participant received a packet containing the control vignette (CON) and one of the treatment condition vignettes, i.e., one with either:

> a) an independent educational evaluation (IEE),
> b) an educational advocate's opinion (ADV), or
> c) both (BOTH).

The CON had neither IEE nor ADV information. Each vignette included an introduction and a set of data related to the eligibility decision that was diagnostically similar. A baseline vignette was used as a control and a set of "treatment" vignettes were employed to determine leaders' decisions under one of three conditions: baseline data plus an advocate's opinion; baseline date plus an independent educational evaluation (IEE); and baseline data plus both an advocate's opinion and an IEE. All participants completed an analysis of the CON scenario and were randomly assigned one of the other three scenarios (IEE, ADV, or BOTH) to complete as well. Table 2 illustrates the distribution of the case vignettes among participants.

Table 2: Distribution of Case Vignettes (*n* = 56)

Vignette	Condition	Recipients
Scenario A	No external opinion (CON)	All participants
Scenario B	Advocate opinion (ADV)	19 participants
Scenario C	Independent educational evaluation (IEE)	19 participants
Scenario D	Advocate and IEE (BOTH)	18 participants

Participants were also provided with a copy of the diagnostic criteria for Specific Learning Disability, as outlined in the state regulations governing students with disabilities; a diagnostic evaluation score classification interpretation chart for reference; and a response form on which they rated the statement, "[t]his student qualifies for special education services," on a scale from one (1) to five (5), where the ratings were as follows: 1 = Strongly disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Undecided, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly agree.

Validity

This study was conducted with the understanding that the subject school system may not be "typical" in any way or related to any other context—for example, an urban district—but it has characteristics that are typical of many large, suburban districts in the nation, it has a growing student population that is becoming increasingly diverse, and it may relate well to large, suburban school systems nationwide. The sample size was small, all participants came from one school system, and the case vignettes were limited in their sensitivity, which may limit the overall utility of the results. Additionally, in the survey provided to respondents, the multiple-choice options identified advocates, independent educational evaluations, and "other" sources of information. Specifying the names of the first two sources may have been suggestive and introduced a degree of bias. The present research, however, does serve as a good starting point for examining how administrators' thought processes may be influenced by external sources.

Results

The study's first hypothesis asserts that school-based administrators credential the opinions of a private practitioner or an educational advocate as more important than other sources of information presented for consideration for special education eligibility. To examine this assertion, participants were asked to provide an answer to the statement, "[p]lease indicate which piece of information you feel to be the most important *for you* when making an eligibility decision." Participants were to choose: "(a) an advocate's opinion, (b) a private evaluation/diagnosis (e.g., IEE), or (c) other, please specify (e.g., educational evaluation, grades, referral question)." Data were filtered into nine different categories: School diagnostic evaluations, Teacher-provided information, Parent report, Private practitioner evaluations, Educational advocate opinions, Scholastic data, Intervention outcomes, Combination of data types, and All Information Provided. "Teacher-provided information" included information such as teacher comments and class work samples, and "Scholastic data" included the types of information housed in a student's cumulative file (e.g., report cards and standardized test results). The category "Combination of data types" (e.g., school-based evaluations *and* teacher report) included responses in which the participant chose more than one type of the first seven types but did not indicate that *all* information was necessary to make a decision. A frequency analysis of the participants' responses was completed to determine which piece of information administrators found most important when making special education eligibility recommendations. The type of data that yielded the highest percentage was considered the most important.

This frequency analysis showed "Combination of data types" to be the preferred type of information for administrators making special education eligibility decisions, with 42.2 percent of participants choosing this response as the most important in their decision-making. "School diagnostic evaluations" were the second most important type of information, selected by 21.4 percent of participants. The least cited types of information (0.0%) consisted of information provided by the parents ("Parent report") or the educational advocate ("Educational advocate opinion"). While parent and advocate information were cited in combination with other types of information, and thus categorized under "Combination of data types," none of the participants cited either as the single most important type of information necessary for making special education eligibility decisions. Hence, hypothesis one is resoundingly rejected. Table 3 illustrates the frequency distribution across categories.

Table 3: Type of information reported by participants as "most important" for eligibility decisions (*n* = 56)

Information type	*n*	%
School diagnostic evaluations	12	21.4
Teacher-provided information	2	3.6
Parent report	0	0.0
Private practitioner evaluations	1	2.1
Educational advocate opinion	0	0.0
Scholastic data	8	14.3
Intervention outcomes	1	2.1
Combination of data types	24	42.2
All information presented	8	14.3

For the second research question, "[i]s there a difference in school-based administrators' special education eligibility recommendations with the inclusion of an external opinion?" a paired-samples *t*-test was used to compare participants' responses to the case vignettes. This question was posed to address the study's second hypothesis, i.e., that there is a difference in school-based administrators' recommendations for special education eligibility when an external opinion is present. For this part of the study, participants read two case vignettes—one without an external opinion included, that served as a control, and one that included the external opinion of a private practitioner, an educational advocate, or both—and then gave a special education eligibility recommendation for each in the form of a rating on a Likert-type scale. The ratings for the statement, "This student is eligible for special education as a student with a specific learning disability," ranged from one to five (1 = "Strongly disagree," 5 = "Strongly agree").

Table 4 displays the frequency distribution of administrators' responses to each condition of the case vignette, with the mean and standard deviation for the control condition and each treatment condition. Perusal of these statistics reveals that the

vast majority of respondents rejected the notion that the student in question would be eligible for special education as a student with a specific learning disability, with the modal response as "Disagree" and a mean response of 1.88. In sharp contrast, for each of the three treatment condition vignettes, at least 40 percent of respondents agreed that the student in question should be deemed eligible, with mean responses ranging from 2.78 to 3.16.

Table 4: Frequency distribution (shown in percentages)

Response	Control *n* = 56	IEE *n* = 19	ADV *n* = 19	BOTH *n* = 18
Strongly disagree	18	0	11	16
Disagree	79	37	44	32
Undecided	2	16	0	11
Agree	2	42	44	42
Strongly agree	0	5	0	0
Mean	1.88	3.16	2.78	2.79
s.d.	.51	1.01	1.17	1.18
n	56	19	18	19

Paired sample *t*-tests were conducted to determine whether these differences were statistically significant. This analysis showed that all differences were statistically significant. Additionally, effect size statistics were computed (Cohen's D), which demonstrated that these differences may be considered large. Specifically, for the comparison between CON and IEE, $t(18) = 5.16$, $p<.001$, D = 1.7. For the comparison between CON and ADV, $t(17) = 3.07$, $p = .007$, D = 1.01. Finally, for the comparison between CON and BOTH, $t(18) = 3.66$, $p = .002$, D = 1.25. These results support the hypothesis that administrators' judgment about student eligibility may be significantly influenced by the inclusion of private practitioner evaluations and/or educational advocates' opinions.

Discussion

This study focused on how stakeholders who are external to the school system influence school-based administrators' decisions, by examining the influence of the private practitioner evaluations and educational advocates' opinions in the decision-making process for making eligibility recommendations for special education services. *Multiple stakeholder* and *social network* theories were used to describe the relationship between an external opinion and the administrator's eligibility recommendation. School-based decisions, including special education eligibility, involve multiple stakeholders. Every member of the team that makes the eligibility decision, including the administrator, is a stakeholder in that decision. Every member of the team, including the school-based administrator, is also a member of a social network, a network that influences the eligibility decision. The literature suggests that in multiple stakeholder decisions, individual stakeholders will draw upon the resources in their social networks in order to increase their social power and thus their ability to

influence the decision toward a desired outcome (Bourdieu, 1986; Pierro et al., 2008; Rahim, Antonioni, & Psenicka, 2001). In the context of a special education eligibility decision, parents will do just that by seeking evaluations from a private practitioner and/or enlisting the services of an educational advocate (Zaretsky, 2004). What, if any, impact this has on administrators' decision-making was examined.

The first research question focused on the level of importance the school administrator assigns to the different types of data that are presented for a special education eligibility decision. To address this, respondents were asked to identify the type of information they found to be most important in making an eligibility determination, the idea being that administrators would choose the type of information they believed had the most power to influence their eligibility decision. The frequency analysis conducted yielded two important insights. First, the majority of administrators identified not one but a combination of data types as most important. This suggests that, all other things being equal, they do not view any one source of information as having power over any other source (e.g., private practitioner vs. teacher), but believe that one must draw upon multiple sources of information, giving each equal consideration.

The second insight is specific to parental power. None of the administrators chose parent information as the single most important piece of data in a decision. Furthermore, while parent information was often included among other data types when administrators chose combinations of data, in no case did an administrator indicate "parent information" in combination with an educational advocate's opinion or a private practitioner's evaluation, to the exclusion of other data types. This seems to suggest that administrators do not credential private practitioners' and educational advocates' opinions as more important than other sources of data, such as school-based evaluations and teacher input. The law dictates that the eligibility group is to consider data from a variety of sources to determine eligibility for special education services. The implications of these findings suggest that administrators are, indeed, acting within both the spirit and the letter of the law.

Question two focused specifically on the influence of two external stakeholder inputs: private practitioners' evaluations and educational advocates' opinions. The influence of external stakeholders is evident in the literature, a review of which shows that decisions are often made without reaching full consensus and are based on factors other than the data, such as external pressures (Furlong & Yanagida, 1985; Shepard et al., 1983), and that students are more likely to be found eligible for special education services when a private practitioner diagnosis is present, even if legal criteria for eligibility have not been met (Della Toffalo & Pedersen, 2005; deMesquita, 1992; Ysseldyke & Algozzine, 1982). Furthermore, committee members, such as the school-based administrator, have sometimes been found to feel threatened by other committee members whom they perceive to have more power (Gutkin & Nemeth, 1997; Mehan, Hartwick, & Meihls, 1986; Ysseldyke et al., 1983), and parents, in their efforts to advocate for their children's education, often employ assistance from within their social network to gain additional influence over decisions made on their children's behalf (Hess et al., 2006; Zaretsky, 2004).

The results of the paired-samples *t*-test indicated that there is, in fact, a significant difference in administrators' recommendations for special education eligibility

when an external opinion (i.e., private practitioner evaluation or educational advo-cate opinion) was present, as opposed to when no external opinion was considered; this indicates that external opinions tend to alter administrators' opinions to a sig-nificant degree.

Generally speaking, results of the present study were consistent with the tenets of social network theory, in that they suggest that it is advantageous for parents to ally themselves an external stakeholder. Further, the stronger relationship between the eligibility recommendation and the private practitioner evaluation, as compared with the educational advocate opinion, seems to suggest a bias toward objective data over subjective data, a possible topic for future research.

Within the context of special education eligibility decisions, the practical impli-cations of these findings include that administrators may need more or better profes-sional development opportunities focused on the use of evidence in special education decision-making. School leaders may struggle with maintaining a legal and ethical balance and resisting undue influence from one stakeholder or another. To the degree this occurs, students may be erroneously over- or under-identified as students with disabilities. As such, the study provides valuable fodder for research into special ed-ucation eligibility decision-making processes, administrative decision-making, and the parent-school relationship. While current and prior research focused on decision-making behaviors of individual team members (i.e., administrators, teachers, and school psychologists), the actual eligibility decision is a *group* decision. Information gleaned from the present study suggests that examining group dynamics, as well as influences on those group dynamics, may be another lens through which to focus re-search on the special education eligibility decision-making process.

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