RURAL LEADERS’ EXPERIENCES IMPLEMENTING FAPE FOR STUDENTS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES

Jessica J. Vogel

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RURAL LEADERS’ EXPERIENCES IMPLEMENTING FAPE FOR STUDENTS WITH INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES

By

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A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education

Division of Educational Leadership

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ABSTRACT

To provide effective leadership and ensure students with intellectual disabilities are receiving an appropriate education, principals must understand the substantial needs of these students. The experiences of rural principals’ leadership in providing a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) for students with intellectual disabilities are not well known. In this study, I sought to describe the experiences of remote rural principals in South Dakota in providing FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities. Eight principals of remote rural school districts, with at least one year of leadership experience participated in this study. This phenomenological study utilized structured interviews to collect data. Data were coded using inter-rater reliability and five themes emerged. These themes were a gap between preparation and implementation, lack of resources, teacher training and continued professional development, principal’s self-efficacy, and reliance on special education teachers. Based on the findings, principals are not professionally prepared to provide FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities, nor are they confident in their ability to do so, and rely heavily on their special education teachers to comprehend and comply with state and federal special education mandates. Providing FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities in remote, rural school districts can be challenging due to the lack of personnel resources.
The members of the Committee appointed to examine
the Dissertation of Jessica Vogel
find it satisfactory and recommend that it be accepted.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctoral Committee</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>iii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Table of Contents</td>
<td>iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Tables</td>
<td>ix</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Question</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of the Study</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of the study</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contribution to the Profession</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Framework</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of Terms</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization of the Study</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Review of Literature</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education History</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Litigation</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legal Mandates</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zero Reject</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Discriminatory Evaluation</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Free Appropriate Public Education</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Least Restrictive Environment</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedural Safeguards</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parent Participation</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual Disability Definition</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prevalence</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Characteristics</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Education of Students with Intellectual Disabilities</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unique Educational Challenges to Rural Leaders</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Resources</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruiting and Retaining Qualified Educators</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Leaders’ Roles in Special Education</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General Special Education Knowledge Requirements</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Specialized FAPE Knowledge Requirements</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional Preparation</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal Preparation Programs</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chapter

3. Methodology........................................................................................................37

Purpose of the Study .................................................................................................37

Research Question ....................................................................................................37
Review of Related Literature and Research .........................................................37
Research Design ..................................................................................................38
Positionality Statement .........................................................................................39
Selection of Participants .........................................................................................41
Data Collection ......................................................................................................42
Data Analysis ..........................................................................................................45
Managing and Organizing Data ..............................................................................46
Trustworthiness ......................................................................................................46
Credibility ................................................................................................................47
Transferability .........................................................................................................48
Dependability .........................................................................................................49
Conformability ........................................................................................................49
Ethical Considerations ............................................................................................50
Summary ..................................................................................................................50

Chapter

4. Findings ..............................................................................................................51

Participants .............................................................................................................51
Textural Themes ......................................................................................................52
The Gap Between Preparation and Implementation ..............................................53
Lack of Resources ...................................................................................................55
Access to Specialized Facilities .............................................................................55

Personnel Resources ..............................................................................................56

Personnel Within the School District .....................................................................56
Chapter 5. Introduction

FAPE and the Role of the School Principal

Methodology

Limitations

Theoretical Framework

Inclusive Principal Leadership Findings

Collaboration

Instructional Leadership

Inclusive Classrooms

Recommendations for Practice and Professional Development

Ongoing Professional Development

Shared Professional Development with Special Educators

Mentoring for Remote Rural Practices

Increase Financial Support for Special Education
Adoption of HLPs .................................................................78
Recommendations for Future Research ................................78
References .................................................................80

Appendices
Appendix A. IRB Letter of Approval ........................................92
Appendix B. Interview Transcript ........................................93
List of Tables

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Table 1. Traditional Conceptualization of Intellectual Disabilities</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Table 2. Participant Demographic Information</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Table 3. Identified Textural Themes and Code Frequency</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Table 4. Identified Structural Themes and Code Frequency</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1

Introduction

Students who are eligible to receive special education and related services are entitled to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). The concept of FAPE was first introduced into federal legislation through the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975. Since then, the law has transformed to establish and refine the rights and responsibilities associated through FAPE, and is now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (McKenna & Brigham, 2021). FAPE entitles all students ages 3 to 21 with a disability that impedes their learning to an individualized education program (IEP), that is designed to meet their individual needs to receive meaningful educational benefit.

Students must receive meaningful educational benefits to ensure each student receives a free appropriate public education. Meaningful educational benefits come in the form of specially designed instruction through an IEP with related services as necessary. According to IDEA (2004), educational services are designed to meet the individual education needs of students with disabilities as adequately as the needs of nondisabled students are met (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). The most significant way to support a student's individual needs is through the design and implementation of an individualized education program (IEP). IDEA (2004) requires students who receive special education services to have this annual individualized program reviewed and updated as necessary. An IEP is a single document designed by a multidisciplinary school and home team to ensure students with disabilities benefit from the education they are provided (Friend, 2018).

Often, building principals are tasked with the instructional leadership responsibilities of ensuring students who qualify for special education receive an individualized program in the
least restrictive environment (LRE). The LRE refers to the environment in which the students is provided educational services. IDEA requires students who qualify for an IEP to be with their peers in the general education setting to the maximum extent that is appropriate (IDEA, 2004). LRE ensures students are only removed from the general education classroom when the child’s disability is so severe that classroom supplementary aids and services cannot provide the child with an appropriate education, and a special class or school is required to meet their individual needs (IDEA, 2004). Critics have argued that principal preparation programs are inadequately preparing principals to be instructional leaders in special education (Crow & Whiteman, 2016; Lynch, 2012; Young et al., 2009).

Remote school principals face additional challenges as they are expected to undertake a multitude of instruction, managerial, and supervisory responsibilities that may differ from their urban school district peers (Klocko & Justis, 2019). Insufficient leadership preparation can have significant ramifications for remote school districts, where special education teacher retention rates are low, and special education program numbers are high (Collins et al., 2005; Courtade et al., 2010). Special education teachers in remote rural areas are most likely to leave their teaching position for a job in a more populated area where they have significantly more resources, collegial support, and higher pay (Downing & Peckham-Hardin, 2007). In the United States, 49 states reported a shortage of special education teachers (National Coalition on Personnel Shortages in Special Education and Related Services, 2016), threatening the quality of education students with disabilities receive.

Prior to the initiation of IDEA, students with intellectual disabilities were educated in specialized classrooms or schools, which separated them from their peers without disabilities (Downing & Peckham-Hardin, 2007). The 1990 reauthorization of IDEA changed the emphasis
of education for students with intellectual disabilities from vocational and life skills to academics and self-determination, pushing schools to provide more high-quality instruction to these students (Friend, 2018). Further, the signing of the 2015, Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) supported the advance of equity for students who are considered disadvantaged or have high needs.

Students with intellectual disabilities have an intelligent quotient (IQ) at least two standard deviations (30) below the average IQ of 100 simultaneously with significantly below average adaptive behavior skills (Friend, 2018). Students with intellectual disabilities often have intense and complex instructional needs, and the school principal is responsible for ensuring these students receive FAPE. Students with intellectual disabilities require specialized, intense academic instruction and often require multiple related services. Due to the involved needs of students with intellectual disabilities, it is crucial that the building principal have the knowledge and skill to oversee that these students are receiving FAPE.

Rural school principals are isolated in terms of resources, professional development opportunities, and collegiality (Southworth, 2004). Further, many remote rural school principals have additional work assignments that may include serving as the principal to more than one school, teaching part of the day, or serving as the superintendent or special education director (Cortez-Jimmenez, 2012; Masumoto & Browne-Welty, 2009; Renihan & Noonan, 2012).

**Research Question**

This study was guided by the following research question.

1. What are remote rural school principals’ experiences with implementing FAPE for students with an intellectual disability?
**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to gather rural school principals’ experiences implementing FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities in remote school districts in South Dakota. Of South Dakota’s 151 school districts, 96 of them are considered remote (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). This study was qualitative in nature to provide participating principals the opportunity to explain their lived experiences in implementing FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities.

Little is known about what remote rural school principals’ experiences are in implementing FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities. This is a significant gap in educational research because the experiences principals face in implementing FAPE impacts student’s daily specialized education services. If we better understand the experiences principals face in supporting special education teachers in the implementation of FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities, we may be able to grasp the specific challenges for which we need to prepare and support school leaders. Furthermore, an understanding of the experiences these remote principals have in supporting special education teachers may help to address the challenges in the recruitment and retention of highly qualified special education teachers in rural and remote areas.

This study may also provide insight and direction for the South Dakota Department of Education and leadership preparation programs in South Dakota by providing a description of the principal’s experiences in supporting special education teachers in implementing FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities. With a description of the experiences principals have, South Dakota preparation and professional development programs can incorporate more specific
strategies for ensuring FAPE for all students, but more specifically for students with intellectual disabilities.

**Significance of Study**

A search of available databases used by many educational researchers produced limited studies that examine the experiences of implementing FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities in remote rural schools. The lack of this research becomes troubling when we examine the number of students receiving special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) for intellectual disabilities in South Dakota. According to the South Dakota Department of Education (2019) 11.65% of all students receiving special education services in South Dakota were labeled as having an intellectual disability as their primary diagnosis.

While principals in all geographic areas may be challenged as leaders of special education, leading in a remote rural and often small school district presents unique challenges. The opportunity lies in capturing the experiences remote rural school principals have in supervising the implementation of FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities to better understand the specific support that they need in leading special educators in a rural setting. The support provided by principals may impact teacher retention which ultimately impacts outcomes for students with intellectual disabilities.

**Contribution to the Profession**

This study addresses the gap in research and sheds some light on the remote rural school principals’ lived experiences overseeing FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities and the challenges for leaders. It is important to know the common experiences these principals
encounter to develop a thick description of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018), and to help inform educational practices.

This study’s description of principal experiences may also lead to higher retention rates of special education teachers in rural school districts. The description may shed light on both the needs rural school district principals have in regard to supporting their special education teachers, as well as the instructional leadership practices that have been successfully implemented to support special education teachers. If teacher support needs surface from this study, principal preparation programs can explicitly address the needs for future educational leaders. Additionally, those who provide in-service and other special education professional development throughout the state can use the defined needs to support practicing principals in remote and rural districts.

Existing research suggests that principal leadership is a predictive factor to teachers’ intentions to remain in their current position or search for another work opportunity (Boyd, et.al, 2011). Teachers who feel supported by their principal and are provided with professional development opportunities and necessary resources are more likely to stay in their current position (Boyd, et. al., 2011). Providing these opportunities to teachers is one of the many tasks for which principals are responsible, and if they are appropriately trained in the supervision of FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities, they are more likely to provide related professional development opportunities, resources, and educational guidance for teachers.

**Theoretical framework**

This research was framed through the lens of inclusive principal leadership theory. Inclusive principal leadership theory evolved from the Council of Chief State School Officers
(CCSSO) after the adoption of the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) in 2015. The CCSSO is a nationwide organization that is designed to assist students attending public schools in the United States to graduate ready to be successful in life (CCSSO, 2017). The PSEL standards communicate the expectations of educational leaders and are a “compass that guides the direction of practices directly through the work of professional associations” (PSEL, 2015). Although the PSEL standards appear to be strong, they do not illuminate specific practices principals need to know and implement to be inclusive leaders.

CCSSO recognized the need to include inclusive leadership training into CCSSO, so in 2017, the National Collaborative on Inclusive Principal Leadership (NCIPL) was assembled. The NCIPL is a manifold of national organizations and researchers that prepare principals for their supervision role (CEEDAR, 2020). The newly assembled NCIPL partnered with the U.S. Department of Education’s Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability, and Reform Center (CEEDAR) to design a resource for states to prepare principals to be inclusive leaders. The resource outlines strategies the state department of education can use to advance inclusive leadership through principal preparation programs and schools (CEEDAR, 2020). These strategies have been adopted and implemented in four states.

Although their implementation strategies vary, each participating state shares the “common goal of building knowledge and instructional leadership skills of school leaders so that they can more effectively coach general and special education teachers in their efforts to support students with disabilities” (CEEDAR, 2020). Even though the implementation of these strategies is long-term, the states that have taken the initiative and implemented them have already seen progress in their practices. Implementing states have narrowed in on these three main strategies
for inclusive improvement: the use of high-leverage practices (HLPs), multi-tiered system of support (MTSS), and positive behavior intervention and supports (PBIS) (CEEDAR, 2020).

High-leverage practices were designed collaboratively through CEEDAR and the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC). The CEC is the leading professional organization for educators that are dedicated to the success of students with disabilities. HLPs focus on the most important practices that all educators should master and demonstrate. The HLPs are a set of 22 practices, arranged around four aspects of practice: collaboration, assessment, social/emotional/behavioral, and instruction (McLeskey & Brownell, 2015). The HLPs are to be used by educators and principals to develop an understanding of the core practices of special education and determine how the practices can be used and improved. Additionally, principals may use the HLPs to select meaningful professional development experiences where the evidence supports the knowledge that using practices makes a difference for student success.

MTSS is a systematic, multi-tiered framework driven by data and evidence-based practices to improve the outcomes for all students (PBIS.org). The tiers of support align to model social, behavioral, academic, and emotional needs in the improvement of education for all. Each tier of MTSS includes instructional methods, interventions, and assessment practices to ensure each student is being supported to be successful in education (RCOE.us). Tier one of MTSS is the foundation for academic and behavioral success in the general education classroom. This tier is the core of MTSS and is implemented in the general education classroom, meeting most students’ needs. Classroom teachers implement tier two when assessment and observation in tier one indicates a student’s needs are more than is being implemented at the core. Students receive instruction for their needs in a small group of peers with similar needs. Tier two provides students with additional opportunities to practice concepts and receive immediate teacher
feedback. The purpose of tier two is to provide students with the skills necessary to be successful and progress at the core. The final tier is the most intensive and approaches the student’s learning individually. Students are typically formally assessed to determine their needs and a plan is designed to determine what the academic or behavioral targeted goals are (PBIS.org).

PBIS is a part of MTSS, as it uses a three-tiered system of support. The reauthorization of IDEA in 1997 incorporated positive behavior interventions and supports to encourage all educators to use research-supported strategies to improve behavioral success using systematic, proactive, and non-punitive techniques (Chapman & Hofweber, 2000). PBIS seeks to create a positive school climate for student growth and to curb unexpected behaviors school-wide through the encouragement of positive behaviors. Research by PBIS Rewards indicates that the key to an effective PBIS program is that all educators recognize the importance and value of the program and implement school wide uniformity. Principals are responsible for fidelity in implementation.

The bulk of PBIS supports lie within tier one and should manage the behavior of approximately 80% of all students (PBISREWARDS, n.d.). School-wide positive behaviors focus on simple, expected behaviors such as walking quietly in the hallway, showing kindness to others, and keeping classroom materials organized. Throughout this tier, teachers and administrators give attention to expected behaviors, which helps to keep the unexpected behaviors low. Students who struggle to meet the expectations of tier one may need additional behavior guidance and are moved into tier two to receive individual guidance for their behavior. Interventions in tier two aim to determine the root of the unexpected behavior and provide students with support to meet their behavioral needs (PBISREWARDS, n.d.). Students who do not respond to the provided interventions in tier two are referred through the ranks of tier three,
where their needs are addressed through a specific behavior plan. Although very few students require the resources of tier three, schools that use PBIS are prepared to assist their students to reduce ongoing, unexpected behavior.

**Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

**Assumptions**

It is assumed that participants will answer interview questions honestly regarding their perceptions of implementing FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities.

**Limitations**

A limitation of this qualitative phenomenological study is from the sample. The study will only focus on principals in remote rural South Dakota schools who provide FAPE to students with a primary diagnosis of an intellectual disability.

Also, the specific setting in the study may be a limitation because it involves only principals from remote rural school districts in the state of South Dakota. This may be a limitation because the results of this study of South Dakota rural principals’ perceptions may not be applicable to other states. Shenton (2004) noted that “since the findings of qualitative project[s] are specific to a small number of particular environments and individuals, it is impossible to demonstrate that the findings and conclusions are applicable to other situations and populations” (p.69).

**Delimitations**

This research study examined remote rural South Dakota principal’s experiences with implementing FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities. Therefore, this qualitative phenomenological study was delimited to participants currently serving as a principal in remote,
rural South Dakota school districts. Qualitative data was gathered from 9 participants. Quantitative data was not used as the researcher was seeking an in-depth view of the principal’s perceptions of the implementation of FAPE for students with an intellectual disability.

**Definition of Terms**

The following definitions ensure uniformity and understanding of these terms throughout the study. The researcher developed all definitions not accompanied by citations.

**Due Process.** The formal process of resolving disputes about a child’s identification, evaluation, or educational placement between a school district and a child’s family.

**Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).** This federal law governs the education of all students in grades pre-K through 12 from 2015 to current (U.S. Department of Education).

**Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE).** Special education and related services that: (A) have been provided at public expense, under public supervision and direction, and without charge; (B) meet the standards of the State educational agency; (C) include an appropriate preschool, elementary school, or secondary school education in the State involved; and (D) are provided in conformity with the individualized education program required under section 614(d). (IDEA Sec. 602 (9))

**Individualized Education Plan (IEP).** A single written document detailing the plan for special education and related services for a student with disabilities. This term is defined by statute and regulation, 20 U.S.C. § 1401(11); 34 C.F.R. §§ 300.340-300.350, (IDEA, 2004).

**Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).** Federal special education legislation.
**Intellectual Disability.** A significantly sub average general intellectual functioning, existing concurrently with deficits in adaptive behavior and manifested during the developmental period, that adversely affects a child’s educational performance. (IDEA Sec. 300.8 (c)(6).

**Least Restrictive Environment (LRE).** To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are not disabled, and special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability of a child is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily. (IDEA Sec. 612 (a)(5).

**No Child Left Behind (NCLB).** This federal law governed the education of all students in grades pre-K through 12 from 2002-2015 (U.S. Department of Education).

**Remote Rural School District.** A rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area and is also more than 10 miles from an urban cluster (National Center for Educational Statistics).

**Response to Intervention (RTI).** A multi-tiered method of service delivery in which all students are provided an appropriate level of evidence-based instruction based on their academic needs. It involves frequent assessment of students’ progress, data-based decision making, and placement of students within a range of instructional support (Barnes & Harlacher, 2008, p. 417).

**Rural.** Areas that do not lie inside an urbanized area or urban cluster (National Center for Educational Statistics).

**Urban Cluster.** An area with a population between 2,500 and 50,000 (National Center for Educational Statistics).

**Urbanized Area.** An area with a population of 50,000 or more.
Zero Reject. This principle of IDEA verifies that there are no children who are uneducable, and all are protected and guaranteed zero rejection under this mandate.

Organization of the Study

Chapter 1 has presented the introduction, opportunity for change, research questions, significance of the opportunity for change, and definition of terms. Chapter 2 contains a review of related literature and research related to the problem being investigated. The methodology and procedures used to gather data for the study are presented in Chapter 3. The results of analyses and findings to emerge from the study will be contained in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 will contain a summary of the study and findings, conclusions drawn from the findings, a discussion, and recommendations for further study.
Chapter 2

Special Education History

Students with disabilities have historically received unequal access to public education. Despite each state's implementation of compulsory education laws by 1918, requiring all children to attend school for a certain period, students with disabilities continued to be kept home, institutionalized, and marginalized (Yell et al., 1998). Wright and Wright (2007) reported that the number of children with disabilities institutionalized in 1972 in the United States was over 200,000. Wright and Wright (2007) and The United States Department of Education (2020) also documented the number of children with disabilities not receiving an education in 1972 was approximately 1.75 million.

Litigation

Several years passed before the rights of students with disabilities were directly protected by law. The first significant court case to influence the appropriate education of students with disabilities directly addressed racial segregation. In 1954, in the case of Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, the Supreme Court Justices ruled unanimously that the racial segregation of children in public schools was unconstitutional (Hulett, 2009). This landmark case laid the foundation for requiring the appropriate education for students with disabilities, impacting educational law; and policy (Yell et al., 1998). Brown v. Board of Education strengthened the notion that all children deserve equal educational opportunities.

The Pennsylvania Association of Retarded Children (PARC) brought the first-right-to-education suit against the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania in 1971. PARC argued that the standing Pennsylvania laws allowing schools to deny students with severe cognitive impairments access to free public education were a violation of the students’ 14th amendment rights. The
court entered a consent decree agreed to by both parties, which declared several state laws unconstitutional, and required the state to evaluate and place all students with mental disabilities ages 6 to 21 in a properly publicly funded educational setting. *PARC v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania*, 334 F.Supp. 1257 [E.D. Pa. 1971].

Shortly after an agreement in the case of *PARC v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* was reached, a federal court in the District of Columbia was making a ruling in the case of *Mills v. Board of Education of District of Columbia*. The decision quoted Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka in that all children, despite their needs, had the right to be publicly educated, with their peers. Local Education Associations (LEA) were not to discriminate against students with disabilities by denying them services due to monetary needs. Each LEA was directed to budget accordingly to provide necessary services to students with disabilities to provide them equal access to education. *Mills v. Board of Education of District of Columbia* led to the passage of Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children in 1975 (Weber, 2009).

**Legal Mandates**

Public Law 94-142 (P.L. 94-142) explicitly addressed and brought closure to the time of the exclusion of children with disabilities in education. President Gerald Ford signed P.L. 94-142, additionally known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1975, guaranteeing a free and appropriate public education to all children ages 3 to 21 with disabilities. P.L. 94-142 is perhaps the most significant law governing the education of students with disabilities (Bateman, et al., 2007). The foundational design of P.L. 94-142 was that “[i]mproving educational results for children with disabilities is an essential element of our national policy of ensuring equality of opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency for individuals with disabilities.” 20 U.S.C. § 1400(c)(1) (2018)
The Act required students with disabilities to be formally evaluated, leading to the thoughtful design of an individualized education program (IEP) to meet their unique needs by a multidisciplinary team. P.L. 94-142 mandated all schools receiving federal funding to abide by the new law to provide all children with disabilities equal access to education and in the environment that was least restrictive (LRE). The concept of due process protections for children and their families’ rights was also introduced with the enactment of this law.

P.L. 94-142 has undergone several changes since its inception in 1975. Public Law 101-476 called for a major change in the Education for All Handicapped Children Act in 1990. Not only was the act renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), but also; it added that children with autism or a traumatic brain injury were eligible for special education services. At the same time, it was mandated that each student’s IEP must include a transition plan at age fourteen to assist in the transition to post-secondary life.

IDEA was amended two times, once in 1992 to allow states to expand the developmental delay category from birth to five years old to birth to nine years old (Aron & Loprest, 2012). The second amendment came in 1997 when Congress focused on the academic potential and growth of students with disabilities. School districts were required to show all students were making educational growth and meeting achievements over a set period. Unfortunately, results from the 1997 reauthorization showed most students with disabilities showed low academic achievement.

Shortly after the second IDEA amendment, President George Bush signed the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) to ensure educational quality for all children (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). NCLB required school districts to administer annual assessments to reflect adequate yearly progress to continue to receive federal funding. This raised concerns within many school districts because it included the adequate academic growth of students with
disabilities, putting significant pressure on school administrators to produce increased test scores for all students despite their ability (Christensen et al., 2013). NCLB also required teachers to be highly qualified, passing a battery of assessments and state licensing requirements to ensure instructional competency. Another significant change that came along with NCLB was the requirement to use research-based instructional practices within all educational settings. These research-based practices were implemented to provide intervention for students who were struggling academically as part of a specific learning disability diagnosis process. Using interventional practices at various intensity levels was coined Response to Intervention (RTI), and its aim was to prevent the misidentification of students with specific learning disabilities.

Congress reauthorized IDEA in 2004, following suit with the high professional standards of NCLB. The reauthorization brought additional pressure to school district administrators, forcing them to be mindful that all students with disabilities were being provided an appropriate education in the least restrictive environment (Lynch, 2012). Turnbull et al. (2018) described an appropriate educational program as one that follows a prescribed process. The process includes two actions: a) a nondiscriminatory evaluation, individualized according to each student’s educational needs and covering cognitive, behavioral, functional, and developmental domains (20 U.S.C. §§ 1414[a–c]), and b) an IEP consisting of special education, related services, and supplementary aids and services that are based on peer-reviewed research to the extent practicable.

Together, these two actions are designed to assist the student in meeting set annual goals (20 U.S.C. § 1414[d][1][A][i][IV][aa]), make progress in the general curriculum and participate in extracurricular and other nonacademic activities (20 U.S.C. § 1414[d][1][A][i][IV] [bb]), and
be educated and participate with other students in the general education curriculum and in
extracurricular and other school activities (20 U.S.C. § 1414[d][1][A][IV][cc]).

Additionally, IDEA is comprised of six primary governing principles, which LEAs must
follow to ensure continued federal and state funding.

**Zero Reject.** Zero reject, the first IDEA principle, is based on the proposition that all
children, regardless of their disabling condition, must receive an appropriate education (Yell et
al., 2006). State education agencies must “provide full educational opportunities to all children
with disabilities” (20 U.S.C. 1412 (a)(2)). This principle verifies that there are no children who
are uneducable, and all are protected under the zero-reject mandate. This mandate is perhaps the
clearest of mandates in IDEA as it requires LEAs to actively seek and evaluate children with
disabilities between the ages of 3 to 21 years with annual Child Find guidelines. According to
federal regulations, Child Find requires states to organize a child identification plan for special
education program development and allotment of money for special education services. The
child identification program must locate children who are suspected of having a disability as well
as those children with disabilities already receiving special education services (20 U.S.C.
Sec.1412(a)(1)(A)). School building principals may be required to collect building data to report
for Child Find.

In addition to identifying all students with disabilities, the zero-reject policy also provides
protection for students in disciplinary situations that may be a manifestation of their disability.
Principals may not terminate educational services for a child that qualifies for special education
for more than 10 school days without conducting a manifestation determination to determine if
the student’s behavior was a result of their disability or not. IDEA “prohibits the exclusion,
allows for discipline, addresses the disparate impact of exclusion on students with disabilities,
and thereby carries out the zero-reject principle” (Turnbull et al., 2007, p. 86). However, DeMathews and Mawhinney (2014) expressed that the history of the marginalization of students with disabilities, with “inequality, segregation, and misidentification” (p. 3) persists today.

**Non-Discriminatory Evaluation.** The second IDEA principle ensures fair evaluation of all students with a suspected disability. Former court case decisions such as *Larry P. v. Riles*, 1984, support the notion that proper evaluation measures must be in place to ensure the appropriate evaluation of, identification of, and placement of students with a suspected disability (Turnbull et al., 2007). The non-discriminatory evaluation mandate requires a multidisciplinary, multifaceted, unbiased evaluation of a child with a suspected disability before classifying or providing special education services for that child (Turnbull et al., 2007).

All test materials used to assess a student for special education eligibility must be nondiscriminatory and technically sound instruments. All assessments must be administered to the student in his or her native language or mode of communication by a trained evaluator. Principals must ensure students are assessed in all areas of suspected disability and that the assessment evaluator uses a variety of assessment tools and strategies to ascertain the educational needs of a student and whether or not there is a disability (Friend, 2018). In order to oversee the requirements of a non-discriminatory evaluation, building principals must be aware of the IDEA requirements and be an active member of the assessment planning team.

**Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE).** Free and appropriate public education is the third IDEA principle, and it requires LEAs to provide individualized instruction to students with disabilities (Friend, 2018). Appropriate education services under FAPE must be provided to the student at no financial cost to the parents and are determined appropriate on a case-by-case basis. FAPE is delivered through the student’s individualized education plan (IEP) and accounts
for most of the legal action under IDEA (Zirkel, 2017). Osborne and Russo (2014) reported that many parents of students with disabilities are dissatisfied with the level of support the schools are providing their children leading to the high degree of litigation in this area. A study by Scheffel, et al. (2005) found that many parents who were dissatisfied with educational services for their child and initiated legal proceedings felt their students’ classroom teacher was unaware of what their role(s) in the student’s education was supposed to be, as well as the requirements of special education law. Building principals may provide ongoing professional development training in the areas of special education law to ensure classroom teachers are aware of student’s rights and the role they play in the students' specialized education.

A student’s special education services and placement must be a results-oriented program. To ensure educational benefit from special education and related services, it becomes the obligation of IEP teams to “ensure that programs are (a) based on student needs, (b) meaningful and contain measurable annual goals, (c) grounded in scientifically based practices, and (d) measured on an ongoing basis to ensure that students make progress” (Yell et al., 2006, p. 243).

**Least Restrictive Environment.** The fourth IDEA principle is that of the least restrictive environment (LRE). Under IDEA, LRE requires that, when appropriate, students with disabilities are educated in settings with children without disabilities (IDEA, 2004; Yell, 2019). Special education is a service, not a place where children with disabilities go, therefore they should be educated in the environment that is least restrictive to their learning. The law explicitly states that:

To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are not disabled, and that special classes, separate schooling, or other removals of children
with disabilities from the regular educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disabilities is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily. (IDEA, 20 U.S.C., 1412(a)(5)(A))

Research indicates that the number of students with disabilities who spend 80% or more of the school day in general education classrooms has substantially increased from 34% in 1990 to 63% in 2017 (McLeskey et al., 2012; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2019; U.S. Department of Education, 2019).

It is the responsibility of the principal to provide the resources and commitment to ensure student’s success in the least restrictive environment (Bateman & Bateman, 2002). Principals must ensure that all building staff are aware of the legal requirements of IDEA, as well as guide them to make instructional changes to their methods and supports as necessary. Principals may also support a student’s LRE by providing their teachers with appropriate planning time and regular meetings to report progress and discuss student needs (Bateman & Bateman, 2002).

**Procedural Safeguards.** Procedural safeguards and due process are the fifth principles of IDEA. This principle requires school districts to present the acting parent(s) with the Notice of Procedural Safeguards. Parents are presented with a copy of the procedural safeguards annually as well as in the following situations:

- Upon initial referral or parent request for evaluation
- Anytime a parent requests a copy of the Notice of Procedural Safeguards
- Upon receipt of the first special education complaint filed with the state of occupancy or request of due process
● When a decision is made to take a disciplinary action that constitutes a change in placement for the child.

The Notice of Procedural Safeguards explicitly lays out the parental rights and due process procedure to protect the rights of parents and their child with a disability. These safeguards also provide the school district and the family with multiple methods to resolve potential disputes (Friend, 2018). The Notice of Procedural Safeguards includes a complete explanation of the safeguards available under IDEA related to:

● Independent educational evaluations
● Prior written notice
● Parental consent
● Access to student education records
● The availability of mediation
● The child’s placement during the process of any due process complaint
● Procedures for students who are subject to placement in an interim alternative educational setting
● Requirements for unilateral placement by parents of children in private schools at public expense
● Due process hearings, including requirements for disclosure of evaluation results and recommendations
● Civil actions
● Attorneys’ fees. [§300.504]

The purpose of due process under IDEA is to ensure students with disabilities are treated equally with the same educational rights as their peers without disabilities (Getty & Summy,
This also ensures the school district is compliant with the other IDEA principles of student placement, appropriate services, and educational programs (Yell, 2019).

**Parent Participation.** One of IDEA’s foundational principles, parents’ right to participation and shared decision making is the sixth and final principle. This section of the Act requires school districts to go to great lengths to ensure parents are meaningfully participating in the decision-making of their child’s evaluation, educational placement, and IEP. Meaningful participation is designed to encourage a collaborative partnership between the parents and the school district for the benefit of the student with disabilities (Yell, 2019).

In accordance with IDEA, parents must receive a copy of their Parental Rights and Procedural Safeguards at least annually from the school district. This document explicitly outlines all aspects of parental rights to meaningful participation in the student’s educational process. Additionally, parents must receive in writing any proposed changes to their student’s educational placement or program (IDEA, 2004). As the instructional leader of the school, it is the responsibility of the principal to ensure these guidelines have been met. Principles should be active participants of the student’s IEP team and have a consistent follow-up with parents following meetings or other educational decisions. These routines are more likely to build a stronger relationship with parents, leaving them to feel comfortable and satisfied with the school’s educational team (Scheffel et al., 2005).

**Intellectual Disability**

**Definition**

An intellectual disability is defined in the IDEA (2004) as students with “significantly sub average general intellectual functioning, existing concurrently with deficits in adaptive behavior and manifested during the developmental period, that adversely affects a child’s
The IDEA definition of intellectual disability illustrates the significant fact that intellectual disability diagnosis is only assigned when a student demonstrates low intellectual ability and significant needs in adaptive behavior. A low intellectual ability is measured by an intelligence quotient (IQ) below 70. Student’s adaptive behavior skills are measured through observation and comparison to other children their age.

**Prevalence**

Intellectual disabilities impact both males and females and have an onset before the age of 18 (Friend, 2018). Various reports indicate that male students are most affected by the disability compared to female students in the United States (Friend, 2018). This difference exists because there are specific syndromes that are more prevalent in males than females or affect them at different rates (Friend, 2018). Many times, the cause of an intellectual disability cannot be determined, yet other times the disability is due to a chromosomal abnormality (Friend, 2018). Down syndrome, Fragile X syndrome, and Prader-Willi syndrome are all prenatal, chromosomal abnormalities that may cause an intellectual disability. Other known prenatal causes of intellectual disabilities are fetal alcohol syndrome, phenylketonuria, and toxoplasmosis. Intellectual disabilities may develop postnatal from encephalitis, lead poisoning, or a brain injury (Friend, 2018).

African American students are approximately 2.48 times more likely than other students to be identified as having an intellectual disability due to racial bias, bias in assessment, and risk factors such as living in poverty (U.S. Department of Education, 2016). According to the Pew Research Center, in 2018, approximately 6.3% of the United States special education population was comprised of students with intellectual disabilities (2020). South Dakota’s 2019 child count...
determined 8.58% of the students receiving special education services in the state had an intellectual disability as their primary disability diagnosis.

**Characteristics**

Students with intellectual disabilities have significant limitations in intellectual functioning. A student’s intellectual functioning level is one of several considerations when determining eligibility for special education. A student is identified as having an intellectual disability if their IQ score is two standard deviations or more below the average IQ score of 100 (Friend, 2018). Although IDEA does not provide distinct categories, traditional classification systems individualize those with an intellectual disability based on the extent of their intellectual impairment (Friend, 2018). The intellectual disability can range from mild to profound. See Table 1.

With limited intellectual functioning, a student's cognitive functioning is also impaired. Students may struggle to process information, think logically, and speak on topic (Hazmi & Ahmad, 2018). Students with intellectual disabilities are also likely to forget instructions, especially if the task involves multiple steps (Friend, 2018). Routine daily skills such as dressing, writing, and social interaction may take a considerable amount of time for students with an intellectual disability to retain.
Table 1

*Traditional Conceptualization of Intellectual Disabilities*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Intellectual Disability</th>
<th>IQ Score</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mild intellectual disabilities</td>
<td>55-69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate intellectual disabilities</td>
<td>40-54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severe intellectual disabilities</td>
<td>25-39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profound intellectual disabilities</td>
<td>Below 25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Education of Students with Intellectual Disabilities

The education of students with intellectual disabilities dates to the 1800s, when Dr. Jean Marc Itard made an effort to educate Victor, a 12-year-old-boy with a developmental disability through an educational experiment. Although Itard’s efforts did not produce practical teaching methods, he did provide evidence that Victor, who was thought by many to be untrainable, made progress (Shattuck, 1980). Itard’s study demonstrated that children with developmental disabilities also referred to as intellectual disabilities, could learn when provided with instruction.

Baker et al. (2015) agreed that students with intellectual disabilities can progress in their education with modified curriculum and instructional methods to help them reach their potential in academic and functional areas. The research of Baker et al. (2015) also established those instructional strategies for students with intellectual disabilities should focus on promoting student’s independence and self-reliability.

The educational reforms in the 2000s expanded academic expectations for students in special education as well as the achievement gap between students who qualify for special education and students who participate in the general curriculum (Aron & Loprest, 2012;
Considerable emphasis was and continues to be placed on ensuring that all students with intellectual disabilities have access to the general education curriculum to the maximum extent possible (Dymond et al., 2007).

Ensuring students with intellectual disabilities receive appropriate education and participate in general education to the appropriate extent often presents hurdles for school teams. Special education teachers have reported that accessing the general curriculum for their students with intellectual disabilities has been a difficult process (Dymond et al., 2007).

Literature suggests problematic behavior in the classroom is an additional obstacle in providing FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities (Dunlap et al., 2009). Often students with intellectual disabilities have deficits in language, coping skills, and social skills. The deficit in expressive language skills to express their wants and needs can evoke unexpected behavior in the classroom, negatively impacting a student's academic performance or that of others. This may limit the amount of time students with intellectual disabilities spend in the general education classroom with their peers, and the amount of time spent on instructional material.

Students with intellectual disabilities may also require social skill instruction due to their limited number of social skills, such as gaining the teacher's attention or working cooperatively with peers. Unexpected behaviors that stem from the lack of social skills may prevent the student from learning or participating in other activities (Kozlowski, et al., 2009). Additionally, students may have limited coping skills, resulting in frustration or unexpected behaviors if they do not have the ability to wait, and reinforcement is not immediate (Ducharme & Shecter, 2011).

**Unique Educational Challenges to Rural Leaders**

Although rural schools tend to be favored by families for their small settings, individualized student attention, and safe communities, the ability to provide a free and
appropriate public education to all students in a sparsely populated setting has challenges (Rude & Miller, 2018).

**Location**

Bouck (2004) found there to be a variety of reasons rural school districts struggle to recruit and retain teachers. Rural school districts that are within proximity to urban centers and attractive environments with services are more likely to recruit teachers if they are willing to accommodate commuting educators from these nearby areas. Rural school districts that lack close travel distance to social and cultural activities are less likely to attract teachers that are committed to teaching in rural communities.

Due to many rural school districts being geographically isolated, there tends to be fewer options available regarding placement decisions for students with disabilities (Hodge & Krumm, 2009).

**Lack of Resources**

Rural principals are challenged with fiscal limitations and restricted access to educational and technical resources, yet they are expected to meet the same accountability requirements as their urban and suburban peers (Preston et al., 2013). Rural school districts receive less money from the federal government as well as less property tax monies due to the likelihood of low-income students (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Of the 9.6 million public school students in the United States, approximately one out of every five rural school students live in poverty (Strange et al., 2012).

**Recruiting and Retaining Qualified Educators**

The shortage of qualified teachers in the United States is well documented, as is the shortage of teachers in special education and in rural settings (Showalter et al., 2017; Sindelar et
al., 2018; Sutcher et al., 2016; Viadero, 2018). The greatest shortage of special education teachers is those who serve students with low incidences (LI) disabilities such as autism, intellectual disabilities, and sensory impairments (Jameson et al., 2019). Sutcher et al. (2016) found the number of educators who have shown interest in working in rural schools has significantly declined in the last decade because attracting and retaining teachers to a rural community presents a unique set of challenges for school administrators. Sawchuck (2018) found a remote location, heavy caseloads, and high poverty rates to be among some of the reasons rural school districts struggle to find and keep highly qualified special education teachers.

Due to the small school size, special education teachers are likely to serve a diverse group of learner needs across multiple grade spans (Brownell et al., 2018). According to the Center for American Progress (2019), teacher preparation program enrollment has declined by more than one-third since 2010 in America. Students in rural school districts are less likely to have highly qualified educators due to these challenges. In addition to the national decline in teacher preparation enrollment and the rural teacher shortage, the entire nation continues to face a critical shortage of special education teachers (Cuero, 2016). The critical shortage of qualified special education teachers is one of the largest challenges to fulfilling a free and appropriate education for students with disabilities (Billingsley, 2002).

Teacher attrition rates are also playing a significant role in the shortage of teachers in both urban and rural school districts. Special education teachers have the highest attrition rate in the education field (Goldring et al., 2014; Theoharis & Fitzpatrick, 2013). High turnover and attrition rates negatively impact student services and achievement (Kraft & Papay, 2014; Ronfeldt et al., 2013; Sorensen & Ladd, 2018), as well as cost school districts thousands of

School Leaders’ Roles in Special Education

General Special Education Knowledge Requirements

The ever-changing leadership responsibilities with legislative action have pressured principals to be accountable for educational disciplines that they were not adequately trained to supervise (Boscardin et al., 2011). To be effective leaders, principals must support and guide teachers to ensure students are receiving educational curriculum and services to meet their individual needs. Limited research exists regarding how principals engage in instructional leadership in ways that directly benefit students with disabilities. Some studies have been conducted seeking the direct impact a principal has on the student body, while other research has focused on the indirect effects of the principal (Lynch, 2012; Sumbera et al., 2014). Despite measuring principal impact at various levels, these studies come to the consensus that principals impact the effectiveness of their school’s operations and student performance. (Lynch, 2012; Sumbera et al., 2014).

Pazey and Cole (2013) explained that over the span of the history of education in the United States, special education has emerged as one of the most litigious issues that school administrators confront in their daily practice. The role of the building principal is crucial to ensuring students’ rights are met under the IDEA. Principals must have a strong understanding of special education issues, policies, instructional practices, and curriculum to effectively meet the needs of students with disabilities. Principals’ planning and instructional practices include choosing curriculum materials, instructional strategies, and modification strategies that complement one another, and that follow Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) as well as lead
to student success (Sanzo et al., 2011). Effective principals focus their curricular efforts on establishing high expectations for all students in their school (Hitt & Tucker, 2016).

Betitti et al., (2016) discovered that working conditions have an impact on teacher’s quality of instruction and student outcomes: “a) a school culture supporting high expectations and shared responsibility for student achievement, (b) administrative and collegial support that provides opportunities to collaborate with skilled colleagues to improve instruction, (c) useful and appropriate instructional materials, (d) appropriate instructional groupings, (e) adequate time for instruction, and (f) planning time to support improved practice” (Billingsley & Bettini, 2017). Principals need to work with school staff to agree on and support student conduct standards with the goal of creating safe, orderly, and productive learning environments (Hitt & Tucker, 2016).

**Specialized FAPE Knowledge Requirements**

To provide effective leadership and ensure all students are receiving an appropriate education, principals must understand the vast needs of students with disabilities. According to DiPaola et al., (2004), “effective instructional leadership is based on the knowledge and skills that permit a deep understanding of what is happening in every classroom” (p.4).

To address the needs of students with disabilities, principals must be aware of and promote the use of evidence-based practices shown to be effective in improving student learning and ensure that these instructional practices are implemented with fidelity (Cook & Smith, 2012). Promoting effective instruction means ensuring that teachers learn and effectively use the instructional practices that research shows are most powerful in promoting student learning (Deshler & Cornett, 2012).

Principals are responsible for the educational performance of all the students they oversee as the educational leader, on state and district assessments. Federal law requires individual states
to test all students in reading and math yearly between third through eighth grade, and once again in high school. Students take the assessment that corresponds with their current grade, or they take an alternative assessment that is not specifically tied to corresponding grade-level standards (Yell, 2019). The alternative assessment option is for students who have a significant intellectual disability. School districts may allow 1 percent of students with intellectual disabilities to take the alternative assessment (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2015). It is the responsibility of the building principal to recognize which students in their care would be candidates for the alternative assessment. Principals must report these qualifying students to the state and justify why the alternative assessment is appropriate. Principals must closely monitor classroom instruction to ensure evidence-based instructional strategies are implemented and meaningful educational gains are occurring for students with intellectual disabilities. These classroom observations help the principal to be a beneficial participant in the determination of the student’s least restrictive learning environment and specially designed instruction that is necessary to meet student’s individual needs for academic and social success (Bateman & Bateman, 2002).

In keeping with IDEA, principals need to be aware of the number of students with disabilities receiving special education and related services within their school and make sure that all available resources are being utilized to increase the opportunities for the students with disabilities to participate in their least restrictive environment.

Evidence suggests that students’ academic achievement improves when district and state policies align with school-wide commitments to high-quality instruction for all learners (Barr & Bracchitta, 2012; Deshler & Cornett, 2012).
Professional Preparation

Principal Preparation Programs

As a principal, one must have a solid understanding of IDEA and ESSA to help administer and monitor special education programs (Loiacono & Valenti, 2010; Lynch, 2012; McHatton et al., 2010; Roberts & Guerra, 2017). School districts need principals to understand the requirements of special education because the number of students receiving special education services has significantly increased in the last 40 years. Pazey and Cole (2013) reported that 3.6 million students were receiving special education services during the 1976-1977 school year. The most recent national standards statistic reported 7.1 million students were receiving special education services during the 2018-2019 school year (National Center for Educational Statistics).

Understanding and having the ability to clearly implement the laws and legislative requirements of IDEA is essential to a successful special education program (Loiacono & Valenti, 2010; Lynch, 2012; McHatton et al., 2010; Pazey & Cole, 2013). It is essential that those who oversee the school district’s certified staff and those with direct contact with the children have training in special education requirements. Additionally, they must have the necessary pre-service training to prepare them effectively to meet the needs of all students, but it is most critical when those students have disabilities (Lynch, 2012; McHatton et al., 2010; Pazey & Cole, 2013). Principals with a strong special education preparation are more likely to be involved in special education improvement efforts and understand student needs (Frost & Kersten, 2011). Yet, research (Ball & Green, 2014) suggests few principals are prepared to be instructional leaders in special education.

Since the implementation of P.L. 94-142, administrators have been required to increase the educational opportunities for students with disabilities. Despite the increase in responsibility
and accountability on the part of the school principal, research dating back almost 40 years by Hallinger et al., (1983) and O’Reilly and Squires (1985) concluded that most principals studied had little to no formal training in special education or required coursework. Principal preparation programs contained little information on special education or its implementation.

As part of determining the level of administrative preparation for school leaders in special education, the researcher reviewed federal, state, and local special education laws and regulations. The State Department of Education is the state agency responsible for setting the certification requirements for all educators in the state, including administrators (Gümüş & Boylan, 2015). Each state’s administrative certification code sets the basic educational requirements, course content, and curriculum for administrators to obtain certification through colleges and universities (Gümüş & Boylan, 2015). All South Dakota K-12 principal preparation programs must meet the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) program recognition standards (S.D. Administrative Rule 24:53:08:02). The preparation programs “must require candidates to demonstrate the applicable content, pedagogical, and professional knowledge and skills identified in the 2018 NELP standards to demonstrate competency on the applicable multiple assessment measures”. These professional standards are studied and designed by and for the leadership profession to provide guidelines in principal preparation programs as well as for practicing school leaders. School district and campus leaders use these standards to develop curricula and policies that communicate the educational institution’s fundamental beliefs and academic outcomes. The current NELP standards do not specifically address special education. Terms such as “inclusive learning experiences for diverse P-12 learners” (NELP Building Standards, 2018, p. 15) and “to work effectively with diverse P-12 learners” (NELP
Building Standards, 2018, p. 21) may suggest the inclusion of special education rules and regulations.

The first set of national standards published for school district leaders was in 1996, when the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the Inter-state School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) came together to create the ISLLC Standards for School Leaders (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2015). Recognizing the changes that were occurring in education to include the evolving responsibilities of the school principals, the standards were revised in 2008 based on current empirical data, and again in 2011. Although ISLLC provided a strong framework for principal practice, these revisions failed to address the principal’s role in education leadership in relation to meeting the needs of students with disabilities (Burton, 2008).

The Professional Standards for Educational Leadership (PSEL) replaced ISLLC in 2015. These standards were developed to replace the ISLLC standards to address “a stronger, clearer emphasis on students and student learning, outlining foundational principles of leadership to help ensure that each child is well educated and prepared for the 21st century” (Council of Chief State School Officers, 2017, p. 2). Also, during 2015, a committee of educators and stakeholders across the United States began developing a set of leadership preparation standards comparable to PSEL.

Summary

This review of the literature included the history of special education, the unique challenges rural school districts face, the importance of principals' knowledge of special education guidelines and FAPE requirements. This review of literature provides a gap to study the perceptions of principals in the implementation of FAPE for students with intellectual
disabilities to provide individualized services. Chapter 3 provides the description of the subjects to be studied and the methods to be used to conduct the research design to study the perceptions of principals in the implementation of FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities.
Chapter 3

Methodology

This chapter includes the purpose of the study, the research question addressed, where the literature review was conducted, a discussion of the qualitative design and description of the phenomenological methodology, and the background of the researcher. Chapter 3 also includes study participant descriptions, methods, data collection procedures to be used, ethical considerations, and reliability and validity measures that were used to verify the credibility of the interpretation.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore school principals' experiences implementing FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities in remote rural school districts in South Dakota. This study was qualitative in nature to provide participating principals the opportunity to explain their lived experiences in implementing FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities.

Research Question

This study was guided by the following research question.

1. What are remote rural school principals’ experiences with implementing FAPE for students with an intellectual disability?

Review of Related Literature and Research

A review of the literature was conducted to gain the perspective on the current research related to principals’ perceptions of providing FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities. The review of literature assisted in structuring the history of special education, difficulties presented for rural school districts, and principal preparation program requirements. The
literature selected for this study was drawn from the I.D. Weeks Library at the University of South Dakota and the Beulah Williams Library at Northern State University. Other resources used to structure this research were *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design* (Creswell & Poth, 2018), *Completing Your Qualitative Dissertation: A Road Map From Beginning to End* (2018), and the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association 7th Edition* (2020).

**Research Design**

Qualitative research “begins with assumptions and the use of theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning of individuals or groups ascribed to a social or human problem” (Creswell, 2013, p.44). A qualitative research design was selected for this study because little research exists giving a voice to principals of remote rural schools about the implementation of FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities and how to best approach methods in leadership preparation programs.

Phenomenological research describes the common meaning for multiple participants of their lived experiences of a particular phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study evolved from the researcher’s interest in working with students who have an intellectual disability, and curiosity about the experiences the rural South Dakota principals have in implementing the critical components of FAPE. The critical components of FAPE include a free education, which allows all students to attend school and receive necessary related services at no cost to their families. FAPE also ensures students an appropriate education, in which a specifically designed IEP is designed to meet the student’s individual academic needs.

Researchers who use phenomenological research focus on participants in their natural settings and allow for the establishment of common themes and patterns (Moustakas, 1994). Further, this study utilized transcendental phenomenology. Transcendental phenomenology
consists of selecting a phenomenon to study, bracketing out the researcher’s personal experiences, and then collecting data from multiple people who have experienced the focused phenomenon. The collected data is reduced into significant statements and quotes and then combined to create themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This transcendental phenomenological research provides a description of the participants' experiences rather than an interpretation from the researcher (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Because no known studies capture the perceptions of principals in remote South Dakota who implement FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities, the qualitative transcendental phenomenological design allowed the researcher to investigate the phenomenon without barriers set by previous research. Another critical component of transcendental phenomenology is the bracketing process in which the researcher takes out their personal experiences to view the phenomenon through a fresh lens (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The researcher selected the transcendental phenomenological approach to help recognize her own experiences with the phenomenon and bracket out those views before proceeding with the experiences of the study participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Patton (1990) recognized the difficulty of ensuring real impartiality, as the intrusion of the researcher’s biases may be inevitable. A significant standard in trustworthiness is the extent to which the researcher exposes their own predispositions (Miles & Huberman, 1994) and employs methods to reduce the impact of bias.

**Positionality statement**

The researcher has former experience as a special education teacher who taught a variety of grade levels for students with intellectual disabilities. Although she did not teach special education in a remote rural school district setting, she did experience urban cluster school district
principals who seemed to face challenges in implementing FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities and supporting those teachers who provided instruction to students with intellectual disabilities. Further, the researcher feels there is a lack of inclusion of students with disabilities, and wonders if teacher attitudes about the inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities in the general education classroom is influenced by the principal’s attitudes.

Her teaching experiences with students with intellectual disabilities and working with principals in an urban school district have stirred up curiosity in studying the experiences of remote rural school district principals in implementing FAPE. The researcher’s perception of these experiences may stem from her deep passion to advocate for those students who have historically been excluded from general education.

The researcher also grew up in a remote rural school district in a neighboring Midwest state. Although she does not recall experiences of the principal's interactions with students with intellectual disabilities, the mere fact that this is where she received her K-12 education and had multiple classmates with intellectual disabilities may impact her personal influence on findings.

Furthermore, the researcher’s current program of study is in the field of school administration. Therefore, she has had the opportunity to experience the professional preparation courses South Dakota administrators are required to take for certification and has noted the limited amount of special education instruction provided and required.

The researcher frequently reverted to her field notes containing personal feelings and connections to participant interviews to ensure the statements documented and emerging themes were a true reflection of the participants and not a personal bias. The researcher had frequent conferences with their advisor, included inter coder reliability, and utilized member checks to
assure personal bias was not impeding the collected data. Each significant statement recorded was given equal value, as to not allow research bias to be reflected (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

**Selection of Participants**

Participants in this study were selected using criterion sampling identifying principals of schools- considered remote rural. Criterion sampling is the process of selecting participants that meet the predetermined criterion of importance (Patton, 1990, p. 238). The criteria for selection were principals of remote school districts in South Dakota who had experience supervising a special education teacher(s) who taught at least one student with a primary diagnosis of an intellectual disability. South Dakota is a Midwest state with a population of 814,180 inhabitants, covering 75,811 square miles of land (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019). Within this population, 85% identify themselves as white, and the median household income for the state is $58,275, with approximately 12% of the population living below the poverty line (U.S. Census Bureau, 2019).

Participants who met the following criteria were invited to participate:

a) Acting Principal of a remote South Dakota school as defined by the National Center for Educational Statistics.

b) The principal must have at least one full academic years’ experience in providing FAPE as an administrator for one or more students with a primary disability of intellectual disability. An academic year is from August to May.

Principals representing elementary, middle school, and high school levels were invited to participate in this study because remote rural school principals often oversee multiple grade level spans within a single building. Principals assigned to preschools, charter schools, urban schools, magnet schools, and alternative education programs were not included in this study.
To identify the school districts in South Dakota that are considered remote rural, the researcher used a map of South Dakota provided by the United States Census Bureau. The map defined the areas of the state that are urbanized areas with a population of 50,000 or more as well as urban clusters with a population of 10,000 to 49,999.

Polkinghorne (1989) recommended that researchers conduct a qualitative, phenomenological study interview from 5 to 25 people who have all lived the experience. The researcher followed Polkinghorne’s recommendation and a sample of 5 to 25 participants or until saturation is reached. Saturation is defined as “a point at which the categories are “saturated”, and the inquirer no longer finds new information that adds to an understanding of the category” (Creswell, 2013, p. 289). The researcher expects a sample size of around 15 participants.

**Data Collection**

After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the University of South Dakota to conduct the study (see Appendix A), the researcher obtained permission to conduct research in each school district. To obtain proper permissions for each school district, the researcher contacted the superintendent per e-mail seeking site approval. Once she had received clarification and permission, she began contacting potential participants.

Initial emails were sent to remote rural school principals in South Dakota including the consent form to inform the reader of the purpose and procedures of the study as well as the following information: voluntariness, benefits, and confidentiality. Participants were informed that they may withdraw from this study at any time and their information will remain confidential (see Appendix A). A follow-up email was sent to the participants who expressed interest in participating in the study. This follow-up included the researcher’s appreciation for
their willingness to participate and a request for dates, times to set up an interview. Participants were also provided a copy of the structured interview questions.

The researcher interviewed 8 participants, until saturation was achieved. In this process, saturation was met when the participant responses were so similar, the researcher no longer found new information that added to an understanding or description of the phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The researcher gathered data by conducting semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews required the researcher and the participant to engage in a formal interview. Each interview began with small talk about the weather, graduate school, or the lingering effects of COVID-19. The researcher used interview questions that need to be covered during the interview discussion to inform the research question (See Appendix B). The researcher followed the guide but was able to follow the participant’s topical route in the conversations that may have stridden from the guide if deemed appropriate (Cohen & Crabtree, 2008). Interviews were conducted over a span of three months, and took between twenty-five and seventy-five minutes, and all participants answered each question presented. By listening to participants explain their experiences with implementing FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities, the researcher uncovered their perceptions and the meaning that they ascribe to those experiences. Interviews were conducted via Zoom due to the contact restrictions of COVID19, as well as the physical living distance between the researcher and the participants. The interviews were recorded using Zoom and Otter.ai to allow the researcher to fully attend to the present interview, as well as to allow the researcher the opportunity to listen to the interview repeatedly to ensure accurate notes and data.
As participants described their experiences implementing FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities, the researcher took notes about the evolving theory to discover patterns, also known as memoing (Lempert, 2007). This process continued throughout the data collection process. The researcher also included field notes detailing the overall interview to provide a rich context of the study (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). As the participants were speaking, field notes consisted of keywords to remain interactive with the participant.

Immediately after the interview, comprehensive field notes were created. Field notes consisted of the interview setting, overall appearance and demeanor of the participants, non-verbal behaviors, and a critical commentary. The critical commentary reflected the researcher's performance and feelings during the interview (Phillippi & Lauderdale, 2018). The documentation of personal feelings assists in bracketing to personal bias or experiential bias (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

After documenting conclusive field notes, Otter.ai was used to transcribe the interviews. Otter.ai is an online transcription service that provides transcripts within minutes. After the transcriptions were complete, the researcher listened to each interview while reviewing the transcript to check for accuracy, and changes were made as needed. To strengthen research credibility, participants were provided a copy of their interview transcript within one week of the interview to ensure transcription accuracy and to confirm the transcript provided a strong, full description of their experiences. Participants were provided time to analyze the interview transcripts and provide additional feedback if they felt it was necessary. Each participant agreed the transcript they were provided was an accurate representation of their experiences and declined to add additional information or comments.
Data Analysis

The data analysis process was structured using Huberman and Miles’s (1994) systematic approach to analysis as well as Creswell and Poth’s (2018) Data Analysis Spiral. The two approaches to analysis complemented each other well, as Creswell and Poth’s (2018) method provided a visual outline, and Huberman and Miles (1994) provided further detailed steps in the process for qualitative research (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The data analysis spiral created by Creswell and Poth (2018) includes managing and organizing the data. Reading and memoing emergent ideas, describing and classifying codes into themes, developing and assessing interpretations, and representing and visualizing the collected data (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The researcher watched each interview 3 times, continuing to memo while listening to the recordings to get a sense of the interviews holistically (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Memos are “short phrases, ideas, or key concepts that occur to the reader” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 188). Memoing may also be used to develop insights and identify bias, which can then be bracketed out. This was the initial phase of attempting to blend the data into a “higher-level analytic meaning” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 95). The additional analysis phases that were used per the structure of Miles and Huberman (1994), were drafting summaries of field notes and noting relationships among the categories.

The next step was to code the data. Here, the researcher built data descriptions and applied codes independently. Creswell and Poth (2018) recommend starting with building descriptions after reading and managing data, as it is the heart of qualitative data analysis. The researcher’s advisor served as the second coder for inter rater reliability. The data were clustered into small categories of information and assigned a label by each researcher. The researchers then met to share their analyses and agree upon codes.
After the completion of coding the data, the researcher started the process of interpreting the data and determining how to present the findings. The researcher identified 48 significant statements during the memo and analysis process. Then, she developed a textual description of what the participants experienced in implementing FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities, followed by a structural description. The structural description described how the participants experienced implementing FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities in terms of the context or situations (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Each theme is supported by participants’ personal quotes and related code tables strengthening trustworthiness. In conclusion, the researcher combined the shared experiences of the principals to provide a rich description of what remote rural leaders encounter with the supervision of FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities.

Managing and Organizing Data

For each interview, the researcher created two recordings, one using the Zoom recording option, and the other using Otter.ai. The use of both recordings was in case of technical error. Otter.ai was the recording option used to transcribe the data. These recordings and transcriptions were placed in a digital file on the researcher’s password-protected drive for each participant and were labeled with a pseudonym for confidentiality. The use of a named digital filing system ensured data could be easily accessed for analysis (Bazeley, 2013).

Trustworthiness

Shenton (2004) summarized trustworthiness in qualitative research as assessing the accuracy of the findings as best described in the study. He suggested that the following four criteria be addressed to assist the researcher in establishing trustworthiness in qualitative studies: credibility, transferability, dependability, and conformability. Credibility addresses the likelihood
that the findings represent the true experiences of the participants. Transferability addresses the extent to which the researcher’s findings may be applied in other settings. Dependability addresses the reliability of the techniques used and shows that “the processes within the study should be reported in detail, thereby enabling future researchers to repeat the work, if not necessarily to gain the same results” (Shenton, 2004, p. 71). Dependability is also linked to conformability, trustworthiness criteria component four. Conformability addresses the objectivity of the research during data collection and analysis by the researcher. Measures have been put into place to ensure the trustworthiness of this study based on the four criteria above.

Credibility

Ensuring credibility is arguably the most important factor in establishing trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). To strengthen the credibility of this study, a thorough literature review is provided in chapter two. Shenton (2004), suggested that credibility may also be established by describing the researcher’s position, background, and qualifications. This was articulated in the positionality statement provided earlier in this chapter. Immediately after each interview, the researcher documented a reflective commentary of her initial impressions of the session to monitor her own developing constructions and progressive objectivity (Shenton, 2004).

To ensure honesty from all participants, each was given the opportunity to refuse to participate in the study. This process ensured that the interviews only involved those who were willing to participate and willing to offer data freely (Shenton, 2004). Also, after the interview transcripts were complete, the participants were asked to review their interview dialogue. This process, known as member checks, provided the participant with the opportunity to consider “if their words match what they actually intended” (Shenton, 2004, p. 68).
The researcher had frequent debriefing sessions with her dissertation advisor to discuss possible alternative approaches to data collection, bring attention to flaws in the research course of action, and help the researcher to recognize her own biases and preferences (Shenton, 2004). Similarly, the researcher sought peer scrutiny of the study from her dissertation committee. The outside perspective of the committee allowed the opportunity to challenge any assumptions made by the researcher who is so close to the project that she may not view it objectively (Shenton, 2004).

A thick description of the lived experiences of the participants was derived from the collected data. A textural description provides a rich description as to the actual phenomenon the participants experienced in implementing FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities. Additionally, the rich structural description describes how the participants experienced implementing FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

**Transferability**

These research findings are specific to rural South Dakota principals, and it is impossible to predict whether these findings and conclusions are applicable to all principals in South Dakota or rural principals in other states (Miles & Huberman, 1994). However, to strengthen transferability, thick descriptions are provided of the population and sample, location, as well as the methods used, and the researcher’s role in the study, as previously noted. Polkinghorne (1989) recommended that researchers interview from 5 to 25 people who have all lived the experience when conducting a qualitative, phenomenological study. The researcher interviewed participants until the saturation point was reached, and a description of the phenomenon was accurately described using the collected data. Saturation is the point where information is saturated, and the researcher no longer finds new information to add to the description of the
phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Nine participants were interviewed, and the interview question protocol is included.

**Dependability**

Dependability is strengthened by the interview questions and interview protocol previously discussed. Shenton (2004) noted, “the process within the study should be reported in detail, thereby enabling a future researcher to repeat the work” (p.71). Details are included on the participant selection process, as well as demographic information on the Midwest state in which the study will be conducted. If changes are made during the data collection phase, these were be transparently noted in the measures section.

Dependability was enhanced by using high-quality recording through Zoom and Otter.ai. The use of both recording devices eliminates the chance of technological error. The interview files were digitally transcribed through Otter.ai and reviewed thoroughly by the researcher to ensure accuracy. Silverman (2013) suggested the use of high-quality recording and transcription to provide the researcher with comprehensive field notes and enhance dependability.

**Conformability**

Conformability relates to the research outcomes truly being the result of the research rather than the subjectivity of the researcher. The researcher’s positionality statement previously provided and reflective commentary post-interviews were used in the creation of thick descriptions of what principals experienced in their implementation of FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities as well as the context in which they experienced it (Shenton, 2004). The researcher’s field notes and transcripts are available for review by other researchers (Lincoln & Guba, 2000). As noted in credibility, member checks were utilized to strengthen conformability.
An in-depth description of the study limitations and methods have been formally introduced to reinforce conformability.

**Ethical Considerations**

This research study was approved by the University of South Dakota’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) before data was collected. The IRB process ensures the study is ethically sound by addressing ethical issues related to the principles of respecting individuals, concern for participant welfare, and justice (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants were provided a copy of the IRB approval, and a copy of the informed consent. The participant was made aware that this study was voluntary and that it would not place them at risk (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Once participants signed the informed consent, they were given a pseudonym to maintain confidentiality. All original names of members were eliminated from the interviews and separated from any data files related to the study.

**Summary**

In this study, the researcher used a transcendental phenomenological design to create a thick description of the experiences of remote, rural South Dakota Principals. The research focused on gathering the supervision experiences remote, rural South Dakota Principals had in implementing FAPE for students who had an intellectual disability.
Chapter 4

Findings

The purpose of this research was to describe the experiences of remote rural principals in the supervision of Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) of students with intellectual disabilities in South Dakota. The transcendental phenomenological approach was used for this study as it allowed the researcher to set aside personal experience biases throughout the process and examine the true shared experiences of the principals from their individual perspectives (Moustakas, 1994).

This chapter provides readers with the findings of this research, including a detailed description of the themes and how they were developed. Four themes were uncovered by the research and answers the research question used to guide this study. The four themes include:

1. Lack of Resources
2. The Gap Between Preparation and Implementation
3. Reliance on Special Education Teachers
4. Teacher Training

Participants

Eight individuals participated in this study in the summer of 2021. It was imperative to use criterion reference sampling to determine the study participants. The criterion was remote, rural South Dakota principals who had at least one academic year overseeing FAPE for one or more students with a primary diagnosis of intellectual disability. Once identified, participants volunteered for the study after being contacted by email. Through structured one on one interviews, the researcher constructed narratives necessary to combine and examine their
experiences. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the confidentiality of the principals and their respective school districts. Table 1 includes the demographics of each participant.

Table 2

*Participant Demographic Information*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Years as Principal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Oliver</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roberto</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>30-40</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alice</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>40-50</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alma</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>40-50</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>40-50</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frank</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>50-60</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>50-60</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calla</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>50-60</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Textural Themes

Transcendental phenomenology requires the researcher to analyze the data by reducing the information statements or quotes and combining the statements into themes (Creswell & Poth, 2018). These themes are then combined to identify Moustakas’ (1994) process of identifying “what” each principal experienced in supervising FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities. Three textural themes originated from 21 codes. Using significant participant statements, the researcher developed a textural description of what participants experienced. The following section includes the codes used in developing and describing the theme, as well as individual statements from participants to support this study’s credibility.
Table 3 shows the number of participants from the study who supported the textural themes developed.

**Table 3**

*Identified Textural Themes and Code Frequency*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Code Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Gap Between Preparation and Implementation</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of resources</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Training and Continued Professional Development</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**The Gap Between Preparation and Implementation**

Most participants expressed that a time gap existed between educational leadership preparation and employment as a principal. Participants shared their recollection of the required special education law course in their educational leadership program as well as their need to learn how to implement the legal content from that course once they were employed as a principal. Participants were asked to describe their experiences taking special education courses in their principal preparation programs, focusing on what they were taught about FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities. Frank, a veteran principal of 17 years, stated multiple times throughout his interview that special education was not an area that he was explicitly trained in during his principal preparation program, nor does he fully understand the mandates of providing FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities in his school district. “I know we had sped law and things like that, but I can’t think of anything [FAPE or intellectual disabilities] specific”.

In fact, all eight participants stated they were required to take special education law, the only required course pertaining to the needs of students with disabilities during their principal
preparation program. Participants felt FAPE for students with disabilities is an overlooked area of principal preparation programs and should be incorporated into the special education law curriculum. “I prefer that anybody going into administration get more exposure to the requirements for FAPE”, Michael said.

However, even if principal preparation programs began to include more information about FAPE for students with cognitive disabilities, participants may not see the immediate relevance of the information, nor would they find it necessary until they are on the job. Many of this study’s participants became principals three or more years after completing their educational leadership preparation program, and although they felt they may have learned about FAPE during their required special education law course, it wasn’t something that stood out as an important factor of their future role, and it certainly wasn’t in the forefront of their minds as they began their tenure as a principal.

Participants said their understanding of FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities came from on-the-job experience. Oliver is currently in his fourth year as a principal, and he stated the COVID19 shutdown in the spring of the 2020 semester made him realize he was not prepared to supervise FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities.

It [FAPE] wasn't much of a concern, and it wasn't something much on my radar, and a couple of things happened in my third year [of being a principal], Covid being one of them, that really had me consider some of those FAPE guidelines and really consider what we're doing for students.

Most participants discussed their first few years as principals in their rural school districts and how they learned about FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities. Oliver said:
The first year or two of my job was kind of survival, I was just trying to figure out the job, and then, you know, as I became a little more confident and a little more competent, I spent more time kind of critically reading and, just kind of educating myself on some of these [federal guidelines] that I need to know for my job.

Alma had a similar response when describing the gap between her principal preparation program and becoming a principal.

I feel it was just like baptism by fire. I think it's just like with everything. Given this and all these ideas to put into this toolkit. And you've got to pull that out at the appropriate times. And sometimes you're using more than one tool and, and, you know, there wasn't like this nice manual where it says, Okay, well, this kid, does this turn to page 45, and here are all the answers.

**Lack of Resources**

Rural school districts tend to be favored by families for their small settings, individualized student attention, and typically safe communities. Despite the appeal, the ability to provide a free and appropriate public education to all students in a sparsely populated setting has its challenges (Rude & Miller, 2018). When describing their experiences as the instructional leader for students with intellectual disabilities, participants described commonly cited challenges of rural school districts. A central focus discussed by participants was that remote-rural school districts lack resources.

**Access to Specialized Facilities.** The participants who mentioned their limited access to larger, specialized facilities in the state reflected on their rural status and the significant physical distance between their school district and those facilities. It is not feasible to send their students to the facilities for a day program due to the vast distance and residential programs are not
justified. Their rural status also makes it difficult for school districts to gain access to the professionals who work in these facilities who may provide outreach or guidance to their school districts.

Frank’s school district is within driving distance to a large facility that specializes in providing services for students who have intellectual disabilities, and the school district provides daily transportation to and from the facility for one of their students. That student travels one hundred miles round trip, daily, to gain access to the facility that has highly trained staff that can meet their needs as a student with an intellectual disability who needs transition services such as job skills and personal living skills. Although Frank’s school has the space to provide services for students with intellectual disabilities, they do not have the knowledgeable staff to ensure they are providing an appropriate education for the student.

Oliver also talked about the need for “outside services” for a couple of students in his school district. The student’s unexpected behaviors and cognitive needs are so significant, that his staff may not be able to continue to support them in the school district appropriately due to a lack of specifically trained personnel. Alma also expressed the need to access professionals at specialized facilities as “It’s sometimes also just having access to people that know more than us.”

**Personnel Resources.** Six of the study participants mentioned the lack of adequate personnel resources. The need for additional personnel services became evident in the interviews and two sub-themes support the participants’ needs for additional personnel resources: access to specialized facilities and people and educational assistant support.

**Personnel Within the School District.** The lack of personnel within the school district emerged several times throughout the interviews. Rural school districts are challenged with fiscal
limitations, yet they are expected to meet the same accountability requirements as their urban and suburban peers (Preston et al., 2013). Rural school districts receive less money from the federal government as well as less property tax monies due to the likelihood of low-income families (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Participants’ school districts do not have the financial means to hire multiple special education teachers in most cases, to provide instruction for low incidence disabilities such as intellectual disabilities. This leaves the special education teachers they do have to serve a wide variety of needs throughout the entire school district, spending limited time in each building.

In addition to the financial factor impeding their lack of school personnel, multiple participants shared they struggle to find teachers and support staff to work with students who have intellectual disabilities. Due to their low salary rates and remote locations, these schools are less likely to recruit experienced special education teachers who have strong knowledge of intellectual disabilities. Due to their low intellectual quotient, students with intellectual disabilities require specialized instructional services at their academic and cognitive levels. These services are generally provided in a classroom with other students who have disabilities. Special education teachers and paraprofessionals must strategically budget time and resources to ensure all students who receive special education services are provided with an appropriate education. Paraprofessionals are non-certified educators who supplement the instruction of the special education teacher (Friend, 2018). Recruiting and retaining paraprofessionals is another lack of personnel participants discussed during their interviews. Some noted their location impedes their ability to find support staff, and others said they struggle to find people who are interested in working with students with intellectual disabilities. Various participants spoke to
these challenges and how it impacts their ability to provide services to students with intellectual disabilities. Alma stated:

What impacts our experiences with helping those students [with intellectual disabilities] is the lack of resources. That means lack of if a student needs a one-on-one para. Finding those supports for students is hard.

Susan said her school district’s biggest challenge in providing services for students with intellectual disabilities is “finding personnel who want to work” within the school and to provide support for students with intellectual disabilities. Beyond being able to support students and teachers with educational assistants, participants mentioned the common rural school challenge of their limited personnel serving in multiple roles within the school district. “We have a lot of people that are overlapping things we have” indicating that the current teaching and support staff perform multiple roles each day and there are sometimes not enough personnel to provide support where needed in the school throughout the day.

Teachers serve as recess duty supervisors, lunchroom attendants, club advisors, and attend various meetings when they are not providing instruction to their students in the classroom. One participant stated that their special education teacher was trying to meet the needs of their entire kindergarten through the twelfth-grade program and fulfill the required extra duties and it was clearly too much. The principal had to strongly advocate for hiring another special education teacher to provide relief to her solo special education teacher, and to ensure they were meeting the needs of all students who qualified for special education. Michael also discussed meeting the individual needs of students and feels effective learning is not happening when teachers are burdened with large caseloads and multiple grade spans to cover. His special education teacher attempts to provide services to students in the elementary school and high
school simultaneously, “a teacher will have three students in a classroom or at a table and two will be a high school while one being an elementary [student]”.

**Teacher Training and Continued Professional Development**

This theme offers the principals’ perceptions of general and special education training. Principals discussed initial teacher preparation as well as continuing education for general education teachers, special education teachers, and themselves as instructional leaders. Ongoing professional development for all teachers in the school district, and the need to further educate general education teachers and themselves was the third theme that emerged from this study.

**Special Education Teachers.** Many of the study participants described their professional development plan for themselves in special education as well as the agenda for their special education teachers. Calla participates in professional development with her special education staff so they can learn together:

It is very important for me to understand their duties and roles. We train together on restraint, restorative practices, and instructional methods. The Coop does provide good professional development for us. And so I, I guess I'm the kind of learner that the more that I can get my hands on myself, for professional development practices with my staff, the better it's just going to make me as a supervisor as well as understanding their role. You're never done learning. No matter how many years you've been in, you can never approach that I'm done learning attitude, or you need to get out.

At Alice’s school, 18% of the student body is currently identified as having a disability. She feels strongly about getting appropriate programs and curriculum in place for all special education teachers through professional development. Since starting as principal, she has
implemented professional learning communities, and provided alternative curriculum for her teachers of students with intellectual disabilities. She also said:

We are trying to provide training and resources for the teachers we do have here so that they can support them [students with intellectual disabilities]. We worked really hard to make sure that any series, like both in the classrooms, and then interventions, we have are research-based.

**General Education Teachers.** Alice, Roberto, Calla, and Darnell all discussed their general education teacher’s lack of knowledge of how to include students with intellectual disabilities in general education and the stipulations of FAPE. Calla referred to the general education teachers in her school and their lack of understanding of what special education teachers are “battling” on a day-to-day basis with their students.

Alice focuses her school’s professional development on general education teachers, as she is aware they lack a lot of the basic special education skills. “I provide a ton of training for those teachers. I have had people [special education specialists] come in and say these are the basics of the IEP”. Although general education teachers are required to take at least one special education course, they are either not retaining the foundational guidelines their university preparation programs are providing or simply choosing not to comply with the IDEA.

Darnell would like to see general education classroom teachers get more special education law training in the teacher preparation courses. He said, “general education teachers are reluctant or don’t feel like they are prepared to teach [those] students in the classroom. They don’t understand student needs, they are focused on fairness. The biggest challenge is finding ways to train them”.
Structural Themes

Through interviewing the principals who experienced the phenomenon of supervising the implementation of FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities in remote, rural school districts, two structural themes emerged from 11 original codes of collections of significant statements. Each participant was impacted by their self-efficacy and their reliance on their special education teachers to understand and implement mandated law and instructional practices. The following section will include the codes used in developing and describing the theme, as well as individual statements from participants to support this study’s credibility.

Table 3 shows the number of participants from the study who supported the structural themes developed.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identified Structural Theme and Code Frequency</th>
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<tr>
<td>Theme</td>
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<tr>
<td>Principals’ Self-efficacy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Reliance on Special Education Teachers</td>
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** Principals’ Self-efficacy **

This theme continuously arose during the participant interviews. Conceptually, these principals know the foundation of special education law. However, they indicated that they have limited confidence in their own knowledge of special education concepts to effectively implement FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities. Seven of the eight participants are listed as the special education director for their school district as part of their administrative duties, despite their lack of formal special education training. The role of the special education director requires principals to supervise the implementation and maintenance of special
education programs for students ages three to 21, according to state and federal mandates. The role of the designated special education director is also to provide supervision and instructional guidance to their special education teachers and support staff. The special education director may also be the school district representative that attends students’ annual individualized education program meetings. The school district representative has the authority to commit resources needed to implement an appropriate program for the student (Friend, 2018). Some participants indicated they were not confident in their role as the special education director; therefore, they rely on their special education teacher(s) to provide them with support and guidance to fulfill the obligation of being the special education teacher.

**Reliance on Special Education Teachers**

As a result of their lack of self-efficacy, principals stated that they rely heavily on their special education teacher(s) to be the expert in instructional methods and mandated special education law for students with intellectual disabilities. The job title of special education director for remote, rural principals is merely a technicality because of their reliance on the special education teacher(s) in their school district to provide them guidance. When asked about his experiences being the instructional leader who oversees FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities, Oliver said “I go to my special education teachers for help because I don’t know. They support me” when asked to describe his experiences being the instructional leader for teachers who provide services for students with intellectual disabilities.

Most of the principals in this study expressed a lack of confidence in their ability to supervise the needs of students with disabilities, and they often distributed the legal obligations of meeting FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities to their special education teachers.
education decisions up to his special education teacher. “I am not really up on that stuff. She knows more about sped law than anyone in the state. She knows that if this is what we need [for a student], I am going to be on board.”

Likewise, many participants said some of their general education teachers lack the confidence to execute the necessary needs of students with intellectual disabilities within the classroom. This lack of confidence encourages them to rely on the special education teacher(s) to provide for the needs of students with intellectual disabilities. Michael said, “I've come up with the classroom teachers or general ed teachers who kind of feel reluctant or don't feel like they're prepared to teach students in the classroom.” Other participants indicated that their general education teachers rely on the special education teachers to provide instruction to students with intellectual disabilities because they do not feel it is part of their teaching responsibilities.

Roberto stated there is often “a fight between the general education teachers and the special education teachers because general education doesn’t know what FAPE is, its importance, or what it represents.” This battle he speaks of is often due to a difference of knowledge of special education law. General education teachers feel the educational instruction of students with intellectual disabilities is the responsibility of the special education teacher. However, special education teachers understand the federal requirements to provide instructional services to students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment, therefore they push to have their students with intellectual disabilities included in the general education curriculum when it is appropriate for them.

Textural and Structural Synthesis

Following the research methods of Moustakas (1994), the researcher used the composite textural and composite structural descriptions to develop a synthesis to answer the research
question “What are remote rural school principals’ experiences with implementing free appropriate public education (FAPE) for students with an intellectual disability?” The process of studying three textural and two structural themes acquired from significant statements led to the essence of the participants’ experience. Creswell and Poth (2018) describe the textural and structural synthesis as a combined description that assimilates both textural and structural descriptions.

The study’s structured interviews encouraged remote, rural South Dakota principals to share their lived experiences of overseeing the implementation of FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities. This description was created using the information provided through one-on-one interviews and participant member checks.

Participants in this study suggest that a gap exists between principal preparation programs and employment as a principal. Principals are not formally trained to oversee the implementation of FAPE for students with disabilities. Although a gap exists between preparation and practice, they felt that additional principal preparation at the university level would not necessarily benefit instructional leaders because working with students in low incidence categories such as intellectual disabilities isn’t practical information until they are immersed in the job. Once on the job, principals found themselves lacking self-efficacy in overseeing the legal requirements and the day-to-day instructional practices for students with intellectual disabilities. Due to their lack of confidence, principals rely heavily on their special education teachers to guide them and ensure compliance with state and federal mandates.

Seemingly, principals are not the only people within the school who rely on the special education teachers to understand and implement the practices and law for students with intellectual disabilities. Participants reported that general education teachers are unaware of the
needs of students with intellectual disabilities and rely on special education teachers to provide services. This adds additional expectations of special education teachers, who are often the only certified special education teachers within their districts to provide special education services. Accessing professionals who specialize in working with students with intellectual disabilities are typically out of reach for rural school districts due to the significant mileage between their specialized facilities and the school district’s remote location. This leaves the special education teacher heavy with the responsibility of meeting the needs of all students with disabilities.

All special education, general education, and principals fulfill multiple roles during the school year. Teachers and support staff are stretched to their abilities providing instructional and supervisory services to students throughout the week, making it difficult for teachers to take time away from the school day for professional development opportunities to learn more about the requirements of FAPE and the ever-changing landscape of special education. Should time and financial resources allow, some participants feel there is no specific training available to them, or within their immediate area to provide for their faculty’s professional development needs on FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities.

**Summary**

This transcendental phenomenological study focused on the lived experiences of remote, rural principals in providing FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities. The research explored the principals’ experiences in their professional leadership preparation program and their feelings about being the instructional leader who ensures FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities. Data collection was completed through structured interviews, member checks, and inter-rater coding.
This chapter presented the research question, participant demographic information, and the personal experiences of the researcher. Structural and textural descriptions of participant experiences were also provided, which were derived from the significant statements participants made. Finally, the textural and structural synthesis that evolved from the structural and textural descriptions, providing the essence of the participants' lived experiences in providing FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities was provided.
Chapter 5

Introduction

This phenomenological study was designed to define school principals’ experiences implementing free appropriate public education (FAPE) for students with intellectual disabilities in remote rural school districts in South Dakota. This study was qualitative in nature to provide participating principals the opportunity to describe their lived experiences in implementing FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities. The findings of this study support the literature on the needs of rural schools to provide services to students with intellectual disabilities and reveal areas in need of further research.

FAPE and the role of the school principal

All students who are eligible to receive special education and related services are entitled to FAPE. The concept of FAPE was first introduced into federal legislation through the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975. Since then, the law has transformed to establish and refine the rights and responsibilities associated with FAPE and is now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (McKenna & Brigham, 2021). FAPE entitles all students ages 3 to 21 with a disability that impedes their learning to an individualized education program (IEP), that is designed to meet their individual needs to receive meaningful educational benefit. Through the IEP, students’ individual needs are intensely evaluated to determine what skills will be worked on throughout the following calendar year.

Students with intellectual disabilities may need a significant amount of assistance in the classroom due to their limited social skills, below-average adaptive behavior skills, and significantly lower I.Q. than that of their peers. School principals are typically tasked with supporting the teachers who provide daily instruction for these students as well as with the
instructional leadership responsibilities of ensuring students who qualify for special education receive an appropriate education through their annual IEP. To provide effective instructional leadership, principals must understand the vast needs of students with disabilities. To address the individual needs of students with disabilities, they must be aware of and promote the use of evidence-based practices shown to be effective in improving student learning and providing the resources outlined in the IEP.

**Methodology**

This study utilized a transcendental phenomenological framework. Phenomenological research describes the common meaning for multiple participants of their lived experiences of a particular phenomenon, in their natural environment (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Criterion sampling was used for this study because the researcher wanted to learn about the experiences of the most rural school districts in the State of South Dakota. Therefore, the criteria for participation in this study was a) the participant must be a current principal of a remote, rural South Dakota school; and b) the participant must have had one full academic years’ experience in providing FAPE as an administrator for one or more students with a primary disability of intellectual disability. The criterion for remote, rural school districts in this study was a rural territory that is more than 25 miles from an urbanized area more than 10 miles from an urban cluster (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2014).

**Limitations**

There is a chance that some principals chose not to participate in this research due to their limited knowledge of the topic or title. Intellectual disability is a nationally recognized term, where cognitive disability is more frequently used in South Dakota. Non-special education trained professionals may not understand the difference between the two or know how to identify
students who have an intellectual disability. Additionally, participants may have been hesitant to contribute more about students with intellectual disabilities and their right to a FAPE due to it being a low incidence disability, and not being a high priority in their current career.

Multiple efforts were used to reach potential participants for this study, yet the researcher felt it was limited. To increase participation in the future, the researcher would use a quantitative survey to gather the experiences of remote rural principles. In field notes, it was noted by the researcher that many principals seemed uncomfortable or distracted when discussing their experiences with students with intellectual disabilities. The participants had to frequently be guided back to discussing students with intellectual disabilities versus all students who qualify for special education.

**Theoretical Framework**

This research was framed through the lens of the inclusive leadership theory. Inclusion is the foundation of our nation’s special education system. Inclusive schools foster a culture and practice of valuing all students within general education and not separate programs (National Center for Learning Disabilities, 2018). The inclusive principal leadership theory, developed by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) in 2017, describes the principal’s approach to leadership for the success of students with disabilities through inclusion.

CCSSO (2017) defines Inclusive Principal Leadership as the following: “Inclusive principals create strong school cultures and distribute leadership across staff to serve all learners well and ensure all students feel safe, supported, and valued in school. In promoting equity for all, inclusive principals must respond effectively to the needs of each student.” Inclusive principals are prepared to serve all students with disabilities and support the teachers, general education, and special education, to improve learner outcomes.
Inclusive Principal Leadership Findings

Collaboration

The findings from this study indicate that some remote, rural South Dakota principals are not fully prepared to serve students with intellectual disabilities by implementing MTSS/PBIS with fidelity. Principals in this study indicated they are unsure if they were advised in the requirements of FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities in their principal preparation program. Participants' perceived minimal understanding of FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities causes them to rely heavily on their special education teachers to understand and implement the principles of FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities. Some participants indicated that they lack self-efficacy in responding to the needs of students with intellectual disabilities and they lean on their special education teachers to support them. One participant said, “I go to them...quite often and I seek out their guidance” when asked what their experiences have been with being the instructional leader for those who instruct students with intellectual disabilities. This indicates many of the participants are distributing leadership to the special education teacher and not to all staff that serves students with intellectual disabilities as suggested by inclusive principal leadership.

Instructional Leadership

Inversely, one participant had an endorsement in early childhood special education, and another participant had a k-12 special education teaching degree. The participants with a background in special education appeared to have significantly higher self-efficacy in the implementation of FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities than their peers. They appear to follow the practices of inclusive principal leadership closely. Unlike their peers, their discussions tended to focus on the strengths of their instructional leadership and how they
support their special education teachers who teach students with intellectual disabilities. One participant with a special education background advocates for special education teacher preparation time and allows leeway in their schedules to complete necessary paperwork. The other voluntarily prepares the special education data from their school for entry to the South Dakota Department of Education, which keeps them abreast of individual student needs. This participant uses their knowledge of the entry data to thoroughly review special education teachers’ caseloads before the start of the year to ensure one teacher is not “too heavy with the cognitive [students]”.

**Inclusive Classrooms**

Some participants expressed that general education teachers lack the knowledge of FAPE and instructional methods to teach students with intellectual disabilities. Their lack of understanding of special education services and providing modifications for student needs, as required by federal law, impedes the rights of students with intellectual disabilities. As mandated by ESSA, schools must report on the progress of all students in the general education curriculum despite their disability status. Students with intellectual disabilities should be participating in the general education classroom curriculum as much as is appropriate and can be accommodated for their ability level. The inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities includes the use of assistive technology, modifications, and appropriate supplemental aids and services. The IDEA (2004) defines assistive technology as “any item, piece of equipment, or product system, whether acquired commercially off the shelf, modified, or customized, that is used to increase, maintain, or improve the functional capabilities of a child with a disability.” Students with disabilities can be formally and informally assessed for assistive technology needs by the school district.
The inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities also requires appropriate supplemental aids and services within the general education classroom. IDEA (2004) requires an annual statement of the supplementary aids and services, based on peer-reviewed research to the extent practicable, to be provided to the child, or on behalf of the child, and a statement of the program modifications or supports for school personnel that will be provided to enable the child: a) to advance appropriately toward attaining the annual goals; b) to be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum in accordance with paragraph (a)(1) of this section, and to participate in extracurricular and other nonacademic activities, and c) to be educated and participate with other children with disabilities and nondisabled children in the activities described in this section. (§300.320(a)(4))

The general education teacher’s lack of understanding of these federal requirements has them also relying heavily on the special education teacher for legal compliance and instructional practices. Michael commented that “general education teachers don’t always understand students' needs, and they think if I assign 10 pages of reading, everyone must do it”, feeling frustrated that some teachers have the mentality that fairness means all students perform the task provided.

The South Dakota Department of Special Education provides a voluntary, structured MTSS program combined with PBIS to public school districts. At the time of this research, only 25 school districts implement formal components of MTSS and PBIs through the state program (SD Department of Education, 2014). The focus of South Dakota’s MTSS program is student behavior and is directed toward special education teachers working with students with disabilities. The initial year of participation is funded by a grant through the state department of education, then school districts are responsible for securing funding for subsequent years.
Participating school districts must also commit to making MTSS one of their top three school improvement goals. None of this study’s participants mentioned their involvement with MTSS or PBIS through the state Department of Special Education.

**Recommendations for Practice and Professional Development**

**Ongoing Professional Development**

This study’s research question focused on the specific needs of students with intellectual disabilities, and participants indicated they are not confident in their leadership in special education matters and do not have a complete understanding of FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities. This study revealed that most participants felt there should be more instruction on the requirements of FAPE and how to serve as the instructional leader for students with intellectual disabilities in educational leadership preparation programs, including strengthening their capacity to be inclusive leaders. However, participants also indicated that knowing the core components of FAPE specifically related to students with intellectual disabilities was not urgent need-to-know information at the start of their instructional leader career. Even if higher education institutions address FAPE and supervision of students with intellectual disabilities in their preparation programs, principals did not report feeling ready for the information until they were on the job and the skills were needed.

Therefore, to bridge the gap between leadership preparation and leadership practice, the South Dakota Department of Education could require and provide new principals with specific training on the six core principles of FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities. This training could provide explicit instruction on their instructional leadership responsibilities and state and national legal requirements using the framework of inclusive leadership. Moreover, principals cannot provide effective instructional support to general education teachers of students
with intellectual disabilities if they do not understand how to ensure inclusion for students with intellectual disabilities themselves. In collaboration with the required FAPE training, the state may consider including professional development for how to encourage and nurture intellectual disabilities in the general education classroom using best practices for tier one instruction (Rogers & Johnson, 2018). The best time to provide this professional development might be within the first three months of their new position to maximize their readiness to learn the information.

**Shared Professional Development with Special Educators**

Study participants indicated they heavily rely on their special education teachers for support and guidance in providing services for students with disabilities and ensuring the requirements of FAPE are met. Participant responses suggested that their self-efficacy in interpreting law, ensuring compliance, and creating an inclusive environment for students with intellectual disabilities could be stronger. They were unable to determine whether this was due to their principal preparation or their lack of special education background. Rather than design collaborative planning as inclusive principal leadership suggests, participants described delegation of responsibilities to their special educators.

The special education teachers may not have anticipated this responsibility when they accepted the position. A possible outcome is that they are already stretched by providing daily services to a diverse group of students, collecting IEP data, conducting and writing educational reports, and other general responsibilities around the school such as recess duty and staff meetings. Special education teachers are becoming burnt out from trying to fulfill these multiple roles and may be related to the high attrition rate of special education teachers in rural school districts. Special education teachers have the highest attrition rate in the education field
(Goldring et al., 2014; Theoharis & Fitzpatrick, 2013). High turnover and attrition rates negatively impact student services and achievement (Kraft & Papay, 2014; Ronfeldt et al., 2013; Sorensen & Ladd, 2018), as well as cost school districts thousands of dollars annually (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017). The researcher recommends addressing the burnout rate of special education teachers through the following supports. First, the South Dakota Department of Education could provide required, annual joint training for principals and special education teachers, so they share an understanding of the rules, regulations, and their personal responsibilities under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. This would also provide the opportunity to establish a clear model of collaboration.

Currently, the state special education department focuses on professional development for special education teachers and trained special education directors. Many remote, rural South Dakota school districts do not have the financial means to hire a certified special education director, so the building principal fulfills the role. This training could serve a dual purpose of the role of the principal as well as the role of the principal as the special education director.

This annual training would cost the state minimally as the state special education department already provides annual workshops for special education teachers, held in two sessions. One session is for teachers in their first three years of teaching special education, and the other session is for those who have been teaching for over three years in special education. Each session addresses the specific needs of new and experienced special education teachers. It would be beneficial for the state to include the building principals in these annual training according to their leadership years of experience, or the training session that correlates with their teacher’s years of experience because they are crucial members of the special education team.
Mentoring for Remote Rural Practices

Secondly, the researcher suggests the South Dakota Department of Education modify their mentorship program for new principals and special education teachers to include specific practices for remote rural school districts. The mentoring program could be designed with the unique challenges of lack of in-district networking and low incidence disability instructional experiences that these school districts face. The remote location and heavy caseloads are among some of the reasons why remote rural school districts struggle to find and keep qualified special education teachers. Due to the small school size, special education teachers are likely to serve a diverse group of learner needs across multiple grade levels (Brownell et al., 2018). For these reasons, new special education teachers may need more than one mentor. Novice teachers need both content-specific support and basic orientation support. I recommend the state education department pair experienced teachers of low incidence disabilities, like intellectual disabilities, with new special education teachers of low incidence disabilities throughout the state to address their content-specific needs. This addresses the lack of experienced personnel resources in rural school districts as reported by the participating principals. With the use of technology, teachers from across the state can virtually connect at minimal cost, to discuss program content or observe student needs in a matter of seconds. A second mentor may be located within the school district to provide the new teacher with orientation support, as they can answer on-demand specific questions about procedures and logistics.

Increase Financial Support for Special Education

Most participants discussed the limited staff they have available in their school district to support all student needs. Participants reported they struggle to find people to fill their support
positions, or they do not have the funds to hire more people, leaving their current staff filling multiple roles. According to IDEA (2004), students with intellectual disabilities have an intelligence quotient of less than seventy and have major deficits in adaptive behavior skills. Therefore, these students often need more direct instruction and supervision to work on their adaptive behavior skills. This requires consistent and adequate paraprofessional support for academics and behavior.

The state of South Dakota can minimize this gap in personnel by addressing the financial burdens that rural school districts face through increasing the rural school district funding formula. Higher pay for teachers may increase their incentive to teach in rural school districts, and additional funding will provide rural school districts with the financial means to hire additional support staff to assist with the significant needs of students who have intellectual disabilities.

Support staff are an integral part of the school district and strongly contribute to the success of students. They should be compensated for their efforts. Typically, district support staff work nine months out of the year and are paid slightly above minimum wage. They are not compensated for the time when students are on long breaks such as winter break and during the summer. With the recommended increase of rural school district funding from the state of South Dakota, school districts could pay their support staff a higher wage, year-round to reduce the turnover and address the shortages. Additionally, applicants for support staff positions do not need to be certified teachers or have a background in education. It would be beneficial for educational assistants to at least be formally trained to work with students and be taught the legal aspects of IDEA. To take the burden off special education teachers and their school districts, I
suggest this training be universal and be provided bi-yearly from the State Department of Education.

Additionally, school districts may use their Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) funds to create an educational assistant to professional teacher pipeline. School districts were given federal funds to offset the impact of the COVID19 pandemic, and could use these funds to assist paraprofessionals, who live in the community or wish to stay in the community, to earn an educational degree to have the ability to provide more services within the school. Feeling valued with an increase in pay and explicit special education training, rural school districts may see less support staff turnover.

Adoption of HLPs

Teachers and instructional leaders play an important role in the academic and behavioral success of students with intellectual disabilities. Research by McLeskey and Brownell (2015) indicates that all teacher candidates, despite their academic discipline, would benefit from a set of critical practices that are necessary to improve student learning and behavior, which should be learned in coursework, and explicitly practiced during field experiences, while receiving feedback from their supervisors. These critical practices are the high leverage practices designed by CEC and CEEDAR and can be essential tools for improving the outcomes for students with intellectual disabilities when recognized and implemented. The researcher suggests all South Dakota higher education teacher and administration preparation programs adopt the HLPs as a guide to prepare teacher administration candidates with the essential knowledge and skills necessary to ensure fidelity to MTSS instructional practices in their tier one. Further, the South Dakota Department of Education may incorporate the HLPs during the teacher and administration training MTSS.
Recommendations for Future Research

This study focused on the implementation of FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities from the perspective of the school principal. Overall, the amount of research addressing students with intellectual disabilities and their right to FAPE is extremely limited. Therefore, one recommendation for further study is to survey new South Dakota principals before and after their required professional development provided by the state department of education. This research would determine if the principal’s awareness of intellectual disabilities and understanding of the regulations of FAPE has increased. This may also inform the professional development providers as to ongoing needs.

Additionally, more research is needed to better understand the connection between the heavy reliance on the special educator and the challenges in recruitment and retention of special educators. It would be beneficial to study where new special education teachers (those within their first three years of teaching) seek support for students with intellectual disabilities and gain experience with low incidence disabilities and to what extent this support contributes to their decision to remain or leave the profession or district. Research around perceptions of leadership support gathered from special educators who left the field might also prove to be a rich resource for understanding what levels/types of support were more helpful than others or which supports were lacking.
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Appendix A

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH DAKOTA
Institutional Review Board
Informed Consent Statement

Title of Project: Rural Leaders’ Perceptions of Implementing FAPE for Students with Intellectual Disabilities

Principal Investigator: Susan Curtin, Delzell Education Center 214B, Vermillion, SD 57069
605-658-6618 susan.curtin@usd.edu

Other Investigators: Jessica Vogel, 414 E. Clark St. Vermillion, SD 57069

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Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. In order to participate, you must be an acting principal of a remote, rural South Dakota school as defined by the National Center for Educational Statistics. You are receiving this invitation because your school district has been identified as remote, rural. You must have one full academic years’ (August to May) experience in overseeing the implementation of a free appropriate public education (FAPE) to at least one or more students whose primary disability is intellectual disability. Taking part in this research project is voluntary. Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

What is the study about and why are we doing it?
The purpose of the study is to understand what remote, rural school principals in South Dakota experience in the supervision of the implementation of FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities. Between 5 and 25 people will take part in this research.

What will happen if you take part in this study?
If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to participate in a one hour interview with the researcher via Zoom about your experiences with supervising the implementation of Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) to students with intellectual disabilities. You may select the environment in which you will Zoom from. Interview questions are included in this document. Within a week post interview, you will be asked to review the interview transcript to ensure accuracy. This concludes your participation in this study.

What risks might result from being in this study?
There are no risks in participating in this research beyond those experienced in everyday life.

How could you benefit from this study?
There are no direct benefits from participating, but you may learn more about yourself and your leadership style. This information may benefit future principal professional development opportunities.

How will we protect your information?
The records of this study will be kept confidential to the extent permitted by law. Any report published with the results of this study will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. To protect your privacy we will not include any information that could identify you. We will protect the confidentiality of the research data by keeping all study data and identifying information locked in a digital file on the researcher’s computer. The Zoom meeting will be password protected and will also be audio recorded. After the recordings have been transcribed without identifying information and sent to you, they will be destroyed.

University of South Dakota
IRB-21-21
Approved on 4-22-2021
Expires on 4-22-2022
Appendix B

Interview Protocol

I would like to thank you again for being willing to participate in this interview for my study. As I have mentioned previously, my study is seeking the lived experiences of remote South Dakota principals in the implementation of Free and Appropriate Education (FAPE) for students with intellectual disabilities.

Our interview today will last approximately one hour. During this time I will be asking you about your experiences implementing FAPE for a student or students with intellectual disabilities while in your role as a principal. Do I have your permission to record our conversation via Zoom and Otter.ai. today?

“Yes” continue on.

“No” inform them the interview has now ended and thank them for their time.

For authentication purposes, are you a practicing principal of a remote South Dakota school?

“Yes” ask: Do you have one full academic school year as a remote South Dakota principal who has provided free appropriate public education to at least one student whose primary disability is intellectual disability according to The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act? One full academic year runs from August to May.

“No”: Thank them for their time. The interview has now ended.
“Yes”: Wonderful! Please tell me at any point in our conversation today if you would like me to stop the recording or end the interview. A pseudonym will be used for your name and your school district will not be identified. The interview recording and all other data information will be digitally stored on my locked computer. I will be taking notes as you talk to help analyze my data in the future. Once the transcripts are complete, I will send them to you to ensure they reflect the experiences you were intending to describe.

You may ask questions you have now. If you later have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research please contact Jessica Vogel at 605-252-2090 or Susan Curtin at 605-658-6618 during the day.

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research subject, you may contact The University of South Dakota- Office of Human Subjects Protection at (605) 658-3743. You may also call this number with problems, complaints, or concerns about the research. Please call this number if you cannot reach research staff, or you wish to talk with someone who is an informed individual who is independent of the research team.

Before we begin, do I have your consent to participate in this research?

“Yes”: Great! We will now start with the interview Questions.

“No”: Thank you for your time, the interview has now ended.

**Interview Questions**

1. What have you experienced in terms of implementing FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities?
2. What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of implementing FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities?

3. What practices have you changed in the implementation of FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities?

4. How do you feel about implementing FAPE for a student or students with an intellectual disability?

5. What have you experienced in terms of supporting special education teachers who provide instruction for students with intellectual disabilities?

6. What contexts or situations have typically influenced or affected your experience of supporting special education teachers who provide instruction to students with intellectual disabilities?

7. What training have you received on the implementation of FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities?

8. How do you feel about the training you received on the implementation of FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities?

9. Is there anything else you would like to say regarding the implementation of FAPE for students with intellectual disabilities?