

# **Principals' Perceptions of Preparation and Practice in Gifted and Special Education Content: Are We Doing Enough?**

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This paper examines in-service school leaders' perceptions regarding the degree to which their administrator preparation program addressed necessary skills and knowledge to effectively work with educators of children in special education and gifted programs. Principals from a large metropolitan district were surveyed. Findings indicate some dissonance between what educational leadership preparation programs and school districts are providing future school leaders and the on-the-job demands for school administrators. Results are provided along with suggestions for future research.

Research suggests there is a widening gap in the level of comprehensive knowledge in areas that are critical for school improvement, such as Exceptional Student Education (ESE) (DiPaola, Tschannen-Moran, & Walther-Thomas, 2004). The need for augmented content can be attributed to

the impact of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) and the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1997 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act in 2004, all of which resulted in high-stakes testing and school accountability

and required access to the general education curriculum and inclusion in district and state assessments by students with disabilities. To date, these mandates require principals to be well prepared in the area of special and gifted education, specifically in the area of inclusion, data-driven decision making, and instructional leadership.

This paper examines in-service school leaders' perceptions regarding the degree to which their administrator preparation program and school district provided professional development that addressed the knowledge and skills needed to effectively work with educators in special and gifted education programs. Results from the study, which surveyed school leaders from a large metropolitan district, are provided along with suggestions for future research. Areas of emphasis included in the survey emerge from the literature on leadership preparation.

### *School Leadership Preparation*

There are numerous reports throughout the literature supporting the need for reform within principal preparation programs to effectively manage different facets of curriculum, instruction, finance, and policy as well as the many varied needs of student groups (Grogan & Andrews, 2002; Farkas, Johnson, & Duffett, 2003; Lauder, 2000; Levine, 2005; Whitaker, 2006). According to Farkas, Johnson, and Duffett (2003), 67% of principals indicate that "typical leadership programs in graduate schools of education are out of touch with the realities of what it takes to run today's school districts" (p. 39). Levine

published a scathing critique describing the preponderance of principal preparation programs, even some of those in well-respected universities, as "inadequate to appalling" (p. 23). Hale and Moorman (2003) further noted that "the general consensus in most quarters is that principal preparation programs (with a few notable exceptions) are too theoretical and totally unrelated to the daily demands on contemporary principals" (p. 5); however, despite much criticism and alleged reform within higher education principal preparation programs, the basic content, structure, and experience remain (Hess & Kelly, 2005b). Moreover, as new field specific topics emerge and the role of the principal evolves, many programs are only incorporating these topics into existing programs of study rather than revising the program in view of current and new knowledge and skill requirements.

The reconceptualization of the role of the principal has compelled university programs to attempt to shift emphasis from theory to practice and from developing management skills to empowering the principal as the school leader (Behar-Horenstein, 1995; Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, & Ahlgrim-Detzell, 2006). This shift is supported by feedback from school leaders and program evaluators, which suggests a greater need to connect theory to practice via the integration of field experiences as well as the expanding role of the principal which has undergone various changes over the past several decades. Initially considered "building managers and student disciplinarians" (DiPaola &

Walther-Thomas, 2003, p. 7), the role of the principal shifted to that of instructional leader in the 1980s and more recently to principal as learning leader. The role of the school leader, particularly at the secondary level, is now that of an active agent in the teaching, learning, and implementation process (Boscardin, 2005; Childs-Bowen, 2005).

Hess and Kelly (2005a) concluded, "Because preparation of principals has not kept pace with changes in the larger world of schooling, graduates of principal-preparation programs have been left ill-equipped for the challenges and opportunities posed by an era of accountability" (p. 40). In particular, there is a dearth of exceptional education experiences included in most school leadership programs and in past analyses, only five states have included a requirement for a specified course in exceptional education to meet credentialing and licensure guidelines (Valesky & Hirth, 1992). Wakeman et al. (2006) reported that principals had "received little (47.8%) or some (37.6%) information about special education in their principal licensing program" (p. 158). There is insufficient research that examines the extent to which information about gifted education is delivered in principal preparation program. This lack of exceptional education content may lead principals to begin their careers without the ability to effectively oversee concerns (programmatic or personnel) related to students with exceptionalities.

### *The Principal's Role and Connection to Gifted and Special Education Services*

Legislative mandates, including NCLB and IDEA 04 have placed additional demands on school principals. Increasingly, principals are expected to be well-versed in both legal and instructional issues related to inclusion, high stakes testing, accountability systems, and teacher evaluations (Flannery, 2000; Olson, 2007). Furthermore, as districts seek positive recognition for innovative programs and student outcomes, there is increased attention on learners in exceptional education. Therefore, it is essential for educational leadership preparation programs to provide future school leaders with the requisite knowledge to ensure the academic success of all students through guidance and support for teachers (Brown, 2006; Grogan & Andrews, 2002). Many principals, however, are unprepared to address these educational imperatives given their lack of preparation in the field of exceptional education (Davidson & Algozzine, 2002).

Increasingly, students with disabilities are being served in general education settings (National Center for Education Statistics, 2008). Considering that effective leadership plays a pivotal role in how teachers respond to inclusion (Villa, Thousand, Meyers, & Nevin 1996), ensuring appropriate preparation is paramount, including foundational knowledge of the academic and social emotional needs of students with disabilities (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). Yet, there is a lack of research examining the preparation of principals in the area of

special education and inclusive practices. Laskey and Karge (2006) surveyed 205 principals in southern California and found that although a majority ( $n = 179$ ) considered formal training in these areas as very important, many indicated little to no direct experience working with students with disabilities in their preparation program; furthermore, a majority ( $n = 152$ ) reported the amount of time spent on special education issues has increased, which may be directly related to the expectations in both NCLB and IDEA.

Current legislation and movement toward accountability requires all students demonstrate adequate yearly progress (AYP) with serious penalties for schools and principals that do not meet annual progress goals (Quinn, 2005). This legislation requires districts to disaggregate assessment scores so principals, teachers, and others can study the performance of high-risk students in four targeted sub-groups: children with disabilities, children with limited English proficiency, children of racial minority status, and children at economic disadvantage (DiPaola, Tschannen-Moran, & Walther-Thomas, 2004); thus, principals must be prepared to provide teachers with building level support as they strive to provide standards-based instruction to an increasingly diverse student population (Kozleski, Mainzer, & Deshler, 2000; Wakeman et al., 2006). Though in the past student academic performance has been monitored, NCLB raises the importance of the principal's function. Failure to meet performance

expectations may result in the loss of their position as principal; thus, principals must be instructional leaders who can respond to the current realities of education through the use of student performance data (Grogan & Andrews, 2002; Hale & Moorman, 2003; Mohn & Machell, 2005).

Nationally, there has been an increase in the number of children and youth eligible for special education services (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2007a). Currently, students in ESE comprise approximately 14% of the total school population; students with learning disabilities account for more than 50% of students in ESE. The percentage of students with disabilities who are served in general education settings for 80% or more of the school day has also increased from 45% to 52% (NCES, 2007b). Indeed, the increased percentage of students eligible for ESE services has principals grappling with the constraints of AYP indicators and school grades, and providing instructional guidance and support to both general education and special education teachers.

The ability to execute complex educational legislation by school leaders, including but not limited to NCLB and IDEA, can protect, propel, and optimize public school environments (Thurlow, 2005). School leaders need to know about Individual Education Programs for students with disabilities, Educational Plans for gifted students, and legal issues in both special education and gifted education (Hehir, 2005; Karnes, Stevens, & McHard, 2008). A thorough understanding of referral

and placement procedures is necessary to ensure full compliance and avoid due process hearings (Brooks, 2005). In addition to policy-related awareness and leadership, principals are responsible for supporting curricular design and instructional effectiveness (Waters & Grubb, 2004). Principals are charged with the evaluation of teachers, especially their ability to create positive classroom environments and to use research-based instructional strategies that lead to student achievement (Waters & Grubb, 2004). To adequately assess what is needed for teaching gifted and special education students in inclusive and self-contained environments, principals must understand and identify practices that relate to the effective instruction of these learners (Boscardin, 2005).

Principals' increased awareness of special education and gifted education issues facilitate greater support of special education/gifted education teachers, responsiveness to program issues, and promotion of ongoing reflection. Wakeman et al. (2006) determined that principals generally believe they are well-informed in fundamental issues relating to special education but seem to lack a full understanding of issues such as self-determination practices, functional behavioral assessments, and universally-designed lessons. Findings indicate that principals who report having more knowledge about special education were more involved in special education programs. Administrative support for best-practices in the classroom and knowledge of legislation for students with exceptionalities leads

to improved outcomes for students in these programs.

### *Principal Professional Development*

Many school districts provide additional development opportunities for aspiring and current leaders. A number of states and districts have implemented additional certification and training beyond the university program to provide "formal mentoring, reflection, portfolio development, and/or on-the-job demonstration of skills" (Lashway, 2003, p. 4). Included in the post-licensure professional development is content specific to exceptional education. Wakeman et al. (2006) reported that 39.7% of principals participated in one or more workshops related to exceptional education over the past two years. In addition, "Principals most often reported using resources related to special education within their system or district (79.3%) or school (59.1%)" (p. 158). Special educators require significant ongoing development in the area of special education in order to remain abreast of new legislation. The same can be said for principals.

While there is a growing body of literature related to leadership in special education, there is a paucity of research addressing principals' knowledge and skills in gifted education. Responding to the unique characteristics and needs of both populations is necessary and requires administrators knowledgeable in both areas. Specifically, principals should have a basic understanding of exceptional education including issues related to legislation, funding, student characteristics, and instructional

methods and accommodations that support access to the general education.

This study examined principals' perceptions of their preparation, practice, and professional development to adequately respond to the needs of students served in special and gifted education. The topics addressed in the survey correspond with what the literature indicates principals should know about exceptional student education.

## **Methods**

### ***Project Description***

This descriptive pilot study explores in-service administrators' perceptions of their preparation, practice, and professional development. A large metropolitan district in the southeastern United States was the pilot site for the survey. The district ranks among the top 10 largest districts in the nation and serves approximately 200,000 students, 58% of whom are ethnically or racially diverse (Florida Department of Education, Education Information & Accountability Services, 2009).

### ***Participants***

The survey, along with a letter describing the purpose of the study, was sent to all principals ( $n = 169$ ) from the participating district; 64 were completed and returned (39% response rate). Of the 64 surveys which were returned, 61 were deemed completed and included in this analysis. Demographic information is presented in Table 1. Slightly over three-quarters of the participants were female, White, and

ranged in age between 45 and 64 years of age. Most (75%) had a master's degree and ten or fewer years of experience as an administrator (88.4%). The majority of the participants were in elementary school settings in either urban or suburban areas with a student populations ranging from 250 to 1000. See Table 1 in Appendix.

The majority of respondents indicated that there was one building-based administrator responsible for the oversight of special education (75%) and one for gifted education (61%). In most cases (66%), the same individual was responsible for overseeing both programs. The schools in which the participants worked provided a variety of program models for both special education and gifted education including consultation, co-teaching, resource, academic and/or enrichment pull-out, and self-contained. Only four participants had a degree in special education, three at the undergraduate level and one at the master's level.

### ***Instrument***

The survey instrument was developed by two faculty from Special Education and Gifted Education and reviewed by two faculty in Educational Leadership. Questions were grounded in needs addressed in the existing literature base. Experts in the field (educational leadership, exceptional student education, and measurement) reviewed the draft of the instrument for construct validity. In addition, the survey was piloted with a group of students participating in an educational leadership course for feedback on wording and readability and an

approximate time to complete the survey.

The survey instrument consisted of six sub-sections: (a) demographics; (b) preparation (i.e., level of preparation in specific activities and educational experiences); (c) practice (i.e., how often respondents participated in specific activities); (d) perception of self-efficacy (i.e., participants perceived sense of efficacy in their ability to address various issues related to special and gifted education); (e) knowledge of effective teachers of exceptional students and of culturally and linguistically diverse exceptional students, and (f) perceptions of

exceptional students, their parents/caregivers, and their teachers. This paper reports only on the sub-sections pertaining to preparation, practice, and perception of self-efficacy (items a through d) including demographic information.

### Findings

The reliability for the three sub-sections was estimated using Cronbach's alpha with the following results: preparation (.941), practice (.689), and perception of efficacy (.912). Mean and standard deviations were also computed and are reported in Table 2.

Table 2:  
*Descriptive Statistics for Survey Sub-sections*

Sub-section	Mean	SD	A
Preparation	2.67	1.01	.941
Practice	3.26	.570	.689
Perception	3.73	.735	.912

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted for each measure (preparation, practice, and perception of self-efficacy) to test for differences by group membership (i.e., gender, race, school type, age, school level, principal experience, school size, courses taken in special and/or gifted education). The data were screened for multivariate normality and outliers

prior to conducting the MANOVA. Results indicate data were approximately multivariate normal; however, there was one multivariate outlier for all analyses as indicated by Mahalanobis' distances of 9.47 [ $F(3, 56) = 3.64, p = 0.02$ ] to 11.75 [ $F(3, 56) = 4.74, p < .01$ ]. Since each analysis had the same multivariate outlier, the MANVOAs were run both with and

without the outlier. Results from the analyses were not changed based on the presence of the outlying observation; thus, it is included in the following results.

Results indicate there were no statistically significant differences in group membership and preparation, practice, and perception of self efficacy except for self-reported race [ $\eta^2 = 0.74$ ,  $F(6, 110) = 3.05$ ,  $p < .01$ ] and school size [ $\eta^2 = 0.56$ ,  $F(18, 141.91) = 1.79$ ,  $p = .03$ ]. Follow-up univariate testing (ANOVA), using the Welch adjustment due to unequal group membership, was conducted for both race and school size. The results indicated there was a statistically significant difference of practice based on race [ $F(2, 10.66) = 18.15$ ,  $p < .001$ ]. Tukey testing did not reveal specific differences among the race categories. Univariate follow-up analyses did not indicate statistically significant results for school size.

Chi-square tests of significance were conducted to test for differences in participants who had completed gifted education courses and those who had not based on race, gender, age, experience, school size, school type, and school level. The same analyses were also completed for participants who had completed special education courses and those who had not. The only statistically significant findings were between whether or not participants took gifted education courses and the type of school they worked at ( $\chi^2(2) = 6.54$ ,  $p = .038$ ). In both urban and suburban schools more participants had not taken gifted education classes ( $n = 21$  and  $n = 18$ , respectively) compared to those who had taken classes ( $n = 16$  and

$n = 7$ , respectively); however, in the rural schools more participants had taken courses ( $n = 6$ ) than those who had not ( $n = 2$ ).

### **Preparation**

*Educational experiences pertaining to special education and gifted education.* Participants were asked to report on content related to special education and gifted education that they received in their preparation program or through district professional development activities. They were also asked to indicate what, if any, additional professional development they desired in these areas (Figures 1 and 2). Approximately half of the respondents (49.2%;  $n = 30$ ) indicated their preparation program contained no specific courses pertaining to special education, 26.2% ( $n = 16$ ) indicated one course, 13.1% ( $n = 8$ ) indicated 2 courses, and 11.5% ( $n = 7$ ) indicated 3 or more courses on special education. The majority (63.9%;  $n = 39$ ) also indicated that their preparation program did not contain any courses related to gifted education. Of the remaining participants, 16 (26.2%) reported their preparation program contained one course related to gifted education, one (1.6%) noted their preparation program contained two courses on this topic, and five (8.2%) indicated their preparation program contained three or more classes on this topic.

Participants were asked to report whether or not they had received specific instruction in their leadership preparation program or through district professional development opportunities pertaining to legal issues, characteristics

of students, modifications and accommodations, discipline issues, and funding issues related specifically to special education and gifted education. The majority of the special education content focused on legal issues, with 75.4% of participants indicating they had received specific instruction on this topic. Approximately half of the participants also reported having received instruction on funding. For each of the remaining items, only 24.6-31.1% of participants indicated that they had been covered in their preparation program.

On the other hand, a majority of participants reported that professional development provided by the district focused on modifications and accommodations (85.2%) followed by legal issues (77%). Each of the remaining items had also been covered to a fair degree as 55.7-59% of participants indicated the content had been included in district professional development. When asked in which area participants would like to receive more professional development, the majority of participants (62.3%-85.2%) indicated they did not want any additional professional development in any specific area. Those that did indicate a desire for additional instruction (37.7%) did so in the area of modifications and accommodations.

Participants were asked to respond to the same content-specific

questions in regards to gifted education. Responses indicate less emphasis on each issue relating to gifted learners. What content was provided by preparation programs focused on legal issues. Slightly less than half (44.3%) of participants indicated they had received specific instruction on legal issues. Approximately one-third (36.1%) reported the inclusion of content related to funding in their preparation program. Each of the remaining items was covered to a much lesser extent; only 8-24.6% of the participants reported receiving specific instruction in characteristics of students, modifications and accommodations, or discipline issues. Approximately half of the participants reported having received additional professional development in four of the five content areas: legal issues, characteristics, modifications and accommodations, and funding issues. A lesser percentage (23%) indicated receiving additional professional development in discipline. When asked in which area participants would like to receive more professional development, the majority (75.4-86.9%) again responded they did not desire additional instruction. Those that desired additional professional development were relatively evenly dispersed across each of the five content areas (13.1-24.6%).

Figure 1. Educational Experiences Received (Preparation Program and District Professional Development) and Desired in Special Education

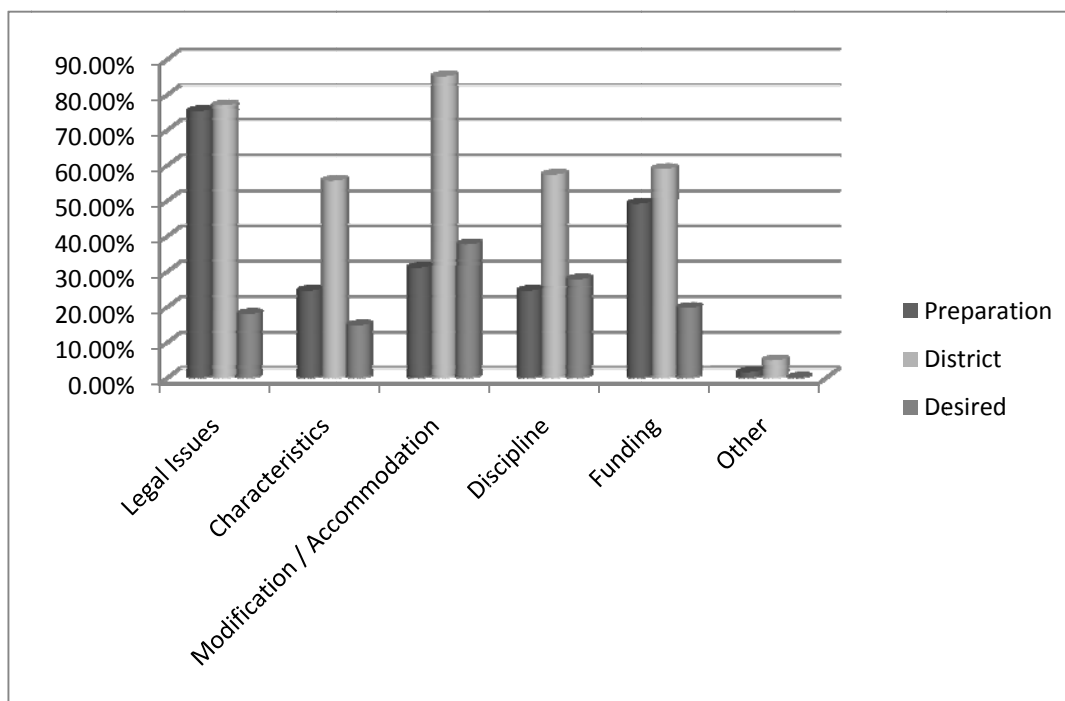
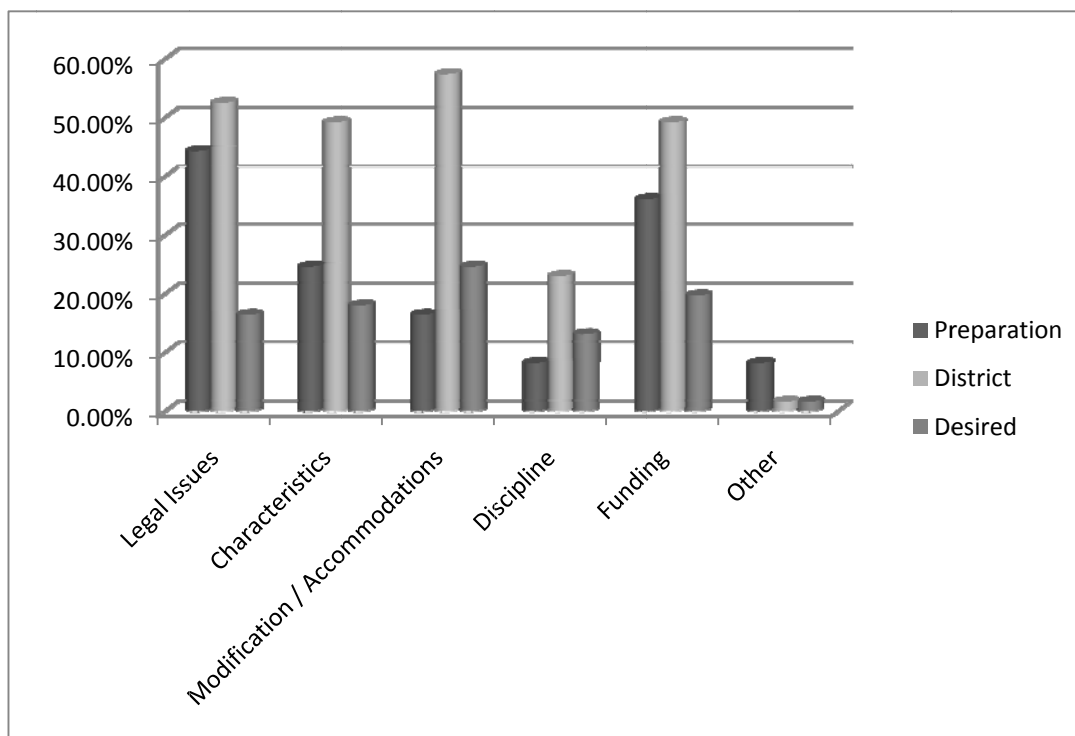


Figure 2. Educational Experiences Received (Preparation Program and District Professional Development) and Desired in Gifted Education



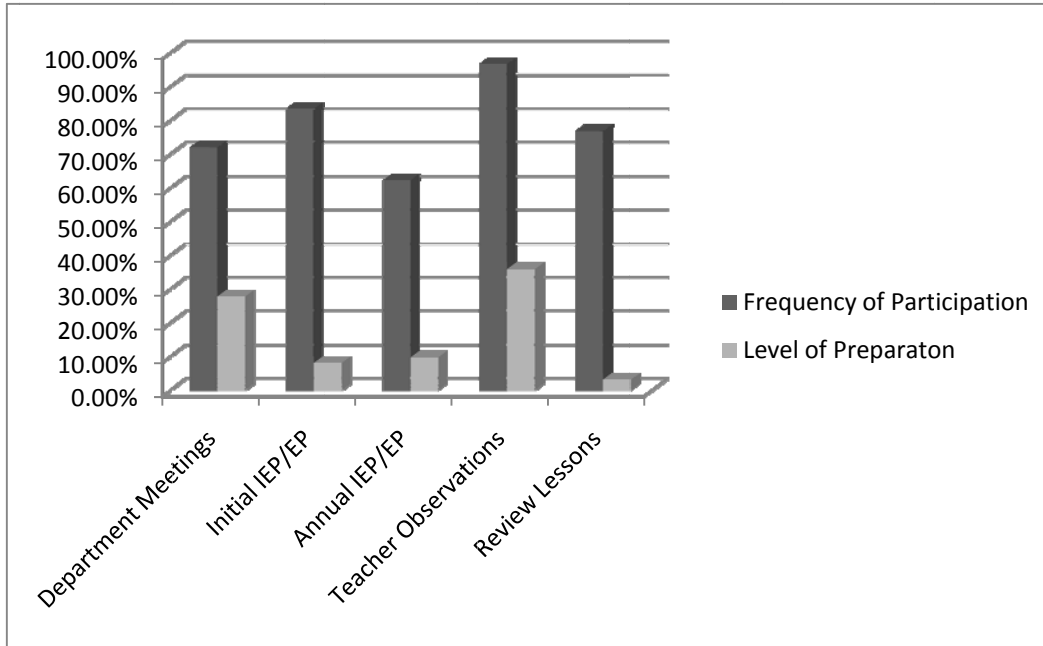
*Practice*

Respondents were asked to indicate, via a Likert scale (1 = never, 2 = seldom, 3 = occasionally, 4 = frequently, and 5 = daily), how often they engaged in specific activities including facilitating department (special education or gifted) meetings, attending initial placement meetings for IEPs/EPs, participating in the development of IEPs/EPs, conducting observations of teachers (in both special education and gifted) and reviewing lesson plans (Figure 3). Most respondents indicated that they participated in each of the specified activities to some degree: approximately 62-97% rated their levels of participation as occasionally, frequently, and daily.

In order to get a sense of the level of preparation versus the level of engagement in specific activities, participants were asked to rate how strongly they agreed with a series of statements beginning with the stem "I

was well prepared by my educational leadership program to..." (a) facilitate department meetings (special education or gifted), (b) attend initial placement meetings for IEPs/EPs, (c) participate in the development of IEPs/EPs, (d) conduct observations of ESE teachers (in both special education and gifted), and (e) review lesson plans. Higher percentages of responses fell in the strongly disagree to disagree categories. Although the percent of agreement was relatively low (36%), the category in which respondents thought they were best prepared was conducting teacher observations. The categories in which they thought least prepared dealt with initial placement meetings (62.3%) and annual development of IEPs/EPs (64%). Approximately one quarter of the respondents rated their sense of agreement as neutral, suggesting they were neither well prepared nor under prepared.

Figure 3. Frequency and Level of Participation of Specific Activities

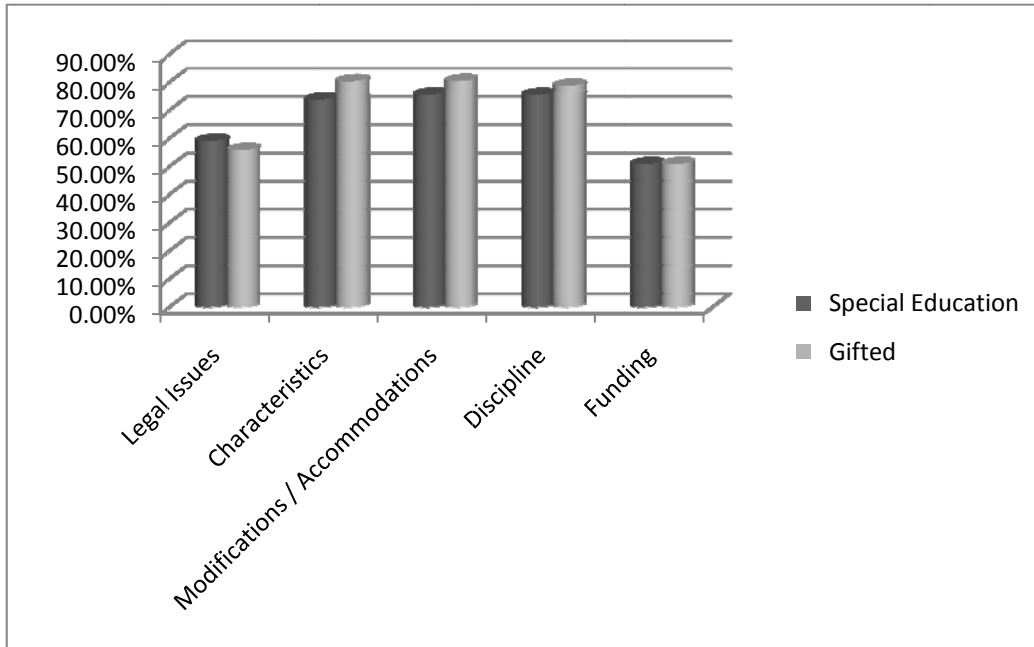


### Perception

Participants were asked to rate their perception of self-efficacy in addressing various areas (legal issues, characteristics, modification and accommodations, discipline, and funding) pertaining to exceptional education within schools. These same factors were identified in the other subsections of the survey. The majority (50.8-75.5%) of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they thought they were well prepared to deal with each of these issues specific to special education. Approximately one quarter was neutral, and 4.8% to 23% disagreed that they were well prepared to deal with the issues. Respondents considered themselves less efficacious in legal issues and funding issues (Figure 4).

When asked to reflect on their perceived sense of self-efficacy in each of the aforementioned factors (legal issues, characteristics, modification and accommodations, discipline, and funding issues) specific to gifted education, the majority (50.8-80.4%) of respondents again agreed or strongly agreed that they felt well prepared to deal with each of the specified issues. Similar percentages were found for both the neutral responses (8.2-23%) and the strongly disagreed/disagreed responses (8.2-21.3%). Respondents also indicated being least prepared to deal with legal and funding issues related to gifted education (21.3% and 18%, respectively).

Figure 4. Perception of Self-Efficacy (Special Education and Gifted Education)



### Discussion

This study examines in-service school leaders' perceptions regarding the degree to which their administrator preparation program and their district provided professional development addressed knowledge and skills to effectively work with educators in exceptional student education programs. Existing literature (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2004; McLaughlin & Nolet, 2004) has indicated effective school leaders need to have a general understanding of the foundations of exceptional student education along with student characteristics, instructional approaches, and financing. Findings from this study reflect existing research (Davidson & Algozzine, 2002;

Valesky & Hirth, 1992; Wakeman et al., 2006) that reveals dissonance between what educational leadership preparation programs are providing future school administrators and their on-the-job demands.

Limitations notwithstanding, findings from this study provide useful and timely information about school leaders' preparation. The sample derived from one district in the southeastern United States limits generalizability. A larger sample size would have allowed for further statistical analysis to determine significant differences based on demographics. In addition, the survey asked participants to report the number of courses related to exceptional student education in their preparation program.

Although a majority indicated few, if any, stand-alone courses, they were also asked if they received instruction on specific topics pertinent to exceptional education. Many noted varying degrees of exposure to specific content suggesting content may have been infused within various courses in their program of study. This finding suggests exceptional student education content may have been infused throughout the program rather than delivered via a stand-alone course.

The statistical analysis of the data indicates a significant difference of practice based on race. Specific differences could not be determined because of unequal group membership and the low numbers of participants of color. A literature review on principal preparation revealed no differential instruction or experiences based on demographics; further study with a larger sample base may support or negate this finding or reveal significant differences in the other categories.

Findings indicate a difference in the areas of emphasis between preparation programs and district provided professional development. In both special education and gifted education, preparation programs focused on legal and funding issues, whereas professional development provided by the district focused on modification and accommodations. This may indicate the increased emphasis on inclusion and ensuring students with exceptionalities receive the necessary supports leading to improved educational outcomes (e.g., NCLB and IDEA). District professional development surpassed that which was

delivered in preparation programs in all areas. This may be due to several factors: (a) the dynamic nature of exceptional education due to changing legislation and litigation; (b) the increased time spent by school administrators on special education issues (Laskey & Karge, 2006); (c) contextual factors (e.g., new state or district mandates, re-authorization of existing legislation), and (d) oversight of exceptional education being relegated to many new assistant principals (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). Although it is possible that these differences are reflective of inadequate training in these areas by leadership preparation programs, the need for principals to remain abreast of new legislative mandates and requirements must be acknowledged.

Results indicate a disconnect between the activities school administrators engage in regularly and the emphasis placed on those activities in their preparation program and professional development. Participants reported spending a majority of their time conducting teacher observations, participating in initial IEP/EP meetings, reviewing lesson plans, facilitating department meetings, and participating in annual IEP/EP meetings respectively. Despite regular involvement in these activities, few participants agreed or strongly agreed that they were well prepared to engage in each activity; furthermore, in each activity category approximately one-quarter rated their feelings of being well prepared to participate in the activity as neutral, suggesting the need for increased emphasis in these areas by initial

preparation programs. The difference between level of participation and preparation may support critiques (Farkas, Johnson, & Duffett, 2003; Hale & Moorman, 2003) that indicate principal preparation programs fail to adequately bridge theory and practice.

Approximately one-third of participants indicated being well prepared by their preparation programs to conduct teacher observations. The remaining two-thirds were either neutral or reported not being well prepared for this responsibility. The high level of engagement in teacher observation versus the attention placed on it within preparation programs highlights the need to incorporate specific content related to teacher supervision including observation techniques, feedback, and mentoring. Most of the individuals entering educational leadership programs are or have been K-12 classroom teachers. As a result, designers of preparation programs may assume that training principals in instructional evaluation and guidance of teachers is not a critical component. This assumption may be that individuals entering administration have served as supervising or mentor teachers and thus have much of the requisite knowledge and skills to engage in this task. Although this may be an accurate assumption, there are indeed differences in oversight required by an administrator versus a mentor or supervising teacher. The legal issues implicit in teacher evaluation processes become even more complex if principals have little or no knowledge of pedagogy or best practices in these fields, especially in schools where merit pay is

based on teacher evaluations.

Equally important is the initial development of IEPs and EPs. This is a critical area in which issues of placement and delivery of services are determined. Although staffing specialists and other district personnel may attend the meeting, their involvement does not preclude the need for the school administrator to be well-versed in the practices and procedures, especially as they relate to the delivery of services after the staffing is completed.

It is likely that participants, as prior educators, engaged in each of the listed activities to some degree; for example, all teachers are expected to attend department meetings. Plus, general education teachers who have students with disabilities or gifted students in their classrooms and special education teachers who are also case managers must participate to some extent in IEP/EP meetings. Participation in these activities varies based on participants' role (i.e., leader, teacher, support personnel, etc.).

The differences in content delivery among preparation programs, district professional development, and desired additional professional development by participants require some scrutiny. Both preparation programs and the district focus on legalities because of the ramifications of non-compliance. Conversely, less emphasis was placed on discipline in special education by preparation programs and district professional development. This is surprising due to the strong IDEA discipline compliance requirements. There was also a marked

difference between preparation programs and district professional development in the areas of student characteristics and modifications and accommodations. Preparation programs may minimally emphasize these areas expecting that teachers certified in exceptional education and serving in leadership positions (e.g., department heads, ESE specialists, etc.) can directly support other teachers. The lack of attention by preparation programs in special education issues negates vital research (Wakeman et al., 2006) that indicates principals who have a broader understanding of exceptional student education can foster an environment more conducive to improving outcomes for these students.

Participants reported a high sense of self-efficacy in the areas included in the survey even though their leadership preparation programs minimally include special and gifted education content. Two possible reasons are: (a) participants gain much of the necessary information relative to their responsibilities on-the-job, or (b) there may be a discrepancy between what the participants think they know and what they actually know; however, in both special and gifted education, participants rated legal and funding issues as the two areas in which they felt less effective. This again may be due to the frequent changes in legislation and compliance requirements.

Although much of the content listed in the survey was not significantly addressed in preparation programs or through district professional development, few of the participants desired additional training on the

topics. The high percentage of administrators who did not want additional professional development in these areas may be attributed to: (a) an already overwhelming workload; (b) a perception that they could obtain information from the district as needed; (c) a perception that they would gain the necessary knowledge on-the-job, or (d) the high sense of self-efficacy reported by participants.

### **Recommendations**

Additional research is needed to clarify some of the points alluded to by the data. As previously noted, the study limits generalizability. Future research should expand this work throughout the state in which the research was conducted as well as the nation to determine if the findings can be generalized to other geographic areas. Findings would be enhanced through individual or group interviews from within the survey respondents, to explore discrepancies between reported lack of preparation of perception of self-efficacy.

Future studies could inform curriculum development and guide university-school-district partnerships in developing a comprehensive preparation program. School leadership has become increasingly complex. Identifying what is feasible in an educational leadership preparation program is necessary. Perhaps a more effective way to approach the preparation of school leaders may be to determine a career ladder for principals. Determining the body of knowledge and skills that all entry level principals

(i.e., assistance principals) need would allow preparation programs to ensure those skills are delivered comprehensively, facilitating application of theory to practice. The district then would be responsible for providing additional professional development as principals advance up the career ladder. Another possibility would be to define separate strands or cognate areas in their preparation program that allow future leaders to develop expertise in specific areas, one of which could be exceptional student education.

The current climate of accountability, high numbers of students served in exceptional student education, and high teacher turnover rates require principals capable of serving as learning leaders who are active agents in the education process (Boscardin, 2005; Childs-Bowen, 2005). In a political environment that purports to be focused on the needs of *all* students, school leaders must understand the needs of all learners, including but not limited to those with disabilities and those who are gifted.

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## Appendix

**Alvarez McHatton, Boyer, Shaunessy, & Terry / PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS**

Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

Gender	Female			Male			
	47 (77%)			14 (23%)			
Race by Gender	Hispanic	African American	White	Hispanic	African American	White	
	2 (4.3%)	4 (8.5%)	41 (87.2%)	2 (14.3%)	2 (14.3%)	10 (71.4%)	
School Type*	Urban	Suburban	Rural	Suburban/Rural			
	27 (44.3%)	23 (37.7%)	9 (14.8%)	1 (1.6%)			
Age	25-34 years of age	35-44 years of age	45-54 years of age	55-64 years of age	≥ 65 years of age		
	2 (3.3%)	16 (26.2%)	23 (37.7%)	19 (31.1%)	1 (1.6%)		
School Level	Elementary	Middle	High	Special Education	Other		
	41 (67.2%)	10 (16.4%)	5 (8.2%)	2 (3.3%)	3 (4.9%)		
Principal Experience*	1-2 years	3-5 years	6-10 years	11-15 years	16-20 years	≥ 20 years	
	19 (31.2%)	16 (26.2%)	19 (31.2%)	6 (9.8%)	1 (1.6%)	0 (0%)	
School Size (Total Enrollment)	<250	251-500	501-750	751-1000	1001-1500	1501-2000	≥2001
	8 (13.1%)	11 (18%)	14 (23%)	20 (32.8%)	2 (3.3%)	3 (4.9%)	2 (3.3%)

\*percentages do not total 100% due to missing date