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How Current School Leaders Make Sense of Inclusive Education Policies: A Qualitative Exploration of Graduates of a "High-Quality" Principal Preparation Program

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How Current School Leaders Make Sense of Inclusive Education
Policies: A Qualitative Exploration of Graduates of a "High-Quality"
Principal Preparation Program

by

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Dissertation

Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of

The University of Texas at Austin

in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements

for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

The University of Texas at Austin

December 2013

Dedication

"The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. Intelligence plus character – that is the goal of true education" –Martin Luther King, Jr.

I would like to dedicate my work to the loves of my life, my family. Without your unconditional love and support, I would not be where I am today. To my mom, thank you for believing in me and for inspiring me to do great things. You have and always will be, been my rock. Your love for your children and education will forever influence me. You have inspired me to do great things and I am eternally grateful for your love and guidance. To my sister Chocho, you are the most selfless person I know and you remind me of what it means to truly be a teacher. I am and will be forever inspired by you. To my brother Mark, thank you for the laughs and for always pushing me to be my best. To my brother Matt, you are so kind and always find a way to make me smile. Thank you for always looking out for your little sister. To my dad, you used to call me your "golden girl" and I hope that I have made you proud.

To my husband Tim, who has shown me what it truly means to love someone. Thank you for inspiring me in so many ways and for encouraging me as my "partner in crime" as we have written and defended out dissertations together. You truly mean the world to me and I am so Blessed to have you by my side. Thank you for the laughs, hugs, and for holding my hand when I needed it the most, I love you THIS much.

To our little girl on the way Nola, you have been there with me every step of the way throughout this dissertation. We collected data together, transcribed interviews together, and sat for long hours on the couch (with tons of pillows!) while writing and editing this study. You are even kicking me right now as I write this! I hope I will inspire you one day to do great things. We love you and cannot wait to meet you soon.

Acknowledgements

"He who walks with the wise, grows wise" – Proverbs 13:20

As I reflect back on all of those who have helped me to get to this point in my life, I must say that I am a little emotional as I write this. From the first school leader who gave me a chance and hired me to work with students with disabilities on her campus to the professors here at the University of Texas who have and continue to inspire me, I am forever grateful.

Dr. Pazey, thank you for guiding me into this wonderful, complex, and inspiring world of Special Education Administration. I feel like we are the "bridge" between general and special education and I am so very proud of our work. I hope to inspire others to continue to pursue social justice for all students and I hope that I will make you proud. Thank you for all of the late-night phone calls and emails throughout this process and for pushing me to do and be my best. You will forever be my "UT mom!"

Dr. Zuna, thank you for taking a chance on me during my synthesis defense. I have been blown away by your knowledge as well as your work to better the lives of children with disabilities. Your positive emails have been such a huge support to me during times when I needed a kind word the most. Thank you for continuing to inspire your students to be their best in order to do incredible things for children with disabilities and their families.

Dr. Flower, thank you for your wonderful and positive support throughout this process. Ever since I watched how you took the time to come out to my student teachers' school to work with them, their students, and their teacher, I knew that that is the kind of dedication and commitment to our field that I wanted to have. I hope you know how

much you have inspired me to go above and beyond to support others in our work to meet the needs of all students. It has been a pleasure and an honor to work with you.

Dr. Gooden, thank you for your continued support and guidance during my time with the principalship cohort and throughout the dissertation process. You have inspired so many of us in the field of educational administration and you are definitely well loved and respected by those who are "in the trenches" putting what they've learned from you into practice. I know that you are proud of the incredible work that these school leaders are doing on their campuses. Thank you for entrusting me with such a huge part of your work. I look forward to many more accomplishments that you will achieve in the future.

Dr. Reddick, I feel like I "hit the jackpot" when you agreed to serve as my methodologist on my dissertation committee! I enjoyed your qualitative course, your style of teaching, your assignments, and everything about your class. I hope to emulate all that you do when I become a professor one day. Thank you for being such a huge and positive supporter. I feel very confident having you "in my corner" and I cannot thank you enough for taking a chance on me. I hope that I make you proud!

Dr. Ovando, what in the world would I have done without you!? Your guidance, expertise, and support throughout the development of my dissertation proposal is something in which I can never "thank you" enough. You took the time to meet me after class, in coffee shops, and even during dinners and lunches at conferences so that I might "pick at your brain" and learn from you. You continued to stay in touch with me throughout my dissertation writing so that I would have the opportunity to talk with you about the process as well as obtain the priceless feedback that you give to those of us fortunate enough to work with you. Thank you for pushing me to be my best and for setting high expectations for me from the very beginning. I am a better researcher, writer, educational professional, and person because of you.

To the HQPPP in study, which was supported in part by a School Leadership Program from the U.S. Department of Education, and to those in charge of the HQPPP, thank you for your time, support, and guidance throughout my dissertation. Thank you for allowing me access to your program in the hopes of learning something new. Thank you to Van, Vintage, CB, RH, Lindy, and Sarah for opening yourselves up to me and for sharing your experiences so that we might all try and understand your roles in meeting the needs of students with disabilities.

To all of my friends and colleagues who took the time to let me "grapple with" difficult and complex ideas throughout my dissertation writing and getting ready for my presentation. I feel so fortunate to be part of a group that supports each other while working on our doctorates. I am proud of the work that we do and the implications that our work has on *all* students.

HOW CURRENT SCHOOL LEADERS MAKE SENSE OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION POLICIES: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATION OF GRADUATES OF A "HIGH-QUALITY" PRINCIPAL PREPARATION PROGRAM

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2013

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Abstract

With increasing demand for school accountability following the NCLB Act of 2001, school leaders have a greater responsibility to students with disabilities than ever tinclude special education leadership due to the leadership imperative to meet the needs of *all* students (Lashley, 2007; Yell, 2012). Little attention, however, has been paid to special education and special education law in leadership preparation programs (Cusson, 2010; Pazey & Cole, 2013), leaving school leaders inadequately prepared to serve *all* students.

The purpose of this study was to explore how six current school leaders who are graduates of a university-based "high-quality" principalship program created an inclusive school culture. Guided by the theoretical framework of sensemaking (Weick, 1995) and a phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 1990), this study examined the ways in which six school leaders used what they know about special education and special education law to develop their understanding of such policy and sought to gain insight into why they made sense of and constructed their interpretations of the policy in

a particular way. Of particular interest was their perceived roles in working with special education staff, and the effects their construction and application of inclusive education policy had on students with disabilities.

The findings of this study suggest that these six school leaders' sensemaking of inclusive education policy was influenced by three factors: knowledge, experiences, and personal contexts. Each of these three factors were situated within the context of the school leaders' constructed identities. If the school leader perceived his or her role as a leader for special education, he or she was more inclined to seek special education and special education law content knowledge, ensure their campus staff attained and maintained the capacity to meet the needs of all students, and continuously searched for specific experiences and opportunities that they could make available to themselves and others that required them to grapple with difficult issues related to special education. In doing so, they were able to effect deeper-level change on their school campuses.

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Chapter 1

Over the past 250 years, a major goal of the U.S. public education system has been to ensure that children achieve positive academic and learning outcomes has been the goal of the U. S. public education system (Rothstein & Jacobson, 2006). Americans have embraced the idea that the U.S. educational system provides equal access for all children (Biddle, 2001); therefore, the view that the nation's education system ensured *equality of opportunity* soon became a fundamental belief (Jackson, 2008). In the early to mid 1800s, Horace Mann, the Father of American public school education, envisioned that schools that could serve a social need and was crucial for the American system of equality and opportunity (Ornstein, 2007). The intent was to provide all children, regardless of social class, access to public education. However, it was not until the 1960s that the education of children with disabilities was brought to national attention.

This study explored how six current school leaders who received training at a high-quality principal preparation program made sense of inclusive education policy in order to ensure that all children, including those with disabilities, achieve positive learning and academic outcomes. This chapter includes the historical and current context of federal inclusive education policies that are in place to ensure that students with disabilities not only have access to a public education, but a *quality* education and practices that have transpired in response to these policies. The context of the problem is followed by the theoretical framework, problem statement, purpose of the study, and research questions. A list of key terms and definitions is also provided, followed by a rationale that supports the need for the study. The underlying assumptions inherent in the

purpose of the study, an analysis of significance of the study as it contributes to theory and practice, and the organization of the study serve as the conclusion.

Context of the Problem

PROVIDING EQUAL EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITY FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Prior to the implementation of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) of 1975, more than eight million children with disabilities were educated in separate buildings or classrooms apart from children without disabilities (Gordon, 2006). The educational needs of children with disabilities were not being met because they were (a) not receiving appropriate services; (b) excluded from the public school system from being educated from their peers; (c) not being diagnosed appropriately or even at all; and (d) not provided adequate resources (Wright & Wright, 2007, pp. 55-56). Following the civil rights movement and the push for equal opportunity by parent advocacy groups (Yell, 2012), Congress began to address the needs of children with disabilities with the Elementary and Secondary Act (ESEA) of 1965 and EAHCA of 1975 (Gordon, 2006). The intent was to provide children with disabilities an equal opportunity to a public education that would prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living (Wright & Wright, 2007). Schools were required to provide children with disabilities a free and appropriate education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE), as delineated in the child's individual education program (IEP). Following a pivotal court case, *Board of Education v. Rowley* (1982), a two-part test was developed in order to provide support during the decision making process throughout the development

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of a student's IEP. First, the IEP must meet the requirements within EAHCA, now the

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Second, the student's IEP should be

reasonably calculated to enable a child to receive education benefits (Yell, 2012). The

Rowley standard established that *equal access* was the goal of IDEA and that this only

guaranteed a "basic floor of opportunity" (Daniel, 2008, p. 348) for students with

disabilities towards academic achievement.

Although Congress took steps to meet the needs of students with disabilities, a

"dual system" of accountability, outcomes, and training (see Figure 1.1) continued to

exist for teachers and administrators in general and special education (Weisharr & Borsa,

2000).
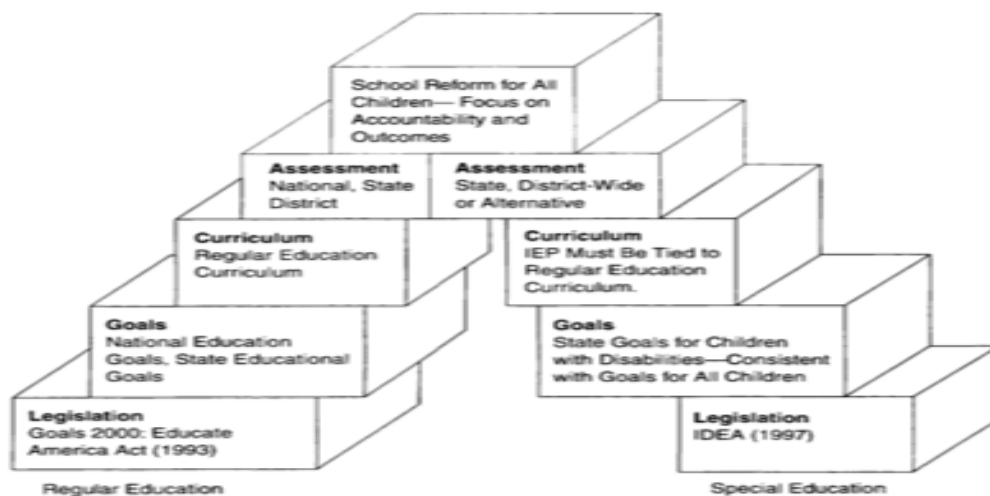
FIGURE 9.1   *Building Blocks for School Reform*

Figure 1: Building Blocks for School Reform

Source: Weisharr & Borsa, 2000

Because special and general education operated from separate bureaucratic

systems (Baglieri, Connor, & Gallagher, 2010; Gartner & Lipsky, 1987, Palinscar, 1997),

there was a linear practice of exclusion (Robinson & Buly, 2008) in which general education was not held accountable for the academic outcomes of students with disabilities. As a result, school leaders were not generally concerned with the educational needs of students with disabilities (Russo & Osborne, 2009). However, advocacy groups with a platform of civil rights called for schools to be held accountable for the quality of education that was provided by schools for students with disabilities (Russo & Osborne, 2009). The dominant trend of policy reform had shifted to support the needs of a diverse population wherein gave birth to the inclusion of students with disabilities in policy and school restructure (Myung-Sook & Robertson, 2003).

ALIGNMENT OF FEDERAL EDUCATION POLICIES: INCLUSIVE EDUCATION POLICIES

Based on the findings of the Commission on Excellence in Special Education created by President Bush on October 2, 2001 (U.S. Department of Education, 2002), Congress proposed that special education would be more effective by setting high expectations for children with disabilities and ensuring access to the general education curriculum to the maximum extent possible (20 U. S. C. § 1400(c)(5)). The most recent reauthorization of IDEA (2004) extends beyond an emphasis of *access* to a FAPE in the LRE and focuses on the *quality* of education that schools provide for students with disabilities. In an effort to align IDEA with federal policy that addressed the need to improve the academic achievement of disadvantaged students in both general and special education (No Child Left Behind Act [NCLB], 2001), Congress increased the "focus on accountability and improved outcomes by emphasizing reading, early intervention, and

research-based instruction" (Wright & Wright, 2007, p. 15). The purpose was to maximize every student's opportunity to learn, promote shared ownership for all students, and draw attention to the specific needs of each student (Myung-Sook & Robertson, 2003). Both NCLB and IDEA addressed high academic standards, highly qualified teachers (HQT), and graduation rates and called for the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms in order to maximize their opportunity to learn.

Both NCLB (2001) and IDEA (2004) mandate that students with disabilities participate in all state and district-wide assessments, have access to the general education curriculum, and be provided with high-quality special and general education teachers (Yell, 2012). With these new federal education policies that emphasize accountability and standards-based instruction (Daniel, 2008) came an "evolved" interpretation of a FAPE in the LRE. Under *Board of Education v. Mercer* (2006), the new understanding of a FAPE in the LRE was that schools must provide students with disabilities with a *meaningful* education that supports self-sufficiency in the LRE (Yell, 2012). LRE "refers to the mandate within [IDEA] that students with disabilities should be educated to the maximum extent appropriate with peers without disabilities" (Yell, 2012, p. 270). Good faith efforts must be made by the school, with the use of supplementary aids and services, to ensure that the child is able to continue his or her placement in a LRE before he or she is placed in a more restrictive setting (Yell, 2012). Building principals have since been charged with making sense of the new interpretations of FAPE in the LRE in this era of accountability.

Statement of the Problem

Principals are not likely to have adequate training, experience, or personal understanding that equips them for addressing FAPE and LRE or enables them to structure the organization to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Based on the results of several investigations of educational leadership programs, administrators lack adequate training in special education content within their principal preparation programs (Cusson, 2010; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Garrison-Wade, 2005; Goor, Schwenn, & Boyer, 1997; Pazey & Cole, 2013; Robicheau, Haar, & Palladino, 2008; Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2006). Praisner (2003) found that some principalship programs cover minimum knowledge of special education; however, strategies and processes to support inclusive education are lacking. In addition, Protz (2005) posited that school administrators are inconsistent at best regarding knowledge of special education law. Because principals were not trained in special education policies, teaching practices specific to the instruction of students with disabilities, or special education law, they reported being unprepared for their new roles as administrators for special education (Brotherson, Sheriff, Milburn, & Schertz, 2001; Crockett, Myers, Griffen, & Hollandsworth, 2007; Goor, Schwenn, & Boyer, 1997).

Confusion also exists among school leaders on how to apply the mandates contained within IDEA (O'Dell & Shafer, 2005; Yell, 2012) due to ambiguity in the language of the legal mandates (Lashley, 2007; McHatton, Boyer, Shaunessy, & Terry, 2010) and the perceived efficacy of their implementation (Bays & Crockett, 2007; Pruslow, 2003). Because of the inability to understand the intent and language of these

policies, school leaders experience difficulty when attempting to comply with the federal

regulations (Lashley, 2007; McHatton, Boyer, Shaunessy, & Terry, 2010) of NCLB

(2001) and IDEA (2004). As a result, principals tend to blame *external* forces such as

new building-level initiatives (Lashley, 2007), cost of implementing inclusive mandates

(Bay & Crockett, 2007; Pruslow, 2003), changing student demographics (Brotherson,

Sheriff, Milburn, and Shertz, 2001), inclusion of students with disabilities on

accountability measures (Crockett, Myers, Griffen, & Hollandsworth, 2007), lack of

resources and support strategies (Brotherson et al., 2001; Crockett et al., 2007; Estes,

2003; 2009; Garrison-Wade, Sobel, & Fulmer, 2007), teachers (Brotherson et al., 2001;

Crockett et al., 2007; Doyle, 2002; Garrison-Wade, Sobel, & Fulmer, 2007; Rice, 2006;

Salisbury, 2006), and competition among school programs (Doyle, 2002). As a result,

school leaders often misinterpret inclusive education mandates (Bays & Crockett, 2007;

Doyle, 2002), place the responsibility for the implementation of these mandates on

teachers and even students (Doyle, 2002), and blame factors that are *out of their control*

for the lack of inclusive practices on their campuses (Doyle, 2002, Lashley, 2007).

As a result, the needs of students with disabilities are not being sufficiently

addressed. Although the percentage of students with disabilities being served for the

majority of the time (80%) in general education classrooms has increased from 33% in

1990 to approximately 58% in 2009, the implementation of inclusive practices varies

across schools (Carter & Hughes, 2006; Houser, Bell, Dickens, & Hicks, 2010;

Livingston, Reed, & Good, 2001; Praisner, 2003; Salisbury, 2006) and disability

categories (Horrocks, White, & Roberts, 2008; Praisner, 2003). This variation implies

that building principals interpret, understand, and enact the mandates FAPE and LRE in different ways.

Through legal fiat, principals have more responsibility than ever before to provide resources and supports that ensure the diverse needs of students with disabilities are met. Because of the law and the necessity to ensure that students, including students with disabilities, are academically successful, it is important to understand how principals make sense of complex federal mandates and how they interpret the legal requirements for implementing a FAPE within the LRE in their schools.

Theoretical Framework

Weick's (1994) synthesis of sensemaking was utilized as the theoretical framework. In short, "Sensemaking is what it says it is, namely, making something sensible" (p. 16). Sensemaking is characterized as follows: (a) a process that is grounded in identity construction, (b) retrospective, (c) enactive of sensible environments, (d) social, (e) ongoing, (f) focused on and by extracted cues, and (g) driven by plausibility (Weick, 1994, p.17). Sensemaking is concerned with more than simply interpreting an idea or concept; it is concerned with how individuals author their understanding or interpretation of a particular policy or mandate and the process of interpreting than the outcome of one's interpretation of such.

Being able to identify the factors that are *internal* and *external* to the individual are critical to understanding the sensemaking process. *Internal* factors include paradigms, lenses, beliefs, values, and assumptions held by the individual. On the other

hand, *external* factors are related to concerns that may be beyond the purview of the individual, such as the introduction of a new policy or the political and organizational context. Sensemaking is not an isolated action (Weick, 1994); thus, the prevalence of identity, routines, and general understandings of roles, expertise, and stature can also be examined.

Purpose of the Study

For this study, how principals constructed what they knew about inclusive education policy, why they constructed their meanings in a particular way, their roles in working with special education staff, and what effects their construction and application of inclusive education policy had on students with disabilities were identified and examined. As a theory, sensemaking highlights what sense making is, how it works, and where it can fail (Weick, 1994). In addition, sensemaking provides a framework for identification of phenomena around the *process* of the current school leaders' application of inclusive education policies.

The purpose of this study was to explore how six current school leaders who are graduates of a university-based "high-quality" principalship program made sense of inclusive education policy and legal mandates to promote an inclusive school culture. The research questions that guided this study were as follows:

1. How did current school leaders who are graduates of a high-quality principal preparation program describe their lived experiences in regard to special education practices on their campuses?

2. How did current school leaders who are graduates of a high-quality principal preparation program make sense of inclusive education policy demands at their schools?

3. How did current school leaders who are graduates of a high-quality principal preparation program perceive the supports that enabled them to navigate the complexity of inclusive education policy on their campuses?

Definition of Terms

Child or Student with a disability. A child who is eligible for special education services under the law (Wright & Wright, 2007, p. 20).

Early Intervening Services. "Requires that schools use proven methods of teaching and learning based on replicable research…funds may be used for students who need academic and behavioral assistance but have not been identified as needing special education services and for professional development to teachers have the knowledge and skills to deliver scientifically based academic and literacy instruction" (Wright & Wright, 2007, p. 24).

FAPE. According to federal law (IDEA, 20 U.S.C. § 1401 [a][18]), a FAPE is (a) provided at public expense, (b) meets the standards of the State educational agency, (c) includes an appropriate preschool, elementary, or secondary school education, and (d) conforms with the individualized education plan (IEP). Although the terms *free* and *public* are rarely disputed (Yell, 2012), the word *appropriate* is often subjected to debate and controversy (Wenkart, 2000 as cited in Yell, 2012, p. 183). How a school leader

constructs his or her interpretation of *appropriate* might have a significant impact on a child's IEP, which is "the embodiment of a student's FAPE" (Yell, 2012, p. 184).

Highly Qualified. "Measurable steps should be taken to recruit, hire, train, and retain highly qualified personnel to provide special education and related services" (Wright & Wright, 2007, p. 2s). "Special education teachers who teach core academic subjects must meet the highly qualified teacher requirements in NCLB and must demonstrate competence in the subject areas they teach" (Wright & Wright, 2007, p. 21).

High Quality Principal Preparation Programs. A school leader preparation program that incorporates the research-based components of an exemplary program. Orr and Orphanos (2011) examined reviews of research on exemplary leadership programs and the components of a quality program and identified the following features of an exemplary principalship program:

- a well-defined theory of leadership for school improvement that frames and integrates the program features around a set of shared values, beliefs, and knowledge;
- a coherent curriculum that addresses effective instructional leadership, organizational development, and change management and that aligns with state and professional standards;
- active learning strategies that integrate theory and practice and stimulate reflection;

- quality internships that provide intensive developmental opportunities to apply leadership knowledge and skills under the guidance of an expert practitioner-mentor;

- faculty who are knowledgeable about their subject matter;

- social and professional support structures, such as organizing students into cohorts so they can take common courses together in a prescribed sequence, as well as formalized mentoring, and advising from expert principals; and

- the use of standards-based assessment for candidate and program feedback and continuous improvement that is tied to the program's vision and objectives (p. 22)

In addition, "high quality" principal preparation program components include: (a) competitive- based recruitment (Darling-Hammond at al., 2007; Darling-Hammond et al., 2010; Jackson & Kelley, 2002; Vornburg & Davis, 1997); (b) a close relationship fostered between higher education and the sending district (Breault & Breault, 2010; Grogan & Andrews, 2002); (c) exposure to practicing principals (Vornburg & Davis, 1997); (d) problem–based learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Darling-Hammond et al., 2010; Davis et al., 2005; Grogan & Andrews, 2002; Leithwood, 1996); and (e) reflection (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Darling-Hammond et al., 2010; Marshall & Oliva, 2006; Orr, 2011; Orr & Orphanos, 2011; Ovando & Hutto, 1999). And finally, a "high-quality" program includes two components important throughout policy implementation, which include: (1) a focus on building the school leaders' content knowledge regarding policy and (2) a focus on the future school leader's personal

context, which are their beliefs and attitudes towards the policy itself, the population it serves, and their perceived efficacy of its implementation (Trider & Leithwood, 1997).

Inclusive Education: The National Center on Educational Restructuring and Inclusion developed the following definition of Inclusive Education: "providing to all students, including those with significant disabilities, equitable opportunities to receive effective educational services, with the needed supplementary aids and support services, in age-appropriate classrooms in their neighborhood schools, in order to prepare students for productive lives as full members of society" ("National Study", 1995, p. 3).

Inclusive Education Policy: Refers to the federal mandates included in NCLB (2001) and IDEA (2004).

Inclusive Schools: The definition of Inclusive Schools was derived from the selection criteria used by Hehir and Katzman (2012) in their book *Effective Inclusive Schools: Designing Successful Schoolwide Programs*. Selection criteria designed to identify inclusive schools were as follows:

> (1) Schools have higher large-scale test scores for students with disabilities as well as those without disabilities than would be predicted by socioeconomic class, race, and disability. In addition, the school must have low dropout, suspension, and expulsion rates.

> (2) Schools are inclusive of students with a disability. The definition of *inclusive* requires that schools educate children with disabilities predominantly in the general education classroom. Schools are intentionally inclusive through school mission statements and school websites.

(3) Schools enroll a broader range of students with disabilities

(4) Schools have a very low suspension and transfer rate.

(5) The school's desire is to provide high-quality education to all students, particularly those with complex needs.

Individualized Education Plans/Programs (IEPs). Reported present levels of academic achievement and functional performance, development measurable goals, evidence of educational progress, appropriate accommodations and alternative assessments, transition requirements, and IEP team meetings are discussed and developed to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability (Wright & Wright, 2007)

Instructional Leadership: Refers to principals that act as leaders for learning to support the instructional capacity at their campuses (Matthew & Crow, 2010).

Lack of Appropriate Instruction. Many experts in the field of learning disabilities believe that a majority of children identified with specific learning disabilities due to inadequate instruction or inadequately prepared teachers (Wright & Wright, 2007).

LRE. Although LRE is often used interchangeably with *mainstreaming* and *inclusion*, it is not a particular setting (Yell, 2012). LRE "refers to the mandate within [IDEA] that students with disabilities should be educated to the maximum extent appropriate with peers without disabilities" (p. 270). Good faith efforts must be made, with the use of supplementary services and supports, to ensure that the child is able to continue his or her placement in a less restrictive environment before he or she is placed in a more restrictive setting (Yell, 2012). A school district is required to provide a continuum of placements in order to meet the needs of students with disabilities (Yell, 2012).

Participation in State and District Assessments. Congress changed the language of IDEA about which students would participate in assessments to *all* children. Thus, children with disabilities must be included in all State and district-wide assessment programs. In addition, as indicated in their respect individualized education programs (IEP), they are to be assessed with appropriate accommodations (Wright & Wright, 2007). "States and districts must issue reports to the public about state and district assessments, alternative assessments, and the performance of children with disabilities on these assessments" (Wright & Wright, 2007, p. 24).

Procedural Safeguards. Pertains to "safeguards designed to protect the rights of children with disabilities and their parents. These safeguards include the right for parents to participate in all meetings, to examine all educational records, and, if dissatisfied with the evaluation performed by the school, to obtain an independent educational evaluation (IEE) of the child. Section 1415 includes requirements for prior written notice, procedural safeguards notice, mediation, resolution sessions, due process hearings, the new two-year statute of limitations, appeals, discipline, and age of majority" (Wright & Wright, 2007, p. 30).

School Leaders. Refers to current principals, assistant principals, and special education administrators.

Special Education. IDEA (2004) defines special education as "specially designed instruction, at no cost to the parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability… (20 U.S.C. §1401(29))." According to Wright and Wright (2007), this term "encompasses a range of services and may include one-on-one tutoring, intensive

academic remediation, services in the general education classroom, and 40-hour Applied

Behavior Analysis (ABA) programs. Special education is provided in different settings,

including the child's home" (Wright & Wright, 2007, p. 21).

University-Based Principal Preparation Programs: Refers to graduate-level programs

housed in public universities and colleges for the purpose of training future school

leaders.

Rationale

IMPORTANCE OF THE BUILDING PRINCIPAL IN THE PROCESSES OF POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

Research on the importance of school leadership has expanded considerably over

the last decade, resulting in a literature base that makes it difficult to argue against school

leaders' influence on policy implementation on a school campus. Building principals

have the ability to influence instructional practice through policy implementation

(Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008) by shaping access to policy ideas and influencing the social

process that teachers use to understand new policy (Coburn, 2005). They have the ability

to hire and retain knowledgeable and skillful teachers (Baker & Cooper, 2005; Fuller,

Young, Baker, 2011; Orr, 2011), provide opportunities for professional growth (Bays &

Crockett, 2007), and encourage communication and collaboration (Lashley, 2007) on

their campuses. They are often seen as the most influential person on campus (Mitchell

& Caste, 2005) as they drive a school's climate (Urick & Bowers, 2011) and culture

(Baker & Cooper, 2005), and significantly impact student achievement (Davis, Darling-

Hamond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005; Fuller, Young, & Baker, 2011; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). Research supports the conclusion that school leaders have a significant influence on the adoption, implementation, and continuation of educational policies and practices on a school campus.

PRINCIPALSHIP PREPARATION PROGRAMS: EXEMPLARY PROGRAMS

Although many of the components of exemplary principal preparation programs judged as effective for principal preparation programs have been identified as effective for student achievement (Fuller, Young, Baker, 2001; Orr, 2011; Orr & Orphanos, 20ll; Perez, Uline, Johnson, James-Ward, & Basom, 2011; Roach, Smith, & Boutin, 2011), little is known about the influence of these components on the achievement of students with special needs. Because school leaders have found difficulty implementing inclusive education policies in their schools throughout the past decade (Bays & Crockett, 2007; Brotherson et al, 2001; Crockett et al., 2007; Estes, 2003; 2009; Garrision-Wade, Sobel, & Fulmer 2007;) and the lack of inclusion of special education in leadership preparation programs (Cusson, 2010; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Garrison-Wade, 2005; Goor, Schwenn, & Boyer, 1997; Robicheau, Haar, & Palladino, 2008; Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2006), it is important to understand how current school leaders who are graduates of a "high-quality" program make sense of and implement complex federal inclusive education policies and legal mandates as well as build the capacity of leadership, teachers, and students to meet the needs of all students on a school campus.

PRINCIPAL KNOWLEDGE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION.

It is important for principalship preparation programs to meet the current and future needs of schools in order to support the education for all children (Young, Peterson, Short, 2002). With the rising number of students with disabilities being educated for the majority of time (80%) in the general education classroom (Aud et al., 2012), changing student demographics (Matthew & Crow, 2010), and call for accountability for all students (IDEA, 2004; Lashley, 2007; NCLB, 2001), it is critical for principals to understand special education law, teaching practices, evaluation of special education teachers, and programs and services to meet the diverse needs of this population. It should be the goal of all principal preparation programs to develop inclusive instructional leaders (Garrison-Wade, Sobel, & Fulmer, 2007) who will invest the time and provide the support needed to address the learning needs of all students, including those with disabilities.

APPLICATION OF SPECIAL EDUCATION TO CURRENT NEEDS OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS

Today, building principals have greater responsibility to serve the needs of students with disabilities than ever before. Following the enactment of NCLB (2001) and IDEA (2001), school leaders are encountering increased demands regarding school accountability. These and other requirements have expanded their roles and responsibilities (Lashley, 2007; McHatton, Boyer, Shaunessy, & Terry, 2010; Provost, Boscardin, & Wells, 2010), not the least to include a multitude of issues related to special

education issues and concerns (Lashley, 2007; Pazey & Cole, 2013; Pazey & Yates, 2012; Yell, 2012). Section 1462(a)(7) of IDEA emphasizes instructional leadership, behavior support, assessment, accountability, and the establishment of positive relationships with parents as the focus for professional development for administrators. In addition, Section 1462(b) describes professional development and support for special educators that school principals, as instructional leaders, must be able to provide. Furthermore, they are required to (a) strengthen the role of parents in the education of their child; (b) ensure that special education is a service rather than a place where children with disabilities are sent; (c) provide an appropriate education and related services; (d) support high-quality, intensive pre-service preparation and professional development or all personnel who work with children with disabilities; (e) promote instructional leadership and improved collaboration between general and special educators; and (f) provide support for a whole-school approach to reform, scientifically-based educational programs and interventions, and early intervening services (Wright & Wright, 2007). The intent is to further prepare school leaders to continue to develop and sustain inclusive schools in order to promote the positive academic and learning outcomes for all students on their campuses.

Under both NCLB and IDEA, building principals are held publicly accountable for the educational performance of all students, including those with disabilities, on state and district assessments (Gordon, 2006; Lashley, 2007; Nichols & Berliner, 2008). In this era of accountability for the *quality* of education for all students (Lashley, 2007), the federal law requires specific organizational decisions to be made by members of the IEP

team and includes the membership of a school administrator within each school. For example, to ensure that a student with a disability receives a FAPE in the LRE, the IEP team must make decisions relevant to the instructional goals and objectives and related services that he or she receives. Throughout the development of a student's IEP, the team must address the specifics of what is most *appropriate* for the student in terms of a specialized education as well as consider the educational placement whereby each student will be educated in the LRE. The building administrator must be able and willing to allocate the resources necessary for the provision of FAPE and LRE. How a building principal constructs his or her interpretation of *appropriate* might have a significant impact on the development and implementation of a child's IEP, which is "the embodiment of a student's FAPE" in the LRE (Yell, 2012, p. 184). Principals need an understanding of special education literature, law, and practice in order to inform their decision-making role throughout the IEP process.

CALL FOR EXEMPLARY PRINCIPAL PREPARATION PROGRAMS

There has been a call for more research on how principal preparation programs grow their future school leaders to lead schools that are inclusive, value diversity, and promote the academic success for all students. To do this, researchers have investigated principal preparation programs that are exemplary as well as the outcomes of these programs for students, teachers, and schools (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, & Orr, 2007; Darling-Hammond, Meyers, LaPointe, & Orr, 2010; Fuller, Young Baker, 2011; Orr, 2011; Orr & Orphanos, 2011; Perez, Uline, Johnson, James-Ward, & Basom,

2011; Roach, Smith, & Boutin, 2011). Orr and Orphanos (2011) examined reviews of research on exemplary leadership programs and the components of a quality program and identified the following features of an exemplary principalship program:

- a well-defined theory of leadership for school improvement that frames and integrates the program features around a set of shared values, beliefs, and knowledge;

- a coherent curriculum that addresses effective instructional leadership, organizational development, and change management and that aligns with state and professional standards;

- active learning strategies that integrate theory and practice and stimulate reflection;

- quality internships that provide intensive developmental opportunities to apply leadership knowledge and skills under the guidance of an expert practitioner-mentor;

- faculty who are knowledgeable about their subject matter;

- social and professional support structures, such as organizing students into cohorts so they can take common courses together in a prescribed sequence, as well as formalized mentoring, and advising from expert principals; and

- the use of standards-based assessment for candidate and program feedback and continuous improvement that is tied to the program's vision and objectives (p. 22)

These features serve as a blueprint for current principal preparation programs wanting to improve the quality and efficacy of their programs. For this study, inclusion of graduates from a leadership program that not only incorporates the preceding exemplary components, but also focuses on special education knowledge and factors that are *internal* to the principal are important to understanding how current building principals make sense of and implement federal inclusive education policies and legal mandates on their campuses.

Assumptions

While this study purported to examine how current school leaders who are graduates of a university-based "high-quality" principalship program made sense of inclusive education policy and legal mandates in order to promote an inclusive school culture, several assumptions inherent in the purpose of this study should be noted. First, there was an assumption that high-quality principalship programs exist. Second, that "high-quality" principalship programs offered information for school leaders to lead special education programs and inclusive schools; and, that having at least one course specific to special education would provide the knowledge needed to become a leader for special education and inclusive schools. Third, that these current school leaders were employed at an inclusive campus. Fourth, that an inclusive school campus was the goal of school leaders who had previously been a member of a cohort of a "high quality" preparation program. And fifth, there was an assumption that current school leaders had the opportunity to make sense of and enact inclusive education policy.

Significance of the Study

The goal of NCLB (2001) was for all students to achieve proficiency in core academic areas by the year 2014 (Ramanathan, 2008). Because principals lack the knowledge of special education (Brotherson et al., 2001; Doyle, 2002; Lashley, 2007) and understanding of how to implement inclusive education mandates (Brotherson et al., 2001; Lashley, 2007; McHatton, et al., 2010) embedded within NCLB (2001) and IDEA (2004), one might deduce that school leaders may be struggling with policies directed toward meeting the demands of the initial goal of NCLB by 2014, especially for the special education population. Researchers suggest the need for further research in the following areas: (a) strategies for school leaders throughout inclusive education policy implementation with the goal of developing inclusive schools; (b) information and training to ensure that principals become effective leaders for special education; (c) skills school leaders will need to facilitate deeper level change; and (d) how school leaders are prepared to meet the future needs of schools in an era of accountability and changing student populations (Brotherson et al., 2001; Crockett et al., 2007; Doyle, 2002; Provost, Boscardin, & Wells, 2010).

Because research in how school leaders make sense of inclusive education policy was limited, the major objective of this study was to enrich our current understanding of the ways in which school leaders make sense of and implement complex and changing inclusive educational policies at their schools. This study provides current school leaders a framework by which they can further understand how they make sense of inclusive education policy. In addition, it adds to the literature regarding effective components for

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exemplary principal preparation training. Findings from this study may assist educational administration departments, program directors, and researchers when evaluating the effectiveness of their graduate-level administrator preparation programs on students with special needs.

Findings from this study adds to empirical literature regarding the importance of special education throughout school leader preparation and the influence on achievement of all students. It illuminates how school leaders negotiate the complexity of their new roles and responsibilities as leaders for special education as well as how they author their own interpretation of critical special education policies and legal mandates. It also expands empirical knowledge related to the use of a unique approach for examining how school leaders make sense of inclusive education policy within state and federal mandates. Finally, findings from this study can assist principal preparation programs, program directors, and researchers when evaluating the effectiveness of their graduate-level leadership preparation programs in regard to inclusive education policy.

Organization of the Study

This study is organized into five chapters. Chapter 1 includes the general introduction and background of the problem as well as pertinent terminology. Chapter 2 presents the body of literature that address research in the following areas: (a) Evolution of Special Education Policy; (b) Federal Inclusive Education Mandates, (c) Implications for School Leaders, (d) Theoretical Framework: Sense Making; and (h) Summary. Chapter 3 is an outline of the research design and procedures that were used to conduct

the study in order to answer the research questions posed. In chapter 4 the findings of the

study are explained and analyzed. The final chapter, chapter 5 presents the discussion,

conclusion, and implications of the findings.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

This chapter is a review of the literature pertaining to inclusive education policy, specifically as it relates to how school leaders understand and implement NCLB (2001) and IDEA (2004) in order to work towards a more inclusive school to meet the needs of all students. The literature review is focused on the following areas: (a) evolution of special education policy; (b) federal inclusive education mandates, (c) implications for school leaders, (d) factors that influence school leaders' ability to implement education policy; (e) role of a principal preparation program in developing inclusive school leaders; (f) theoretical framework: sense making; and (g) summary. The purpose of this study was to explore how current school leaders as graduates of a university-based "high-quality" principalship program made sense of inclusive education policy and legal mandates to promote an inclusive school culture.

The research questions that guided this study were as follows:

1. How did current school leaders who are graduates of a high-quality principal preparation program describe their lived experiences in regard to special education practices on their campuses?

2. How did current school leaders who are graduates of a high-quality principal preparation program make sense of inclusive education policy demands at their schools?

3. How did current school leaders who are graduates of a high-quality principal preparation program perceive the supports that enabled them to navigate the complexity of inclusive education policy on their campuses?

Evolution of Special Education Policy

"In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied that opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right that must be made available to all on equal terms" –

Chief Justice Earl Warren, Brown v. Board of Education, 1954

U.S. CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

The history of special education can be characterized as a "continuous pursuit of equity" (McLaughlin, Krezmein, & Zablocki, 2009, p.2) in which students with disabilities were excluded from America's public schools (Yell, 2012). In fact, prior to the 1970s, special programs were generally the responsibility of states and individual school districts (Lipsky & Gartner, 1997) and students with disabilities were deemed to have no legal right to a public education (Yell, 2012). It was not until *Brown v. Board of Education* was established as a legal precedent in 1954 (Jackson, 2008) that students with disabilities were included in the educational opportunity movement (Yell, 2012). Using the *Brown* decision, parent advocacy groups pushed for the inclusion of students with disabilities into public education. As a result, disability groups joined minority groups advocating for equal opportunity through schooling, thus, placing pressure on policymakers to enact inclusive education reform.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 was one of the first laws to address the inequalities of students from low-income families and those with disabilities ("Great Society," 2004). ESEA (1965) allocated over $1 billion from federal funds to help schools establish Head Start, special education programs, and purchase materials for low-income schools. Although this law set the stage for inclusive reform, there was a lack of federal mandates specific to meeting the needs of students with disabilities or including them in public education programs. Schools were still not held accountable for how or where students with disabilities were educated at their campuses.

Two seminal court cases, *Pennsylvania Association for Retard Citizens (PARC) v. Pennsylvania, 1971* and *Mills v. Board of Education, 1972,* set the precedent for the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) of 1975, which ended the exclusion of children with disabilities from public education (Yell, 2012). *PARC v. Pennsylvania* (1971) established the standard of *appropriate* in a FAPE in which each child is offered an education that suitable for his or her own learning capacities (Yell, 2012). In addition, the outcome of the case favored an education for student with disabilities in the LRE (Yell, 2012) in which a continuum of services would be provided to meet the needs of students with disabilities. The following year, *Mills v. Board of Education* (1972) established that school districts were prohibited from deciding that insufficient funding and resources kept them from serving students with disabilities (Yell, 2012). Both cases helped to set the foundation for special education policies in that they both emphasized the individual needs of the child and the school's responsibility to meet their needs, regardless of cost or availability of resources (Yell, 2012).

The EAHCA of 1975, often called P.L. 94-142, provided additional federal funding to relieve the effect of inclusion on local school budgets (Ramanathan, 2008). EAHCA (1975) established the formal identification of children with handicapping conditions and provision of appropriate services. In addition, it ended the exclusion of children with disabilities from public education and provided additional funding to relieve the effect of their inclusion on local school budgets (Ramanathan, 2008). EAHCA (1975) mandated that students with disabilities had the right to (a) nondiscriminatory testing, evaluation and placement procedures; (b) education in the least restrictive environment; (c) procedural due process, including parental involvement; (d) a free education; and (e) an appropriate education (Yell, 2012, p. 53). The original intent was to provide access to educational programs in public schools. Although students with disabilities were being educated within the public schools, in many instances it was not within the least restrictive environment.

Federal Inclusive Education Mandates

In the 1980's, a report called a *Nation At Risk* was written by the National Commission on Excellence in Education in response to the general concern that the U.S. educational system was mediocre and falling behind global standards and in turn threatened the economic well being of the nation (1983). A Nation At Risk recommended changes in 5 areas: (1) curriculum content, (2) standards and expectations of students, (3) time devoted to education, (4) teacher quality, and (5) educational

leadership and the financial support of education (A Nation Accountable: 25 years after A Nation At Risk, 2008). Around the time of A Nation At Risk, a report from the National Academy Press entitled "Placing Children in Special Education: A Strategy for Equity" was published in response to a growing concern for the disproportional number of minority students referred to Special Education (Heller, Holtzman, & Messick, 1982). In the report, the quality of general education programs, special education programs, and assessment processes in the identification of a disability were evaluated. The researchers identified several causes for the disproportional of minorities in Special Education including: (a) characteristics of the legal and administration system within which special education programs operate; (b) characteristics of the instruction and of the institutional setting; (c) characteristics of the students themselves; (d) possible biases in assessments; (e) characteristics of students' homes and family environments; (f) and broader historical contexts in which they are embedded (Heller, Holtzman, & Messick, 1982). Following the critiques of public education, there was a push to promote the importance of accountability and student achievement for all students, including those with disabilities

In 1990, the EAHCA was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and included additional mandates, such as "people-first" language, the addition of the categories of Autism and traumatic brain injury, and required that transitional services be included in the Individual Education Plan (IEP). In 1997, IDEA was reauthorized and led states to monitor where and how students with disabilities were served (Yell, 2012). The 1997 reauthorization emphasized a new goal of the inclusive education mandate, which was providing a quality education for each student with

disabilities (Eyer, 1998 as cited in Yell, 2012, p. 57). IDEA was no longer just addressing an *access* issue, but also the quality or meaningfulness of educational program for students with disabilities. Students with disabilities were to be included in all state and district assessments, thereby placing increasing pressure on school leaders to meet the academic needs of students served in special education.

SHIFTING PARADIGMS: "THEM" TO "US"

Although great efforts had been made to ensure that students with disabilities received an equal opportunity to a FAPE, special education and general education still operated from separate bureaucratic systems (Baglieri, Valle, Connor, & Gallagher, 2010; Gartner & Lipsky, 1987; Kirp, Buss, & Kuriloff, 1974; Palincsar, 1997), maintaining a relationship described as a "polite polarization" (Robinson & Buly, 2008, p. 86) in which each organizational system operated from its own paradigm. Prior to IDEA 1997, school leaders were not always "concerned with the educational needs of students with disabilities" (Russo & Osborne, 2009, p. 9) and were now expected to place them in general education classes. This transition created a major challenge of how to address the diverse educational needs of students with disabilities (Russo & Osborne, 2009). There was an intense focus on "inclusion" and a call for conversations regarding students with disabilities to be the responsibility of both general and special education on a school campus. School leaders faced a complex reform that would be challenging to implement (Sindelar, Sheaer, Yendol-Hoppey, Liebert, 2006). This reform required a shift in school structure as well as changes in they way school leaders conceptualized special education.

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In addition, factors such as parent groups, litigation, increasingly high costs of special education, and the intensified advocacy for equity and excellence in educating students with disabilities (Lipsky & Gartner, 1997) all illuminated the need for a unified public education system. All of these factors placed pressure on policymakers to ensure that students with disabilities were included in discussions of high standards as demonstrated by the accountability era set forth by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2001) and IDEA (2004) at the turn of the 21st century.

RECENT FEDERAL INCLUSIVE EDUCATION POLICIES

Reauthorization of ESEA, rebranded the NCLB Act of 2001 and reauthorization of IDEA (2004) requiring the participation of all students, including those with disabilities, in state assessments (Christensen, Braam, Soulin, & Thurlow, 2011; Lashley, 2007; Pazey & Cole, 2013; Pazey & Yates, 2012). NCLB (2001) and IDEA (2004) promote the importance of accountability and student achievement for all students, including those with special needs (Lashley, 2007). Both inclusive education policies seek to ensure that students with disabilities receive a quality and meaningful public education (Yell, 2012). They also required school districts to provide quality programs that ensured a meaningful education for all students. NCLB (2001) and IDEA (2004) both include recommendations for the inclusion of students with special needs in the general education classroom (Anastasiou & Kauffman, 2010; Carter & Hughes, 2006). Current interpretation of LRE within federal mandates is that, "'inclusion' is the preferred policy direction" (Marshall & Patterson, 2002, p.354). Including students with

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special needs within general education and instilling a vision of shared responsibility may be the ideal management and accountability system (Deno, 1994; Ramanathan, 2008).

NCLB

The reauthorization of ESEA significantly impacted the "quest for educational equity and equal opportunity for students with disabilities" (McLaughlin, Krezmein, & Zablocki, 2009, p. 2). The purpose of NCLB was to set high academic standards for all students, produce and hire highly qualified teachers, establish safe classrooms conducive to learning, ensure that all students are proficient in English, and that all students would graduate from high school (NCLB, 2001). The intent was to increase the achievement of students in U. S. public schools (Yell, 2012). Students with disabilities would now be included in high stakes testing and accountability requirements under the law, which held schools publicly accountable for their educational performance (Yell, 2012). Schools that failed to meet these requirements, or adequate yearly progress (AYP), had the potential to be reprimanded and, in worse cases, closed down.

IDEA

The intent of IDEA (2004) is to improve the academic achievement of students with special needs through the ongoing implementation of concepts such as the LRE and a FAPE in which students with special needs have access to the general education curriculum and participate in state-wide assessments. IDEA (2004) also defined a "highly qualified" teacher, prohibited the use of a discrepancy model to determine eligibility of students with learning disabilities, and encouraged the use of a response to

intervention (RTI) model to identify a learning disability (Yell, 2012). School leaders were now faced with confronting individualistic special education policies along with "general education" policies that called for universal standards and high stakes assessments (McLaughlin, Krezmein, & Zablocki, 2009).

OUTCOME OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION POLICIES

As noted earlier, federal inclusive education policy was developed in response to issues of equity and quality of education for students with disabilities (McLaughlin, Krezmein, & Zablocki, 2009). The hope in reauthorizing inclusive education polices, NCLB (2001) and IDEA (2004), was to address these issues and to support the collaboration of special and general education to meet the diverse needs of all students. In addition, the intent was to promote high expectations for students as well as schools in order to ensure that each child was receiving a quality education. With the enactment of these polices, significant changes in school systems and structures occurred. For example, since students with disabilities have been being identified at an increasing rate (NCES, 2010), the number of students with disabilities that were being served in general education has increased (McLaughlin, Krezmein, & Zablocki, 2009). A continuum of services is needed to be readily available to meet the diverse needs of learners (Yell, 2012), and the roles of school leaders are continuously evolving (Lashley, 2007; Pazey & Cole, 2013; Pazey & Yates, 2012).

Shifts in Student Placement

Following the EAHCA in 1975, the percentage of students with disabilities served in public schools, with students without disabilities, has risen from 8.3 percent (8.3%) to 13.2 percent (13.2%) of the total enrollment in 2009 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2010). This percentage continues to increase due to inclusive education mandates that ensure *access*, such as early intervention services (EIS), FAPE in the LRE, and RTI. In addition, the call for inclusion and high stakes accountability for all students continues to influence the number of students with disabilities who are being served in general education. The percentage of students with disabilities being served for the majority of the time (80%) in general education classrooms has increased from 33% in 1990 to approximately 58% in 2009. Furthermore, 98% of schools have one or more students eligible for special education and related services through an individual education plan (IEP) (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2011). Clearly, ensuring students with disabilities have *access* to a public education is affecting school demographic composition, however how school leaders provide quality programs to ensure a meaningful education is currently a practice and goal that school leaders are struggling to deliver (Yell, 2012).

Implications for School Leaders

To successfully implement federal inclusive education polices and legal mandates requires school leaders to have the knowledge and skills to enact them as intended. As schools move away from separate systems of general and special education and towards a

united system of inclusive education, it has become increasingly more important for school leaders to become leaders for special education. School leaders' roles have "changed [in order to] to meet a demand for greater involvement in advocacy, training, collaboration, and shared decision making" (Cusson, 2010, p. 14). As Garrison-Wade, Sobel, and Fulmer (2007) stated,

> …students with challenging academic and behavioral needs participate in a wider array of settings, programs, and opportunities, the need for school leaders who understand the complexities of varied systems and alternative teaching strategies becomes essential to ensure student success (pp. 128-129).

Prior to the implementation of recent inclusive policies NCLB (2001) and IDEA (2004), the roles of general education administrators in relation to special education were blurred (Cusson, 2010). General education administrators were not held accountable for the academic performance of students with disabilities. At the present time, school leaders need to be able to make sense of and implement federal mandates within NCLB (2001) and IDEA (2004) in order to remain compliant with AYP. The key principle for school leaders under these federal inclusive education policies has been accountability (Gordon, 2006). In this era of accountability, students with disabilities must perform proficiently on standardized tests. The intent of these policies was to increase the academic achievement for all students, including those with disabilities (Nichols & Berliner, 2008). The challenge for school leaders is to

…redefine education educational leadership, transform the dual system of

general and special education administration to a distributed system of

leadership mission, transforming the dual system of general and special

education administration to a system of leadership that collaboratively

supports the use of proven practices to achieve school-wide improvement

for students with disabilities (Boscardin, 2005, p. 24).

Because the leadership and support that principals provide to schools significantly

influences successful school change (Fullan, 2001), it was important to review the

existing trends in principals' sensemaking regarding federal inclusive education policy

and legal mandates and how their perceptions influence their ability to lead inclusive

schools.

THE CALL FOR SCHOOL LEADERS TO LEAD INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS

Policy that involved civil rights helped to give birth to the concept of inclusive

schools (Hehir & Katzman, 2012). Inclusive schools value children with disabilities and

seek to provide them with a high quality education in inclusive setting (2012). In an

effort to investigate effective successful school wide programs for inclusive schools,

Hehir and Katzman (2012) identified the following criteria of an inclusive school:

(1) Schools have "higher large-scale test scores for students with disabilities as

well as those without disabilities than would be predicted by socioeconomic class,

race, and disability" (p. xx). In addition, the school must have low dropout,

suspension, and expulsion rates.

(2) Schools must be inclusive of students with a disability. The definition of *inclusive* "required that schools educated children with disabilities predominately in the general education classroom" (p. xx). Also, "schools are intentionally inclusive through school mission statements and school websites" (p. xx).

(3) Schools "enrolled a broader range of students with disabilities" (p. xx).

(4) Schools that have a "very low suspension and transfer rate" (p. xx).

There was a culture among inclusive schools in which "students with disabilities were valued and seen as a positive aspect of a diverse 'democratic' institution" (Heir & Katzman, 2012, p. 20). The leadership provided at inclusive schools was essential to their success (Hehir & Katzman, 2012).

LEADERSHIP FOR INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS

For school leaders to lead effective inclusive schools, a commitment to an inclusive school culture is essential. Inclusive leaders play a major role in developing a school wide mission, collaborative vision, and a focus on justice and diversity (Hehir & Katzman, 2012). The following beliefs provide a framework for the role of a school leader in an inclusive school: (1) all children can learn; (2) accept all children as part of the community; (3) educators can teach a diverse group of students; (4) teachers are responsible for all student learning; and (5) they [school leaders] are responsible for all children at their school (Goor, Schwenn, & Boyer, 1997). In addition, school leaders must foster new meanings about diversity (Guzman, 1994; Riehl, 2000) and vision (Bakken & Smith, 2011), promote inclusive school cultures (Riehl, 2000) and

instructional programs (Bakken & Smith, 2011; Guzman, 1994; Riehl, 2000), build

relationships between schools and communities (Bakken & Smith, 2011; Riehl, 2000),

providing resources (Guzman, 1994), recruit knowledgeable staff (Bakken & Smith,

2011), and create and support a professional learning community (Bakken & Smith,

2011; Guzman, 1994; Matthews & Crow, 2010). These beliefs are shared with literature

surrounding a socially just leader. Recently, educational leadership scholars (McKenzie,

Christman, Hernandez, Fierro, Capper, Dantly, Gonzalez, Cambron-McCabe, &

Scheurich, 2008) have conceptualized foundational components of leadership with focus

on social justice. They suggest school leaders take on the following principles:

1. High test scores do matter; therefore, leaders must raise the academic
    achievement of all students

2. Prepare students to live as critical citizens of society

3. The first two goals can only be achieved when leaders assign students to
    inclusive, heterogeneous classrooms that provide all students access to a rich
    and engaging curriculum

Furthermore, in a study that investigated the characteristics of effective inclusive

leaders, Hehir and Katzman (2012) categorized effective inclusive leadership qualities

using Bolman and Deal's (2005) four frames:

1. Symbolically they provided strong moral leadership concerning issues of
    inclusion and diversity, frequently "telling the story" of their schools and
    continually celebrating success.

2. Structurally, each provided opportunities for teachers to work together and problem-solve.

3. Politically, they mustered support within their schools and communities that enabled them to move their schools' missions forward.

4. They devoted enormous resources to develop the skills of the teachers and staff within their schools (p. 53).

Accordingly, Guzman (1997) highlighted the following factors consistently identified among successful inclusive school leaders: (a) ability to establish a communication system that allows for rich dialog; (b) be actively involved in the IEP process; (c) be personally involved with parents of students with disabilities; (d) collaboratively develop philosophies regarding inclusion; (e) articulate clear polices for addressing discipline issues; (f) implement professional development around inclusive practices; and (g) demonstrate skill in data gathering and problem-solving (as cited in Garrison-Wade, Sobel, & Fulmer, 2007; p. 119). Although the previous characteristics are important for developing and sustaining an inclusive school, school leaders must also understand and be able to implement inclusive education policy in order to meet the policy demands as well as the needs of all children at their schools.

SCHOOL LEADERS IMPLEMENTATION OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION POLICY

Researchers have found that effective inclusive school leaders use policy as a springboard to ensure that all members of the school community were committed to educating all students to high academic standards in inclusive setting (Hehir & Katzman,

2012). Further, school leaders who are able to enact important and interrelated roles in vision, structure, culture, learning, and politics were more able to create and establish an inclusive service delivery model (Kose, 2009). Principals' perceptions of inclusive education policy, or as some refer to as "inclusion," are extremely important for the delivery of educational services (Praisner, 2003; Riehl, 2000) and the implementation and advancement of inclusion (Praisner, 2000) within a school. Cook, Semmel, and Gerber (1999) stated,

> As school-site administrators and policy leaders, principals influence reform implementation decisions, control resource allocations, and exert a supervisory role relative to school personnel. Hence, principals' attitudes toward inclusion represent a particularly powerful influence on schoolwide policy implementation and operational innovations (p. 200).

Olson and Sexton (2009) believe that earning the trust of the teachers, encouraging innovative thinking, opening lines of communication, and promoting a culture of inclusiveness might ease the adoption of inclusive practices. In other words, school leaders who were successful at implementing inclusive education policy did so by developing an inclusive school-wide vision, including others in decision-making, and proactively working to change the beliefs and attitudes of the people who work with them in order to illuminate the importance and meaning behind the intent of the policy.

In addition, school leaders must promote change while facing real consequences of failure to meet the requirements of inclusive education policy. In a study of school administrators' perceptions of the impact on NCLB on special populations, Vannest,

Mahadevan, Mason, and Temple-Harvey (2009) found that administrators negatively

perceived the impact of accountability and the consequences associated with not meeting

these standards. They suggested that future research efforts should focus on the impact

of public policies as perceived by the participants who are at the level of implementation

in schools. In addition, future research efforts need to be focused on identifying the

degree of policy implementation of NLCB. In order to explore the degree of policy

implementation on a school campus, it was important to first understand how and why

school leaders implement a policy and what influences the implementation (or lack

thereof) of a policy.

Factors that Influence School Leaders' Ability to Implement Education Policy

In an investigation of the factors that influenced the policy implementation

activities of principals, Trider and Leithwood (1998) developed a framework that

conceptualized how building principals went about the policy implementation process

and its consequences (see Figure 2). The framework consists of three main categories

that include: policy specifications, political and organizational context, and personal

context. Policy specifications consist of the responsibilities identified in the policy itself

or succeeding regulations (Trider & Leithwood, 1998). Political and organizational

context refers to the "characteristics of the organizational or broader political

environment in which implementation must take place" (p. 295). Personal context

consists of the personal values or beliefs of the policy implementer or building principal

as well as his or her interpretation of the significance of other contextual factors such as

the policy itself, the political environment, or the organizational context (Trider &
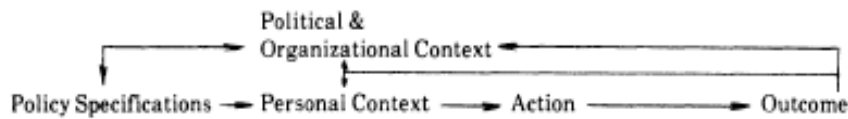
Leithwood, 1998).

Figure 2: A Conception of the Policy Implementation Process and its Consequences

Source: Trider & Leithwood, 1998

Among the most influential factors throughout policy implementation were those

internal to the principal, such as professional experience, beliefs, and values regarding

schooling (Trider & Leithwood, 1998). Congruent with their findings, the research team

highlighted the need to examine principals' beliefs and identify predictable patterns that

might influence their decision-making process throughout policy implementation. They

also recommended that policy implementation planners recognize the crucial role that

beliefs and values play in shaping a principal's practice and identify any discrepancies

between beliefs held by building principals and those assumed by policy (Trider &

Leithwood, 1998).

The following sections illuminate previous research that support the significance

of the factors *internal* to the policy implementer, the building principal, as well as the

role that formal preparation plays throughout the implementation process.

BELIEF SYSTEMS

Belief systems play a major role in policy implementation (Levine, 1998). According to Bandura (1993), individuals with low levels of beliefs on their ability to change or control their environment will produce little change. Beliefs influence the way in which we see the world and guide our behavior (Goor, Schwenn, & Boyer, 1997). Bolman and Deal (2005) state, "…our mental maps influence how we interpret the world [and] less widely understood is that what we expect often determines what we get" (p. 40). In addition, Carter and Hughes (2006) found that the implementation of educational practices, such as inclusion, is contingent upon the acceptance of those practices by the school staff. Brantlinger, (1997) suggests that inclusion is based on a belief system and that those beliefs are not so different from "*facts*" in that they reflect "shared values, normative controls, and consensus among members of certain groups" (Bensimon, 1995 as cited in Brantlinger, 1997 p. 443). Lashley (2007) concluded that "[a]lthough the motives behind inclusion are laudable, entrenched beliefs about special education, which blame students for their lack of success … remain in place in many localities." Scheurich and Skrla (2003) suggest that "[i]f you are going to successfully lead a school to attain both equity and excellence, you first have to believe it is possible" (p. 10).

ATTITUDES

In a study that investigated the impact of administrators' beliefs had on placement of students with disabilities, Vasquez (2010) found that there was a relationship between a principal's attitude toward inclusion and the decisions made regarding placement,

services, and programs of students with disabilities. Interestingly, the principals believed that students with autism and emotional behavioral disorders should be educationed in separate classrooms. There was also a correlation with the principal's professional experiences and having an inclusive attitude. Center, Ward, Parameter, and Nash (1985) compared principals' attitudes towards inclusion over five years. They found that little had changed in the principals' perceptions of inclusion and that they were only positive about integrating students who did not demand extra duties or competencies. They were also dissatisfied with the level of support services that were available to supplement inclusive practices.

When applied to the concept of inclusive education, these findings might imply that if an administrator does not believe in his or her ability to create an inclusive school or does not value a diverse population, then he or she will probably not support inclusion or inclusive practices. "Principals who value diversity in the student population support programs that meet individual needs" (Goor, Schwenn, & Boyer, 1997, p. 2). In order for "principals to be effective special education leaders, they must examine their belief structure to determine the viability of adopting more accepting and inclusive paradigms" (Goor, Schwenn, & Boyer, 1997, p. 3).

PERCEPTION OF ORGANIZATIONAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONTEXT

In addition to beliefs and attitudes, behavior is also a function of the individual in the context of their environment (Owens & Valesky, 2011). For example, in a national study that investigated principals' perceptions of academic climate, researchers (Urick &

Bowers, 2011) found that student socioeconomic status (SES) and discipline issues

negatively impact the perception of the academic climate. The researchers suggested that

this might be indicative of a feedback loop, which means that if a principal views the

school as a *challenge* then the school might have more of a *challenging* academic climate

(Urick & Bowers, 2011). In addition, Bays and Crocket (2007) found that systemic

factors such as time constraints, size of the school, and the number of special education

programs within the school impacted the principal's leadership abilities for special

education. Organizational and environmental factors such as these provided school

leaders with an *outlet* for placing blame on external forces rather than focusing on what

they, as school leaders, needed to do in order to develop and sustain an inclusive school

culture and climate.

ADDITIONAL INFLUENCE ON POLICY IMPLEMENTATION: PRINCIPALS' KNOWLEDGE OF POLICY CONTEXT

It is not only important to understand the beliefs and attitudes of the implementer

towards a specific policy, but also the knowledge that the implementer has regarding the

context of the policy. Trider and Leithwood (1998) posit, "the principal's special

knowledge is one of the central determinants of the pattern of policy implementation

behavior in which they engage" (p. 307). However, principals who lacked knowledge of

special education are more likely to rely on the guidance of central office or others with

existing skills (Trider & Leithwood, 1998) in order to make sense of and implement the

mandates within NCLB (2002) and IDEA (2004). For example, if a principal does not

understand his or her role throughout an IEP meeting, he or she would be more inclined to seek district- or school-level support or resources to do so. Additional time and training would be needed in order for these principals to ensure that they are in compliance with special education policy and lead an inclusive school.

For school leaders to lead inclusive schools, they must not only be instructional leaders for general education but also for special education. Bays and Crockett (2007) analyzed instructional leadership for special education and found that (a) understanding of special education, (b) perceived competence of special educators, and (c) the principal's definition and regard for special education significantly impacted their leadership abilities for special education. Several researchers (Brotherson, Sheriff, Milburn, & Shertz, 2001) stress the importance of information and training to ensure that principals become effective leaders in implementing inclusive programs. Although principals do not need to be experts in the field of special education they do need a working knowledge of special education law, and research-based practices around serving students with disabilities (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). To enact instructional leadership practices on their campuses, school leaders must understand special education policy and appropriate teaching strategies and know how to ensure students with disabilities are benefiting from a meaningful education (Yell, 2012). School leaders are also expected to be aware of current research as they are often viewed as *experts* in interpreting and implementing inclusive policy (Crockett, Becker, & Quinn, 2009) in their schools. Building principals who clearly understand the intent of IDEA, the needs of the children receiving special education supports, and challenges that

educators might face in meeting the needs of children with disabilities are far better prepared to provide appropriate leadership and support (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003, p. 9). In addition, they are also less likely to rely on district support to implement educational policies (Trider & Leithwood, 1998) or face due process and/or possible litigation (Patterson & Marshall, 2001; Yell, 2012).

Findings from the previous sections that addressed school leaders' beliefs, attitudes, perception of environmental context, and knowledge of special education highlighted several factors that are *internal* to the principal that have the ability to impact their capacity to make sense of and implement inclusive policy as intended. Examining how school leaders are influenced by and deal with these internal factors plays an important role in understanding how school leaders make sense of complex federal inclusive education policy and legal mandates and, as a result, become leaders for special education.

Because the knowledge that a school leader has regarding a policy also plays a major role in how policy is implemented (Trider & Leithwood, 1998), it was important to understand how school leaders use what they learn throughout their leadership preparation in order to make sense of federal inclusive education policy and legal mandates. It was important to not only focus on the "what is taught" in a preparation program, but also how, and if, there is a focus on cultivating the *internal* factors that influence a principal's policy implementation process.

The sample for this study was selected from a population of principals who were graduates of a principal preparation program that incorporated two important

components: (1) a special education knowledge base and (2) an emphasis on factors

internal to the individual, which Trider and Leithwood (1998) coined their *personal*

context. Because the focus of this study was to understand how current school leaders

made sense of federal inclusive policies, NCLB (2002) and IDEA (2004), it was essential

that the program incorporated special education into the curriculum in an effort to expand

the knowledge base of school leaders regarding federal inclusive policies.

Role of Principal Preparation Programs in Developing Inclusive School Leaders

To meet the leadership demands for leading an inclusive school such as

interpreting and enacting inclusive education policy, setting high academic standards for

all students, and valuing diversity, new training requirements for general administrators

have emerged (Cusson, 2010). Since the turn of the 21st century and the enactment of

federal inclusive education policies, NCLB (2002) and IDEA (2004), school leaders have

been called on to lead their schools in "rethinking of goals, priorities, finances, staffing,

curriculum, pedagogies, learning resources, assessment methods, technology, and use of

time and space" (Levine, 2005, p. 12). Following a review of empirical literature,

Cusson (2010) identified the following 12 competencies for preparing general and special

education administrators: (1) relationship building and communication; (2) leadership

and vision; (3) budget and capital; (4) laws and policies; (5) curriculum and instruction;

(6) personnel; (7) evaluation of data, programs, students, and teachers; (8) collaboration

and consultation; (9) special education programming and delivery services; (10)

organization; (11) professional development; and (12) advocacy (pp. 52-57). These 12

competencies were found to be critical for principals serving students with disabilities (Cusson, 2010). Because principals are held accountable for the success of all students, principal preparation programs have the responsibility of ensuring that graduates are prepared to meet the needs of a diverse student population. The role of leadership training programs in developing the capacity of future leaders to lead inclusive schools is crucial for the improvement of academic outcomes for all students.

PRINCIPAL PREPARATION PROGRAMS

The intent of leadership preparation programs is to develop the leadership capacity of future leaders and to develop the future leader's aspirations to seek advancement (Orr, 2011). In addition, Young, Peterson, and Short (2002) stated that the goal of educational leadership programs was ultimately to provide high-quality education for all students. In this era of accountability, *all* students include those being served in special education Because where a school leader is prepared makes a difference on teacher qualifications and, ultimately, on student achievement (Fuller et al., 2011; Orr, 2011), it was important to examine how school leaders use what they learn throughout their preparation in order to make sense of inclusive education policy. In the following sections, critiques of principalship programs as well as the response to those critiques are addressed. Recently, empirical research has focused on strengthening principalship programs. It was important to understand how the "what" is taught in leadership preparation programs influences sensemaking of school leaders. First, the evolution of

the principalship program is discussed and outcomes of exemplary or "high quality"

programs is illuminated.

CRITIQUES OF PRINCIPALSHIP PROGRAMS

The quality and efficacy of principalship programs have been contested for a

number of years (Breault & Breault, 2010; Jackson & Kelley, 2002; Kottkamp, 2011,

Levine, 2005). Additionally, there has been a lack of consensus on what criteria should

be used to identify and measure the level of success of leadership development programs.

In 2005, Levine examined the quality of educational administration programs where

principals are prepared. He identified the following criteria for excellence for a

university-based school leadership program:

(a) Purpose is explicit; Goals reflect needs of today's leaders, schools, and

children; Success is tied to student learning

(b) Rigorous curriculum

(c) Integration of theory and practice of administrators

(d) Competent faculty; Scholars and practitioners

(e) Competitive recruiting practices; Students with capacity and motivation to

become successful school leaders

(f) High graduation standards

(g) Research is high in quality and driven by practice

(h) Resources adequate to support the program

(i) Continuing self-assessment and performance improvement (p.47)

Levine (2005) found that programs for educational administration range from inadequate to appalling. Hess and Kelly (2005) conducted a study of university-based preparation programs and found that preparation had not kept pace with changes in the larger context of schooling. This left graduates ill equipped for the challenges and opportunities imposed by an era of accountability (Hess & Kelly, 2005). In addition to other critiques of relevance and rigor of programs (Bredeson, 1996; McCarthy, 1999; Milstein & Fruger, 1997), it was evident that substantive change was needed in the area of educational administration and specially how universities were preparing future school leaders.

RE-CONCEPTUALIZING AND RESTRUCTURING THE PRINCIPALSHIP PROGRAM

In 2001, Dr. Robert Kottcamp issued a call to the University Council of Educational Administrators (UCEA) research community to "initiate action on empirical evaluation of leadership preparation programs" (2011, p. 12). The need to address the criticisms of leadership preparation programs (Breault & Breault, 2010; Jackson & Kelley, 2002; Kottkamp, 2011; Levine, 2005) was and still is critical to the efficacy of leadership preparation. In addition, Young, Peterson, and Short (2002) posited a collaborate effort to improve the field of educational administration. The research team advocated that a collaborative effort must be undertaken to address the following:

(a) institutional support for educational leadership programs;

(b) faculty professional development;

(c) increase numbers of preparation programs;

(d) pool of capable and diverse applicants;

(e) ongoing program development;

(f) program content;

(g) licensure and accreditation; and

(h) focus of the profession (p. 143).

The complex factors that needed to be addressed for the improvement of leadership

preparation programs identified by Young, Peterson, and Short (2002) were later echoed

by Levine (2005) throughout his critique of such programs. Both articles stressed the

importance of addressing these critiques due to principal shortages, a national focus on

leadership, changing student populations and school contexts, and the responsibility of

the school leader to ensure that all students are successful. In addition, empirical articles

on evaluation of leadership preparation were published in a 2011 special issue of the

journal of Educational Administration Quarterly *Leadership Preparation in Education*.

These articles add to the empirical knowledge of how a quality leadership preparation

program can influence school leadership and student outcomes.

RESPONSE TO CRITICISMS: EXEMPLARY PRINCIPAL PREPARATION PROGRAMS

In response to criticisms of principal preparation programs, several researchers

sought to investigate the ways in which current programs influences their graduates as

they sought advancement, met the needs of their student population, and what

components of a principal preparation program impacted their ability to lead schools.

Fuller, Young, and Baker (2011) sought to understand the relationship between

preparation programs and leadership behaviors and the extent to which the programs

were able to provide the principals with the knowledge, skills, and ability necessary to promote a positive change in student achievement. They found that principals who received their leadership training from programs that were housed at research or doctoral institutions were more effective at improving the overall quality of teacher instruction and teacher quality on a campus which, in turn, had a positive effect their ability to impact student achievement. Interestingly, school or principal characteristics, school location, and principal tenure had little or no effect on school or student outcomes, and led them to conclude that a school leader's graduate education plays a major role in the quality of the educational leader (Fuller et al., 2011).

In addition, Orr (2011) surveyed members of 17 leadership preparation programs to investigate the relationship of the principal candidates, their program experiences, career outcomes, and what they learned. She found that there was a high correlation between program quality and career outcomes and suggested that the "quality of preparation influence what graduates learn about leading schools and, to a lesser extent, their career outcomes" (p. 153) Orr and Orphanos (2011) investigated the influence that exemplary preparation program had on the effectiveness of school leaders. They found that there was a strong relationship between program and internship quality and leadership practices. Their findings suggest that "the quality of candidates' programs and their field experiences contribute significantly to what and how much they learn about effective leadership and, through what they learn, how they subsequently function as school leaders" (p. 48). In addition, graduates who frequently used the learned leadership practices resulted in greater school improvement progress. One might conclude that the

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quality of the leadership program has a significant impact on the knowledge, skills, and capacity gained by the graduate to directly and indirectly impact student achievement. It is imperative to investigate the ways in which current school leaders, who are graduates of a "high quality" principal preparation program, made sense of and implement federal inclusive education policy and legal mandates with the intent of ensuring that all students, including those with disabilities, are successful.

COMPONENTS OF AN "EXEMPLARY PRINCIPALSHIP PROGRAM"

In a review of the literature, Salazar, Pazey, and Zembik (2013) identified research-based components of an exemplary principalship program. Their operational definition of an "exemplary principalship program" included the following components: (a) competitive-based recruitment (Darling-Hammond at al., 2007; Darling-Hammond et al., 2010; Vornburg & Davis, 1997), (b) an internship (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Darling-Hammond et al., 2010; Davis et al., 2005; Leithwood, 1996; Orr, 2011; Orr & Orphanos, 2011; Vornburg & Davis, 1997); (c) a well-defined curriculum that encapsulates the critical knowledge and skills needed to ensure the principal's success as a building leader (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Davis et al., 2005; Leithwood, 1996; Orr, 2011; Orr & Barber, 2007; Orr & Orphanos, 2011; Vornburg & Davis, 1997); (d) a strong relationship between the higher education institution in which the program is housed and the surrounding district(s) (Breault & Breault, 2010; Grogan & Andrews, 2002); (e) exposure to practicing principals (Vornburg & Davis, 1997); (f) problem–based learning (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Darling-Hammond et al., 2010; Davis et

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al., 2005; Grogan & Andrews, 2002; Leithwood, 1996); and (g) reflection (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Darling-Hammond et al., 2010; Marshall & Oliva, 2006; Orr, 2011; Orr & Orphanos, 2011).

Orr and Orphanos (2011) examined reviews of research on exemplary leadership programs and the components of a quality program and identified the following features of an exemplary principalship program:

- a well-defined theory of leadership for school improvement that frames and integrates the program features around a set of shared values, beliefs, and knowledge;
- a coherent curriculum that addresses effective instructional leadership, organizational development, and change management and that aligns with state and professional standards;
- active learning strategies that integrate theory and practice and stimulate reflection;
- quality internships that provide intensive developmental opportunities to apply leadership knowledge and skills under the guidance of an expert practitioner-mentor;
- faculty who are knowledgeable about their subject matter;
- social and professional support structures, such as organizing students into cohorts so they can take common courses together in a prescribed sequence, as well as formalized mentoring, and advising from expert principals; and

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- the use of standards-based assessment for candidate and program

    feedback and continuous improvement that is tied to the program's

    vision and objectives (Orr & Orphanos, 2011, p. 22).

KEY FINDINGS: EXEMPLARY PREPARATION PROGRAMS

Given the interest, research, and time spent on investigating exemplary programs, it is important to understand the outcomes of these programs for schools. Dr. Diana Pounder (2011) reviewed and summarized findings of studies that evaluated principal preparation programs (Fuller, Young, & Baker, 2011; Orr, 2011; Orr & Orphanos, 2011; Perez, Uline, Johnson, James-Ward, & Basom, 2011; Roach, Smith, & Boutin, 2011), which were included in a special issue of *Educational Administration Quarterly* in 2011. She (Pounder, 2011) synthesized the following learning outcomes from graduates of exemplary preparation programs:

(a) greater understanding of the complexity of educational leadership and the

    interrelatedness of education issues, strategies, and outcomes;

(b) greater facility using data to problem solve and inform decision processes;

(c) greater collaboration skills and team-building processes to effect change;

(d) more depth of knowledge regarding institutional and organizational

    leadership; and

(e) more effective use of leadership practices to improve school learning climate

    (pp. 63-64).

Graduates of high-quality programs hired and retained higher quality teachers, which was associated with greater student achievement gains (Pounder, 2011).

Given the complexity of federal inclusive education policies, the changing roles and responsibilities of school leaders, and the pressure to adhere to accountability standards for all students, determining how school leaders make sense of and implement these policies can provide insight to what school leaders know and what they need to know throughout future efforts to comply with federal inclusive education policy and legal mandates. To examine how school leaders *deal with* changing school cultures and structures and if, how, and why they apply inclusive education policy, the theoretical framework of sense making (Weick, 1994) was utilized as a theoretical framework.

Theoretical Framework: "Sensemaking" of Inclusive Education Policy

"Sensemaking is what it says it is, namely, making something sensible"

– Karl Weick, 1995, p.17

SENSEMAKING DEFINED

For the purposes of this study, Weick's (1994) synthesis of sensemaking was utilized as the theoretical framework. Sensemaking theory (Weick, 1994) holds the potential to help researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to better understand ways in which school leaders negotiate the complexity of their changing roles and responsibilities in order for appropriate action to take place (Saltrick, 2010). Sensemaking provides a frame of reference for identifying specific phenomena that surround or are related to the *process* of how school leaders make sense of and implement policy mandates. For this

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study, it was important to understand how school leaders made sense of the complexity inherent in federal inclusive education policy and legal mandates and how they influenced others to do likewise.

Sensemaking is more than simply interpreting an idea or concept; it is how individuals author their understanding or interpretation of it. Sensemaking theory allows for the analysis of how school leaders "construct what they construct, why, and with what effects" (Weick, 1994, p. 3). For this study, *how* principals constructed what they knew about federal inclusive education policy and legal mandates, *why* they constructed their meanings in a particular way, their roles in working with special education staff, and *what effects* their construction and application (Weick, 1994) of inclusive education policy had on students with disabilities were identified and examined. Weick's (1994) framework provides an understanding of what sensemaking is, how it works, and the circumstances under which it can fail. Sensemaking is not merely about interpretation, but the authorship of interpretation (Weick, 1994). The act of sensemaking is characterized as "a process that is grounded in identity construction, retrospective, enactive of sensible environments, social, ongoing, focused on and by extracted cues, and driven by plausibility rather than accuracy" (Weick, 1995, p.17). Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld (2005) posit that understanding sensemaking is important because one's meanings in the form of language, talk and communications begin to materialize into action. This is important because *how* a school leader makes sense of FAPE and LRE has the potential to have a significant influence on the action that that he or she might

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take in the future, which will ultimately impact students with disabilities on his or her campus.

KEY FACTORS IN SENSEMAKING

The following are the seven key factors that individuals use throughout the sensemaking process and an eighth factor of *fallacy of centrality* (Weick, 1994), as identified and defined by Weick (1994):

1. *Identity.* The manner in which school leaders define his or her self, role, and responsibilities are significant factors in the determination of how they may have developed their self-identity (Weick, 1994).

2. *Retrospect.* Actions are only known once they are completed; therefore, attention is directed to experience (Weick, 1994). Values or priorities highlight the projects, services, policies, and practices that might be important to that individual. The experiences that an individual chooses to refer to, pull from, or emphasize provide additional insights into his or her belief system or agenda (Weick, 1994). In addition, the experiences that an individual chooses to leave out or ignore are just as important throughout sensemaking (Weick, 1994).

3. *Plausibility.* Sensemaking is about "… pragmatics, coherence, reasonableness, creation, invention and instrumentality" (Weick, 1994, p. 56). The school leader interacts with each of these factors and uses accounts that have been previously judged as socially acceptable and credible to the

individual to inform his or her attempt to make sense of inclusive policy. The

story that emerges may not be true or accurate; however, it provides an

account that can stand in the face of criticism and can "keep things moving"

(Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005, p. 415). The account is logical, it is a

pattern, and it *makes sense* to that individual (Weick, 1994).

4. *Environment*. According to Weick (1994), sensemaking is the "feedstock of

   institutionalism" (p. 36), which implies a *this is the way things are done*

   mentality. Understanding the school culture, what gets dropped or done too

   late, and the *norms* of the school can all shed light on the belief and value

   systems that take place within a school (Weick, 1994).

5. *Social.* Sensemaking is rarely a solitary process. "Talk, symbols, promises,

   lies, interest, attention, threats, agreements, expectations, memories, rumors,

   indicators, supporters, detractors, faith, suspicion, trust, appearances, loyalties

   and commitments" (Weick, 1994, p. 41) all social activities that take place

   throughout sensemaking in an organization.

6. *Ongoing.* According to Weick (1994), people are always in the middle of

   things. Thus, sensemaking is a continuous process. An interruption to the

   flow of normal activity could result in an emotional response such as relief,

   anger, or anxiety (Weick, 1994). The introduction of a new policy,

   accountability measure, or curriculum might *disrupt* the normal day-to-day

   activity of an administrator or teacher. Understanding how and when an

interruption to one's flow will occur has the potential to lesson the negative impact of a significant change.

7. *Cues*. Understanding how individuals respond to paradoxes, problems, and new issues can highlight knowledge and understanding of that individual. Weick (1994) illustrates an example of the use of cues for when a person is lost in a forest without a map. He explains that they might use trees, rocks, stars, paths, etc. in order to help them find their way back home. The cues, or acts of faith, help people deal with the state of being caught in a dilemma, such as being lost (Weick, 1994).

8. *Fallacy of centralit*y. This final factor can be described as, "I don't know about this event, it must not be going on" (Weick, 19954, p.3). Inclusion of fallacy of centrality as the eighth factor was due to its connectedness to the communication, both within and throughout the organization. Because of centrality of fallacy, the better the communication and/or information system, the more likely that organization will detect a novel event (Weick, 1994).

UNIQUE FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSIS AND APPLICATION: SENSEMAKING

Numerous studies have applied the theoretical framework of sensemaking (Weick, 1994) to examine the ways in which school administrators make sense of the complex issues surrounding the principalship. Areas investigated include (a) accountability policy (Saltrick, 2010; Spillane, Diamond, Burch, Hallett, Jita, & Zoltners, 2002); (b) student demographic changes (Evans, 2007); and (c) reading policy changes

(Coburn, 2005). Heretofore, no studies have utilized sensemaking theory to understand how principals, who have graduated from a high-quality principal preparation program, make sense of the legal mandates and policy frameworks of FAPE and LRE in their schools. Therefore, sensemaking is a unique and powerful way to examine how principals make sense of FAPE and LRE.

The sensemaking framework allows for a systematic analysis of a large amount of qualitative data into theoretical categories. Furthermore, courts, schools, and researchers have disputed the topics that surround the *access* to and *quality* of education for students with disabilities since the enactment of EAHCA in 1975 (Daniel, 2008; Yell, 2012). Therefore, the complexity of these topics made sensemaking the ideal theoretical framework to apply throughout data analysis due to the nature of sensemaking, which is simply making something that is confusing or unintelligible, sensible (Weick, 1994). Application of the sensemaking framework can provide researchers, policymakers, and practitioners with a lens through which they can continue to understand and examine the complexities that school leaders face throughout their attempts to simultaneously meet the demands of NCLB and IDEA. Because sensemaking helps "fill important gaps in organizational theory" (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, p. 410), it is important to continue to utilize sensemaking as a theoretical framework throughout investigations with a focus on school leaders and their influence on the educational outcomes of students with disabilities.

Research in this area is needed in order to understand how and why school leaders make decisions related to students with disabilities. As Brotherson and colleagues (2001)

stated, "the voices… are saying loudly that they [school leaders] need help in implementing this policy of inclusion…we need to listen" (p. 43). It is time to not only investigate the outcomes of inclusive education policies such as NCLB and IDEA, but also to further explore how and why current school leaders make sense of and enact these policies on their campuses and what that means for students with disabilities.

Summary

All schools "exist in a complex policy milieu in which local, state, and federal policies seek to influence the people working in them" (Hehir & Katzman, 2012, p. 161). Policy can be a helpful tool as well as a necessary condition for promoting diversity and effectiveness within inclusive schools (Hehir & Katzman, 2012). For an inclusive school to be effective, it must to be lead by "competent, focused, value-based leaders and skilled, committed leaders working within collaborative problem-solving organizations" (Hehir &Katzman, 2012, p. 181). School Leaders are often seen as the most influential person on a school campus (Mitchell & Caste, 2005), drive a school's climate (Urick & Bowers, 2011) and culture (Baker & Cooper, 2005), and significantly impact student achievement (Davis, Darling-Hamond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005; Fuller, Young, & Baker, 2001; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008). They have the ability to hire and retain knowledgeable and skillful teachers (Baker & Cooper, 2005; Fuller, Young, Baker, 2011; Orr, 2011), provide opportunities for professional growth (Bays & Crockett, 2007), encourage communication and collaboration (Lashley, 2007), involve stakeholders (Lashley, 2007; Mitchell & Castle, 2005), and influence change through school reform

efforts (Baker & Cooper, 2005) on a campus. Therefore, one might deduce that school leaders have the most significant impact on the adoption, implementation, and continuation of inclusive practices on a school campus. Understanding the process that current school leader go through throughout their sense making of inclusive education policy might provide insight on the "how" and "why" schools are inclusive or not.

CHAPTER 3

Methodology and Procedures

In this chapter, the research design and methods used in this study are discussed. The research questions that guided this study and the rationale for using a qualitative phenomenological approach (Creswell, 1998; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Patton, 1990; Smith & Fowler, 2009) as the research design and sense making (Weick, 1995) as the theoretical framework are presented. Next, the sampling method and selection criteria used to identify the participating school leaders and the HQPPP to which they belonged are discussed (Maxwell, 2005). Next, data collection and analysis are discussed. Finally, concerns of validity (Maxwell, 2005) are addressed.

Purpose and Research Questions

As described in Chapter 1, understanding how school leaders make sense of inclusive education policies have important implications for ensuring the academic success of all students, including students with disabilities. The purpose of this study was to explore how current school leaders who are graduates of a university-based "high-quality" principal program make sense of inclusive education policy recommendations to promote an inclusive school culture. This study also investigated how school leaders' attitudes and beliefs towards special education, students with disabilities, and instructional practices for this population influenced their perceptions about inclusive education policy.

How school leaders interpret and implement these policies may be influenced by their perceptions. Because school leaders play an important and central role at their campuses, sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995) is utilized as a conceptual framework to understand how they shape and make meaning of complex and changing inclusive education policies.

The research questions that guide this study are:

1. How did current school leaders who are graduates of a high-quality principal preparation program describe their lived experiences in regard to special education practices on their campuses?

2. How did current school leaders who are graduates of a high-quality principal preparation program make sense of inclusive education policy demands at their schools?

3. How did current school leaders who are graduates of a high-quality principal preparation program perceive the supports that enabled them to navigate the complexity of inclusive education policy on their campuses?

Rationale for Qualitative Methodology

Because the purpose of this study was to understand *how* and *why* school leaders made sense of inclusive education policy, this study employed qualitative research methods, which can be defined as a "systematic approach to understanding qualities, or the essential nature, of a phenomenon within a particular context" (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klinger, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005, p. 196). The purpose of qualitative research is to

examine the way in which "individuals and groups experience the world, construct knowledge, and make meaning of their experience" (Paul, Kleinhammer-Tramill, Fowler, 2009, p. 6). Qualitative research methods such as observations and interviews are best suited for understanding *how* and *why* individuals and groups make meaning of their experiences, construct their knowledge, and the process in which they undergo to interpret their world (Maxwell, 2005; Paul, Kleinhammer-Tramill, & Fowler, 2009). Qualitative researchers are "concerned with understanding the processes by which actions take place, developing causal explanations, and identifying unanticipated phenomena and influences in which new conclusions are drawn" (Maxwell, 2005, pp. 22-23).

To gather data, open-ended semi-structured interviews, observations, field notes, and relevant documents were collected. Sensemaking (Weick, 1995, 2001; Spillane, 2005) was utilized as the theoretical framework throughout data collection and analysis. Because the purpose of this study was to examine the ways in which school leaders acquire an understanding of inclusive education policies and subsequently explain and enact such policies, sensemaking as a theoretical framework was selected. Seven key characteristics of sensemaking were employed as an analytic tool: (1) identity, (2) retrospect, (3) plausibility, (4) environment, (5) social, (6) ongoing, and (7) cues. Based on findings from previous studies (Coburn, 2005; Evans, 2007; Saltrick, 2010; Spillane, Diamond, Burch, Hallett, Jita, & Zoltners, 2002), these characteristics of sensemaking allow for the researcher to understand *how* and *why* they make sense of a concept, policy, or particular topic.

Rationale for Phenomenological Approach

In qualitative research, phenomenological inquiry addresses the meanings and perspectives of participants (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 1990). According to Patton (1990) a phenomenological study focuses "on descriptions of what people experience and how it is that they experience what they experience" (p.71). A phenomenological approach assists the researcher to interpret the essence of one's lived experience as perceived by the research participant (Rossman & Rallis, 1998). Marshall and Rossman (2006) reference phenomenology as the "study of lived experiences and the ways we understand those experiences to develop a worldview. It rests on the assumption that there is a structure and essence to shared experiences that can be narrated" (p. 105). The participants discover and describe their perceptions to a past and/or present experience in relation to the phenomenon of interest. The researcher attempts to identify, categorize, and make meaning of the lived experiences as described by research participants. Because the purpose of this study was to understand how and why current school leaders who are graduates of a "high-quality" principalship program made sense of inclusive education policy, a phenomenological approach allowed for the application of sensemaking theory due to the compatible elements within the phenomenological approach to answer the research questions posed.

PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH

In order for an outsider--or researcher--to understand the experiences as perceived by the study participants, the experiences must be "described, explicated, and interpreted"

(Patton, 2011, p.106) by the researcher. In phenomenological research methods, the data must be generated from the participants' perspective (Creswell, 1998). The major data source for this inner perspective is interviewing, which captures the meaning of a concept, experiences, or events from the individual participant's perspective. To explore participants' perspectives about their lived experiences, phenomenological researchers should focus on both past and present experiences throughout data collection (Creswell, 1998). The methodology presented within this chapter aligns with the phenomenological approach as described by qualitative methodologists such as Creswell (1998), Maxwell (2005), Patton (1990), and Marshall and Rossman (2006). Examples of phenomenological methods utilized in this study include selection of a purposeful selection of participants (Maxwell, 2005; Patton, 1998), in-depth interviews (Creswell, 1998; Marshall & Rossman, 2006; Maxwell, 2005; Patton, 1990), and description of personal experiences to identify a phenomenon (Creswell, 1998).

PHENOMENOLOGY AND SENSEMAKING

The phenomenological approach and sensemaking theory share components that allow the researcher to investigate life experiences of participants and to identify a specific phenomenon. Both the phenomenological approach and sensemaking theory originate with the outside observer interpreting and trying to understand the individual, who is under investigation, and how he or she constructs their reality or perceptions of reality in relation to the identified phenomenon. In other words, throughout both the phenomenological approach and use of sensemaking theory the researcher distills the

human experience (Patton, 1990). Phenomenology requires that data be generated from participants' interpretations and perspectives of their experiences (Creswell, 1998; Patton, 2011) just as Weick (1995) posits that sensemaking begins with the sensemaker. To gain understanding of a particular phenomenon, the researcher must analyze the ways in which participants construct their perceptions and explain their understanding of their experiences. According to sensemaking theory, the sensemaker undergoes a cognitive process that allows him or her to derive meaning from an experience or an event and then attempt to explain or interpret that experience or event (Weick, 1995).

The research participant--as a sensemaker--uses language to mediate the way in which he or she comprehends and interprets a specific event or experience. Weick (1995) posits that throughout meaning making, the sensemaker asks, "How can I know what I think until I see what I've said?" (p.12). Patton (2011) argues that philosophically, a phenomenological approach assumes that "we can only know what we experience" (p. 105). Both the methodological approach and the theory place importance of using the individual senses to construct knowledge regarding a specific phenomenon. Due to the subjective nature of the research questions and conceptual framework, a phenomenological approach is useful for uncovering and describing participants' perspectives of events and experiences. Their subjective views are what matters (Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

Description of the Sample

"Decisions about where to conduct your research and whom to include... are an essential

*part of your research methods." –*Maxwell, 2005, p. 87

PARTICIPANT SELECTION CRITERIA

"Selecting those times, settings, and individuals that can provide you with the

information that you need in order to answer your research questions is the most

*important consideration in qualitative selection decisions." –*Maxwell, 2005, p. 88

The participants in this study were purposefully selected (Maxwell, 2005; Patton, 1990). Participants were purposefully selected because they were " 'information rich'" and offered "useful manifestations of the phenomenon of interest" (Patton, 2011, p. 40). Purposeful selection helps the researcher gain insight into a specific phenomenon. The small number of participants did not warrant generalization; however, the intent was to "learn from them…[and] open up new territory for further research" (Patton, 2011, p. 46). Purposeful selection allowed me to conduct an in-depth inquiry and focus on acquiring a rich understanding of the issues of central importance for this study.

All six participants were graduates from a "high quality" principal preparation program (HQPPP). The following sections detail the criteria that was used for the purposeful selection of the research participants

"High quality" Program Selection

To be considered "high-quality," the program had to have met the following criteria: (a) alignment with the components identified in the operational definition of an

"exemplary principalship program" as discussed in chapter 2, and (b) include two components central to effective policy implementation, as discussed in chapter 2. The two components central to policy implementation were: (1) a focus on building *content knowledge* (e.g. required courses specific to special education), and (2) a focus on developing the *personal context* (e.g. belief systems, attitudes, values) of the school leader.

     The HQPPP selected for this study was identified as a "high quality" program because it met the inclusion criteria discussed above. Specifically, the HQPPP met the criteria due to its:

(a) *alignment with the operational definition of an "exemplary principalship program"* (see Appendix D),

(b) *focus on building content knowledge*: required at least one course specific to special education to build the future school leaders' knowledge base regarding special education, and

(3) *focus on developing the personal context*: included components that developed the future school leaders' beliefs, attitudes and values (personal context), such as inclusion of social justice leadership throughout the program curriculum, activities, and project based learning.

Cohort of HQPPP between 2009 and 2010

     Participants were enrolled as a member of a cohort of a "high quality" single university program between 2009 and 2010. In 2009, a change in leadership of the

principal preparation program occurred which impacted the components of the program. As a result of these changes, cohort members for this study participated in a "high quality" program, as identified by the operational definition. These two years were selected because cohort members from 2009 and 2010 had already graduated and were currently holding a school leadership position.

Current School Leaders

All participants were school leaders in a K-12 grade school at the time of this study. A school leader was defined as a principal, assistant principal, or special education administrator.

Number of Participants

For this study, six school leaders were selected as participants. This number is consistent with previous research employing "sensemaking" as a theoretical framework to investigate the process in which school leaders make sense of educational policy (Coburn, 2005; Evans, 2007; Saltrick, 2010; Spillane, Diamond, Burch, Hallett, Jita, & Zoltners, 2002). The purpose of this study was not to generalize but to understand how these school leaders made sense of inclusive education policy.

PROCEDURES FOR PROGRAM AND PARTICIPANT SELECTION

Because the "validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have more to do with the information-richness of the cases [participants] selected …than with sample size" (Patton, 2011, p. 245), a purposeful selection of the "high-

quality" program was important. In order to answer the research questions of this study, the "high-quality" program was purposefully selected because of three specific criteria:(1) alignment with the operational definition of an "exemplary principalship program" described in chapter 2; (2) inclusion of at least one required course specific to special education (e.g. Special Populations, Processes and Procedures in Special Education Administration) that build future school leaders' knowledge base regarding special education; and (3) the "high-quality" program included components that developed the future school leaders' personal contexts (e.g. social justice leadership throughout the program; equity audits; courageous conversations).

In addition, my ability to conduct qualitative research and enter the research context was taken into account throughout the selection process (Patton, 2011). According to Maxwell (2005), the researcher must be knowledgeable of the setting of the study as well as take into account the "feasibility of access and data collection [and] research relationships with study participants" (p. 90). My selection of the program and ability to observe and analyze the phenomenon of interest (Patton, 2011) because of my knowledge of a HQPPP program and ability to gain access to the program directors helped me narrow the selection of the research site.

To confirm my selection of the HQPPP, additional steps were taken. First, I conducted a search for principalship programs that required special education coursework and contacted the University Council for Educational Administrators (UCEA) to learn about principalship programs that required special education as a specific curriculum component. The UCEA is an organization that consists of a consortium of higher

education institutions that develop and prepare future school leaders. The executive

director of UCEA referred me to a dissertation that was recently conducted (Cusson,

2010) that investigated the extent to which UCEA, university-based principalship

programs included topics, coursework, and practica related to special education.

Dr, Cusson (2010) was contacted through email and phone conversations to

discuss the study, particularly in relation to selecting a principal preparation program that

met my selection criteria. Although components of special education were covered in

several of the law classes, topics related to advocacy and special education programming

were rarely covered throughout the various principalship programs of the institutions she

examined (Cusson, 2010). Moreover, several of the program area professors were

uncertain about whether their programs required special education components within

their programs (Cusson, 2010). After speaking by telephone with Dr. Cusson and sharing

my findings with my dissertation chair, we determined the HQPPP selected for this study

differed from other programs in that two courses--Processes and Procedures in Special

Education Administration and Special Populations-- were required courses within the

principalship program.

In addition, Dr. Michelle Young, the Executive Director of UCEA, suggested that

I contact Dr. Leonard Burello, a professor at the University of South Florida (USF) and

professor emeritus at Indiana University. According to Dr. Young, Dr. Burrello had

served as the Director of the UCEA Center for Special Education Leadership and the

USF program was well known for education leadership preparation with a specialization

in special education. In his return email, Dr. Burello confirmed that the HQPPP in this

study was unique as it required both Processes and Procedures in Special Education Administration and Special Populations as part of the principal preparation program's program of study.

The HQPPP for this study was selected because of its unique special education curriculum components as recognized through consultations with experts in the field. Additionally, the HQPPP included a social justice leadership emphasis, which met the second inclusion criteria for building the future school leaders' personal contexts. Consequently, the selected HQPPP was unique in that it met all of the inclusion criteria for this study.

Description of the HQPPP

The HQPPP is housed within the College of Education of a research-intensive research institution in the south central area of the United States. The program was a two-year master's degree program that consisted of a 39-hour course curriculum requirement that included leadership-related coursework with a social justice theme (i.e. personal context component) and a one-year internship. The HQPPP utilized a closed-cohort model for leadership training (Greenlee & Karanxha, 2010). In this design, aspiring leaders were expected to complete all required classes together as a group. Once selected, the cohort members attended a two-day transition camp that fosters collaboration. Throughout the transition camp, they participated in team-building activities where they developed group norms and were introduced to faculty and staff. The cohort remained with each other throughout the two-year program. One participant

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(CB) was a member of this HQPPP cohort housed at a satellite location. The satellite

program consisted of a 36-hour course curriculum and required only one special

education course. This program was unique in that it required at least one special

education course throughout the curriculum and embedded social justice leadership

throughout the program.

Description of Required Special Education Courses

The HQPPP required both cohorts to take the Processes and Procedures in Special

Education Administration course. The cohort housed at the research institution also took

a Special Populations course. Special Populations was required in the fall semester of the

second year of the HQPPP. Topics included: (a) explaining disproportionality in special

education as differing views of culture; (b) social construction of disability; (c) Hispanic

and African American youths' perceptions of identity, culture, and school; (d) access to

general education; (e) students diagnosed with autism; (f) race, racism, and special

education, (g) effects of labeling children with a disability; (h) students who are

homeless; and (i) education and students in poverty. Activities included a wheelchair

simulation in which the cohort members navigated throughout campus in an electric-

powered wheelchair. They were to follow a map provided to them by the professor. The

route took approximately two hours. Cohort members were asked to write a reflection

paper following this activity. Other activities included article critiques, in-class

discussions, reflections throughout the course, and a presentation on a marginalized

group in education (HQPPP, Special Populations Syllabus, Fall 2010).

The course Processes and Procedures in Special Education Administration was required during the second summer session of the program. According to the course syllabus, the purpose was to provide future school administrators with professional knowledge and skills that they need as instructional leaders to ensure that students with special needs and their parents/guardians are able to receive the services to which they are entitled. Topics included: (a) ethical leadership and decision-making in education; (b) IDEA and NCLB, 504; (c) Special education law and procedural due process; (d) LRE, Zero Reject, and Parental Participation; (e) Response to Intervention (RTI) and instructional models; (f) IEP process and transitional planning; (g) leadership for special education; (h) social justice and transformational leadership; and (i) surviving the first year. Throughout the course, the cohort members were asked to write reflections and short essays, take turns facilitating class discussions, and work in groups to present a case analysis to the cohort (HQPPP, Processes and Procedures in Special Education Administration, Summer 2010).

Description of Social Justice Leadership Theme

Educational leadership preparation programs that focus on social justice are more likely to fully address the needs of a diverse student population and do so in a culture of inclusion and equity (McKenzie et al., 2008; Marshall & Olivia, 2006; Pazey, Cole, & Garcia, 2012; Theoharis, 2007). Leaders who are dedicated to social justice should be prepared to fully embrace and meet the following three goals: (a) raise the academic achievement of all students, (b) prepare students to live as critical citizens, and (c) assign

students to heterogeneous and inclusive classrooms to receive a rich and engaging curriculum (McKenzie et al, 2008). In addition, they must possess the necessary knowledge and skills to provide equitable educational opportunities for all students and work to eliminate the marginalization of students who have been discriminated against "whether by race, class, gender, or disability" (Pazey, Cole, & Garcia, 2012, p. 196).

The HQPPP involved in this study emphasized social justice as an underlying focus and incorporated several components in common with Marshall and Oliva's (2006) recommendations: (a) the creation of group norms; (b) the development of a vision statement; (c) ongoing analyses of case studies; (d) a specific, field design and research experience; (e) utilization of equity audits; (f) involvement in "courageous conversations," (g) art making, e.g. creating leadership symbols in the form of a sculpture, poster, or poem, (h) participation in a meaningful internship experience; (i) the completion of a professional portfolio assessment and a conflict-management analysis; and, throughout the program, (J) self-reflection. Cohort members also developed leadership platforms to explore the importance of self-reflection for instructional leaders (Ovando & Hutto, 1999). Other activities included (1) attendance at diversity conferences, (2) the completion of a racial autobiography, (3) examination of theories of change, and (4) a research critique and review.

Pilot Interview Session

To ensure interview questions were valid and reliable for this study, pilot interviews were conducted with two individuals that are graduates from the 2010 HQPPP

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university cohort: (1) an African-American male serving as an assistant principal at a large high school in a large urban school district, and (2) a Caucasian female who holds the position of assistant principal at a large middle school in a large urban school district. Feedback was utilized to eliminate ambiguities and determine whether the questions fulfilled their intended purpose and the need for possible revisions (Maxwell, 2005). Comments, questions, and suggestions were solicited from my dissertation chair and colleagues throughout data collection to ensure that interview questions addressed the research focus of this study.

Selection of Participants

Following the University of Texas IRB, district IRBs, and dissertation committee approval, a cover letter, demographic survey, and an invitation to participate in this study (see Appendix A), was sent to both cohorts, numbering a total of 31 potential participants, via email. Email addresses were provided by the HQPPP program director. The email invitation explained the purpose of the study, the risks and benefits of participation, and their right to decline or discontinue their participation in the study at any time without prejudice. A link was provided for them to begin the survey. If they did not wish to participate in the study, they were instructed to not click on the link to indicate their desire to decline participation. If they chose to take the survey, they clicked on the link at the bottom of the email and completed the survey. At the end of the survey, if they chose to participate in this study, the potential participant selected "*I want to be considered as a participant in this study and am willing to be interviewed throughout this*

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school year (2012-2013)." Those that indicated their willingness to be interviewed

provided their contact information to arrange for future interviews. Participants were

selected from completed surveys based on three criteria: (1) they held positions as a

school leader when they completed the survey; (2) they were employed at a K-12 school;

and (3) they checked the statement that indicated their willingness to participate in the

study. Twelve individuals took the demographic survey, and seven indicated they were

willing to be interviewed as potential participants in the study. One respondent held a

classroom teacher position; thus, the total number of six participants met the inclusion

criteria for the study. All six participants and their schools were given a pseudonym to

protect their identity.

Data Collection Instruments

Because the purpose of this study was to understand *how* and *why* school leaders

made sense of inclusive education policy, this study employed qualitative research

methods with a phenomenological approach, which included interviews, observations,

document analysis, and field notes. The interview protocol for this study (see Appendix

B) was adapted from a set of questions from a previous study (Saltrick, 2010) in which

Dr. Saltrick sought to investigate how eight New York principals made sense of

accountability policy. Permission to use and adapt the interview protocol was granted via

email on June 29, 2012 from Dr. Saltrick (see Appendix C). Prior to conducting

interviews, each participant was presented with the IRB approval and a copy of the

study's consent form. Each participant signed the consent form prior to interviews and consent forms are stored in a secure filing cabinet.

Interviews commenced in March 2013 and continued through May 2013. The duration of each interview ranged from 45 to 90 minutes in length. A digital recorder was used to record all interviews and handwritten notes were taken throughout interviews. Data triangulation was achieved through ongoing personal and direct observations of the participant within his or her leadership context, written field notes, and an analysis of relevant documents. According to Maxwell (2005), data triangulation helps to reduce the potential risk that one's "conclusions will reflect only the systemic biases or limitations of a specific source or method" and permits the researcher "to gain a broader and more secure understanding of the issues" (pp. 93-94) being investigated. The following sections chronicle the data collection procedures used.

SURVEY

A demographic survey (see Appendix A) was developed to collect a descriptive profile of the six participants, which included questions related to the following:

    (a) Current position of graduate

    (b) Number of years in current position

    (c) Number of years as a school leader (if applicable)

    (d) Race/ethnicity of graduate

    (e) Age of graduate

    (f) Gender of graduate

(g) Geographical location and type of school in which graduate is currently

employed (urban, suburban, rural)

(h) School level in which graduate is currently employed (elementary, middle,

high school)

(i) Percentage of students served in special education

The cover letter and link to the demographic survey was emailed to the members of the

2009 and 2010 HQPPP 2009 cohort by the program director. The survey was open for

nine weeks from February 26, 2013 to April 30, 2013. Twelve graduates of a HQPPP

took the demographic survey. Seven respondents agreed to be interviewed and to

participate further in this study. One of the respondents was not currently a school leader

and was excluded from this study. As shown in Table 1 below, six current school leaders

participated in this study. Additional results from the demographic survey are reported in

Chapter 4.

Pseudonym	Age	School Pseudonym	School Type (Size, Type)	Tenure at School
Van Wilder	35+	South High	Large; Rural	1st year
Vintage Heart	35+	Capitol Middle	Large; Urban	3rd year
Real Highflyer (RH)	30+	Bush High	Medium; Urban	3rd year
Sarah Smith	30+	West Middle	Large; Urban	1st year**
Lindy	45+	Lincoln High	Large; Urban	1st year
Café Brazil (CB)	30+	Calvin Middle	Medium; Urban	1st year

Table 1: continued next page.

• *Small* schools < 500 students	
• *Medium* > 500, but < 1000 students	
• *Large* > 1000 students	
** Sarah spent two years as an assistant principal before coming to West Middle	

Table 1: Participant Profile Data

Source: Demographic survey and Participant Interviews

INTERVIEWS

   After the participants agreed to be interviewed following the completion of the demographic survey, initial interviews with each of the participants were scheduled at mutually agreeable times and locations (see Table 2).

Participant Pseudonym	Interview 1	Interview 2
Van Wilder	Date: March 18, 2013	Date: March 25, 2013
	Length: 67 minutes	Length: 70 minutes
	Location: Coffee shop	Location: Coffee shop
Vintage Heart	Date: March 29, 2013	Date: April 8, 2013
	Length: 96 minutes	Length: 108 minutes
	Location: Coffee shop	Location: Coffee Shop
Real Highflyer (RH)	Date: April 12, 2013	Date: May 15, 2013
	Length: 144 minutes	Length: 25 minutes
	Location: Bush High	Location: Bush High

Table 2: continued next page.

Sarah Smith	Date: April 19, 2013	Date: May 8, 2013
	Length: 107 minutes	Length: 116 minutes
	Location: West Middle	Location: West Middle
Lindy	Date: April 19, 2013	Date: May 8, 2013
	Length: 41 minutes	Length: 47 minutes
	Location: Lincoln High	Location: Lincoln High
Café Brazil (CB)	Date: April 15, 2013	Date: May 14, 2013
	Length: 73 minutes	Length: 35 minutes
	Location: Coffee Shop	Location: Calvin Middle

Table 2: Participant Interview Venues and Dates

Initial interviews lasted between 41 to 144 minutes with the intent to build a

relationship with participants (Creswell, 1998; Maxwell, 2005;) and to learn more about

his or her background, current school and leadership context, views on school culture and

climate, and an initial sense of how they have made sense of the complexity of their roles

in implementing inclusive education policy on their campuses. As in Saltricks's study

(2010), questions were centered on (a) career history and career motivations, (b) school

characteristics and culture, and (c) details of their current responsibilities. Following the

initial interview, a second interview was scheduled at a time and location convenient for

each participant. All interviews were conducted face-to-face. In addition, a transcript of

the first interview was emailed to participants for them for member-checking purposes

(Maxwell, 2005). I transcribed all interviews. Prior to returning transcripts to

participants, each transcript was checked with audio-recordings to ensure transcript accuracy.

The second interview explored participants' accounts of specific incidents where they negotiated complexity of implementing inclusive education policy. The second interview ranged from 25 to 116 minutes in length. Relying on a preliminary analysis of data from the first interview, gaps and emerging themes were identified and used to guide the construction of questions for the second interview. Similar to Saltrick's (2010) study, participants were asked to (a) reflect on implementation of an inclusive policy that caused conflict on their campuses; and (b) recall and describe the supports and challenges they perceived to be effective or ineffective throughout the process of policy implementation (see Appendix B). The second interview also focused on the demands placed on school leaders throughout implementation of inclusive education policy. Second interviews were conducted face-to-face with all six participants. Interviews were transcribed and sent to participants as a member check. Transcripts were reviewed and checked against audio-recordings to ensure accuracy of transcriptions prior to member checks.

OBSERVATIONS, MEMOS, AND FIELD NOTES

Observations enabled me to be able to "draw inferences about [a] perspective" that might not have been obtained by relying solely on data obtained from interviews (Maxwell, 2005)). According to Maxwell, observations are integral for "getting at tacit understandings and 'theory-in-use,' as well as aspects of participants' perspective that they are reluctant to directly state in interviews" (p. 94). Dependent upon each of the

participant's comfort level, I attended staff and administrator's meetings and shadowed them as they attended to responsibilities that pertained to implementation of inclusive education policy and special education meetings. Participants were asked to provide opportunities to observe them in contexts relevant to this study. Due to confidentiality issues related to special education and the timing of my interviews, however, most of my observations were confined to meetings and their job duties. Field notes were maintained throughout the study and included: (a) reflections; (b) observations; and (c) comments related to the interviews, observations, conversations with dissertation committee member, and my thoughts regarding my analysis of relevant documents.

DOCUMENTS

Understanding culture, norms, expectations, language, practices, policies, and the *way things are done* are essential to sensemaking (Weick, 1995). To understand the environmental context in which these school leaders worked, documents that illuminated the following were analyzed:

(1) school climate and culture;

(2) academic performance of schools, districts, and the state;

(3) demographic information of schools, districts, and the state;

(4) demographic information of students, teachers, and school leaders at each school; and

(5) school, district, and state goals and visions.

The following documents and resources were accessed:

- HQPPP Course Syllabi and website

- Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) reports;

- AYP campus and district reports;

- School and district reports on the state education agency (SEA) website;

- Campus websites;

- Campus newsletters;

- Campus mission and vision; and

- Campus improvement plans.

Documents selected and collected for analysis reflected both current and, when applicable, previous school conditions for each participant. Thus, for those participants who obtained their leadership position prior to the 2012-2013 school year, documents and resources related to both the current school year and previous school years--from the initial year of the participant's job placement—were collected.

Data Analysis

Transcripts were read and reread several times to obtain "feelings" for them (Creswell, 1998, p.89), an initial step in the phenomenological approach to analyzing the data. Significant phrases or sentences that pertained directly to the experience of sensemaking of inclusive education policy were identified (Creswell, 1998), initial themes common to the participants' transcripts were identified, and holes in the data were highlighted. Throughout transcribing short memos were recorded, whereby I noted particular issues for further probing or clarifying questions during follow up interviews.

Member checks for each interview were conducted to confirm validity of interviews and to inform future interview questions. Transcripts were uploaded and analyzed through the use of a qualitative data analysis tool, Dedoose, which is designed to aid the researcher in categorizing data into codes. Dedoose is web-based qualitative research software designed as a low-cost innovative mixed-methods research data analysis tool. Because the intent was to understand how school leaders from a "high-quality" principal preparation program make sense of inclusive education policy, two approaches were deemed necessary throughout data analysis:

(1) Theoretical (etic) and substantive (emic) coding categories

(2) Phenomenological methods (connecting strategies)

Once the transcripts were analyzed and codes were established, relationships between the codes were identified and the phenomena that emerged from participants' responses were highlighted. Results were integrated into an in-depth, exhaustive description of phenomenon (Creswell, 1998). The following sections provide a detailed account of how the qualitative data was analyzed.

CODING

As described in Chapter 2, sensemaking is a cognitive process that is highly mediated by language and retrospection (Weick, 1995). It is a social process that involves both individual and collective activities, and takes into account the interaction of knowledge, beliefs, and attitudes of the sense maker as they make sense of something (Spillane, Reiser, & Reimer, 2002; Weick, 1994). Sensemaking theory served as the

framework to make sense of the data collected, illuminate particular events of phenomenon, and shed light on relationships throughout the data (Maxwell, 2005).

Coding Categories

The intent of including sensemaking theory and literature was to establish theoretical categories (Maxwell, 2005) throughout coding. Once a list of significant statements was developed (Creswell, 1998), they were grouped into larger units of information or themes. To do this, etic and emic codes were employed. The seven key factors in sensemaking (identity, retrospect, plausibility, environment, social, ongoing, cues) and an additional *fallacy of centrality* represented the "etic" categories (Maxwell, 2005) that were applied throughout data analysis. For example, the significant statement "I also seek out training. Like, last summer I knew I was going to be taking over special education and so I went to a lot of district trainings" (Vintage, 3/29/13) was coded as the etic code of *Extracted Cue*, because it represented how the participant dealt with being in a dilemma or an event that interrupted their typical flow of normality (Weick, 1995).

In addition to etic coding categories, substantive or "emic" categories (Maxwell, 2005), which are taken from participants own words, were employed to address participants' concepts and beliefs that did not *fit* into existing theoretical categories. Emic categories are more inductive in nature, primarily descriptive (Maxwell, 2005). For example, a pattern of language was identified in how participants described their students. These included phrases such as "special ed kids," "students with disabilities," "M kids," and "folder kids." These statements were classified as emic codes. Within etic

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and emic codes, meanings were clustered into common categories that represented the words of the participants (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 1990). These meanings were designated as sub-themes within each coding category.

Inter-rater Reliability

Prior to synthesizing the data, the significant statements from each transcript as well as the initial coding were presented to four educational professionals to validate my initial grouping of themes. All four raters had doctoral degrees in education. Three had a PhD with a focus in special education and one had a PhD with a focus in education policy and leadership. Inter-rater reliability training was conducted on June 21, 2013. One rater was not present; however, he attended a Skype training the following day. The purpose and research questions guiding the study, background on sensemaking and phenomenology, and procedures for conducting inter-rater reliability were presented. Each rater was provided with one coding category and the significant statements from the participants as well as the initial sub-themes for that coding category. For example, one rater was given the coding category of *Identity Construction*. This rater was provided with an explanation of the etic code *Identity Construction*, participants' statements coded as *Identity Construction*, and initial sub-themes within *Identity Construction*.

Raters were given a week to review and provide feedback on their assigned code and significant statements with a focus on how statements were coded, and sub-themes that were emerging. Each rater independently provided and discussed feedback regarding the coding category, significant statements, and the sub-themes. There was a high

correspondence among the assigned statements and sub-themes and raters. This process provided clarity in how to use language to describe themes as well as giving context to significant statements.

Synthesizing the Data

Once interviews were transcribed and analyzed through *etic* and *emic* coding and inter-rater reliability was complete, relationships that connect sub-themes were identified (Maxwell, 2005). Throughout the next steps of the synthesis process (Miles & Huberman, 1994), I sought to understand common or shared experiences of each phenomenon (Creswell, 1998, 2007; Caelli, 2000; & Patton,1990). Creswell (2007) suggests the following steps to phenomenological research:

1. Understand several individuals common or shared experiences

2. Phenomenon is identified

3. Recognize the broad philosophical assumptions of phenomenology

4. Collect data, ranges of information

5. Ask open- ended questions about the phenomenon

6. Data analysis, code horizontally and develop clusters of meaning

7. Write a description of the participant's experiences

8. Write about the essence of the phenomenon from the earlier writings (pp. 60-62)

To identify a phenomenon, ideas, comments, and questions throughout coding were identified. In a phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2007; Patton 1990), writing a

description of the *textual description* or "what" the participants experienced and the *structural description* or "how" the participants experienced helps to culminate the "essence" (Creswell, 2007, p.159; Patton, 1990, p. 71) of the experience of participants. Using the sub-themes that had emerged from the etic and emic codes, observation and field notes, memos, and official documents from the state department of education and school websites, summaries that reflected the perceived lived experiences as described by the participants were developed. Any surprises and findings that were relevant to the research questions were taken into account.

Prior observation and field notes were also reviewed to confirm emerging themes, search for any "holes" throughout data analysis, and identify relationships that might illuminate a phenomenon among participant responses. For example, in response to an interview question regarding supports, several participants' responses contained language such as: "relationships," "building trust," "becoming a 'team,'" and "distributive leadership." These types of statements were highlighted as a theme as collaborative effort was essential to implementing inclusive education policy at their schools.

Validity

"This is reality…giving the phenomenon that we are trying to understand the chance to prove us wrong." –Maxwell, 2005, pp. 105-106

Maxwell (2005) describes validity as the "goal rather than the product" of qualitative research. Miles and Huberman (1994) view qualitative research as taking place in the real world where "real consequences in people's lives" (p. 277) are revealed.

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Jones, Torres, and Armino (2006) suggest that qualitative researchers embrace the concept of "goodness" as a criterion for judging their work. In any event, providing truthful and honest conclusions with integrity should be the goal of all researchers, especially with the recent emphasis on "scientifically based" research and practice embedded within current policies (e. g. No Child Left Behind Act [NCLB, 2001]; Individuals with Disabilities Education Act [IDEA, 2004]).

Researcher(s) are responsible for providing consumers of research with reliable conclusions and findings in which they can be confident. By ruling out "specific plausible alternatives and threats to your interpretations and explanations" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 107), qualitative researchers can move away from generic strategies borrowed from methodological books. It is also important to address specific threats to the validity of our conclusions to make sure what we are trying to understand is truly given "the chance to prove us wrong" (p. 106). Transparency throughout this study provides readers with enough information for them to draw their own conclusions. The following sections address the validity concerns that were foreseen as possible threats to the reliability of conclusions.

RESEARCHER AS INSTRUMENT

Within qualitative research, data collection is a selective process in which the instrument used as the primary source for data collection will selectively determine the data and its meaning (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Because researchers often view themselves as "the instrument" (p.197) throughout data collection and analysis, opinions

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regarding objectivity and subjectivity are one of the most controversial topics within qualitative research (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klinger, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005). Rather than believing the researcher can be neutral or distant, he or she needs to explain how his or her values and expectations influenced the reported findings conclusions of their study (Maxwell, 2005).

For this study, my bias(es) impacted the following components of the study: (a) the operational definition of a "high quality" principalship program; (b) the selection of the research site and participants; (c) the interview questions asked; and (d) the reported findings and conclusions. Reflecting on and acknowledging my potential bias(es), afforded me the opportunity to check my understandings and thoughts against those of the participants. Consequently, I was able to identify and correct any misconstructions that existed within the early stages of data collection and throughout data analysis and member checking processes with participants. In addition, my discussions with the professional educators as raters (throughout inter-rater reliability training and feedback), my dissertation chair, and other colleagues helped me to distinguish my bias(es) throughout the study.

REACTIVITY

According to Maxwell (2005), my presence might also impact the setting or individuals studied, or "reactivity" (p. 108). Therefore, it is important to understand how the researcher may be influencing what an informant says and how conclusions can be drawn from that data. It is important to disclose that I was a member of the university-

based HQPPP selected for this study, albeit with a different cohort, in 2010. Graduates

from the 2010 HQPPP cohort housed at the doctoral insitution were not asked to

participate in this study. Prior to participation in the HQPPP, I also had prior experience

as a special education teacher, response to intervention (RTI) interventionist, and a

university facilitator for student teachers. On the other hand, I have never held a "school

leader" position. Because of previous experience as a cohort member within the HQPPP

and lack of experience as a school leader, the "internal" view of a HQPPP and the

"external" view of the intricacies associated with school leadership in the state in which

this study was conducted were present.

To establish trust and build rapport, I presented all of the participants with a

consent form (Creswell, 2007; Maxwell, 2005) prior to the start of the initial interviews.

The participants had the right to skip or refuse to answer any questions and review all

transcripts. They also had the opportunity to validate findings (Creswell, 2007) through a

final member check and, if desired, to redact any information within the transcripts or

findings. Reviewing the transcripts, it was evident that participants did the majority of

talking. This was an essential aspect of the methodology due to the importance placed on

the participant's voice throughout sensemaking within a phenomenological approach.

GENERALIZABILITY

It is not the intent of qualitative research to provide findings that are widely

generalizable; rather, findings are to be used to "produce evidence based on the

exploration of specific contexts and particular individuals" (Brantlinger et al., 2005, p.

2003). Qualitative findings, by their very nature, are "highly contextual and case dependent" (Patton, 2011, p. 563). Maxwell (2005) highlights the potential for qualitative research to enhance internal generalizability, which refers to the "generalizability of a conclusion within the setting or group studied" (p. 115). The descriptive, interpretive, and theoretical validity of conclusions depends on internal generalizability. Results and conclusions included in this study were intended to inform rather than to create universal knowledge regarding building principals and sense making of inclusive policy.

To address these concerns, the following strategies to address specific threats to validity were employed.

"RICH" DATA

The time period allotted for data collection occurred over a three-month period. Conducting intensive interviews that were both detailed and varied (Maxwell, 2005) provided a robust account of a specific "high quality" principal preparation program and how graduates were using what they learned in regard to making sense of and implementing inclusive policy. In addition, observation and field notes throughout the interviews provided information that provided a "rich, detailed grounding for, and test of, [my] conclusions" (p. 111). A description of data collection, data analysis, and subsequent interpretation was provided so readers can replicate the process. Transparency regarding the procedures used to reach certain by conclusions increases the reliability of findings.

Maxwell (2005) characterizes member checks as "the single most important way of ruling out the possibility of misinterpreting the meaning of what participants say and do and the perspective they have on what is going on" (p. 111). For most qualitative studies, member checks are used to validate findings. Because I was working closely with the principalship program and its graduates, it was important to solicit feedback about data collected and conclusions about people and the program being studied (Maxwell, 2005). Maxwell (2005) suggests that the participants' feedback should be taken as "evidence" (p.111) and not be used as a more valid account than their interview responses. As a qualitative researcher, my intent and goal was to represent and uphold the integrity that is held for qualitative research due to the impact that the findings might have on principal preparation programs. Member checks were imperative measures that had to be taken to ensure that the researcher and author of this study did not allow the presence of personal and professional bias(es) to impact the findings and conclusions.

Member checks were conducted in two stages: data collection and data analysis. Throughout data collection, I provided a copy of each of the interview transcripts to the participants to give them an opportunity to *see what [they] said* (Weick, 1995) and ensure that the transcripts were accurate. Throughout data analysis, the participants were provided with a detailed description of themselves, their schools, their roles in serving students with disabilities, and how they initially made sense of inclusive education policy. This provided the participants an opportunity to validate the findings and identify any misinterpretation of the data. Although there were no major changes made following

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member checks, the responses from the member checks suggested changes in names and some identifying words. For example, one of the respondents requested that I change the name of the campus-based Autism program because the program was unique to the school district.

TRIANGULATION

Concerns with the study's findings were addressed by utilizing data triangulation (Brantlinger et al., 2005; Maxwell 2005) with the use of a variety of different data sources and data collection methods such as interviews, observations, field notes, and document analysis. Although it was important for me to include other data sources as a means to critically examine findings and to provide a robust description of both the textual and structural descriptions of phenomenon, the intent of employing sensemaking as a theoretical framework and a phenomenological approach was to "uncover and describe the participants' perspectives" (Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p. 102) of events and experiences that took place throughout their sensemaking of inclusive education policy. According to Marshall and Rossman (2006), "the subjective view is what matters" (p. 102); therefore, the *words of the participants* were central to this study. In addition, peer debriefing (Brantlinger et al., 2005) was employed whereby my doctoral dissertation chair, graduate student colleagues, and members of the dissertation committee provided "critical feedback on [my] descriptions, analyses, and interpretation of the study's results" (p. 201). More formal peer debriefing took place throughout scheduled meetings and inter-rater reliability events. Informal peer debriefing took place

during email and telephone communications with members of my dissertation committee and professional colleagues, during writing sessions with other doctoral candidates, and at educational conferences with professors and colleagues within the educational leadership and special education field.

CHAPTER 4

Analysis of the Data

In this chapter, I introduce the six participating school leaders (Van, Vintage, RH, Sarah, Lindy, and CB). This chapter is divided into four sections: (a) a description of the school leaders' accounts of their lived experiences with special education and inclusive policy, (b) how the school leaders made sense of inclusive education policy, (c) supports that the school leaders described as influential throughout their sensemaking of inclusive education policy, and (d) a summary of the chapter. To help readers get a sense of the school leaders' experiences and the larger context within which they make sense of inclusive education policy, I provide a profile of the participants, a brief overview of their schools, and the school leaders' perspectives on special education at their schools. All participant and school names have been replaced with pseudonyms and, in some cases, certain descriptive details have been disguised.

The research questions that guide this study are as follows:

1. How did current school leaders who are graduates of a high-quality principal preparation program describe their lived experiences in regard to special education on their campuses?

2. How did current school leaders who were graduates of a high-quality principal preparation program make sense of inclusive education policy demands at their schools?

3. How did current school leaders who are graduates of a high-quality principal preparation program perceive supports that enabled them to navigate the complexity of inclusive education policy on their campuses?

Description of Lived Experiences

"A phenomenological study…is one that [focuses] on descriptions of what people experience and how it is that they experience what they experience" -Patton, 1990, p.71

"Sensemaking begins with the sensemaker" -Weick, 1995, p. 18

In this section, I address the first research question: *"How did current school leaders who are graduates of high-quality principal preparation programs describe their lived experiences in regards to special education practices on their campuses?"* This study examines the accounts of six current school leaders, who are recent graduates of high-quality principalship preparation programs (HQPPPs), as they made sense of inclusive education policy and describes the supports that enabled their sensemaking. Three participants are assistant principals, two are assistant principals and curriculum directors, and one is a special education director. Five participants were members of the same 2009 HQPPP cohort, and one participant was a member of the 2010 satellite HQPPP cohort. Table 3 details the six participants and their schools in this study.

Pseudonym	HQPPP cohort	Current Role	School Pseudonym	Students Identified as "Economically Disadvantaged" (%)	Special Education Population (%)
Van Wilder	2009	CSED	*South High*	80	12
Vintage Heart	2009	CAD**	*Capitol Middle*	77	13
Real Highflyer (RH)	2009	AD**	*Bush High*	91	13
Sarah Smith	2009	AP	*West Middle*	27	6
Lindy	2009	AP	*Lincoln High*	89	14
Café Brazil (CB)	2010	AP	*Calvin Middle*	92	12

- AP = Assistant principal
- AD = Academic Director
- CAD = Comprehensive Academic Director
- CSED = Campus Special Education Director

**School leader's position was also an Assistant Principal (AP)

Table 3: continued next page.

Table 3: Participants and School Information

Source: Demographic survey, Participant Interviews, and state education agency website

       This group's demographics reflected diversity in race, sex, and background experience as shown in Table 4. While the participants' race or sex was not a focus of this study, I chose to include their descriptions of themselves to help readers gain a better understanding of their leadership contexts. The study's participants consisted of four women and two men. Four participants identified themselves as Caucasian and two as Hispanic.

Pseudonym	Age	Sex	Race	Tenure at School
Van Wilder	35+	Male	Caucasian	1st year
Vintage Heart	35+	Female	Caucasian	3rd year
Real Highflyer (RH)	30+	Male	Hispanic	3rd year
Sarah Smith	30+	Female	Hispanic	1st year**
Lindy	45+	Female	Caucasian	1st year
Café Brazil (CB)	30+	Female	Caucasian	1st year

**Sarah spent two years as an assistant principal before coming to West Middle

Table 4: Participant Demographics

Source: Demographic Survey and Participant Interviews

In the sections below, I introduce the participants, describe the school to which they are assigned, and provide a brief description of their experiences with special education. As noted earlier, pseudonyms have been used to preserve confidentiality. The participants were given the opportunity to choose their pseudonyms, which may provide the reader with a better idea of the participants' character and personality. In both phenomenology and sensemaking, participants' perceptions and language are the focus of analysis. Therefore, the participants' descriptions of themselves and their schools are heavily drawn upon to provide textual information (the "what") and structural information (the "how").

VAN WILDER: FIRST YEAR SPECIAL EDUCATION DIRECTOR AT SOUTH HIGH

When I first met Van, he was a special education director at South High, a large high school in a rural area. He was also a special education doctoral student at a nearby university. Van was responsible for all of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings on his campus. He had a background in educational psychology, and prior to his current position, he was a behavioral classroom teacher at a rural middle school. Throughout the interviews, Van's playful nature was evident in his responses. For example, when asked how he would describe his leadership style, he responded, "I'm like the lead ape from *Planet of the Apes*, because he never came out and said he was a leader, he just did what he knew what was right and acted." But Van consistently brought the focus of the conversation back to the students with comments such as, "The number one thing, and it might sound corny or cliché, but it is always about what is best for kids,"

which illustrates his deep compassion for the students he served. When asked about his strengths as a leader, Van said that he was a "good listener and can make people feel valuable." When asked about his areas of growth, Van talked about paying more attention to detail, and he described an unpleasant part of his job as "clicking of the boxes on the computer screen" --an area he knew he needed to work on. He also talked about something that he had been doing less frequently, which was to "write handwritten notes to people to let them know that you appreciate what they do." He saw this as important to building relationships and believed in rewarding positive behavior for both adults and students on campus. I found Van to be a highly personable and compassionate leader, who seemed to use humor to convey his inner workings regarding his role at his school.

School Context

South High is a large high school, with more than 1,000 students. Eighty percent (80%) of those students are labeled "economically disadvantaged, " and 12% of the school population is identified as students with disabilities (State Education Agency [SEA], 2012). When asked about his school, Van talked about the "nuts and bolts" involved in working in a large high school in a rural environment. He talked about the school's pride regarding its current accountability ratings but cautioned that it would be "a new ugly picture when the new accountability ratings come out … whenever that is." His attitude toward the school was further illustrated in one of his replies to my question about his school: "Well, we had a pep rally today and everyone seemed excited to be there on campus for that." He also talked about the school slogan: "I will tell you, one

slogan that we put on our t-shirt (I shouldn't say 'we' because I had nothing to do with it), 'In this world you can only be one person, but to a child you can be the whole world' … that is people just patting themselves on the back." It needs to be noted that Van's position was eliminated by the school district at the end of the academic year and he had to reapply for a teaching position for the coming academic year. I believe this influenced Van's attitude toward his school; however, it did not seem to influence his attitude toward working with and empowering students with disabilities. Van mentioned that "a nice thing" about his job was that it was "part of my responsibility in letting kids know where they have power and influence," and his goals were to "help kids graduate and for them to get the most out of themselves."

Special Education

Van believed that his sole purpose on campus was to meet the needs of students with disabilities. When asked about his role, he said, "I don't really interact with 'whole school issues' as much as I do 'individual student issues.'" He was told that he was an "extension of the district special education director as the special education director." at South High. Interestingly, he felt that he was limited in the ways that he could help by the district special education director, because she told him that he does not answer to the school administration but only to her, that he was not to train any of the teachers, and that he was not to write emails to the staff or to her. Van talked about the lack of communication regarding his specific role on the school campus and how he worked with the "real administrators." When I asked him more about his role as a special education

director, he told me that teachers did not feel that he had authority over them because he was not their direct supervisor.

Because it was his first year on a high school campus, he struggled with "graduation plans, course sequences, and what it takes to graduate in the age of accountability with the new state testing coming through." Among the special education topics he felt most strongly about were systemic issues surrounding graduation plans and the lack of communication between the district and the school. For example, the district did not communicate why they had asked all special education directors to not check "co-teach" on IEP paperwork, which was a signal to Van that systemic changes were coming. During the first interview with Van, he said he felt as if his job would be the "easy fat to trim" when budget cuts were being discussed at the district level and that his role as a special education administrator would most likely be repurposed. His assessment turned out to be quite accurate.

VINTAGE HEART: THIRD YEAR ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL AT CAPITOL MIDDLE

Vintage was in her third year as an assistant principal at Capitol Middle, a large urban middle school that also was a magnet school site. She had been asked to oversee the comprehensive program as the comprehensive academic director just 3 months before the initial interview. Capitol Middle housed both a magnet school component and a comprehensive program. The comprehensive program served students who lived in the neighborhood attendance zone of the school, who were not enrolled in the magnet school. The magnet program had a curricular focus on law, humanities, and international studies,

and drew student attendees from the entire district. Vintage spoke of the magnet school being integrated into the comprehensive program in that students from both programs attended core courses such as math, science, and social studies, together. In addition, students from the magnet school and comprehensive program ate lunch together. However, only students of the magnet school were provided opportunities to take electives specific to the magnet school program such as law, humanities, and international studies. Although Vintage did mention the majority of students with disabilities were served in the comprehensive program, she did not provide a specific percentage of students with disabilities in either the magnet school or the comprehensive program. She explained her role as being responsible for the comprehensive program. There was also a magnet school academic director. Both Vintage and the magnet school academic director reported to the principal of Capitol Middle. Vintage's story is unique in that prior to her current leadership position and middle school science teacher experience in an affluent suburban campus, she had been a nighttime school custodian. She laughed and talked about how it was "almost like this undercover job…because I hadn't been to school for so long…and so here I was, in this school at night, just seeing what education was and what it was like." She then decided, at age 27, to start working on her undergraduate degree. After graduating, she became a middle school science teacher and was quickly nominated to the HQPPP by one of her administrators. Vintage was eager to talk about her role in working in special education, which included being involved with Title I and Title III budgets, district compliance pieces, and master schedules. My impression of Vintage was that she is a deeply caring and intelligent

leader who wanted nothing more than to see her students succeed. She had an extraordinary gift for building relationships. She is a lifelong learner who recognizes the need to attain knowledge, distribute leadership, and empower those around her.

School Context

Capitol Middle is a large urban middle school with more than 1,000 students. Seventy seven percent (77%) of those students are identified as "economically disadvantaged," and 13% of the student population is identified as students with disabilities (SEA, 2012). When asked about her school, Vintage talked about the school culture "shifting to be really positive" and stated that they have a "really really really fantastic and active and creative staff." She talked about the importance of teacher voice in order to meet goals. Vintage noted that the students were starting to feel like "school was a safe place to be." She added that this was the first year that she had noticed that the campus was "normal" in that the student body behaved during the Valentine dance and the teachers were enjoying themselves. She talked about the unique area in which her school resides: "In my school, you can literally see the state capitol, and we are on a really popular street with lot of shops and people enjoying themselves … and then here are my kids walking to school that are not far from there and they have a lot of needs." Although she recognized that the majority of her students were "high needs," she worked very diligently to ensure that the campus met their diverse needs.

Special Education

Vintage did not have a background in special education, but she asked her principal if she could become involved in special education for the 2012–2013 school year because "it is one of the big programs and I don't think it is particularly going as it needs to in the past years on the campus." Vintage believed that she could "effect positive change for the students," especially with regard to making progress at the same rate that the general education students were on state accountability measures. One example of how Vintage felt she could make positive changes was when a teacher came to her with a highlighted roster of class. According to Vintage, the teacher said, "These are all of the 504 kids and these are all of the sped kids," which was over 70% of the class. Vintage then said that she "want[ed] to be able to make sure that when I am scheduling that that [percentage of students being served by special education does not exceed percentage of students in general education] doesn't happen."

Vintage believed strongly that it was her responsibility to be a leader for all students. For example, she talked about general education teachers' lack of knowledge regarding how to implement IEPs in their classrooms and said, "It's the responsibility of the administrator to know about these things and to go back and help the teacher to understand and implement those IEPs in order to meet the needs of students with disabilities in their classes." Vintage was also excited about working with the special education department chair and trying to develop strategies to build relationships and communication between special and general education. Vintage's current focus is on building the Positive Behavior Intervention and Socio-emotional Learning Programs on

campus. She feels that those two programs will "help to level the playing field for everybody on campus." She was proud of the fact that Capitol Middle had "reduced the number of special education students to alternative placement from 15% [last year] to under 2% [current year]." She attributed this success to the implementation of a new Socio-emotional Learning curriculum throughout weekly advisory classes.

REAL HIGHFLYER: THIRD YEAR ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL AT BUSH HIGH

Real Highflyer (RH) was in his third year as an assistant principal and second year as an academic director at Bush High, a medium-sized high school in an urban area. RH is responsible for curriculum (particularly math) and for state accountability testing on campus. According to RH, he is a different person than the "boy who came from the Valley," which is heavily influenced by the Hispanic culture. He talked about the high esteem in which the community held teachers, in that "if you've made it into teaching, then, you've 'made it.'" RH reminisced about how he did not think he would even finish high school: "I thought I was going to die before I got out of school…. The people I hung out with, where I'm from … I was ELL [English Language Learner] myself … just everything didn't lead me to believe." RH talked about "using [his] mind to cheat the system" from a young age—from figuring out how to pick certain courses throughout his undergrad years to changing district benchmark tests as a school leader. RH was previously a high school math teacher and loved working with the math department. He frequently talked about his expertise in math and that that was something he knew he did well. When asked about his strengths as a leader, RH had difficulty thinking of a

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response. He did note his ability to "give time," "knowing math," and "being able to

relate to students, because [he] came from the same environment that they [were] coming

from." He also believed that he was "rough on people" because people were rough on

him growing up, but that his expectations were high. As far as his self-identified areas of

growth, he said that "being nice to people, being 'smiley,' being able to celebrate … or

[be] creative" were his top areas needing improvement in his current position. All in all,

RH was exciting to talk to throughout this study due to his passion for helping students

and making changes on his campus; my learning about his past experiences, which he

freely shared; and his "hold nothing back" attitude in trying to explain his point of view.

As a leader, he definitely had high expectations for both his students and his staff, but he

modeled living up to similar standards himself.

School Context

Bush High is a middle-sized urban high school with just under 1,000 students.

Ninety-one percent (91%) of the student population is identified as "economically

disadvantaged," and 13% of the student body is identified as students with disabilities

(SEA, 2012). RH discussed the school's culture when he first began as a high school

math teacher. He told himself that he would "never come to [Bush High]" and that he

"had heard a lot of bad things about it like other people hear." He explained that the "kids

wouldn't pay attention…there was no sense of urgency for the students of the

teachers…the students and the teachers had given up."   He went on to talk about how the

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school was in a poorer area of town and was a school where "experienced teachers didn't want to come … it was at the bottom of the barrel."

After his current principal asked him to step up into a leadership position, RH recounted, he promised district administration that he could double school state accountability test scores. RH told me, "I mean, how hard is it to go from 13% to 26% passing rate for the campus?" RH gave several examples of how the culture of the campus is changing and how he was excited for Bush High to have "normal" problems. For example, RH talked about a teacher who was angry that a student was not in class. Even though the student was not failing this year, she had failed last year, and she was out of class that day for a district band competition. RH went on to say, "I was happy, not that he was upset, but it was the fact that he could tell me that this is what she [student] needed and she wasn't there for that lesson…those are the problems that I want. It's makes me feel as if we are 'normal.'" RH also talked about his excitement over rising enrollment—from 700 to 1,100 next year. He talked about students leaving Bush High due to poor performance on state accountability tests in previous years and the negative impact that had had on school culture. Now, students are returning to their neighborhood campus, and RH believed that this was another step in a positive direction.

Special Education

At Bush High, special education seems to be the responsibility of the special education instructional specialist. She is considered the special education director, although her title does not reflect this. RH talks of her as being the "end-all [and] be-all

of special ed," and if she tells him to do something, he will listen. He talked about her leaving for a year and the difficulty he had without her on campus. RH explained how the special education instructional specialist makes a spreadsheet for him containing information on students with disabilities, such as their grade level, which state test they are taking, which accommodations they need, and which teachers would be a "better fit" for students with disabilities. RH uses this spreadsheet in IEP meetings so that he "can speak to each student."

Some systemic issues that RH discussed involved incorrect IEPs, the IEP meeting itself, and graduation. For example, he talked about trying to "get kids out of special ed that don't need to be there…who are misplaced and mislabeled." He also vented about the inconvenience of IEP meetings. He gave the example of going to three IEP meetings to "make three changes [that] needed to occur that were changes that we, the administration, could have done real easy" if it were not for IEP meeting requirements. As far as graduation, RH talked about the contradictions embedded within the graduation requirements of NCLB and IDEA. His dilemma was "do I graduate them in 4 years or do I miss my accountability…and educate them until they're 21?"

Despite the many challenges of special education, RH did consistently express a desire to help students feel "OK" with their disability. He talked about students coming into his office saying that they could not complete a task because they were "special." RH then told the students, "Just because you are special ed doesn't mean that you can't do it. You can do it; you just need a little help on something. Everyone needs a little help on something." RH goes on to tell the student, "I'm not the best person at writing, so I'd

rather write with spellcheck. So that's my 'need.'" RH enjoys sharing personal experiences and relating to the students with disabilities in order for them to not feel as if they are "different" from other students.

SARAH SMITH: FIRST YEAR ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL AT WEST MIDDLE

Sarah was in her first year as an assistant principal at West Middle, which is a large middle school in an urban area. She is responsible for the seventh grade. Previously, she was an assistant principal for 2 years at another middle school campus in the same district. During her first year as assistant principal of West Middle, Sarah had an accident and had to be "out for two months, which really impacted" her first year as a school leader. Sarah talked extensively about her dissatisfaction with district policies and the steps that she took to change policy. For example, in her previous administrative role, she disagreed with how "students with disabilities were being excluded from the learning opportunities" on her campus. She talked about her previous campus "having multiple years in which they didn't have a single special education student…they denied access," which, she stated, was "completely wrong". She decided to go to the district and ask that they "fix it." Sarah also talked about knowing how the inner circles worked in a school system. She talked about being told that if she "wanted to move up in [her previous] district…people would tell me what church I should join and what time to go to the service." Sarah valued fairness and understood the importance of knowledge in getting things done. She is a deeply genuine leader who was willing to share her thoughts, challenges, and critiques in order to make things better for all students. She wanted to

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share as much as possible so that others might read about her experiences and then changes could be made to improve learning outcomes for all students.

School Context

West Middle is a large urban middle school with more than 1,300 students. Twenty-seven percent (27%) of the student population is labeled "economically disadvantaged," and 8% of the student body is identified as students with disabilities (SEA, 2012). Sarah talked about her school being a "receiving campus for students from campuses that did not meet AYP [adequate yearly progress] expectations," which apparently created cultural and other shocks to a campus that had been previously stable. She said that West Middle School was "over capacity" and that the school did not have enough teaching positions when the academic year started. Sarah talked about the parents "knowing how to get things done" in that "in all of the middle schools in the district, this school has had the most lawsuits." Sarah also talked about cultural barriers that were beginning to surface due to the school's role as a receiving campus. Struggles with the staff were also apparent when Sarah discussed how she was met with "sighs" and negative attitudes when she suggested a cultural diversity program to help with inclusion of the non-neighborhood "receiving" students. The teachers responded, "We are not racist, but we're not lowering our standards and 'watering down' our curriculum to meet the needs of a new population." On the other hand, Sarah did praise the teacher of the autism classroom by proudly stating that she had won the middle school Teacher of

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the Year award, and that good things were happening for students with disabilities on her campus.

Special Education

Most of our conversations regarding special education involved Sarah voicing concerns about challenges to meeting the needs of students with disabilities. She was extremely reflective in her responses, and she seemed to have written down her thoughts prior to our interviews. Sarah did talk about having personal experiences with persons with disabilities (e.g., a cousin, a woman she met through an undergraduate learning activity), and perhaps having these types of relationships made her more aware of challenges and conflicts regarding special education. She pointed out systemic issues, such as lack of funding and resources, as barriers to implementing inclusive education policy. For example, she talked about being frustrated with the lack of resources and manpower to "truly provide…for the kids that do not fit the 'norm' in special education," meaning students with severe disabilities. Sarah said that parents who had the option to place their child in advanced classes did so mainly because they refused to "put their child in a in a class with 'those kids.'"

Although Sarah pointed out that the majority of parents were knowledgeable regarding special education and their rights as parents, there were other parents who lacked this knowledge. Sarah felt that both she and the school were responsible for acting as advocates "for families who do not know better." Sarah talked about the intense focus on special education that was consistent throughout her undergraduate preservice

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teacher program. She came to the field of education armed with special education

acronyms, an understanding of disabilities, and personal experiences with persons with

disabilities, all of which, she believed, better prepared her to meet the needs of all

students. Interestingly, Sarah was one of the only administrators to consistently use

person-first language throughout her interviews. Sarah also questioned and challenged

the system and district policies at a greater frequency than the other participants in this

study.

LINDY: FIRST-YEAR ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL AT LINCOLN HIGH

Lindy was in her first year as an assistant principal at Lincoln High, a large high

school in an urban area. She jokingly described herself as an "unusual critter" because

she had been a teacher at Lincoln High for 10 years and a school improvement facilitator

for 1 year prior to taking on the assistant principal position. She talked about being

"super devoted to teaching Title I kids and serving Title I kids," as well as advocating for

all students. When asked to list her strengths as a leader, she responded "energy, passion,

commitment, hard work ethic, humor, and love." She went on to describe the areas

needing improvement as "impulsiveness … need[ing] to work on how to handle three

crazy things at once … horrible with technology…[and] be[ing] overly emotional at

times." She was very insightful and elaborated on reflections of herself as a leader and

how she impacted others. For example, she said that she struggled daily with different

biases, one of them being a "White, middle class bias about when someone should

become a mother and how many babies you should have." She went on to say, however,

that she is grateful for, and sees the benefits of, in-school day care at Lincoln High and is proud of the high graduation rate of those students who utilize the daycare.

Lindy was a pleasure to talk to throughout this study. Her sense of humor was evident throughout our conversations, and she acknowledged using humor as a way to handle conflict on campus. To encourage teachers to communicate with each other throughout conflict, her mantra was, "No triangulation. *Mediation*." For Lindy, this meant encouraging teachers to practice mediation skills with each other rather than including a third party (e.g. school leadership team members; other teachers) to mediate or solve the conflict. She stressed the importance of teachers as problem solvers and working together as professionals. My sense of Lindy was that she was someone who was very comfortable with herself and her role on campus and as an advocate for students. Her insights were powerful and deep, and her way of expressing her thoughts and perceptions was vivid and captivating.

School Context

Lincoln High is a large urban high school with just under 1,500 students. Eighty-nine percent (89%) of the student body is labeled "economically disadvantaged," and 14% of the student body is identified as students with disabilities (SEA, 2012). Lindy talked about how the school district and city "look at [Lincoln High] as a 'ghetto school' …and that really hurts me." Lindy spoke about students "coming in extremely behind grade level…freshman who are pregnant…hav[ing] the poorest kids in the city." Because of poor scores on the state accountability tests, students are allowed to leave

Lincoln High and attend other district schools. Lindy said that this resulted in a "brain drain [because] our high achievers go to other schools." She referred to her school as "not diverse" due to its high numbers of Hispanic students, and "90% of our campus is free and reduced lunch." Lindy emphasized the importance of culture on her campus and expressed pride in the fact that someone from "the outside looking in" would see that Lincoln High has "a lot of really strong traditions…[and is] really student centered." Although during her time at Lincoln High had been through five principals, Lindy noted that the faculty has "been here awhile…and are very [tightly] knit but at the same time welcoming to new blood." She called the campus a high-stress environment due to constant pressure to "meet the immense needs of our kids and our families," and that it is the administrative team's responsibility to reduce stress on faculty.

Special Education

Lindy was one of two participants who had a personal relationship with a person with a disability. Her son has been identified as a child with autism, and he came up often throughout our conversations. Lindy mused on the importance of "embracing differences … realizing that those differences make us stronger." Lindy discussed her love for sitting in on IEP meetings. She sees these meetings as an "opportunity to advocate for kids and to make sure that we are serving their needs and pushing them to excel at high levels." She felt she needed to become an advocate because in "the vast majority of [IEP meetings] I have been at, the parents are not really able to advocate for their kids the way that I can advocate for my son. So that's my role." She said that

because she had the experience of being the mother of a child with special needs, she

"would never want to be the assistant principal sitting in an IEP meeting and being

passive and not participating." Although she had had these experiences with special

education, she talked about an assistant principal, who has since left the district to work

for the state, who was the "guru" of special education at Lincoln High. Lindy talked

about "soaking up as much as she could from her" before the woman left. Interestingly,

Lindy concluded that special education is "not really my area." She identified her role in

meeting the needs of students with disabilities on her campus as (a) being "an active

participant in IEP meetings," (b) monitoring teacher quality, and (c) trying to promote an

inclusive school culture.

CAFÉ BRAZIL: FIRST-YEAR ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL AT CALVIN MIDDLE

Café Brazil (CB) was in her first year as an assistant principal at Calvin Middle,

which is a medium-sized school in an urban area. She is the only participant from the

2010 HQPPP satellite cohort. She spent quite a bit a time before our first interview

telling me about her district and school, which was important because I was unfamiliar

with her large urban district. She was a member of a district-based program in which

future principals are cultivated. Her official title is "Principal Fellow," and she was

designated "Central Office staff." She has a background in English and was a high school

English teacher with "all of the teacher leader codes that you can throw under there."

Her various teacher leadership positions include department chair, Response to

Intervention (RTI) director, state transition grant coordinator, an early start coordinator,

ninth-grade transition camp founder, a member of the site-based decision making (SBDM) team, and member of the principal's executive leadership team (PELT). CB displayed a "no holds barred" attitude, that is, she held nothing but the highest expectations of her staff and students. She saw herself as having a strong commitment to teaching, and she highlighted "data and curriculum" as her strengths as a leader. CB believed that her perspective as a teacher leader, her experiences with the HQPPP, and now her role as an assistant principal all gave her exceptional insight into the challenges of urban schools. She was a pleasure to learn from throughout this study.

School Context

Calvin Middle is a medium-sized urban middle school with just under 800 students. Ninety-two percent (92%) of the student body is labeled "economically disadvantaged," and 12% of the student body is identified as students with disabilities (SEA, 2012). CB described her campus as on the "west side of the city where [it is] low performing, high poverty … generational poverty." In previous years, students would leave class to go to the roof, where "selling drugs and sex was happening." CB said that the current administration has high expectations for the school. Calvin Middle has a reputation not for having "bad kids" but as a school full of "bad teachers." She talked extensively about the importance of "counseling out or counseling up" poor teachers. When I visited the school, there was a metal detector at the front door, the students were all wearing uniforms, and the school was located between two power plants and hugging

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a railroad. CB talked about the work that went into cleaning up the school on the inside, with the next project focusing on the school's outside appearance.

Special Education

Although Response to Intervention (RTI) is not technically a "special education" initiative, the process of RTI can be used as a tool to identify individuals with learning disabilities (Garcia & Ortiz, 2008). In addition, I thought it interesting to have an RTI director on a secondary campus because I was not expecting RTI to be discussed at the secondary level. In my experience, RTI has been discussed more frequently at the elementary level. Because of this, it is important to note that CB was an RTI director as a teacher leader. Consistent with RTI recommendations, she often referred to students on campus as "Tier I," "Tier 2," or "Tier 3." She shared her frustration over the fact that when the administrative team tried to implement a behavioral RTI program this year, teachers on her campus viewed the RTI program as an opportunity to send students to alternative schools.

CB talked about there being an "IEP day [this year on her campus] where you [general education teacher] went to your planning period and you met with you special ed case manager for the kids on your roster." When asked if there was a special education director on her campus, CB said there was one, but she was "like a teacher" and did not necessarily have the same administrative power as the assistant principals or principal. She talked about struggles between special and general education teachers, but also within the group of special education teachers. CB explained, "There are few of them

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that are very effective, and they feel like some of the others are stupid and shouldn't be there." Another interesting topic of discussion arose when CB described certain students as having the knowledge to work the system and get their "crazy card." She told me that her students "just know how to answer those types of questions when they are being tested, and they say 'yes' to everything, and, 'whoop,' they get their 'crazy card,'" which allows the students "pysch services and a meds check [from the government] for that kind of stuff." She spoke about this type of behavior "lending itself to generational poverty." A goal for CB, once she is principal, is to focus on building collaboration between the special education team and the administrative team, "to develop individual academic plans for every special ed student…for every student who failed the 6 weeks…for every kid who didn't pass the state assessment exam [and] for semester failures, too." CB talked about being a "big advocate for making sure that teachers are aware and understand IEPs and what they are supposed to look like."

COLLECTIVE DESCRIPTIONS OF THE PARTICIPANTS

Collectively, these school leaders used language throughout their interviews that illuminated portions of their perceived lived experiences. The intent of including examples of their language in this section is to provide the reader with concise descriptive accounts of this group as a whole. Due to the inclusion of a phenomenological approach and sensemaking theory, it is important to use the language of the participants. Each section highlights how these school leaders talked collectively about three areas: (1) their

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leadership role in serving students with disabilities, (2) the application of a social justice lens, and (3) their students with disabilities.

Leadership Role in Serving Students with Disabilities

All six of these school leaders spoke about their roles in meeting the needs of students with disabilities. Although all gave examples of how they serve students with disabilities on their campuses, half of the school leaders (Lindy, RH, and CB) talked about someone other than themselves as being responsible for special education on their campuses. For example RH said, "To be honest, [name of special education instructional coach] handles all of that [special education]. I lean on her quite a bit for special education in this campus." Interestingly, Van, the sole special education director in this group of school leaders, appreciated his separateness from his campus principal and assistant principal. He reported that

> this is the beautiful dynamic… because we [special education
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> directors] are basically "property" of the [district] special
>
> education director. So, we don't have to answer to any
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> administrator on our campus. The idea is that we have as much
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> power as they do… or even more when the door closes for the
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> [IEP] meeting to start.

Sarah and Vintage were the only two school leaders in this group who felt the need to assume a leadership position over one or more aspects of special education on their

campuses. All of the school leaders described themselves as "advocates" and as individuals who did "what was best" for students with disabilities.

Application of Social Justice Lens

Although evaluating the effectiveness of utilizing social justice leadership throughout a principal preparation program was not the focus of this study, the participants referenced the concept of social justice throughout their interviews related efforts to create a more just and equitable school by identifying inequities within their school campuses (Theoharis, 2007), advocating for marginalized student populations such as students with disabilities (Pazey, Cole, Garcia, 2012; Theoharris, 2007), and promoting a collaborative and inclusive school vision and culture (Pazey, Cole, & Garcia, 2012). Terminology such as "just," "equitable," "every child," "collaboratively," "understanding," and "all students" are consistently used throughout the social justice leadership literature (Marshall & Olivia, 2010; McKenzie et al., 2008; Pazey, Cole, & Garcia, 2012; Theoharis, 2007). Each of these school leaders "pulled from" the social justice terminology to talk about themselves, their roles in meeting the needs of students with disabilities, and the difficulties they encountered in meeting those needs. The language they used mirrored the four principles of the social justice leadership framework as outlined by Pazey, Cole and Garcia (2012). Elements of this social justice leadership include four key components: (1) a belief, vision, and leadership orientation for the success of all children; (2) a commitment to eliminate marginalization; (3) a willingness to advocate in the best interest of every learner; and (4) accountability for diversity, the

opportunity to learn, and the promotion of inclusive practices (p. 196-197). Specific to

this study, a socially just leader understands that schools must fundamentally change in

order to eliminate the marginalization of students with disabilities. To do this, a socially

just leader identifies organizational, programmatic and personnel inequities within their

schools and takes action to eliminate those inequities by implementing inclusive practices

to ensure that all students are successful (Pazey, Cole, & Garcia, 2012).

The following quotes illustrate some of the statements used by these school

leaders throughout our interviews that are consistent with the social justice leadership

framework described above:

- "[The] social justice lens is permanently engraved in me now." (Van)

- "I look at any situation as, 'Is this equitable?'" (Van)

- "Equal is not always fair." (Van)

- "I think that a big injustice is being done in making sure that they [students with disabilities] are getting academic content." (Vintage)

- "There were a lot of injustices that had been done and for a long time." (Vintage)

- "I read 'social justice leader' [while a cohort member of the HQPPP] and …it rang a bell for how I like to run things." (RH)

- "It's tough to be a first-year AP and you know that something is not happening for what's best for 'all.'" (Sarah)

- "I would go home and worry about it [discipline data] because I felt it was such an injustice." (Lindy)

- "Horrible injustice in a lot of cases." (Lindy)

- "There shouldn't be any gaps…it's every child, the whole school, all the time. Period." (CB)

Throughout our interviews, I did not ask these school leaders questions specific to social justice leadership or how they perceived themselves as being socially just leaders. It was apparent that this group of school leaders utilized social justice terminology-- referenced in the literature--when they talk about their role in serving students with disabilities—"equity," "justice," and "doing what is best" were terms that cropped up often. This may be indicative of the possibility that these leaders have internalized the principles inherent in the social justice leadership framework utilized throughout their HQPPP.

Description of Students: Importance of Language

The emic code "description of students with disabilities" was established based on a pattern of the language these school leaders used to talk about students with disabilities. This pattern of language emerged throughout the interviews independent of any specific question about a description of students with disabilities. The following are phrases that were frequently used throughout the interviews to talk about students and children with disabilities. The name(s) after each phrase indicate which school leader used the phrase throughout our interviews.

- "students with disabilities" (Van, Vintage, Sarah, RH)
- "students with special needs" (Van, Sarah)
- "students who receive services" (Sarah)
- "kids with special needs" (Vintage)

- "kids with SPED" (CB)

- "persons with disabilities" (Sarah)

- "special education students" (Vintage, RH)

- "special ed students" (Vintage, Sarah)

- "special ed kids" (Lindy, Sarah)

- "SPED kids" (Lindy, Vintage)

- "special needs kid" (Lindy)

- "life skill kids" (Lindy)

- " 'M' kids" (Vintage, CB, RH, Lindy)

- "modified kids" (RH)

- "folder kids" (Lindy)

These school leaders used a wide range of terminology and language to describe students with disabilities throughout the interviews. For example, school leaders who talked about having a more robust knowledge base of special education (Sarah and Van) used person-first language when talking about students with disabilities. Others (RH, CB, Lindy, and Vintage) described students using the name of the type of accountability test that student was assigned (e.g., " 'M' kids" or "modified kids").

Inclusive Education Policy: How Was It Talked About?

The creation of meaning is an attentional process" -Weick, 1995, p. 25

In the following sections, I address the second research question: *"How did current school leaders who are graduates of high-quality principalship programs make*

sense of inclusive education policy demands at their schools?" These sections present findings on how they described and understood inclusive education policy. What did they talk about? In what ways did they speak about the complexity of implementing inclusive education policy? What specific actions did they take that enabled them to make sense of the complexities they encountered?

To understand sensemaking is to be sensitive to the ways in which people notice something in particular—something that emerges from a flow of ongoing events. They then proceed to author their interpretation of what they noticed in an attempt to give plausible meaning to what they noticed (Weick, 1995). In other words, what the person pays attention to, what he or she talks about, and even what he or she doesn't pay attention to or talk about are all important in sensemaking.

The intent of the data collection was to "cast a wide net" that would allow each participant to reflect on past events and experiences, chop moments out of events or experiences that were memorable to them, and grapple with and create their own meaning of the extracted events and/or experiences. As a qualitative researcher employing both sensemaking theory and a phenomenological approach, it was more important to focus on what these school leaders chose to talk about or not talk about, rather than come up with a survey of bounded special education terms or language throughout data collection to *test* their knowledge. I wanted to go deeper into their thought processes to understand what they paid the most attention to and what was important to them as sensemakers and as school leaders. In doing so, as the researcher, I am staying true to the phenomenological approach and the intent of my theoretical framework of sensemaking. In addition, the

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idea is to provide the reader with insight into the potential thought processes of these school leaders. The following sections highlight what the school leaders chose to talk about throughout our interviews. As discussed with the school leaders prior to starting the initial interview, there are no right or wrong answers, simply a presentation of what the school leaders chose to pay attention to and in what way they paid attention to certain experiences or events what actions they took, and how they justified their earlier words and actions.

Initial Responses: Inclusive Education Policy—What First Comes to Mind?

When the school leaders were asked, "When you hear about 'inclusive education policy,' what comes to mind?" their answers varied widely. I decided to include the entirety of each initial response (i.e., the first thing that came to each of the school leaders' minds when I asked the question) for two reasons. First, the diversity in the school leaders' perceptions is fascinating. Responses such as these are the reason why "casting a wide net" in a phenomenological approach is both intriguing and scary. I want the reader, who is perhaps contemplating a similar phenomenological approach in future research endeavors, to understand what he or she might "catch" when employing a similar methodological approach. Second, I want the reader to have a full description of what came to the minds of this group of school leaders. In doing so, my hope is that the reader will be afforded the opportunity to make sense of these statements and can try to understand the process of sensemaking that these school leaders went through regarding

the implementation of inclusive education policy. The school leaders' responses to my

initial question about inclusive education policy varied:

- "It is all about what is in the best interest for the student. And with special

  education, you know, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, it is about

  the individual and about how that individual kid has everything that they need,

  and, you know, their accommodations are being followed, you know, that they are

  being programmed for an individual. One phrase I like is that 'equal is not always

  fair.' It is something that you need to adopt as a special education teacher. With

  inclusion and having students with special needs in a general education setting …

  it's something that other students have to understand as well. But, it's about

  meeting the needs and understanding them, and FAPE is just about understanding

  that everyone deserves a free and appropriate public education regardless of race,

  gender, sexual orientation, and level of disability. And, it's about believing in the

  potential of students and trying to see past what even they see as their potential"

  (Van).

- "It's just stuff that you need to do. Just like you would handle any other

  educational policy. But, that they set forth for us. Which is part of our job

  because we are funded by [the] state and federal government. You're going to

  have policy. When you're an employee, you're going to be expected to know

  how to do it. Like, if I'm going to serve this kid, I need to know the policy to

  make sure that I am doing it appropriately. Those are all safeguards put into place

  for a reason just because someone didn't do it before. So, you just know them

and you take care of it. It also means providing all of our students with the supports they need within the regular classroom to be able to achieve a high level. So, those supports might be accommodations, or, you know, maybe some more one-on-one time. Whatever they need so that we can give it to them to be just as successful as anyone else" (CB).

- "On campus, inclusion is having special education students participate in general education classes with additional supports, rather than be in their own class with only special education students, or majority special educations students. I think it's [inclusive education policy] really important especially because, as I mentioned before, our special education resource classes are struggling, and I don't know why. There is part of me that wonders, 'Is this the right placement?'" (Vintage).

- "It's a 'buzz' word. The first thing I think of is 'tolerance' and 'accepting of differences.' Um, 'flexibility' [pause] that we are not segregating kids [pause] that we are not *trying* to segregate kids" (Lindy).

- "I think of the least restrictive environment. The practice that, and I wasn't around when they [students with disabilities] were all 'in the corner' and brought to the forefront, but definitely through my background and my programs, with civil rights not just being about race or gender, but ability" (Sarah).

- "So, when it comes from the federal level, I think it's, excuse my language, it's shit. You know, they [federal government] make policies and they make things that they think is 'best' for the kids, but a lot of times, they don't even know

what's going on in the classroom. And they are making these rules. These rules

that *I* have to live by. They don't even know what they are talking about. It

makes me upset that I have to 'play by the rules' by people who have never been

in the classroom or don't know how it functions. Or, they think that they are

doing a good thing, but they really don't know what's going on" (RH).

The sense that these school leaders made of inclusive education policy was

influenced by their respective situations, especially their histories as school leaders.

Those histories were ultimately influenced by three major variables: (1) personal and

professional experiences; (2) knowledge base; and (3) values, beliefs, and attitudes.

Throughout their responses, these school leaders selectively attended to specific

mandates embedded in inclusive education policy that were consistent with their own

agendas. At the same time, they failed to notice or intentionally ignored (Spillane, 2004)

other aspects of policy. What these school leaders paid attention to and what they chose

to disregard are central to understanding their sensemaking of inclusive education policy.

In the following sections, I develop a descriptive account of how these school leaders'

responses to the question "When you hear about 'inclusive education policy,' what comes

to mind?" was influenced by their experiences, knowledge base, and values, beliefs, and

attitudes.

Experiences

Four of the school leaders (Van, Vintage, CB, and Sarah) used language

embedded in the mandates found in IDEA. For example, CB, who attributed her

understanding of special education to her experiences throughout her preparation and practice as a teacher and school leader, talked about "accommodations," "appropriately," and "supports" to provide her understanding of inclusive education policy. Her response demonstrates her understanding of inclusive education policy in terms of implementation and practical application of the IDEA mandates. At the time of the interviews, Vintage was grappling with the efficacy of resource classes at Capitol Middle and RH was struggling to meet accountability expectations and still do what was best for students with disabilities. This could explain both why Vintage chose to talk about the "right placement" and RH's heated response, which showed that he was obviously frustrated with the disconnectedness of policymakers to the "real world." Because sensemaking is an ongoing process in which you author your interpretation (Weick, 1995), human situational context heavily influences the sense you make of an event or experience. In other words, it is absolutely necessary to understand that experiences and the way in which you perceive those experiences influence the sense you make of an experience or event.

Knowledge Base

Van and Sarah, the two school leaders who perceived themselves as having a robust knowledge of special education, were the two that in discussions of inclusive education policy sprinkled terms such as *Individuals with Disabilities Act*, *FAPE*, and *LRE* throughout their responses. Vintage began to question the appropriateness of the actual placement of students with disabilities within general education classrooms. Just

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last year, she asked her principal if she could assume leadership responsibility for special education. She spoke about seeking district support and training last summer to prepare her for her role. Although she had been a school leader on campus for 3 years; this year, she began to question placement decisions, parental attendance at IEP meetings, and the collaboration between special and general education. Spillane (2004) reminds us that "knowledge is a primary resource in the development of new, sometimes better, understandings" (p. 76). Having a more robust knowledge base allowed these school leaders to be less distracted by superficial similarities (Spillane, 2004) and, in turn, focus on deeper understandings of inclusive education policy.

Personal Context: Values, Beliefs, and Attitudes

In the preceding sections, the social justice lens was highlighted as being influential in how these school leaders negotiated their roles in meeting the needs of students with disabilities. Similar language was used to talk about and describe their understanding of inclusive education policy. For example, Van spoke about "everyone deserv[ing] a free and appropriate public education regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, and level of disability;" Lindy mentioned "tolerance" and "accepting of differences;" and Sarah pointed out that civil rights were not "about race or gender, but ability." These three school leaders--at one point in time or another throughout our interviews--used terminology contained within social justice theories and civil rights theories to justify their intentions and actions. Weick (1995) reminds us that plausibility is more important than accuracy in sensemaking; that is, the explanation may seem

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reasonable and socially acceptable to others. Therefore, the way in which an individual makes sense of inclusive education policy is credible to that individual.

Sensemaking of Policy: Perceived Challenges and Conflict

Each of the six school leaders pointed out what they perceived to be complexities and conflicting directives within inclusive education policy as well as the challenges to implementing policy at their schools. They expressed concerns that there were few resources to support the implementation of inclusive education policy, they were understaffed for meeting the needs of students with disabilities, district infrastructure was not designed to support the implementation of the mandates within the policy, and there was a lack of time to complete all of their leadership tasks. Not one of these challenges is new to the literature surrounding policy implementation; but how these individuals reacted to these shortcomings invites further scrutiny.

Weick (1995) compared sensemaking to mapmaking, whereby you use the map as a starting point that encourages goal setting (e.g., "Where do we want to be?"), communication (e.g., "How do we get there?"), and action (What experiences or events took place to get the six participants to where they wanted to be?). Using Weick's (1995) analogy of a map, federal, state, and district educational policy act as a map throughout sensemaking and policy implementation. Like a map guides an individual to a specific location, educational policy guides school leaders to an intended and specific outcome. An individual's perceived efficacy of the map--or, in this case, educational policy--is based on his/her ability to read, decode, and understand the path laid out by the map.

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Leaders are, in a sense, authoring their interpretation of the map based on their prior experiences, prior knowledge, and beliefs. As a result, they rely on their own interpretations and make their own determinations about how the map will guide them to their intended destination and whether they will follow the map or elect to take shortcuts or alternative routes along the way. These school leaders characterized the *map* (i.e., inclusive education policy) as confusing as it had holes in it, and was generally *poor*. The next section points out what they perceived to be the shortcomings of inclusive education policy, or the *poor map*.

A *POOR MAP*: DISCREPANCIES AND CONTRADICTING ASPECTS OF POLICY

"I think that this is sort of how the system is set up. I mean … if we look at accountability rating and look at individual education programs, those things do not mesh at all" -Van

Several school leaders struggled with the specifications of inclusive education policy. They expressed the belief that conflicting policy messages existed, and the policy did not match "real life." Although referenced previously, RH's heated response to the interview question, "When you hear about inclusive education policy, what comes to mind?" shed light on how certain school leaders react to inclusive education policy and the federal government's involvement in developing such policy. In his words, the law or policy was "shit" and the government served as an agency that doesn't "know what is going on [in the classroom]" yet "they are making the rules." In fact, he went so far as to say, "They don't even know what they are talking about." Basically, RH referenced

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policymakers as not having a grasp on the reality that school leaders experienced and therefore did not understand what is "right" for kids. The greater concern on his part, however, appeared to be the inconvenience that the policies created for him rather than what was in the best interest of the student: "These rules that *I* have to live by…. It makes me upset that I have to 'play by the rules' by people who have never been in the classroom or don't know how it functions" (RH).

Sarah shared a similar frustration, and challenged legislators to "walk in her shoes." She asserted,

> I want a legislature to follow me around. They need to be here for
>
> at least a month, because, you cannot *see* something in just a day
>
> or two, but that's also why I say 'the people making decisions are
>
> not walking the walk' and they are not in the school. They don't
>
> know the half of it. (Sarah)

During the interview, Sarah emphasized the importance of experience and experiential learning and how both are key in understanding the perspectives of others. Sarah and RH characterized legislators as "outsiders" as, in their opinion, they had no familiarity with what school leaders experience or appreciation for what they know. How could legislators claim to be qualified to enact policy if they had never walked in their shoes? They could not possibly understand the reality of the school context and the complexities inherent in fulfilling the needs of the students they serve from an outsider perspective. According to Sarah and RH, inclusive education policy lacked conformity with "real life."

Several of the school leaders pointed out the confusing and often conflicting nature of inclusive education policy, specifically regarding the mandates concerning IEP meetings and graduation requirements. An account of how these school leaders grappled with the complexity of these mandates follows.

Conflicting Ideas of What is "Appropriate"

Decisions regarding a free, appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) are made by the IEP team, of which a school administrator is a member. Throughout the development of the IEP, the team must address the specifics of what is appropriate for each student in terms of educational goals, related services, supplementary aids and resources, and educational placement. How a school leader (e.g., principal, assistant principal, special education administrator) constructs his or her understanding of "appropriate" could have a significant impact on the final outcome of a student's IEP. The next section illuminates the challenges inherent in defining "appropriate" and the frustration behind conflicting definitions among the IEP committee members.

Vintage said she felt as if she had "gotten better" at making sense of the IEP process and at providing appropriate services for a student with a disability. However, she struggled with the notion that "sometimes the paperwork might be 'right' but 'real-life' isn't. And sometimes 'real-life' is 'right' but the paperwork isn't," implying that the reality of the student on paper did not necessarily conform to the reality of how Vintage

perceived that student. RH had a similar experience. In reference to a conversation he

had with the IEP committee members regarding "appropriate" services, he said,

A lot of the kids are forced into things. We are sitting through

meetings and the kid is *needing* this, but, I can't give him that

because the [IEP members] said 'this' and so this is what should

happen. When we sit through the [IEP meetings], I try to make

them go through that, but…no. 'That's not what we can do,

because, we've decided that he has this disability and because he

has this disability we've gotta go this way.' And so, data ends up

hitting each other, right, because, yeah, you might need this, but

we've got to make sure that we do it this other way.

Throughout RH's decision-making, data were a major influence. He used data frequently

to rationalize his decisions and, ultimately, his actions. RH talked about "know[ing] my

kids" and "speak[ing] their language," which justified what he perceived to be his unique

ability to "see what they are needing." Both Vintage and RH struggled with their

perceptions of what the student with a disability needed in order to be successful.

Furthermore, they struggled with the conflicting perceptions of other committee

members; more specifically, which individual was more accurate in their determination

of what was most "appropriate" for the student.

Graduation: My Neck or Theirs?

Due to each of the school leaders' placements in secondary schools, it was not surprising that the majority of this group turned their attention to the contradictory aspects of graduation. Van, Lindy, and RH spoke of the challenges involved in meeting conflicting rules for graduation. It was a particularly huge concern for RH who spoke about his frustrations throughout both of the interviews. For example, during the first interview RH said,

> You know, I have this problem right now…. I need to graduate
>
> kids in four years. But, special ed kids get to be here [at school]
>
> longer. So, what is a principal supposed to do to not get "dinged'
>
> on graduation rate but still service the special education kid? Just
>
> stuff like that that you will run into as a principal.

He continued to talk about the difficulties involved in trying to meet both accountability requirements and the mandates within IDEA in the second interview:

> There's a rule for this, but there is also a rule for that. They don't
>
> match. You've gotta graduate them [all students] in 4 years.
>
> You've also got to educate them [students being served in special
>
> education] until they are 21. What the hell? What am I supposed
>
> to do? You juggle as best as you can. You break rules as best as
>
> you can without them [the district] finding out. So, when they [the
>
> district] show up [to campus] and ask you about it, you just say,
>
> "Hey, that's the best that I can do."

In his eyes, RH was faced with a major ethical decision regarding graduation accountability requirements. He often talked about "break[ing] the rules" to do what was best for the student, but he conceded that those were difficult decisions to make. It is important to note that RH was eager to move up professionally in the education system, and he felt as if he needed to have a record of meeting accountability requirements to do so. Yet, he also felt as if it was his job to do what was best for the students in order for them to be successful. It was evident that his career aspirations and his belief in what was best for students added to the complexity of his decision-making.

SYSTEMIC SHORTCOMINGS: INTERRUPTIONS TO POLICY IMPLEMENTATION

"To be very frank with you, the way that the system is created, students with disabilities are at a disservice" -RH

"It's a reactive instead of a proactive system. It is very frustrating" -Sarah

Throughout sensemaking, interruptions are a "signal that important changes have occurred in the environment" (Weick, 1995, p. 46). For this study, interruptions can be described as challenges to policy implementation. These include (a) perceived lack of support, time, and resources; (b) miscommunication; and (c) lack of capacity. These interruptions induce an emotional response in individuals who are in the act of sensemaking. The emotional responses of the majority of these school leaders consisted of confusion, frustration, and feelings of being overwhelmed. If we can describe these interruptions, then we may be able to predict where emotional experiences might influence their future sensemaking (Weick, 1995). To do so, we must be aware of the

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distribution of interruptions in the organization—where they are most likely to occur (Weick, 1995).

Regardless of challenges to implementing policy, the majority of these school leaders perceived the district to be the "instigator" of interruptions to policy implementation. Whether it was the lack of resources, miscommunication, or holding services "captive," according to these school leaders, the school district was the central governing body to which they were held accountable. Others believed that it was the teachers who lacked the capacity to carry out the implementation of inclusive education policy. The following is an account of what these school leaders perceived to be (1) interruptions to policy implementation at the district and campus level and attempts to provide insights into (2) how and why these interruptions may have influenced the way they made sense of inclusive education policy.

School District–level Interruptions: Lacking Support and Direction

The majority of these school leaders perceived challenges to implementing inclusive education policy as originating outside of themselves and their schools. To this group of school leaders, the school district is an external entity. Looking at the language within the responses, the majority chose words such as *them, they, they'll, you're*, and *you* when they talked about their school districts. Their tendency to see district initiatives and mandates as being *done to* them, not *implemented with* them suggested that they perceived themselves as being pushed into a corner, over which they had no control. Throughout the interviews, they spoke about the ways in which the school districts were

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not paying attention to special populations that impacted the availability of resources,

services, and personnel for meeting that particular population's needs. For example,

Sarah asked, "What do we make a priority? What are we showing we value? Where is

your money going?" This takes us back to the importance of values, choice, and

priorities. According to Weick (1995), values, choice, and priorities help to clarify what

matters, externally and internally. This being said, if these school leaders perceive their

school district as not valuing students with disabilities, what is keeping them from doing

the same?

Statements made may help the reader understand the significance of the language

they used to describe district shortcomings. Although the shortcomings and challenges of

policy implementation (e.g., lack of services, resources, and personnel) are important, it

was the way in which they referenced them that is central to this study. When they

described the challenges they faced in meeting the needs of students with disabilities,

most of the school leaders attributed any shortcomings to the *district*. The pattern of

language that continued to emerge seemed to reflect a "them versus us" mentality rather

than a collegial relationship between "us" as school administrators, and "them" signifying

the district administration. The following statements regarding their experiences with

attempting to implement inclusive education policy illustrates this perceived dichotomy:

- "I'll find out "at this campus they have this, and at that campus they have that,"
  and then I say, 'Well, can my kid go to that?' And they [the district] will say,
  'Oh, no, they can't go to that. They have to meet certain qualifications.' And we
  are back to the whole documentation thing. And, I know that kids need to be

placed appropriately, but I feel that the process is to not allow proper servicing

… and that's a *big* problem. And, it could be where I'm at right now, but I think

that's it's how it is" (Sarah).

- "I really do not understand why they [the district] will not see that a Title I

  campus like this, we need our own devoted social service specialist. I would love

  that because than we could offer wraparound services, which is really what our

  families need" (Lindy).

- "You know you [the district] want it to be 'individualized' …but you're not going

  to give me a person [support person] for every kid" (Sarah).

- "We [campus-based special education administrators] were told at the beginning

  of the year that each student needed a transitional goal, a continuing education

  goal, and an independent living goal. The problem is that nobody communicated

  those expectations to the teachers. And, we are not allowed to give any training

  to the teachers. So, while I'm told [by the district special education director] that

  I am a special education administrator, in the district and campus, but, I am not

  allowed to train or influence how the teachers learn in any one way. It's, um,

  miscommunication in that regard, and it is also setting it up to where no one in

  the system can learn early on and be able to meet an expectation that we are all

  going to be evaluated on at some point in the year" (Van).

- "They [the district] ask us to be accountable for them [students with

  disabilities]…but they don't give us what we need to get it done" (RH).

- "Students with disabilities … don't fit the 'norm' and have extra needs, and we [the campus] are not provided with resources [by the district]. That student needs more than what we [as a campus] can provide" (Sarah).

Interestingly, CB did not share the mentality of "us versus them" regarding the school and the school district. She considered her role to be "central office staff" and an employee of the school district. Prior to the start of the initial interview with CB, she felt that it was important to explain the district's new organizational structure, where she fit into the organizational structure, and her role as a Principal Fellow. She felt connected to the district. She was a member of a network of aspiring school principals who were being trained *by* the district, *for* the district. Vintage shared this unique perspective with CB, even though they were in different school districts. They are currently members of a district-led initiative in which school leaders must apply for, be accepted to, and participate in district-specific, leadership-capacity-building programs. The intent of the district-led leadership program is to build the capacity of current assistant principals within the district to become principals. Although Vintage mentioned the new district initiatives, throughout her interview, she talked about the lack of knowledge and skills held by the building-level administrator who was responsible for special education and, perhaps, an unwillingness on their part to implement district initiatives relative to the number of goals required for new IEP paperwork. This was one reason she asked her principal to "take over special education."

The following sections highlight some of these school leaders' descriptions of the "interruptions" within the schools. Vintage and CB were more critical of the

"interruptions" that they perceived existed within their schools than they were of those they perceived to be evident between their school district and their school.

Campus-level Interruptions: School Staff

One of the major complaints was the lack of knowledge, incompetence, and/or resistance to change perceived by the school leaders regarding their school staff in working with students with disabilities. It was a struggle for them to establish the minimum threshold of knowledge that teachers needed in order to serve students with disabilities. It was an even greater challenge to work with teachers who were resistant to serving these students. Although there were some instances in which the school leaders would praise a teacher (Vintage, Lindy, and Sarah), the majority of the time the school leaders directed their attention to the lack of knowledge, incompetence, or defiant nature of their teaching staff.

Unknowledgeable

The way in which these school leaders talked about their experiences with certain teachers and specific events that took place is important. *Knowledge* was a central issue in how these school leaders perceived teachers who they believed were not doing their job to educate all students. Researchers, policymakers, and practitioners still discuss and debate the threshold of knowledge needed by school professionals to meet the diverse and unique needs of students with disabilities. It is easy to identify literature on the lack of special education knowledge of principals and assistant principals and the

corresponding negative outcomes for students with disabilities (Brotherson, Sheriff, Milburn, & Schertz, 2001; Crockett, Myers, Griffen, & Hollandsworth, 2007; Cusson, 2010; Pazey & Cole, 2013).

Vintage seemed protective of her teaching staff and constantly reassured me (or maybe herself) that "it's not that the teachers don't want to do the right thing, it's maybe they don't know how to do the right thing." In addition, she attributed teachers' deficit thinking to lack of knowledge:

> [A] challenge with inclusion is that teachers that have been
>
> teaching for a long time and are not used to diversity in their
>
> classrooms, you might encounter an attitude of "I don't want these
>
> students" or "They take up too much time" and that sort of thing or
>
> the general "fear," which I think is an uncomfortableness and lack
>
> of knowledge to serve these students that are different from those
>
> general education students. It's tough on people sometimes.

She compassionately spoke of the teaching staff and shared her worries of "not maintaining the teaching perspective" as she moved into higher positions. Vintage had spent quite a bit of time and resources on developing her teaching staff, specifically providing opportunities for general and special education teachers to collaborate. Because of her role on campus this year as "over special education," she had identified areas of need and had begun to develop a repertoire of strategies and attain resources to address those needs that she would be able to share with the teachers.

When CB spoke to me about the teachers on her campus, she pointed out the animosity between special and general education teachers. She attributed this conflict to a lack of understanding of each other's roles in serving all students:

> I think that they [general education teachers] have a misconception about the purpose of our special ed teachers, especially because they are inclusion teachers. They [general ed teachers] think that they [special ed teachers] are there to handle behavior instead of there to co-teach.

She even spoke about the dislike within the group of special educators. Unlike Vintage, CB did not share stories of attempting to mend these conflicts and relationships between special and general educators, or even within the group of special education teachers. She did, however, talk about what she would do differently if it were "her school" and she was able to make all of the decisions. CB was interviewing for other positions during the spring semester. She had been guaranteed a position as a principal in one of the schools in the district, so she knew that she would not be an assistant principal at Calvin Middle the following year.

Defiant or Lazy

CB is prominently featured in this section, as she chose to share several of her experiences with teachers whom she perceived to be lazy or defiant. When CB spoke about co-teaching arrangements, she told me a story about a special education teacher who would sit in the back of the classroom and read the newspaper throughout instructional time. The story concluded with the teacher being fired at the end of the

year. CB told me this story twice throughout the interviews. It was an experience that was meaningful to her.

She recounted situations where general education teachers complained of not receiving IEPs when the special education teachers claimed that they had delivered them. It was the type of conflict that CB was accustomed to at Calvin Middle and one that was becoming "ridiculous" in her eyes. She expressed frustration with teachers who found loopholes in the system to remove students with disabilities from their classrooms. When she introduced an RTI program that was meant to record interventions that the teachers were implementing, she said the teachers used the RTI program to "get kids out [of their classrooms] instead of for academic plans and sharing plans that are working." CB said that the type of disability that students were identified with had an impact on whether they were accepted by their teachers. In regard to students who were considered to be behavior problems, she opined,

> I think it's more of behavioral issues that get treatment that's not
>
> preferred. So, if they [students with disabilities] are a "pain in the
>
> butt" or they have behavioral issues, then that's where they get
>
> "shut down" and they [teachers] don't care about their learning.

CB's struggle with walking into a school whose reputation was centered on "bad" teachers and not "bad" students was made apparent. The focus of her discussions on "bad" teachers was no surprise, given our prior conversations regarding her perception of the culture of the school. In sensemaking, "people created their own environments and these environments then constrained their actions" (Weick, 1995, p. 31). Although CB

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did not necessarily create the culture or external perception of her school as being full of "bad" teachers, she did not talk about steps to "fix" the culture. Whether, in reality, she did or did not take action was not discussed. However, she did talk about what she plans to do with her next school as the principal in terms of teacher quality and school leadership.

Lindy valued relationships at Lincoln High, which is not surprising, as she had been employed at that school for more than 10 years. She saw herself as an advocate and took it upon herself to put a teacher, and her friend, on a growth plan because it was in the best interest of the students. During the interview she paused, reflected, and said, "You know, one poor teacher with a deficit mindset of what special ed kids can do can [do] a lot of damage." She valued equity and justice and expected the same from the school staff. She talked quite a bit about her son with autism and the type of teacher she would want for him. Her beliefs, attitudes, and values shaped her idea of what she perceived students with disabilities deserved.

Resistant to Change

Sarah's focus throughout the interviews was heavily centered on policy and what was "best for kids." She talked about the importance of possessing knowledge about special education and how her undergraduate program prepared her to work with and meet the needs of students with disabilities. Some of her conversations revolved around the knowledge base of other teachers and their resistance to change. She spoke specifically about older general education teachers as the "kind of teacher who wants

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'them' [students with disabilities] to go over 'there' [special education classroom]" and went on to say,

> You know like [teacher stated,] "Since when did it become my
>
> responsibility?" And it's like, guess what, it is your responsibility.
>
> It has been your responsibility, and maybe no one told you, but it
>
> has been for a while, [and] they should have been doing this all
>
> along. But the way that they see it and perceive it, it's "one more
>
> thing I have to do."

Sarah was adamant that these types of teachers were aware of the fact that they were responsible for all students but were unwilling to change their perception of what *all* truly meant. Vintage spoke of a similar experience in which she heard a school counselor say that she was not going to place a child in a particular teacher's classroom because she knew that that teacher would not provide what that child needed, to which she reacted, "That should not be happening. All teachers should be following IEPs and be able to follow them." Both Sarah and Vintage spoke of communicating expectations to teachers regarding the teacher's role in serving all students.

FEAR OF FAILURE

"Your hands are tied…it makes you give up. It makes you say, 'It's impossible.'"-RH

The fear of not meeting accountability standards was a major concern for these school leaders. This finding was not surprising. Neither NCLB nor IDEA focuses much attention on "enhancing pedagogy or instruction throughout its accountability

mechanisms" (Ramanathan, 2008, p. 299). Instead, the emphasis is "on punishment rather than capacity building" (p. 299). Because of this, loss of funding, loss of students, loss of teachers, and the social stigma that came with a "failing" school plagued the majority of the school leaders. Many of the school leaders talked about their special education populations having an impact on the testing culture and, as a result, the outcomes of the state accountability testing. The school leaders talked about the difficulties of meeting the needs of students with disabilities in their classrooms as well as adhering to the percentage allotted to each testing category in regard to the number of modified and alternative tests that were "allowed" by the district.

All six leaders felt the need to talk about their struggles with meeting accountability standards, and about the negative outcomes that come if they failed to meet those standards. Even though Van did not feel as if his role on campus had any impact on accountability requirements, he understood that "it all relates back to accountability. There is a distinction between the number of students that you graduate on the recommended plan verses the minimum plan." He also stressed the importance of meeting deadlines and the standards that were set forth so that the school wouldn't "lose any funds," which was only one of the outcomes of failed accountability that was important to this group of school leaders.

Loss of Students

Several of these school leaders were losing students, which in their eyes was one of the most detrimental effects of failed accountability. If their schools did not meet

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accountability standards, students had the option of transferring to another school within the district. Vintage, Lindy, CB, and RH all spoke about the difficulties of a diminishing student body and the effects on the school culture, teachers, and the remaining student population. Vintage underscored that losing students also meant losing teachers. She said,

> This was the first year that our school didn't meet No Child Left
>
> Behind, and so, it impacted our school quite a lot. You know,
>
> students could choose to go to another middle school. And so, we
>
> lost 75 students and we are going to end up losing 4 teachers next
>
> year as a result of that…and that's a shame. (Vintage)

Losing teachers, for Vintage, meant that she was being stripped of resources to meet the needs of all students on her campus. The level of frustration and feelings of defeat were also apparent throughout my interviews with Lindy. She described the impact of failed accountability on her campus:

> The fact that if you miss AYP you can transfer out, that policy is
>
> killing us. So we are left with everyone that isn't invested in
>
> magnet schools, who has parents that don't have the transportation
>
> to get them somewhere else, you know … a lot of our kids come
>
> from across the freeway and they are from [name of nearby
>
> government housing neighborhood]. And, that's just reality. So
>
> really the only way to change it, realistically, is to change the
>
> scores. Because, that's what everyone looks at. (Lindy)

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Lindy touched on the fact that her school did not have a "draw," that is, there were no special programs to encourage students to come to Lincoln High, unless they were living within the zoned neighborhoods for the school. RH and CB talked about the negative impact that a loss of students had on the school culture. A vicious cycle that began with losing students then led to losing teachers, which then resulted in the school having to deal with a poor reputation in the community which, ultimately, contributed to a low morale, campus-wide. These school leaders worked hard to raise the students' morale and build the school community's morale, as well as external perceptions that others had of the school. If they could accomplish their mission, they believed the positive attention they attracted from the school community would create a stronger incentive for other students to attend the school.

Gaining Students

Something unique to this group of school leaders is that although four of the school leaders (Vintage, Lindy, CB, and RH) talked about the impact of losing students due to failed accountability, one school leader (Sarah) shared her perspective of working at a campus that "received" these students. Sarah pointed out that the district designated West Middle as a "receiving campus" this year. Several of her responses to interview questions were centered on the difficulties involved in trying to meet the needs of the receiving students, specifically the students with disabilities. She said,

> But I will say this, when we did get more students [due to her
>
> school being designated a "receiving" school following state

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assessments], we were not staffed for the increase in students.

And, when it comes to special ed, our schedule [points to master

schedule], this wall and this wall and this wall were all covered

with master schedule and it was all for special ed and inclusion

support and covering the needs. We were only allotted the staff for

the students that we *knew* were coming to us…then a week before,

we found out that we were getting a whole new group of kids…and

now you have this student who has this and that student that has

that. And so, on top of kids who didn't even have a schedule yet,

we had to do hiring in that first week, we changed kids' schedules

to accommodate…but we made it work, but it was a nightmare. A

nightmare. (Sarah)

Sarah also spoke about the evolving culture of the campus. West Middle was a well-established school in a more affluent area. Parents, teachers, and even students did not perceive the inclusion of the new students as positive. Sarah grappled with reculturing West Middle while meeting the needs of all of the students.

"M" Kids

Probably one of the unanticipated findings from this study was that some of school leaders spoke about students with disabilities as the " 'M' kids," meaning students with disabilities who were assigned the modified state assessment by their IEP team. These school leaders indicated that their school *missed* accountability requirements

because of the " 'M' kids" or "SPED kids." As discussed in previous sections, failed accountability had a major impact on the student body, teachers, culture of the school, and the community. If these school leaders believed that the "'M' kids" were the cause or one of the causes of failed accountability, this could have an immense influence on the way in which they perceive students with disabilities. Perceptions influence behavior (Weick, 1995).

Lindy spoke of the injustices associated with being labeled and having to take the modified state assessment:

> I'm a little bit worried that special ed kids…and this could
>
> change. If they take a [modified state assessment], they cannot
>
> graduate on the 'Recommended,' which relegates them to only
>
> being able to go to a community college. I don't think that's very
>
> just. I think we are punishing people and limiting them due to
>
> their disabilities. (Lindy)

Others pointed out a need to change testing assignments in order to avoid future injustices. Vintage believed that it was important to "get the 'M' kids off of the modified test" in middle school so that these students would have a chance to participate in a regular graduation. She recognized the social and academic implications that were associated with having the " 'M' kid" label. These school leaders recognized the implications and the long-term, negative outcomes that would occur for those students who were relegated to taking a modified state assessment from year to year.

In such cases, these school leaders actually *acted* in ways that they viewed were "best for kids" when they were faced with systemic challenges, confusing and contradictory policies, interruptions to policy implementation, and potential failure. The following sections draw attention to the ways in which these school leaders acted in light of the perceived barriers to policy implementation.

Enactment of Inclusive Education Policy

"How can I know who I am until I see what I do?" -Weick, 1995, p. 23

Weick (1995) reminded us that sensemaking is different from interpretation in that it is "about an activity or a process" (p. 13) and not about description. It is important to note that these school leaders did not merely describe inclusive education policy and the interruptions to policy implementation that they encountered but also sought out knowledge, grappled with ideas, and enlisted the help of others in order to meet the needs of all students at their schools. Perhaps the most interesting finding was the way that they were willing to "take a hit," as RH described it, for students with disabilities. The following sections highlight several actions taken by these school leaders throughout their sensemaking of inclusive education policy, which include (a) grappling with ideas, (b) focusing on what they could change, and (c) taking a "hit" for students.

"GRAPPLING" WITH IDEAS

Although these school leaders were faced with confusing and conflicting policies, interruptions to policy implementation, and undesirable consequences for failure to meet accountability expectations, they questioned certain aspects of inclusive education policy.

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The act of questioning served as an initial step in the process of developing a plausible explanation for what they had each experienced throughout the process of making sense of inclusive education policy. In Weick's sensemaking theory (1995) an individual begins to make sense of something that appears to be complex or confusing or something that interrupts their daily life, such as the introduction of a new program or a change in district initiatives. These school leaders practiced a higher-level analysis in which they began to question policy, identify complexities and contradictions, and draw their own conclusions of the efficacy of the policy and its intent. In a sense, they became *critical consumers* of policy in which they examined the components and efficacy of policy through a critical lens in order to gain a deeper understanding of the policy, the policy's intent and expected outcomes, and the population for whom the policy was written. For example, Sarah's questioning was directed toward the district's actions or lack thereof: "I questioned a lot of policies that I was told were written, and I wanted to see them. I wanted to know why." She spoke about the district being "secretive" about services for students with disabilities, in that they were available for some schools and not others. She began to "ask a lot of questions…push back…[and] not make [her]self popular." She believed that it was her job to advocate for students and parents who did not have the financial resources or the background knowledge to approach the district with concerns.

In a similar vein, Lindy talked about "see[ing] polices that I don't think are best and I start speaking up about that, although, it might limit my job opportunities." She believed that it was important to advocate for students during IEP meetings as this is where she could be most influential. Some of these school leaders were critically

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examining policy and questioning different aspects embedded within policy, specifically inclusive education policy. Following their critical examinations of policy, they tended to focus on specific aspects of policy that they believed they could change. The following sections highlight these changes.

FOCUSING ON "WHAT WE CAN CHANGE"

Several school leaders articulated the belief that it was not reasonable to expect the community, or the disabilities to change; but, that they could focus on aspects of policy that allowed them to meet the diverse needs of students with disabilities. For example, Vintage spoke at length about a Campus IEP, whereby the district provides each school with a progress report of how their students are being served in special education. In this report, they are given data on variables such as overrepresentation, behavior and discipline, attendance, and benchmark testing. For Vintage, there was no question that "if we have kids that need special education services and we have overrepresentation, we are going to have overrepresentation." Essentially, she believed that if students came to school with specific needs; she was going to ensure that those needs would be met. She was not going to exit students from special education in order to meet a district quota if their educational progress would be impeded in doing so. She mentioned that she could not change the students' need for services, but in order to meet district standards, "there are some things that we can change" related to student discipline such as lowering the number of student removals to an alternative educational placement setting and reducing the percentage of suspension for students with disabilities. As noted

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previously, Vintage began to work with the special education department chair and
teachers to build their capacity and knowledge base to support students with disabilities
in their classrooms. Another aspect of the district progress report she felt the school
could address was parent participation in IEP meetings. Vintage explained,

> I just asked our special education department chair, she's been
>
> collecting data, and that is something that we are reviewing with
>
> the teachers. We look per special education case manager [also a
>
> special education teacher]. We look at what their rates are of
>
> parent participation. And so then I am moving forward with
>
> conversations about how many [IEP meetings] they've had in a
>
> month, and I track how many with parents and the percent, and
>
> then I compare it with what our campus goal is. And so then we
>
> have those conversations of "why are our parents not attending at
>
> the goal rate? What can you do to get them to attend?" and that sort
>
> of thing. (Vintage)

Lindy, like Vintage, emphasized the roles and responsibilities that she knew she could
change that would ultimately benefit students with disabilities. She spoke about her work
in the area of behavior and discipline at Lincoln High, where she noticed that some
students spent inordinate amounts of time in the in-school suspension (ISS) room:

> I marched into my principal's office and asked him for those
>
> [behavior and discipline] areas--I did not like what I was seeing
>
> and I thought we needed to make some improvements. And, a lot

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of that was inspired by the program…It had been a mess for years.

I would go home and worry about it. Because I felt it was such an

injustice. Here we had the most at risk, the most struggling kids

and they are just being warehoused in a room. I just could not live

with it. So [name of principal], my principal, he is fabulous. He

said "It is yours, take it." (Lindy)

During the second interview, Lindy proudly showed me a copy of her discipline data for

the year and how the numbers of student referrals and suspensions had dropped.

These school leaders focused on aspects of policy that they knew could change.

They did not blame the students for coming to school with disabilities or challenges; they

focused on systemic and programmatic change in order to meet student needs.

CB spoke about holding teachers and students with disabilities to the highest

expectation. She believed this was important for cultivating change on campus. RH

focused on district benchmark testing, providing students Saturday school, where they

could receive lunch and supplemental instruction, and building the morale of students

with disabilities. He described a conversation he had with a student with a disability

where the student walked into his office and said, "I can't do this. I am sped, mister." RH

responded,

That's what someone in some place classified you as. And, you

are special. Not because you can't do things, but because there are

special ways for you to do things. I can't do things that you can

do, and you can't do things that I can do. That's the way things

are. And, that's what makes you special.

As noted in previous sections, RH felt he could connect with students due to his

struggles when he was a child and teenager. Based on my observations, it was apparent

that RH wanted to act as a role model for the students on campus. He opened doors for

them, invited them to come to his office to talk, repeatedly shook hands with them, and

asked students how their day was going. As small as the effort seemed to RH, he

believed that he was helping students become successful.

"TAKING A HIT" FOR STUDENTS: PLAUSIBLE EXPLANATIONS

"I make sense of whatever happens around me by asking, what implications do these

events have for who I will be? What the situation will have meant to me is dictated by the

identity I adopt in dealing with it. And that choice, in turn, is affected by what I think is

occurring. What the situation means is defined by who I become while dealing with it or

what and who I represent" -Weick, 1995, p. 24

"It is all about what is in the best interest of the student" -Van

Five of the six principals chose to talk about the ways in which they were willing

to "take a hit" from the school, district, or state in order to ensure that they were making

the best decisions for students with disabilities on their campus. To them, "taking a hit,"

meant that they were willing to put their professional career on the line so that *all*

students' needs would be met. In doing so, these five leaders checked their moral

compass regularly, throughout the decision-making process. Although CB is not

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included in this section, this does not mean that she did or did not choose to "take a hit" for her students. She simply chose to not talk about it during the interviews. The following sections illuminate five of these school leaders' experiences and how they acted despite knowing that they might face ramifications.

Vintage

Vintage described herself in this way: "I do what's best for the kid. It's the only time I'm hard to deal with." She sought out opportunities to do what she felt was right for students consistently and was willing to be reprimanded for not meeting district and state accountability requirements. For instance, she talked about meeting the 2% rule for the percentage of students taking the modified state assessment.

> If we have kids that need to take [modified state assessment], then
>
> they are going to take [modified state assessment] and we are
>
> going to be overrepresented there. We are not going to put a kid
>
> on a [name of state assessment] test just to get a number right,
>
> because it's not right for the kid. (Vintage)

RH

Both Vintage and RH relied heavily on data when making campus-based decisions. They used data to identify programmatic discrepancies and highlight areas of improvement. RH spoke quite frequently about his struggles to meet accountability

requirements while still meeting the needs of students with disabilities. One struggle

occurred during an IEP meeting:

> I'm sitting there having to make this decision in this [IEP meeting]
>
> like, "What do we do? Does everyone agree that we should serve
>
> him until he's 21?" It's double jeopardy. Yes, I would love for
>
> this kid to continue, but, you know, I'd also like to keep my job. I
>
> have family to feed, so, what do I do? "No, I don't think this kid
>
> should continue." That's the *worst* thing to do according to my
>
> morals. So I said, "Yes, he should continue." But then, there goes
>
> my job. (RH)

For RH, doing what was best for students also meant doing what it took to make them

successful. When describing himself, he said, "I advocate for kids all of the time and I

want all kids to succeed." Success was important to RH. He spoke about his goal of

becoming the state superintendent, and the political road that lay ahead of him. The fact

that he knew that he needed an impressive school accountability record made his student-

based decision-making even more fascinating. To him, it was more important to meet

that student's needs by allowing him to remain on campus than it was to make a decision

that would progress his professional career.

Sarah

According to Weick (1995), people actively try to influence others' conduct

while-- at the same time—they react to the conduct of others. Sarah believed it was her

responsibility as a school leader to be informed and to take action against the injustices she encountered. For example, throughout the two interviews Sarah brought up an incident in which the principal at her previous school was telling parents that the school did not serve students with disabilities or that their child would be better served elsewhere. As she started to recount her story regarding a denial of a FAPE in the LRE at her previous school, she wanted to go "off record" at first; but she decided her experience was important

> So, my campus had multiple years in which they didn't have a
>
> single special education student. [pause] Yeah. Denied access,
>
> public funding, public school. Completely wrong. And, I could
>
> not continue to be there [at previous campus] knowing what I
>
> knew and knowing that that happened and what they [leadership at
>
> previous school] did.

Sarah explained further that the principal of her previous school "would blatantly and flat-out tell parents of special needs students, 'Your child cannot come to this school.'" She took it upon herself to inform the school district's human resources department of her experience. She claimed that there was "a way [for schools] to 'get away with it' but she would give the school and district a chance to "fix it" before she took further action. Like Vintage and RH, Sarah was faced with a difficult decision, and she ultimately left the school where she had been an assistant principal. Interestingly, she did not take action to "fix" things on campus herself. She felt that the situation would be resolved if she brought it to the attention of the school district. She spoke about the education system as

a "political world", and how she realized that it was "ok to push back, but you have to do it in the right ways."

Despite the belief that these school leaders could change certain policies or actions, Sarah admitted that, in some cases, she needed to follow the chain of command and allow the district administration to determine the appropriate actions to take. When faced with cases that could jeopardize their professional or political relationship with individuals on their campus or the district, some school leaders were more reluctant to attempt to change things on their campuses. Or, they believed they would not be able to do so due to either political reasons or the realization that they lacked the authoritative or positional capacity to do so. In Sarah's case, after she weighed the gravity of the situation and the political ramifications that might occur, she determined that she had no direct control over her principal's action and needed to revert to going up the chain of command. Thus, she brought her concerns to the attention of the powers-that-be and then left it up to them to fix it.

Van

For Van, the notion of not being given the authority, as a school leader, to train teachers was absurd. Van chose to obey his orders from the district, but he did find ways around his district directives in order to provide the training that he perceived to be necessary for special education teachers to do their jobs.

I don't know if I shared this in the first interview, but the

department chair was going to lead a meeting for all of the

facilitators in a certain grade level. And, I've told you that I

wasn't supposed to give any direct training. So, my solution to

that was that I was going to rely on the experienced teachers and

ask, "Well, how do you take care of this?" Which is empowering

them and … giving them ownership of their department. And it's

also a way to give the training to the people if they needed [it]. It

was the route that I wanted to take because, one, I believe in the

distributed leadership model, and, two, because if I was having the

experienced case managers speak from their experiences, then I

wasn't actually delivering the training. I'm facilitating

communication. (Van)

Van had been told not to train teachers, yet he believed that it was necessary for them to

know how to correctly write IEPs for students. Regardless of the topic throughout the

interviews, Van typically rationalized his choices, responses, and actions by saying they

were "best for kids." Although in his eyes Van did not break any rules, he bent them.

Van believed that through his actions, he was able to facilitate what he believed teachers

needed to know in order to write correct IEPs, and he did so while still obeying his

orders.

Lindy

The majority of these school leaders did not choose to talk about a personal

experience regarding their choice to do what was right for students. For Lindy, Lincoln

High had been her home campus for 10 years. In fact, she began her career at Lincoln High as a student teacher. She spoke of the teachers as a "tight-knit group." Having to put one of her colleagues on a growth plan was a difficult decision to make. She believed, however, that she "did the right thing for the kids. I wouldn't want my son in that classroom." She spoke about having both an administrator's and a parent's perspective when making decisions for kids. She believed that having both perspectives gave her a unique insight into meeting the needs of students with disabilities on campus.

AVOIDING THE "YUPPIE NUREMBERG DEFENSE."

Although not central to sensemaking, the phrase *avoiding the yuppie Nuremberg defense* (Reitman, 2006) seemed a plausible way to talk about this section. The "Nuremberg defense," is a legal defense used by the accused to defend his or her actions as *only following orders* (D'Amato, Gould, & Woods, 1969). Basically, it is defendants' plea that they not be held responsible for their actions because they were ordered to do something by a superior officer. Although not as extreme as in the case of war crimes, the phrase *only following orders* might be used as a "well-groomed" plausible explanation throughout inclusive education policy implementation by those who view district orders as beyond their scope of authority (Rotter, 1966).

It is interesting that these school leaders did not invoke the "yuppie Nuremberg defense" throughout their sensemaking of inclusive education policy. In RH's case, he actually considered how his decision [allowing a student with a disability to stay in school until he was 21 or forcing the student to graduate within four years] could have

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cost him his job and potential future job prospects. He did not simply *follow* [district] *orders* to keep his job to pay his mortgage by adhering to accountability requirements. He believed that doing what he perceived to be best for a particular student with a disability—even though, in doing so, he might be risking his job-- was something that he had control over. In a sense, he viewed himself as a policymaker on his campus.

These school leaders believed that they were given specific district and state orders in terms of testing and graduation requirements, training, and teacher quality. However, these school leaders were willing to negotiate these orders and take the blame for not following them; particularly if they felt that these orders were not in the best interests of their students. Consistent with Weick's (1995) theory, they did justify their actions with a plausible explanation. The interesting question is, why did this group of school leaders choose doing what was best or right for students as their plausible explanation(s)? Furthermore, where did these plausible explanations come from? In the next section, I attempt to answer these questions as well as enumerate the supports that enabled these school leaders to make sense of inclusive education policy.

School Leaders' Interpretation of Supports

In this section, I address the third research question: *"How did current school leaders who are graduates of high-quality principalship programs perceive supports that enabled them to navigate the complexity of inclusive education policy on their campuses?"* To elicit responses from these school leaders that would allow me to capture anything and everything that they said regarding supports, I cast a wide net

throughout the interview and data collection process. There were no right or wrong answers, just a descriptive account of the supports that these school leaders identified as most beneficial and that enabled them to navigate their way through the complexities inherent in implementing inclusive education policy on each of their respective campuses.

In the earlier section, *A Poor Map: Discrepancies and Contradicting Aspects of Policy*, I compared the experience of identifying complexities within inclusive education policy to Weick's (1995) example of a *poor* map in which school leaders identified missing information, "holes" within policy, and contradicting elements. Although inclusive education policy was perceived as a *poor map* throughout sensemaking and policy implementation, these school leaders identified supports that enabled them to navigate policy implementation despite being provided with a *poor map*. The supports described by these school leaders facilitated policy implementation and allowed them to make sense of inclusive education policy. The school leaders mentioned the following supports: (a) external resources, (b) the help of others, (c) university-based programs: undergraduate and HQPPP, and (d) prior experience. Each of these supports is discussed in detail in the following sections.

EXTERNAL RESOURCES

"It [having the capacity to serve students with disabilities] is how intrinsically motivated you are to learn more and seek out knowledge" -Lindy

This group of school leaders sought special education knowledge from three external sources: district trainings, empirical research, and books. Of the school leaders, Vintage talked about seeking knowledge from external resources more frequently and more in depth than the other school leaders. A possible explanation for this could have been due to her request that she be given the administrative responsibility for handling issues related to special education on the campus--she spoke about recognizing the need to know more in terms of special education administration. On the other hand, Van, who was a special education director and a doctoral student in a special education program, seemed to seek information only to "reinforce my current behaviors and the way I already think." Needless to say, there was wide variety of responses among these school leaders in what knowledge they sought and how and where they acquired such knowledge.

District training

Sarah and Vintage sought district training to acquire information about students with disabilities. Sarah said she wanted to learn how to meet the needs of a student with autism on her campus. Although she pointed out several of the district's shortcomings in previous sections, she felt very comfortable asking the district for support. During the first interview, when Sarah invited me into her office, she was on the phone with a district transitional specialist. She explained that she had a new student coming to her campus and wanted to make sure she was following district protocol regarding his IEP. Vintage, on the other hand, was more interested in understanding special education

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populations in general. She also inquired about programmatic training for co-teaching and inclusion. Both Sarah and Vintage sought training that was parallel to what they perceived to be their job responsibilities. For example, Vintage saw herself as responsible for all aspects of special education at her school; thus, she took a holistic approach when seeking special education knowledge

Van had a different perspective on district training. He was forced to take the same training each year, which he perceived as a waste of his time. He said, "It's about development, not regurgitation. It's not 'professional regurgitation' …they gave me the same stick to beat the same dead horse with." Van stressed the importance of matching training to the need of the individual. He seemed to believe that training was done *to* him, not *for* him. Throughout the interviews, he gave examples of the ways in which he would "fix" this problem had he been given the authority to do so. Yet, he perceived his role as lacking the capacity and the authority to interfere with district training initiatives.

Empirical research

Empirical research was a second source of knowledge for these school leaders. At one point or another, all of them mentioned seeking or referring to empirical research in order to help them solve a problem. The majority of these school leaders referred back to research articles that were given to them as HQPPP cohort members. CB remarked, "We [the cohort] were given so much research to go back on" when she mentioned things "not working" on campus. Vintage mentioned that her principal required that prior to the presentation of a new idea, a potential change in an existing program, or an alternative

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approach or solution, they made sure they could accompany their recommendation with empirical studies—evidence-based research—that supported their thinking. This requirement applied to both the staff and the leadership team.

Revisiting books from HQPPP

Five of the six school leaders mentioned revisiting or rereading books that were assigned to their HQPPP cohorts. Although Van did mention one book that he used to help him build relationships with his staff, it was suggested to him by one of his special education professors throughout his doctoral program. RH mentioned a book on social justice leadership that affirmed his stance on "keeping the student in mind" throughout decision-making:

You know when you try to find your "identity" and how you try to find the person you want to be? When I read that book and I started to learn about it, it gave it a name for what I wanted to live for. It gave it a name for what I want to do. And so me hearing that and understanding that there are other people out there that are the same and are willing to stick their neck out and get fired for the good of their students, it was good to hear. And, it was also good to know that there was a name for it. And so, I strive to be one [social justice leader], but I'm not sure if that's what I am doing. … We will see. Because, like I said, they [the district] throw all of these rules out to you, and lines start blurring and you start to lose

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your direction. And so, I like to push back and think, "What's

good for me? What's good for the school? What's good for the

student? How can we do all of this with the student in mind?" It's

so easy to take off in another direction where the student is not as

important. And so, I think just learning about it and reading about

it so I can step back and say, "OK, the reason that we are here is

for the students." (RH)

RH's response illustrated several talking points from the previous section " 'Taking a

Hit' for Students: Plausible Explanations." Consistent with Weick's (1995) discussion of

identity construction, RH spoke about developing his identity and becoming "the person

you want to be" in light of the difficult decisions that needed to be made. Weick (1995)

posited, "I make sense of whatever happens around me by asking, what implications do

these events have on who I will be?" (p. 24). RH seemed to be asking himself a similar

question as he developed his sense of identity, which is an essential aspect of

sensemaking. The types of books read by these school leaders influenced the ways in

which they constructed their identities.

ENLISTING THE HELP OF OTHERS

"Sensemaking is not entirely an individual level of analysis" -Weick, 1995, p. 38

Sensemaking occurs at both the individual and the group level. It includes both

individual and social contributions (Weick, 1995). Based on previous research

(Brotherson et al., 2001; Crockett et al., 2007; Estes, 2003; 2009; Garrison-Wade, Sobel,

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& Fulmer, 2007; Rice, 2006; Salisbury, 2006; Taylor, 2006), school leaders do not typically include others in their leadership efforts to implement inclusive mandates. In fact, they are more inclined to place demands on the shoulders of staff and students or blame external forces for the lack of implementation on their campuses. This lack of consistency with established research is interesting given the context that the school leaders in this study have participated in a principal preparation program where collaboration was an essential component (e.g. cohort model, collaborative school study). Therefore, are they more inclined to employ collaborative efforts to deal with complex and difficult demands on their campuses than observed in the literature?

These school leaders sought out others as a support for meeting the needs of students with disabilities on their campuses. The majority of the school leaders mentioned seeking the support of experts at the campus level in regards to special education, although some enlisted help from individuals at the district level. Not surprisingly, all six of the school leaders utilized their cohort members throughout their initial years as school leaders when facing difficulty. Although not specific to special education, their concerns included several aspects of meeting the needs of *all* students on their campuses, such as programmatic concerns, class sizes, and nurturing the campus climate to become more inclusive of all children.

District Expertise

Vintage was the only school leader who mentioned district expertise as a support. She enlisted the help of a district co-teaching expert to provide training and feedback to

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teachers regarding their co-teaching practice and inclusion efforts. Vintage spoke about

the high quality of teaching that she observed while in the resource classrooms and that

the resource teachers were "fabulous…doing the things they needed to be doing…small

groups, individualized instruction, [and] using relevant materials." However, she did not

understand why the students in these classes were not attaining higher scores on state

accountability tests. In order to provide instructional support, she spoke about asking a

district consultant to work with the resource teachers. Vintage was eager to seek support

and knowledge from others, both from the district and her campus.

Campus Expertise

Several of the school leaders identified individuals on campus with whom they

would brainstorm or ask advice regarding special education. Lindy spoke about "relying

on the teachers around me" when asking questions related to special populations. Sarah

mentioned another vice-principal who had a background in special education, which she

viewed as a "strength of our administration." She believed she could go to him for any

questions regarding special education and that he was an important resource for the

school's administrative team. RH heavily relied on his special education instructional

coach for special education campus-based decisions. Vintage named several individuals

as campus experts:

> I'll sit down and brainstorm with the principal and with the other
>
> director a lot and also the special education department chair, and
>
> then I always include the teachers, too, as much as I can because

they have really great feedback, particularly the lead teachers of all

of our special programs…our life skills, our autistic program, and

our social behavior skills. I meet with those teachers. (Vintage)

For Vintage, collaboration was instrumental in meeting the needs of all students on her

campus, and she spoke about providing opportunities that helped to make that happen.

CB mentioned that her special education department chair was not someone to whom she

would go for support due to the department chairs' level of competency as perceived by

CB. She tended to rely on data, empirical research, and herself for special education

support.

HQPPP Cohort Members

Although these school leaders shared several experiences of how they utilized

their HQPPP cohort members' expertise when making decisions on their respective

campuses, they were less likely to use their cohort members for decisions solely

involving students with disabilities. Instead, they called on their cohort members to talk

about whole-school issues, such as difficulties with being a first year school leader,

struggles of being a social justice leader, and how to meet the diverse needs of all

students on their campuses. These school leaders mentioned that their cohorts' dynamics

began with the HQPPP during their first summer together as a group. One cohort even

began to call each other "family," CB explained:

we just started to call each other "family." I think [male cohort

member] started it. He was like "we are no longer just a

group…we are family." And so he just started saying "family" and

that's how we got to calling us "family." And, then after that took,

it was brother [cohort member first name] and sister [cohort

member first name]. And, it started out as a joke, but, when we

saw the cohesiveness of our cohort…we were like "no no, we are

family."

She perceived her "family" going through similar struggles as school leaders and used

them as a resource consistently throughout her first year as a school leader. Like CB, RH

believed that his HQPPP cohort shared a close bond and stated: "we knew things about

each other and we loved each other so much." Having strong relationships with other

cohort members proved to be a powerful support when making difficult decisions on their

respective campuses. As Sarah explained:

I also think that the cohort model of our program really builds

leadership in a way where we can call each other, we can email

each other, we can keep in touch. We care about each

other…genuinely. The amount of time they [HQPPP program

directors] made us stay together, you know, I feel like they

[HQPPP cohort members] are my extended brothers and sisters.

And, it's like that college roommate that you haven't seen for years

and you see them and it's like you never left off…you can pick

right back up. I think that the principal position is a "lonely"

position. I think that people have said that and shared that.

Having a strong support system in place where trust was already established was highly valued by this group of school leaders. Trust, honesty, and self-respect are important for social interaction to occur throughout sensemaking (Weick, 1995). Having an established and trusted network in place provided these school leaders with the diverse expertise they needed to extend their knowledge of inclusive education policy and to enlarge the capacity for them to make sense of such policies.

HQPPP Professors

One of the most interesting supports described throughout the interviews was these school leaders' reliance on the HQPPP professors. Due to confidentiality, I cannot name each of the professors or the specific courses that they taught. However, it is important to discuss the ways in which they acted as supports to these school leaders. Several of the school leaders spoke about the in-class activities, books, articles, and topics that were discussed throughout the curriculum that added to their understanding of special education and special education law. Again, the majority of these school leaders spoke about special education in a "whole school" approach and attributed this approach to their program professors. Vintage explained: "She [HQPPP professor] got me to think about special education on a campus. [She] let me think about special education at a campus-level rather than just a classroom level."

Several of the others spoke about contacting HQPPP professors via telephone, email, or online chat communications to ask questions specific to *doing what's right* for children. Sarah spoke about calling on her professors when she noticed that students with

disabilities were being excluded from attending her previous school. She explained: "consulting with my professor, you know, I've called them [HQPPP professors] and they were available and I said 'here's what's happening' and they said 'you know what, you do what's right'" (Sarah). These school leaders perceived their HQPPP as approachable and knowledgeable and, as a result, continued to utilize them as supports throughout their roles as school leaders.

Perhaps the most fascinating finding was the way in which these school leaders spoke about their professors' "voices" being present in their heads throughout decision-making. For example, Lindy stated:

the voice that I've had in my head all year is Dr. [HQPPP

professor]'s. That's my voice. And one of the things that she said

that I remember the most is "you've got to know your teachers.

You've got to get to know your teachers." And so, I made a point

of getting in the classrooms of all of my teachers that I evaluate as

much as possible.

Although many of the experiences shared by these school leaders were not specific to special education, it was important to note that they relied on their professors for many of their "whole school" issues, which for these school leaders, included special education.

UNIVERSITY-BASED PROGRAMS: UNDERGRADUATE AND HQPPP

Special education training at the university level seemed to affect these school leaders in the areas of (1) foundations of expertise and (2) identity construction. It was

interesting to note that they pulled from their principal training more frequently than any other source of support. Several of the school leaders attributed their identity to the social justice themes embedded in the principalship program. As Van explained, "The [social justice] lens is something that is permanently engraved now. It is a part of who I am. I would say that the program definitely shaped who I am."

Undergraduate Program

Sarah was the only school leader who drew upon the knowledge, skills, and ideas she gained during her undergraduate program as a support for meeting the needs of students with disabilities. Through her undergraduate training, she acquired a solid foundational knowledge of special education and the skills that were essential for meeting their diverse needs:

> My undergrad program was so strong and I felt like it truly
>
> prepared me. Like, how to accommodate, how to serve students
>
> [with disabilities] and things like that. I didn't realize the extent to
>
> which it helped me have the knowledge until I was out and seeing
>
> what other teachers were doing. (Sarah)

Her favorite project throughout her undergraduate program was meeting regularly with a woman with a disability in order to learn more about people with disabilities. Sarah said that this helped her develop a sense of empathy and "urgency." She noted that you must "live it" and go through experiences with disability before you can truly understand how important it is to serve those with disabilities.

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HQPPP

  All of the school leaders mentioned their HQPPP as a support throughout their efforts in meeting the needs of all students on their campus. The program influenced the school leaders' sensemaking by (1) adding to their knowledge base and (2) developing their identity as school leaders.

Knowledge-base

  The school leaders mentioned, variously, their law class, mock IEP meetings, wheelchair simulation, school case study, and equity audits as adding to their knowledge of special education. Vintage said,

> I think the cohort program at [name of university] got me through
> thinking of the legal side of it [special education], the differences
> between the programs and to really understand why the programs
> were created and the importance of them. And, what my role as an
> administrator might be in terms of [IEP meetings] or in terms of
> representing the district and those sorts of things….like the
> financial implications that would come into play.

CB mentioned that the inclusion of special education and the experience of the school case study was

> eye-opening…because you know that you can look at the data and
> there is a gap and you can see it. But looking into the causes and

how long that gap has been there, when it started, how much of a

disservice was done, it helps to wrap my head around. (CB)

She noted that through their equity audit as part of the school case study, her HQPPP

cohort determined that a disproportionate number of the school's African-American

students were being placed and served in special education programs, leading to their

discovery of a common occurrence within schools—the overrepresentation of African-

American students in special education.

Members of both of the HQPPP cohorts engaged in a school case study activity

throughout the first summer session of their program. They were assigned a school site

as a research project whereby they interviewed campus staff, analyzed data obtained from

their interviews and archival school documents, and conducted a community walk.

During community walks, cohort members canvassed the homes within the neighborhood

and businesses located within the nearby radius of the school campus to which they were

assigned to collect data for the school case study. They spoke with business owners,

patrons on buses, and community members to gain a deeper understanding of the

community and school culture. They collected descriptive and qualitative data in the

form of memos and field notes. The purpose of the school study was to identify areas of

need, provide recommendations, and then present the findings to the school faculty. CB

mentioned that she liked to reread the school case study when making decisions for her

campus as a school leader.

Lindy and Sarah talked about their experiences with the wheelchair simulation in

one of their special education courses. They explained that the simulation was an activity

in which they followed a specific route on campus while sitting in an electric wheelchair. The simulation was about 2 hours long, and they were able to choose the time and day to complete it. They added that there was a reflection paper that helped them express their feelings and attitudes that surfaced as a result of the wheelchair simulation. Sarah mentioned that after that experience, it made her wonder about several inequities at her school, such as why the handicapped ramps are at the back of the building. Sarah observed,

[It] helps me to want to understand and advocate for least

restrictive environment … I am even more aware about certain

situations and I ask questions like, "OK, you put the handicapped

bathroom at the end of the bathrooms?" and, "You put the ramp to

get into the building at the back of the building instead of the

front?" So, these are things that I never probably would have

looked at had I not had those experiences.

RH and Lindy mentioned a mock IEP meeting, wherein the professor provided an opportunity for the school leaders to facilitate an IEP meeting in class. Lindy found that it was a combination of the wheelchair simulation, mock IEP, and the law class that "help[ed] prepare me and just increase my awareness of the rights, the legal rights of families of kids with special needs."

Van pointed out the benefit of using an equity audit (see Skrla, Scheurich, Garcia, & Nolly, 2004). According to these school leaders, an equity audit was a tool in which to identify and analyze inequities within their schools. One of the components within the

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equity audit is assessing the quality of each special education teacher as well as identifying any disproportionality that may exist within the special education student population. Van said, "I don't do an equity audit but maybe once a month or every six weeks, but any situation that I look to, there is just a framework of 'is this equitable? Is this a situation that is good for all students or just certain students?'" Van used this framework to help him identify inequities within special education programming throughout his decision-making as a special education director.

Identity Construction

One of the most interesting way in which the school leaders utilized their HQPPP for support was in developing their identities as school leaders. They all said that aspects of social justice leadership were part of their daily lives.

Interestingly, CB admitted, "[H]ad it not been for that [inclusion of the social equity piece within HQPPP], I would have been one of those 'angry people.'" She spoke further about a conversation with one of her HQPPP program directors in which he told her, "It's not about you. It's not about me. It's about the kids. It's about their achievement and their level of success. And, it's about the communities that they are in and supporting them." These words resonated with CB and pushed her to think about school, students, and the community in a different way. Several school leaders discussed the influence that social justice had on their perceptions of their assigned school and the way in which students were being served. Lindy remarked,

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It [the principalship program] really just validated things in my

own ideology about education and public education on social

justice. It validated all of that for me and it let me know that

you're on the right track with your thinking and the way you

perceive schools and students. (Lindy)

Like Lindy, Vintage spoke about the extent to which the HQPPP changed her way of

thinking about schools and meeting the needs of *all* students. Vintage stated,

I think that the principalship program really made you to think

about protecting the needs and the rights of *all* kids. And so,

especially those with more challenges, they need more protection.

And so, they [HQPPP professors] really got you to think about the

budget and looking at the percentage of the special education kids.

How much funding are you getting for those kids? How are you

spending that funding? And then, looking at classroom[s] and set

up, and "What's best?" Should there be inclusion? What does

inclusion look like? If you have teachers who are providing

inclusion, what type of model are they using, what type of support

are they providing? What support are you giving to those teachers?

Vintage listed the types of questions she might ask herself when trying to protect the

rights of all students on a campus. Throughout the interviews, she explained that when

she said "all students," she truly meant *all* students, including those with disabilities.

Like other school leaders, Sarah called attention to how the HQPPP program communicated to the principalship cohort members that they were the advocates for the child. She said, "Let me tell you, in the grad school [HQPPP] program, we definitely got the message that we are the advocates for the child. You are the advocate for the families who do not know better. Yes, you are the representative of the school district. You are the representative of the campus." As a representative of the school campus, Sarah believed that that it was her responsibility to advocate for parent rights, especially those lacking knowledge of the "system." Sarah, Lindy, and Vintage spoke at length about the importance of advocating for families who did not have the capacity or knowledge to advocate for their child throughout IEP meetings. They believed that it was necessary to ensure that the parents were well informed and active participants in their child's IEP.

PRIOR EXPERIENCE

In sensemaking, people make sense of things that they have already experienced. In other words, they "can know what they are doing only after they have done it" (Weick, 1995, p. 24). For these school leaders, providing examples and stories enabled them to make sense of what they had experienced in the past. In turn, they began to predict future outcomes, share advice, and identify additional goals for meeting the needs of students with disabilities. The following sections highlight some of their professional and personal experiences.

Professional

Vintage acknowledged that she was "getting better over the years with figuring out what documentation do I need in order to move forward with a kid with special needs, like, what do I need to have to make things right?" CB alluded to working with special education co-teachers. Lindy mentioned that she learned better through that actual experience of attending IEP meetings—what was discussed, considered, and decided in the process of developing the student's IEP provided her with a special education knowledge base. RH told an interesting story about walking into an IEP meeting and realizing that the parents of a student with a disability had brought an attorney. RH continued,

> So, my special education instructional coach was like, "You know
> you can't continue right?" and I was like, "Why [not]?" and she
> said, "Because there is an attorney in here." And I was like, "So?"
> and she said, "We need to have our [district] attorney in here." So,
> I had to tell them [the IEP team] that we needed to hold this [IEP
> meeting] at a later time. Because, you know, I didn't know that.
> And she [the special education instructional coach] had to tell me
> that. It's embarrassing you know. It's embarrassing for me to be
> the leader and not to know.

RH recognized the importance of being familiar with special education law and district policies. This experience was memorable to him, and it influenced what he perceived as important for school leaders to know regarding special education.

Sarah also had an interesting story. While employed at a different campus, Sarah

began to notice that the social/behavioral skills (SBS) teacher was coming in and out of

the office for coffee. She was curious as to why he seemed to always be away from his

room and his students. She took a few personal days off in order to shadow him so that

she might gain a better understanding of his job responsibilities. She began to notice that

students would stop by to say hello and that was their connection for the day. She

noticed the behaviors of the students and the importance of a constant adult figure in their

lives. She then began to understand the difficulties associated with the position of an

SBS teacher. After this experience, she remarked, "my respect for him [SBS teacher]

totally changed. I'm like, 'You know what? When he's getting coffee, he needs coffee.

He deserves coffee. Let me make the coffee for you!" As humorous as her response was,

Sarah grasped the knowledge, skill, and hard work that went into serving students with

disabilities. Because of this, she stressed the importance of experiences. She said, "I

think that every principal or aspiring principal needs to live it. If you want them to make

decisions that are in the best interests for students with special needs, put them in the

situations and make them live it."

Personal

Only two of the school leaders--Sarah and Lindy--mentioned having personal

experiences with someone with a disability. As noted earlier, Lindy was the mother of a

son diagnosed with autism. She felt "blessed to have him" and even if she could "wave a

wand over my son and not make him autistic, I wouldn't do it because the elements of his

autism make him really cool and unique." Before she had her son, she did not have many experiences with "special needs" in her classes, but believed she was now better able to advocate for students with disabilities. Sarah spoke about rekindling her relationship with her cousin with a disability after learning more about special education in her undergraduate program and, as a result, she encouraged her aunt to provide more learning opportunities for her cousin via technology.

These types of experiences shaped the school leaders' understanding of what it meant to meet the needs of students with disabilities. It was evident that they pulled from their experiences when trying to make sense of inclusive education policy. In addition, they relied on existing knowledge and the help of others, sought out knowledge from experts, and searched for evidence-based practice related to their administrative roles and meeting the needs of their students through empirical literature.

Highlighted Areas of Concern

Although it was important to include the supports these school leaders discussed throughout the interviews, they also highlighted a sense of concern that relates to the scope and depth of special education and special education law content knowledge base that they had throughout their sensemaking of inclusive education policy. Because the school leaders' perceptions were central to this study, several of their suggestions as to what they believed they needed to know as current school leaders is incorporated in the following recommendations.

- Topics in special education and special education law: "special education process, law, what we can do, what we can't do, how do you put a kid into special education, how do you take them out, what is the process, what happens with a special ed kid turns 21 and you can't service him anymore... Can you keep going further? Things that I've learned here that I'm telling you about." (RH)

- Proactive strategies: "...proactive strategies in meeting the needs of all kinds of learners....There is just so much with accountability and the possibility of litigation when you are dealing with students with special education services...preparing people to be a bit more proactive in talking about what it takes to meet those needs." (Van)

- Role of school leader: "The one thing that I do not think that I was prepared for were all of the different special programs within special education...Another hard thing was the testing decision making... [and] a lot of times in special education when you host a meeting on campus, you've got a lot of outside players that come, and so learning how to facilitate when you have 20 people sitting at the table and learning what you can realistically provide and that their needs are being met.." (Vintage)

- Content knowledge specific to cohort's needs: "We [the HQPPP cohort] were wanting to get law protocol and really in-depth definitions of all abbreviations kids can get, and, we got some of that, but we got a lot of situational stuff geared towards elementary, but our cohort was specifically designed for secondary...I feel like the lessons didn't engage higher-level thinking as far as special ed kids

went. Now, the case study we did in the summer, that really dove into that [high-level thinking] with the overrepresentation of African Americans in special education." (CB)

- "Real life" experiences as leaders for special education: "in our sped class, we had a mock [IEP meeting] that was actually a pretty helpful simulation, and we had some advocates come and speak to us…but honestly I have learned more from sitting in on real [IEP meetings] with real families and real students," (Lindy)

- Special education throughout internship and experiential learning opportunities: "I think we would have needed more about the array of needs students can present…and understanding the inner workings of the district, like, 'Who do I call?' and 'How do you navigate the electronic system?'…having exposure to the system the district uses…guiding us on interpreting scores…providing real examples of successful [special education] models to imitate or to analyze and to evaluate, to see, to observe. You know, make it 'real.' Like us [the HQPPP cohort], seeing successful [special education] programs and watching an IEP meeting…knowing what is an advocate and what do they do throughout IEP meetings…the more I know what's been done, the more I know how to advocate and what to ask for [that] is 'appropriate.'" (Sarah)

In short, these school leaders sought depth and scope of special education content as well as opportunities to be involved in as many lived experiences as leaders for special education as possible. It is important to note that several suggestions listed encompass aspects of their personal contexts, special education and special education law knowledge

base, and experiences that they perceived as necessary throughout sensemaking of inclusive education policy.

Summary of Chapter 4

Guided by three research questions,

1. How did current school leaders who are graduates of a high-quality principal preparation program describe their lived experiences in regard to special education practices on their campuses?

2. How did current school leaders who are graduates of a high-quality principal preparation program make sense of inclusive education policy demands at their schools?

3. How did current school leaders who are graduates of a high-quality principal preparation program perceive the supports that enabled them to navigate the complexity of inclusive education policy on their campuses?

this study sought to examine how a group of six current school leaders and graduates of HQPPPs made sense of inclusive education policy and the supports that enabled them to do so. The participants' words were utilized to shed light on the ways in which they navigated the complexities inherent in understanding the details of and implementing inclusive education policy on their campuses. Throughout sensemaking, these school leaders applied their perceptions of their lived experiences, their knowledge, and "personal context" (Trider & Leithwood, 1998, p. 295) to help them make sense of inclusive education policy.

The supports that enabled these school leaders to make sense of inclusive education policy stemmed from four sources: (1) external resources, (2) enlisting help from others, (3) university-based programs: undergraduate and HQPPP, and (4) prior experience. One of the most influential supports was the coursework and focus on social justice leadership embedded in the HQPPPs. These components contributed to the school leaders' knowledge base as well as influenced their identity construction throughout sensemaking of inclusive education policy.

CHAPTER 5

Summary, Discussion, Implications, Recommendations

This chapter provides a summary of the study, a discussion of the findings, limitations to the study, and recommendations for research, practice, and policy. This chapter is organized into seven sections: (1) purpose and research questions; (2) summary of methods; (3) summary of findings; (4) discussion of findings; (5) implications and recommendations; and (6) limitations, and (7) recommendations for future research.

Purpose and Research Questions

With increasing demand for school accountability following the NCLB Act of 2001, school leaders have a greater responsibility to students with disabilities than ever before. School leaders' roles have expanded (Provost, Boscardin, & Wells, 2010) to include special education leadership due to the leadership imperative to meet the needs of *all* students (Lashley, 2007; Yell, 2012). Little attention, however, has been paid to special education and special education law in leadership preparation programs (Cusson, 2010; Pazey & Cole, 2013), leaving school leaders inadequately prepared to serve *all* students.

A lack of understanding of special education and special education law has significant implications for school leaders as they strive to interpret and implement of inclusive education policy (Lashley, 2007). Trider and Leithwood (1998) found that knowledge is one of the central determinants of policy implementation. In addition, they found that a school leader's belief or attitude toward a certain policy—his or her

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"personal context" (p. 295)--was among one of the most influential factors in policy implementation. For these reasons, I contend that principal preparation programs should include specific coursework in special education and special education law along with the incorporation of components that build emerging school leaders' "personal context." Because school leaders shape policy on their campuses (Coburn, 2005), principal preparation programs need to pay particular attention to the development of future school leaders' knowledge base (i.e. special education and special education law content) and their "personal context" (i.e. beliefs and attitudes towards the policy and the population the policy is designed to serve). Such a focus could significantly impact the academic and social outcomes of students with disabilities.

The purpose of this study was to explore how six current school leaders who are graduates of a high-quality principal preparation programs (HQPPP) made sense of inclusive education policy and legal mandates in attempting to promote an inclusive school culture. The high-quality program was selected based on three criteria: (1) it contained several the majority of the components of an exemplary principalship program, (2) it included at least one required course for special education or special education law in the curriculum, and (3) it included components such as social justice leadership that, in some way, addressed the future school leaders' personal contexts. The research questions that guided this study are as follows:

1. How did current school leaders who are graduates of a high-quality principal preparation program describe their lived experiences in regard to special education practices on their campuses?

2. How did current school leaders who are graduates of a high-quality principal preparation program make sense of inclusive education policy demands at their schools?

3. How did current school leaders who are graduates of a high-quality principal preparation program perceive the supports that enabled them to navigate the complexity of inclusive education policy on their campuses?

Due to the paucity of research in how school leaders make sense of inclusive education policy, this study has the potential to enrich current understanding of the ways in which school leaders implement complex and changing inclusive educational policies at their schools. This study may provide current school leaders a framework in which they can further understand how to make sense of inclusive education policy. In addition, it has the potential to add to the literature regarding effective components for exemplary principal preparation training. The findings from this study may assist educational administration departments, program directors, and researchers when they are evaluating the effectiveness of their graduate-level administrator preparation programs.

Summary of Methods

Because the purpose of this study was to understand how these school leaders made sense of inclusive education policy, a qualitative phenomenological approach was employed. This approach is focused on "descriptions of what people experience and how it is they experience what they experience" (Patton, 1990, p. 71). Complementary to this approach, the theoretical framework *sensemaking* (Weick, 1995) guided this study.

Sensemaking provided a frame of reference for identifying specific phenomena that were related to these school leaders' implementation of inclusive education policy.

Qualitative and descriptive data were collected via a demographic survey, interviews, observations, field notes, memos, and document analysis. Data were analyzed via two approaches: (1) theoretical and substantive coding and (2) a phenomenological approach to synthesizing data. Inter-rater reliability was assessed via four educational professionals who validated subthemes that emerged from initial codes. Validity was addressed by implementing the following methods as suggested by Creswell (2007) and Maxwell (2005): (a) researcher reflexivity, (b) emphasizing "internal generalizability" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 115), (c) collecting rich data, (d) respondent validation, and (e) triangulating the data. A summary of the findings that emerged from this study is provided in the next section.

Summary of Findings

The six school leaders involved in this study articulated their sense of inclusive education policy as it related to three areas:

1. *Their knowledge base*: understanding of special education and special education law, students with disabilities, instructional capacity to support teachers who support students with disabilities, and policy intended to support students with disabilities

2. *Their experiences*: professional and personal experiences, situational context, and past histories

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3. *Their personal contexts*: how their professional and personal identities were constructed; perceived values, beliefs, and attitudes toward special education and special education law; attitudes toward students with disabilities; attitudes toward special education service providers; and attitudes about policy intended to support students with disabilities.

All three areas influenced the way in which they made sense of and enacted inclusive education policy on their campuses. In other words, these three areas were identified as influential across the three research questions that were the focus of the study. Nevertheless, the school leaders' personal contexts had the greatest influence on the ways in which they navigated the complexities of inclusive education policy, their ability to do the "right thing" or what they believed was "best" for the child, their ability to provide plausible explanations for their actions, and their motivation to seek supports to assist them in making sense of and implementing inclusive education policy on their respective campuses. The following section provides a summary of the study's findings and explores implications for policy, practice, and future research.

Discussion of the Findings

This study explored how six school leaders who graduated from a high-quality principal preparation program (HQPPP) made sense of inclusive education policy and legal mandates in order to promote an inclusive school culture. Following the passage of NCLB (2002), school leaders were held publically accountable for ensuring that students with disabilities make adequate yearly progress (Lashley, 2007; Pazey & Cole, 2013;

Pazey & Yates, 2012). In response to the expectations of NCLB, the language specified

in IDEA (2004) requires that students with disabilities be given access to the same

general education curriculum as their nondisabled peers. As discussed in chapter 4 and

outlined in the literature (Lashley, 2007; McHatton, Boyer, Shaunessy, & Terry, 2010;

Yell, 2012), NCLB and IDEA create a complex web of policy mandates. It is no surprise

that controversy inherent in these school leaders' sensemaking process emerged due to

the need to create a balance between (a) the inclusive education policy mandate of the

least restrictive environment (LRE) contained in IDEA that requires schools to educate

students with disabilities in the general education setting to the maximum extent

appropriate, and (b) the pressure placed on schools and districts to demonstrate

continuous improvement in the academic learning outcomes for all students as evidenced

by the NCLB mandate to meet adequate yearly progress (AYP). These two expectations

were viewed as competing goals by several of the school leaders in this study.

Previous studies have shown that school leaders rely on their prior knowledge and

existing beliefs to make sense of complexities that surround policy messages (Coburn,

2005; Saltrick, 2010; Spillane et al., 2002). Many of the school leaders in these studies

(Coburn, 2005; Saltrick, 2010; Spillane et al., 2002) formulated their own interpretation

of inclusive education policy through perceptions or attitudes that affected what they

chose to accomplish. In doing so, school leaders shaped access to policy ideas for their

school staff by operationalizing policy intent guided by their interpretation of the policy

(Coburn, 2005; Spillane et al., 2002), influenced the social processes that school staff

used to understand new policy in formal ways through training and development as well

as informal ways through conversations and modeling (Coburn, 2005; Saltrick, 2010; Spillane et al., 2002), and created conditions for teacher learning in schools by providing supports necessary for professional development such as time, resources, and funding (Coburn, 2005). The desire to highlight the important role school leaders play in the policy implementation process propelled this study.

Interestingly, scholars who have explored educational leaders' sensemaking of policy implementation (Coburn, 2005; Spillane, 2004; Spillane et al., 2004) have recommended training that pays attention to content knowledge as a means to prepare leaders to implement policy as intended. In this study, the majority of these school leaders were required to take two special education courses in their HQPPP. In addition, the school leaders' HQPPP emphasized social justice leadership theory throughout the program. Social justice leadership focuses on deeper-level change in beliefs and attitudes. The HQPPP in this study incorporated previous scholars' recommendations about best practice regarding policy implementation at the school level (Coburn, 2004; Spillane et al., 2002; Trider & Leithwood, 1998).

Exploring the sensemaking of school leaders who graduated from a HQPPP and what it is that drives their sensemaking has the potential to enrich our understanding about school leaders' insights and actions throughout sensemaking of educational policy and policy implementation. In this study, sensemaking of inclusive education policy was influenced by three things: the participants' (1) knowledge, (2) experiences, and (3) "personal contexts."

SPECIAL EDUCATION CONTENT KNOWLEDGE

The level of knowledge a school leader possessed concerning special education and special education law as they relate to FAPE, LRE, and the concept of inclusion was important. When the school leaders showed confidence in their ability to make sense of and enact special education–related policy, their personal and professional identities thrived, which, in turn, influenced both their belief in how students should be served in special education and the manner in which they implemented inclusive practices on their school campuses. The ways in which this group of school leaders spoke about and questioned inclusive education policy, identified "holes" in policy, pinpointed challenges to implementation, and formed plans of action to ensure that they were doing what they believed was "best" for *all* students can provide insight into the level of special education content knowledge they had acquired.

Perceived Level of Knowledge Matters

One's level of knowledge, as perceived by the sensemaker, plays a role throughout sensemaking. Spillane (2004) claimed that "the sense we make depends on the sense we already have; our existing knowledge is a primary resource in the development of new, sometimes better understandings" (p. 76). If the sensemaker has little knowledge, he or she might understand a new policy message as something old. Lacking knowledge also places the sensemaker at risk for "missing the boat" (Spillane, 2004, p. 79) or missing out on structural change versus surface-level change (Spillane, 2004). On the other hand, if the sensemaker perceives himself or herself as an expert and

as already having more than enough knowledge, he or she sees no reason to "grapple with" (Spillane, 2004, p. 90) difficult policy messages or enlist the help of others to implement policy. Sensemakers might also "miss the boat" on policy ideals as well as miss out on opportunities to instill deeper-level change in their school campuses. In addition, complacency or a lack of knowledge can lead to what Weick (1995) refers to as fallacy of centrality. School leaders exhibiting *fallacy of centrality* (Weick, 1995) either overestimate or underestimate the likelihood that an event is taking place. They assume that because they are in a central position at their schools, they know everything necessary to be an effective leader. Although many times well intentioned, school leaders might assume that if they do not know about an event on their campus it must not be going on. On the other hand, they might assume that if something serious has happened on their campus, because of their positionality as a central member of the school organization, they would know about it. Weick (1995) reminds us to beware of fallacy of centrality and to be sure to recognize that even though individuals may view themselves experts, they maintain a realistic view of their own expertise.

The following outcomes can occur:

a) *"Missing the boat"* – The school leader might perceive himself or herself as familiar with new policy mandates and therefore overlook details embedded within new policy or lack the capacity to understand new policy and implement it as intended;

b) *Lost opportunities: Grappling with ideas* – If the school leader perceives himself or herself as knowing "enough" about special education or lacks

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familiarity with special education and special education law content, he or she misses out on opportunities to question policy, identify policy shortcomings, encourage social interaction among school staff regarding policy ideals and implementation, and influence deeper-level understanding of policy and efficacy of implementation.

c) *Lost opportunities: Instilling deeper-level change* – If the school leader succumbs to the pitfalls in (a) and (b), opportunities to instigate deeper-level change are limited and the shared understanding among school staff regarding the intent and efficacy of policy implementation may be lost.

For example, a school leader might perceive providing a FAPE in the LRE for students with disabilities as a placement decision rather than an ideal or a civil right for children. School leaders who lack special education knowledge or perceive themselves as having enough knowledge might consider complying with the mandates of NCLB (2002) and IDEA (2004) at the surface level such as moving all special education teachers from a resource classroom to a co-teaching classroom arrangement for all students, regardless of the individual needs of each student that may call for other educational arrangements. When school leaders implement superficial changes without considering the full continuum of options available, they may be less likely to encourage critical thinking among school staff regarding the intent and efficacy of the policy, particularly with regard to fidelity in implementation.

Throughout our interviews, school leaders critiqued what they perceived to be areas of weakness concerning inclusive education policy. Each of these school leaders

had sufficient knowledge of special education and special education law that enabled

them to question policy. They identified "holes," or contradicting requirements of NCLB

(2002) and IDEA (2004), which served as "interruptions" to their sensemaking of policy.

These school leaders also recognized the supports and resources needed to implement

inclusive education policy. They grappled with what they perceived to be difficult and

complex policy ideals and mandates. In many cases, they became policymakers in their

own right (Kingdon, 1984, 1995; Mintom & Norman, 2009). For example, Sarah was not

given any directives from the school district on how to complete IEP paperwork on her

campus. After reaching out to the district for guidance and receiving none, she enlisted

the help of the special education director, and together they developed an IEP protocol

for teachers on her campus. Sarah understood the importance of district- and school-level

coherence of IEP paperwork and was proactive in seeking support and guidance at both

levels. She enlisted help from campus staff to develop a solution to the perceived

problem.

This group of school leaders actively sought input from others when they

recognized their limitations in supporting students with disabilities. Vintage sought

district training, RH consulted the campus-based special education curriculum coach, and

several others relied on empirical research and books provided to them by their HQPPP.

The important thing to note is that typically, these school leaders did not shy away from

difficulty when attempting to meet the diverse needs of students with disabilities on their

school campuses. The identity they constructed of themselves (e.g. leader for special

education; leader for all students; leader for general education) seemed to influence the

extent to which they sought support to meet the needs of students with disabilities on their campuses.

Vintage perceived herself as "in charge of" special education on her campus. She expressed the belief that her role as the comprehensive academic director made her responsible for special education curriculum, teachers, and students. She took time to examine the state of special education on her campus. She sought support through district training for herself and her teachers to meet the needs of students with disabilities on her campus. She took certain actions to encourage deeper-level change on her campus including (a) starting book studies among school staff to encourage discussion of social justice issues, (b) employing empirical research to support new programs, (c) encouraging communication between special and general education staff members, and (d) encouraging the administrative team to work with her and the special education department chair to enhance their decision-making capacity in IEP meetings. Her constructed professional identity included what she perceived to be her role and responsibilities regarding special education.

On the other hand, RH relied heavily on his special education curriculum coach when making decisions for students with disabilities on his campus. He spoke about being "lost" without her and struggled when she left Bush High for a year. Although he admittedly needed additional knowledge of special education, he did not feel the need to increase his expertise because of his reliance on another special education staff member. Even though he spoke frequently about the ways in which he supported the success of all students on his campus, he did not view special education issues to be in the purview of

his responsibility. Lashley (2007) found that school administrators tend to rely heavily on colleagues with more experience or training in special education when attempting to meet the academic needs of students with disabilities. However, the school leader is held legally responsible for students with disabilities on his or her campus. By relying on his special education curriculum coach in nearly every aspect of special education on his school campus, RH ran the risk that he might be less likely to notice or recognize novel events (e.g. fallacy of centrality), some of which could potentially lead to litigation.

Ambiguity: Lack of Knowledge

Knowledge of special education and special education law decreases the likelihood of ambiguity among school staff regarding their roles and responsibilities. This includes a decrease in ambiguity about the processes and procedures related to special education on a school campus. According to Weick (1995), however, "ambiguity allows people to maintain the perception that there is agreement, when in fact, there is not" (p. 120). Knowledge fosters sensemaking. The majority of these school leaders understood that if they were going to instill deeper-level change in their campuses, they were going to have to learn more. Their desire to understand and to learn more about the legal mandates and expectations surrounding special education appeared to be related to the construction of their professional identity. How these school leaders perceived their roles on campus, or their professional identities, influenced their perception of their capacity to learn more regarding special education and special education law. For example, Vintage perceived her role on campus as "over special education" and therefore

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she sought out district training in order to better meet the needs of students with disabilities on her campus. On the other hand, RH relegated special education issues to the special education curriculum coach. He did not talk about seeking training to meet their needs, but rather spoke of consulting with the special education curriculum coach when necessary.

PRIOR EXPERIENCES: PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL

Sensemaking is influenced by context (Spillane, 2004). For example, a school leader might experience sensemaking of inclusive education policy differently in a school where no evidence of inclusive practices existed previously versus a school with an established inclusive culture. These two leaders might view change positively or negatively at their respective campuses. The difference in the hypothetical situational context between these two leaders could lead to differences in the way in which the policy is implemented and how people served by the policy are perceived. Sensemaking is influenced by context: the way in which the sensemaker *perceives* his or her situation or past histories in comparable situations matters. The following sections highlight how the situational contexts and past histories of these six school leaders influenced their sensemaking.

Political Situation

School leaders face political challenges to policy implementation because they are both responsible for and dependent on others for successful policy implementation

(Spillane et al., 2002). While they are accountable by groups such as community members and district-level stakeholders for policy implementation, they may also be dependent on others--such as teachers and other school leaders--throughout policy implementation. They serve as the *middlemen* of policy implementation. Understanding their political situation necessitates a closer look at coupled systems as described by Weick (1976, 1995).

Coupled Systems

Where and how these school leaders described interruptions to policy implementation in consistent with Weick's (1976; 1995) theory of coupled systems. Weick (1976; 1995) posited that connections within an organization are either tightly or loosely coupled. A tightly coupled system exists when there is evidence of highly controlled actions and shared goals among the organizations within the larger system. Activities and decisions influence and are influenced by all of the organizations within the system. A loosely coupled system exists when there is evidence of controlled actions, shared goals, and actions and decisions influence and is influenced by those within an organization within the system, however, not necessarily throughout the entire system. In other words, a loosely coupled system exists when there is evidence of a tight coupling within an organization (e.g. school) and loosely coupled between organizations (e.g. school and school district) within the educational system (Weick, 1976). The majority of the school leaders talked about interruptions to policy implementation as being the shortcoming of the district. Consistent with Weick's (1976; 1995) theory, members of a

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loosely coupled system appear to "know" their environment better and can therefore interpret and respond more frequently and faster than members of a tightly coupled system (Weick, 1976). These school leaders would be more likely to identify with elements of a loosely coupled system, hence the language they used to describe inclusive education policy implementation applied to the school level.

An analysis of tight and loose coupling between two organizations within the educational system—the school district and leaders on their school campuses—reveals several discrepant findings. Vintage and CB were members of a district-led principal preparation program and exhibited stronger connections with their school districts. Because of CB's and Vintage's positionality, they have stronger connections with their school districts and are more likely to be members of a tightly coupled system (Weick, 1976). They would be likely to have empathy for what the districts are trying to accomplish, and they would understand why the district takes specific actions to do so. Just as CB was able to describe her district's organizational structure prior to the initial interview, members of a tightly coupled system see and talk about the areas that are tightly coupled more clearly. Throughout sensemaking, they were more likely to be critical of their campuses than their districts. Consistent with how Weick (1976) described a tightly coupled system, they were more empathetic to district-led initiatives and understood the district's actions and perceived their positions within the district differently than the other school leaders. Both of these school leaders had a professional connection with the district; therefore, they were more inclined to initiate communication with the district (hence Vintage's seeking district support to serve students with

disabilities and CB's considering herself an employee of central office and not the school campus).

The other four school leaders (Van, Lindy, Sarah, and RH) tended to be more critical of their school districts and eager to point out its shortcomings. Consistent with Weick's (1976) description of members of a loosely coupled system, these four school leaders identified interruptions to policy implementation that occurred outside of their school environments. As an example, Van viewed himself as an administrative extension of the district's special education director. At the same time, he believed a lack of communication existed between the district special education director and the school-based special education directors. He was even encouraged not to communicate through email. As a result of the lack of communication between Van and the district special education director, he criticized the district and did not share Vintage or CB's perspective on the well-intentioned actions of the districts. Hence, his relationship with the district was not tightly coupled.

Weick (1976) stressed that positive and negative aspects to both tightly and loosely coupled systems occur: you cannot have one without the other. For example, loosely coupled systems often lack coordination, tend to have slow feedback times, and have difficulty implementing systematic change. However, it may help the school organization improve its sensitivity to the environment, allow for creative solutions to take place, and allow for more self-determination by its actors (Weick, 1976). If the school leader perceived his or her relationship with school district as loosely coupled, s/he might be more likely to detect novel events and provide opportunities for their staff

to so the same. Weick (1976) refers to this as creating a "sensitive sensing mechanism" (p. 6) in which the staff act as "independent sensing elements" (p. 6) who are more familiar with their environment and can therefore detect changes better than in a tightly coupled system. The positionality of each of the school leaders, how their position influenced where interruptions to policy implementation were noted, and to whom they attributed blame depended on where they placed their loyalties. For members of a more tightly coupled system, interruptions were identified at the school level (e.g., teacher quality). Members of a loosely coupled system were more likely to identify interruptions at the district level (e.g., lack of resources, time, personnel, and support).

Experiences: Shaping the School Leaders' Sense of Inclusive Education Policy

Weick (1995) reminded us that actions are only known once they are completed; thus, attention is directed to experiences. When school leaders enact laws, "they take undefined space, time, and action and draw lines, established categories, and coin labels that create new features of the environment that did not exist before" (Weick, 1995, p. 31). Throughout our interviews, these school leaders shared past experiences, stories, and histories to explain their understanding and interpretation of inclusive education policy. These experiences influenced the ways in which they sought additional knowledge related to special education issues, perceived the professionals who served students with disabilities, and how they perceived students with disabilities.

These multiple situational contexts contributed to how each of these school leaders made sense of what was happening on their school campuses. Their previous

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experiences shaped how they constructed their personal and professional identity. An important aspect of sensemaking is telling a story (Weick, 1995). The school leader, as the sensemaker, authors his or her own interpretation of policy by using his or her unique personal and professional experiences in order to become a sensegiver and convey insight. By providing a narrative that is vivid and easily understood (Weick, 1995), the sensegiver encourages the actions of others. For example, a school leader's expectations for his or her school, staff, and students are influenced by his or her sensemaking of policy that is situated in a particular context.

In this study, school leaders imposed structure on the flow of actions based on their expectations which, in turn, had an influence on "what was noticed, what was inferred, what was remembered…and most importantly, they had an effect on what was done" (Weick, 1995, p. 151) on their school campus. Lindy's personal experiences that incurred as a result of having a son diagnosed with autism influenced what she expected from the IEP committee members, the way in which the IEP meeting was organized and held, and actions she tagged as integral on the part of the school to protect the rights of parents and students with disabilities. Sarah's experience of shadowing the SBS teacher on her campus influenced her perception of special education teachers' roles and the students whom they serve. Had Sarah not had that experience, she might have continued to perceive special education teachers as lazy or always out of their classroom. Following her experience, her perceptions and expectations of teacher quality changed and have influenced the ways in which she now supports teachers.

PERSONAL CONTEXT: BELIEF SYSTEMS, ATTITUDES, AND PERCEIVED VALUE SYSTEMS

"All the normative ethical thinking that administrators carry to work is part of who they are, defines them for themselves and others, and has bearing on what professional practice means to them" -Frick, Faircloth, & Little, 2012, p. 25

As noted in Chapter 2, the school leader's "personal context" (Trider & Leithwood, 1998, p. 295) or beliefs and attitudes towards policy is one of the most influential factors in determining how one chooses to implement policy. In this study, school leaders' beliefs and attitudes regarding students with disabilities and special education played a major role in how they perceived inclusive education policy and, ultimately, how they enacted such policies. The following influences on school leaders' personal contexts are explored: (a) knowledge is not "enough," (b) deeper-level versus surface-level change, (c) treating policy as *optional*, and (d) value-laden actions.

Knowledge is Not "Enough"

The school leader's perceived level of expertise in special education influences his or her capacity to effect deeper-level change on the school campus. However, knowledge is not the only factor that influences one's actions on a school campus. The expression "knowledge is power" coined by Sir Francis Bacon (n.d.) conveys the principle that acquired knowledge provides the possessor of that knowledge with the power to act. However, *how one uses* that power matters. For example, after interviewing seven school leaders about their knowledge of special education law for an initial study (Estes, 2003), the researcher returned to the schools several years later.

Estes (2009) conducted in-depth interviews with six school leaders to assess changes in their understanding and implementation of IDEA related components. Although the school leaders' knowledge of special education law had increased since the initial interviews, they drew upon their knowledge to implement inclusive education policy mandates in only a handful of instances. Some of the school leaders used their knowledge of special education law to find loopholes that allowed them to refer a student with a disability to another school (Estes, 2009), telling parents that removing their student from the school was in the best interest of the child and that they would be better served in the neighborhood public school (Estes, 2009).

Similar to the school leaders in this study, the school administrators in the Estes study used language to justify their actions such as *doing what was "best" for the child* to attain a specific goal. However it was the way in which they used their knowledge that was different. While the school leaders in this study chose to use their knowledge of special education and special education law to support students with disabilities and their families, the school leaders in Estes' study choose to use their knowledge to counsel out students and their families from the school.   As evidenced in the study's (Estes, 2009) findings, knowledge of special education law did not necessarily mean that the school leader would use that knowledge to act in accordance with the best interest of the child. Truly, using one's knowledge of special education law to exclude students with disabilities from receiving a meaningful education contradicts the original intent of the Education for Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA, 1975) nearly 40 years ago.

Deeper-level Versus Surface-level Change

Doyle (2002) asked 18 principals how they perceived inclusion. Most of them described inclusion as a practice of placing students rather than a mindset or a way of thinking based on a set values or a philosophy related to inclusion (Doyle, 2002). Principals referenced inclusion as a category, mandate, or a reorganizational process and, consequently, responded to their perceived understanding by restructuring the school with *inclusion* classrooms, *inclusion* teachers, and *inclusion* students. They did not support the practice of "reculturing for inclusion" (p. 52) by addressing the deeper beliefs, values, and principles behind their mindsets and those of their staff. Because the principals in Doyle's (2002) study used their knowledge of special education and special education law to enact surface-level changes on their campuses, they missed an opportunity to instill deeper-level changes such as developing an inclusive vision for their schools, encouraging collaboration among staff members, or building the capacity of school staff to meet the needs of students with disabilities.

Unlike the principals in Doyle's (2002) study, several school leaders in this study attempted to transform their schools through their actions. Sarah provided cultural training for her staff, Vintage worked to build relationships between special and general education teachers, and CB held high expectations for students with disabilities and for those who served them. Some school leaders focused on deeper-level changes at a more individualized level. Van and RH focused on building the capacity of students to succeed academically through one-on-one conversations, while Lindy saw herself as an advocate for students with disabilities and their families during IEP meetings.

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Consistent with the discussion regarding school leaders' perceived content knowledge base, the extent to which the school leader worked to instill deeper-level change seemed to be influenced by his or her identity construction. In addition, these leaders acted in response to their perceived situational contexts. For example, Van perceived his sole role on campus as being the person responsible for students receiving special education services. Throughout sensemaking of inclusive education policy, his attention was focused on the needs and goals of each individual student. Van focused his change efforts on the individual student or a specific group of special education teachers. His sensemaking capacity was *bounded* by two factors: (1) his professional constructed identity as a special education director who did not "answer" to the school administration and (2) his situational context in which he entered the school as a new leader and was told that although he held the same amount of authority, he was not part of the administrative team. Because of his constructed professional identity and his perception of his situational context, Van perceived his capacity to instill deeper-level changes at the individual student level rather than the campus-level. Van did not believe that he had the capacity to pursue any meaningful deeper-level change at the campus level due to the "orders" by the district special education administrators to not take action in that regard. In turn, Van was "disempowered" from the ability to do so because of his perceived lack of power or authority to take action at a campus-level.

Policymaker Versus Policy Executer

To enact policy on their campuses, some school leaders treated policy as *optional*. Rather than implementing the policy as intended, they altered the policy to conform to their own interpretation of what needed to be done and, in a sense, became policymakers in their own rights. Other leaders who implemented policy as it was intended acted as policy executers. Like sensemaking, policymaking is a resource-intensive process that necessitates effort. Sensemaking and policymaking require "time, brain work, and political skill" (Spillane, 2004, p. 93), especially when a fundamental change in one's thought processes, understandings, and actions must occur. Each of these leaders took actions they deemed necessary to enact inclusive education policy at their campuses. They were all policymakers and policy executers at one point in time or another. However, it was these school leaders' justifications for their actions that warrant further consideration.

Several of these school leaders took it upon themselves to enact policy in ways that they believed were best for the student. When they treated policy as optional and justified their decisions with a student's best interest rationale, they did not act as policy executers, but policymakers. For example, when RH spoke about being in an IEP meeting and having to decide whether a student with a low-incidence disability could stay at Bush High until he was 21, he justified his decision as being "best" for the student. He chose to treat what he thought was the district's policy regarding graduation requirements for students with disabilities as optional. Had RH executed the *orders* that he *perceived* were outlined in policy set forth by district and state accountability

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standards, he would have stated in the IEP meeting that the student in question needed to graduate and transition after his fourth year at Bush High to assist the school and district in meeting AYP in terms of the high school graduation rate. However, RH stated that making such a decision did not resonate with him morally and he needed to do what was in the best interest of the student. Most of these school leaders acted as policymakers, in that they treated certain policies or mandates within policy as optional. They took actions to either "bend the rules" or "take a hit" whenever they felt it was best for the student.

As discussed in Chapter 2, beliefs and attitudes are extremely important in the delivery of educational services for students with disabilities (Praisner, 2003; Riehl, 2000) and throughout policy implementation (Trider & Leithwood, 1998). For this group of school leaders, doing what was best for students was influenced by their belief systems and attitudes toward students with disabilities and what they thought these students deserved. According to Weick (1995), *plausibility* refers to the pragmatics of one's actions in response to a particular policy. The sensemaking process is rendered operable through the language used to create meaning or rationale provided for one's actions. In terms of inclusive policy, these school leaders utilized language (e.g. "best" or "right" for the student; equitable; just) that adhered to the particular norms and values of an individual or member of a particular group (in this case, the HQPPP cohort), drawing on socially acceptable and credible accounts. In the mind of the individual or group, the action that they took *made sense.* It was logical and followed a pattern or, in some cases, aligned with their existing personal and professional belief systems and attitudes.

Value-laden Actions

As noted in Chapter 4, systemic factors, such as insufficient time and lack of resources, influenced the school leaders' perception of the purpose and importance of particular inclusive education policy expectations, including IEP meetings. Sarah, RH, and Vintage talked about the IEP process infringing on time and the school's resources. Sarah spoke about the current schedules of students with disabilities who were included in the general education curriculum. Some students were double-blocked for English: they attended the English inclusion class *and* the English resource class every day. Sarah was hoping that "results show[ed] that that had given them growth," otherwise the students would have to have IEP meetings to change their schedules. This outcome was viewed as time taken away, unnecessarily, from her regular assistant principal duties. RH struggled with having to go through a time-consuming IEP process when he believed that the decision could have been made effortlessly were that process bypassed. RH's frustration is evident in his response:

> I just went to three ARDs, because three changes needed to occur.
>
> Changes that we [the administration] could have done real easy,
>
> for the best of the kid. But no. I have to leave *my* area. I have to
>
> sit through this meeting. Go through introductions and all that
>
> other stuff. Just so I could say that the student who is pregnant
>
> needs homebound services, so now we are switching to
>
> homebound services. And so, they've [the policymakers] made it
>
> too "nitty-gritty." Too…it ends up being a pain in the ass.

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While waiting for our first meeting to take place, the office staff at Bush High told me that RH was "fast paced" and always on the move. During my initial contact with RH to set up our first interview, RH gave me his cell phone number and told me to call him the morning of the day I wanted to interview him and he would tell me if he would be able to meet that day or not. His fast-paced style and chaotic schedule were inseparable from his understanding of what was time-consuming or a "pain in the ass." Although his perception of the irrelevance of IEP meetings might not be accurate, it was true for RH and therefore it was his reality.

Van had a completely different perspective of IEP meetings. Those meetings were important to him. His role on campus was to prepare for and conduct IEP meetings and ensure that the IEP process complied with the law. As a special education administrator, he was aggravated by the lack of attention paid to IEP meetings from his administration. Van voiced his frustration when he said, "One big problem that we [Van and his principal] had in the beginning of the year and something that we still butt heads on is having the administrators show up to IEP meetings on time." The experience of having the principal show up late to IEP meetings led to conflict. Punctuality to IEP meetings is something of value to Van. He believed that showing up late to IEP meetings meant that the principal did not value his role as a school leader, the IEP process, or the students who were being served. Sensemaking is about choice, and choice "imposes value" (Weick, 1995, p.159). Again, the principal might have valued the IEP process and the children who were being served, but Van perceived a different reality.

Actions speak louder than words: People's actions are a reflection of their values, priorities, and what matters to them (Weick, 1995). Throughout sensemaking, there are too many things with too many meanings to consider; consequently, "the problem [faced by the sensemaker] is confusion, not ignorance" (Weick, 1995, p. 27). The individual's "values, priorities, and clarity" (p. 27) support the sensemaker as he or she makes decisions and acts on what he or she perceives as important. Applying Weick's concept to those who participated in this study, these school leaders drew upon their belief systems, values, and attitudes to make sense of and clarify to others which policies, programs, personnel, and students mattered, and, ultimately, how *much* they mattered. Their belief systems and attitudes shaped not only what mattered to them and the actions they took, but also how *others* perceived what was of value to them.

How another administrator, teacher, student, parent, or community member perceives a school leader's values can have significant implications for the communication, collaboration, and trust among the school's stakeholders. If the capability to build trusting collaborative relationships is lost when stakeholders view the school leader as not valuing their role or child or contributions, then neither inclusive culture nor communications among stakeholders can survive.

Implications and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways in which school leaders who graduated from HQPPPs made sense of inclusive education policy and attempted to promote an inclusive school culture. Because research in how school leaders make sense

of inclusive education policy is limited, findings from this study can strengthen our current understanding of the ways in which school leaders make sense of and implement complex and changing inclusive educational policies at their schools. As noted in chapter 2, several researchers suggested the need for further research in the following areas: (a) strategies to be used by school leaders throughout inclusive education policy implementation (Brotherson et al., 2001; Crockett et al., 2007; Provost, Boscardin, & Wells, 2010), (b) requisite training to ensure principals can become effective leaders for special education (Brotherson et al., 2001; Doyle, 2002; Provost, Boscardin, & Wells, 2010), (c) skills needed by school leaders to facilitate deeper-level change (Brotherson et al., 2001; Crockett et al., 2007; Doyle, 2002), and (d) learning opportunities that prepare school leaders to meet the future needs of schools in an era of accountability and changing student populations (Brotherson et al., 2001; Provost, Boscardin, & Wells, 2010).

INCLUSIVE EDUCATION POLICY

The major findings of this study suggest that sensemaking processes of these school leaders were influenced by the confusing, sometimes conflicting, requirements and language in inclusive education policy mandates. As noted in chapter 4, these school leaders were given a *poor map* (Weick, 1995) throughout their sensemaking of inclusive education policy. One implication is that policy implemented in different schools or districts may look and behave quite differently, depending on who is making sense of and enacting policy. Another implication is that it might take more effort and, thus, longer

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for deeper-level change to take place on a school campus when implementing policies that involve multiple stakeholders in the process as is the case for inclusive education policies. This could be due to factors such as the capacity of the school leader to make sense of and implement inclusive education policy or the situational context of a school leader within their first year on a school campus. A final implication is that these school leaders perceived some aspects of inclusive education policy as not in the best interests of the child.

Recommendation #1

Policymakers need to construct a better "map" for enacting inclusive education policy. Throughout the school leaders' sensemaking, all of them pointed out inconsistencies, contradictions, and ambiguous language in inclusive education policy, a finding that is consistent with previous research findings. Scholars addressing how school leaders comply with and implement mandates within NCLB (2002) and IDEA (2004) found that school leaders have had difficulty in applying inclusive mandates on their campuses (Lashley, 2007; Bays & Crockett, 2007; Doyle, 2002; McHatton, et al., 2010; O'Dell & Shafer, 2005; Yell, 2005) due to factors ambiguous language contained in inclusive education policy (Lashley, 2007; McHatton et al., 2010). Confusing and conflicting language within policy might leave the school leader guessing--unsure how to interpret and then implement inclusive education policy mandates.

NCLB (2002) supports an accountability model that appears to be in conflict with IDEA (2004). Ramanthan (2008) argues that IDEA takes the top-down federal

outcomes-based accountability a step further than NCLB by requiring a "bottom-up mechanism of individual due process rights" (p. 300), which provides a stronger basis for local implementation of the policy. When enacted and codified into law, most federal policies will be "diffused" to individual actors at "the district, school, and teacher level" (Ramanathan, 2008, p. 303). Due to the loosely coupled nature of the educational system (Weick, 1976; Ramanathan, 2008), "each individual actor makes a value judgment about its applicability to his or her practice and adapts it to meet local circumstances" (Ramanathan, 2008, p. 303). Policy dissemination, analysis, and implementation can be compared to the "telephone game" (Spillane, 2004, p. 169). The policy travels through the lines of communication; however, by the time the policy message reaches the intended recipients at the school and classroom level, the original language and intent of the policy has become distorted. Federal oversight is proposed yet, in reality, the extent to which inclusive education policy is understood and implemented depends more on the sensemaking ability of individual decision-makers located at the state, district, and school campus levels. As a result, one can surmise that the policy, itself, will not be implemented with fidelity and uniformity.

Because IDEA (2004) required a local accountability mechanism, both the government and parents share responsibility for the implementation of the policy (Ramanathan, 2008). Without "bottom-up" accountability mechanisms to support policy implementation, NCLB leaves the Department of Education the sole regulatory entity. There would be no formal "check and balances" mechanism for school leaders to use throughout policy implementation on their campuses. Policymakers need to be consistent

in their requirements and in the language of mandates such as NCLB (2002) and IDEA (2004), as well as in state and school district policy to ensure that these polices are truly complementary to one another.

Recommendation #2

Policymakers need to consider the complexity of a school leader's roles and responsibilities when developing inclusive education policy and specifying procedural due process mandates. Policymakers should strive to understand the impact that inconsistency, confusion, and ambiguous policies have on the role and responsibilities of school leaders. School leaders are politically constrained as the *middlemen* of policy implementation. Policymakers need to consider the time it takes to make sense of policy, enact it, and instill change on a school campus since improving schools "often requires changing them" (Sergiovanni & Starratt, 2007, p. 331). To effect systematic change, the perspectives of the stakeholders involved need to change as well (Johnson, 2002), which takes time and resources. Policymakers need to account for the time and resources required to implement policy as it was intended.

Recommendation #3

Policymakers should explore a full array of options in regard to what is "best" for all children prior to making recommendations regarding inclusive education policy. Several of these school leaders were hesitant to label a student as having a disability or were eager to exit the student from special education because of the perceived injustices

resulting in their academic and social outcomes. To inform policy content, regulations, and the language embedded within policy mandates, policymakers are advised to focus on the following: (a) build collaborative relationships with research institutions, (b) enlist findings from empirical literature throughout policy development, and (c) listen to the voices of those school leaders "in the trenches" who are implementing inclusive educational policy

SENSEMAKING AS PREPARATION AND ADMINISTRATIVE PRACTICE

Sensemaking is grounded in identity (Weick, 1995). The sensemaker—or school leader—asks him- or herself, "How can I know who I am until I see what I can do? …What implications do these events have for who I will be?" (Weick, 1995, pp. 23–24). The sensemaker is continually reevaluating his or her professional and personal identities based on previous experiences and actions. Their experiences and actions are influenced by the identity constructed by the sensemaker, which is influenced by his or her attitudes and belief systems, knowledge, and past histories. Sensemaking is an ongoing cyclical process that is retrospective and grounded in how identities are constructed (Weick, 1995).

The belief systems and attitudes of these school leaders' had a strong influence on their sensemaking of inclusive education policy. These factors, which are internal to the school leader, affected why they took certain action pertaining to special education and inclusive education policy and how they did so on their school campuses. In addition, knowledge and experience played a major role throughout these school leaders'

sensemaking processes. Special education and special education law content knowledge

provided them with an understanding of special education to the extent that they were

able to question policy, grapple with difficult ideas throughout policy implementation,

critique special education on their campuses, and take action(s) to improve academic

outcomes for students with disabilities. Experiences in their situational contexts

prompted them to seek further knowledge, support, resources, and to continue to question

the quality of education for students with disabilities. The following sections provide

implications for practice for two separate entities: (1) school leaders as recent graduates

from a HQPPP, and (2) principal preparation programs within departments of educational

administration.

SCHOOL LEADERS AS RECENT GRADUATES FROM A HQPPP

Findings from this study support the likelihood that the process used by graduates

from a HQPPP who have become school leaders' to make sense of inclusive education

policy is grounded in their constructed professional and personal identities. These

identities, then, are influenced by their perceived knowledge of the intent of the policy,

their experiences in present and past situational contexts, and their belief systems and

attitudes. One of my favorite interview questions to ask the school leaders was, "Did you

have any thoughts after our first interview that you would like to share?" The question

prompted all six school leaders to think about our interview, reflect on their own past

experiences, and select what *they* believed was important to talk about. An important

aspect of sensemaking is that it is retrospective (Weick, 1995). What an individual

chooses to talk about, and even what he or she leaves out, is important to note. My hope is that findings from this study might prompt new and veteran school leaders to reflect on their own leadership practices as well as how they perceive their professional and personal identities.

Recommendation #1

Current school leaders should employ sensemaking as a framework for reflection. Throughout the interviews, several of the school leaders commented that participating in this study prompted reflection in areas such as their professional and personal identities, prior actions and experiences, and priorities as school leaders. They appreciated and saw value in having an opportunity to think retrospectively about their roles as school leaders and how they were working to meet the needs of all students on their campuses. Sensemaking theory and practice provides current school leaders with a framework by which they can further understand how they make sense of inclusive education policy at their schools.

Recommendation #2

School leaders need to engage in efforts to influence, change and enact inclusive education policies. School leaders act as policy influencers, change agents, and policy executors. They should be active participants in these efforts not only at their own campuses but also through more direct methods, such as making recommendations to local and state representatives. It was evident from the findings of this study that these

school leaders perceived policymakers as lacking a real-world understanding of the appropriate conditions for policy implementation in schools today. Therefore, school leaders should communicate with local, state, and federal representatives about policy solutions, difficulties in implementation, ambiguity of conflicting policies, and challenges to achieving policy intent.

PRINCIPAL PREPARATION PROGRAMS WITHIN DEPARTMENTS OF EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION.

The findings from this study may assist principal preparation programs within educational administration departments, those in charge of principal preparation programs, and researchers in their attempts to evaluate the effectiveness of their graduate-level principal preparation programs for students with special needs. The implications for principal preparation programs are twofold: (1) graduates of a HQPPP use what they learn in their preservice training in their current positions, and (2) what is included as content and specific experiences relevant to that content and *how* the "what" is included in principal preparation programs is crucial. The following recommendations illuminate the importance of the structure and curriculum content of a principal preparation program. Elements of content knowledge, professional and personal experiences, and belief systems and attitudes are embedded in each recommendation.

Recommendation #1

Make special education and special education law courses required. It is not enough to *offer* extra courses in special education and special education law; they need to be required courses within the program of study for the principal preparation program curriculum. If those in charge of principal preparation program do not require knowledge of special education and special education law, why should we expect future school leaders to value special education and special education law content knowledge?

Recommendation #2

Those in charge of principal preparation programs should not teach "separate but equal." Special education and special education law should not only have their place in principal preparation programs as required courses; elements of special education and special education law and the imperative to meet the needs of every student, including students with exceptionalities, should be threaded throughout the curriculum of the program's courses and coursework (Pazey, Cole, & Garcia, 2012; Pazey & Cole, 2013). As noted in chapters 1 and 2, scholars underscored a "separate but equal" mentality surrounding special and general education (Bagalieri, Connor, & Gallagher, 2010; Gordon, 2006; Hehir & Katzman, 2012). Prior to IDEA 1997, school leaders were not concerned with the academic or social needs of students with disabilities (Russo & Osborne, 1997). Consequently, they continue to face challenges when addressing the diverse needs of students with disabilities (Crocket et al., 2007; Lashley, 2007; Pazey & Cole, 2013; Russo & Osborne, 1997). If principal preparation programs within

educational administration departments expect our future and current school leaders to ensure that educational professionals at school campuses provide a high-quality education for all students, university-based principal preparation programs must provide the content-related knowledge base to do so and must serve as examples of an inclusive culture for learning. Including special education and special education law in the curriculum would encourage future school leaders to think about and keep issues related to special education at the forefront of all aspects of their school leadership efforts. These leaders, in turn, would be more likely to view special education as part of the school, community, culture, and system, *not* as a "separate" entity.

Recommendation #3

Train school leaders to be critical consumers of inclusive education policy. Throughout this study, these school leaders revealed a higher level of analysis when it came to making sense of inclusive education policy and the subsequent implementation of such policy. They were able to critique the policy, identify "holes" and inconsistencies, and develop plans of action. They enlisted the help of others, sought new information, and relied on lessons learned from previous experiences throughout implementation. Spillane (2004) stated that the "will to understand" (p. 95) is dependent, in part, on the sensemaker's existing knowledge. In his words, "To want to know more about something, it is necessary to have some threshold-level expertise in order to appreciate the need to learn" (p. 95). The six school leaders in this study were required to take at least one course in special education. Although they were not expected to be

special education experts, they were provided with a threshold-level knowledge base for acting as critical consumers of policy. In addition, and probably just as important, these school leaders were taught how to be critical of research, programs, and policy. As Sarah noted, "I find myself reading, researching. I think I'm going back to my program. I feel like they [the HQPPP] were really big on 'investigate, investigate, investigate.'" All six of these school leaders were exposed to courses related to critical policy analysis whereby they learned how to critique educational policy, empirical and evidence-based research, and a variety of educational and student-support programs. They grappled with difficult and conflicting ideas that helped to build their capacity to become critical consumers of inclusive educational policy on their school campuses, as school leaders.

Recommendation #4

Enhance school leaders' personal context. Although an understanding of special education and special education law content is important, the perceived efficacy of inclusive education policy and whom the policy is intended to serve plays an important role in policy implementation. Principal preparation programs need to focus on *why* inclusive education policy is important and encourage a critical, higher level of analysis of the underlying principles and language contained within the policy. In light of the upcoming reauthorization of NCLB (2002), referenced as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), and the IDEA (2004) that will soon follow in response to the ESEA mandates, the materialization of this recommendation becomes even more critical. To arm school leaders with the capacity to fulfill a previous recommendation—to engage

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in efforts to influence, change, and enact inclusive education policies—the program may need (a) to encourage their candidates to examine their current thinking and develop new mental models and paradigms, and (b) to provide opportunities for them to grapple with difficult ideas and have critical conversations with others about diversity and ability.

For these six school leaders who were graduates of HQPPPs, social justice leadership was a major influence on their professional and personal identities. They acted consistently in ways that they believed were "best" for children. They were prepared to have difficult conversations with teachers if they perceived that the teachers were not doing what was right for their students. They made efforts to instill deeper-level change in their school culture and encourage school staff members to welcome diversity in its many forms including diversity in ability. Those in charge of principal preparation program should include components throughout the curriculum that build the personal context of the future school leader. For example, social justice leadership could be embedded throughout the program curriculum, projects, and experiential learning activities. Such a focus on social justice leadership should encompass the various aspects of difference such as race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, language, culture, and ability (Pazey, Cole, & Garcia, 2012; Theoharis, 2007).

Recommendation #5

Provide experiential opportunities for future school leaders to "live" special education leadership. All six of the school leaders shared aspects of special education and special education law that they believed should be included in principal preparation

programs. Although they mentioned the need for more depth and scope to special education and special education law training, several stressed the importance of being exposed to the "lived experience" they could encounter in practice when serving students with disabilities. Suggestions were as follows: (a) include special education throughout in-class activities and discussions, (b) provide opportunities to shadow special education directors and teachers, and (c) require a special education component throughout the internship.

Similar to Levine's (2006) finding in which school leaders rated their preparation programs low in providing practical opportunities to work with diverse student populations, it appears evident that the content and actual experiences from the internship are still not satisfying the needs that these school leaders have regarding knowledge, skills, and actual "hands on" experiences in special education administration and the application to processes and procedures inherent in serving the needs of students with disabilities. This group of school leaders highlighted the need to "live it," or experience what it meant to be a leader of *all* students--to help students in HQPPPs see what their futures might be like as school leaders on their own campuses. Courses in special education and special education law could be offered in combination with the internship to supplement future school leaders' learning experience.

SENSEMAKING AND LEADERSHIP PREPARATION

School leaders' belief systems and attitudes, professional and personal experiences within their past and present situational contexts, and perceived knowledge

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base regarding the context of inclusive education policy influenced their professional and personal identities. This present study can inform future research efforts on leadership preparation in two ways

(1) It adds to the existing literature (Coburn, 2005; Saltrick, 2010; Spillane, 2004; Spillane et al., 2002) that employs sensemaking theory as a theoretical framework to explore the ways in which educational leaders make sense of and enact policy at their schools by

    a. employing sensemaking as a theoretical framework to explore how school leaders make sense of and implement inclusive education policy on their school campuses;

    b. illuminating how school leaders negotiate the complexity of their new roles and responsibilities as leaders in special education as well as how they author their own interpretation of critical special education policies and legal mandates; and

    c. expanding empirical knowledge related to the use of a unique approach for examining how school leaders make sense of inclusive education policy within state and federal mandates.

(2) It adds to the literature (Fuller, Young, & Baker, 2011; Levine, 2005; Orr, 2011; Orr & Orphanos, 2011; Pounder, 2011) regarding effective components for exemplary principal preparation training by

a. highlighting the importance of special education and special education law content knowledge throughout school leader preparation and the influence on sensemaking of inclusive education policy; and

b. illustrating the influence that one's personal context, knowledge, and experiences have in developing a school leader's capacity to meet the needs of all students.

Limitations

"Keep findings in context is a cardinal principal of qualitative analysis" - Patton, 2011, p. 563

The purpose of this study was to explore the sensemaking of a purposeful selection (Maxwell, 2005; Patton, 1998) of six current school leaders who recently graduated from HQPPPs. This sample was selected because the HQPPP program they attended required a special education course as part of their program of study, and because an attempt to build their personal context from a social-justice-leadership theme embedded in the program curriculum was evident. The main focus was to gain an understanding of the human experience specific to these school leaders. To do so, the theoretical framework of sensemaking (Weick, 1995) was employed to gain insight into these school leaders' lived experiences, as they perceived them.

The nature of a phenomenological study and the purpose of this study limited my ability to understand *everything* throughout data collection. Due to institutional and district-level constraints, the time allotted for me to spend time in the field was limited to

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the spring 2013 semester. Had these school leaders been interviewed at the beginning of the academic school year, the findings and conclusions might have reflected differences in the experiences, knowledgebase, or personal contexts of the participants than was reported in this study. There was a small number of participants. The participants were selected from only one HQPPP rather than from several HQPPPs. The study was exploratory in nature and intended to build rather than test theory. Hence, there was a lack of comparison of graduates from other program. Had there been a comparison group, the findings and conclusions might have illuminated a more "formal comparison that contributed to the interpretability of the results" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 113). The inclusion of a comparison group could provide a greater understanding of the causality of the factors that influenced the sensemaking of school leaders from a HQPPP versus a non-HQPPP. Conducting a similar study with a comparison group is something that future researchers may wish to consider. Guba and Lincoln (1990) underscore an important issue relevant to the limitations inherent in this study, in that "phenomena can only be understood within the context in which they are studied; findings from one context cannot be generalized to another" (pp. 44–45 as cited in Patton, 2011, p. 563). Therefore, the results cannot be generalized to the larger population of school leaders who are recent graduates from HQPPPs.

Nevertheless, these limitations do not lessen the importance of the study's findings. By their very nature, "qualitative findings are highly context and case dependent" (Patton, 2011, p. 563). The school leaders' experiences, knowledge, and personal context gained from taking part in a high-quality principal preparation program

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enabled me, as a graduate from a HQPPP, to draw conclusions about exemplary

principalship programs as well as exemplary practice. As noted in chapter 3, the findings

of this study are to be viewed as internally generalizable, which refers to "generalizability

of a conclusion within the setting or group studied" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 115). Although

findings cannot be generalized to other schools or group of school leaders, they can be

taken into account in an effort to move toward "consensus" (Patton, 2011, p. 563)

regarding effective components of exemplary principalship programs, effective school

leadership, and the implementation of inclusive education policy.

This study's limitations are shared among phenomenological qualitative research

methods and, consequently, are not unique to this study. Patton (2011) reminded us that

the phenomenological researcher is limited in the following ways:

a) It is rarely possible to observe all situations even within a single setting.

b) Time periods during which observations and interviews take place

constrain temporal sampling.

c) Selectivity is limited in sampling participants for either interviews or

observations (p. 563).

Although several steps were taken to address threats to validity, as noted in Chapter 3,

there were some limitations to this study that were unavoidable.

INTERVIEWING ELITES

The perceptions of the participants, or their subjective views, mattered. The data

collection phase of this study involved two in-depth interviews and direct observations of

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each of the school leaders to gain a better understanding of how they operated as school leaders on their individual campuses. Due to the nature of their administrative roles and duties, each of these school leaders served as "elites" who, according to Marshall and Rossman (2011) are viewed as "influential, prominent, and/or well-informed in an organization or community" and who "are selected on the basis of their expertise in areas relevant to the research" (p. 105). Due to their busy schedules and time constraints (Marshall & Rossman, 2011), gaining access to these school leaders to conduct interviews and observations served as a disadvantage.

Throughout data collection, it was difficult to schedule interviews and to obtain permission to observe the school leaders in their school settings. Interview and observational data were collected primarily between March and May 2013, during state-level accountability testing. District policy prohibited campus visitors on certain testing days and limited my ability to conduct ongoing observations of the school leaders within their school contexts. Further, due to the confidential nature of special education, these school leaders did not feel comfortable inviting me to any administrative or staff meetings related to special education. Therefore, my ability to observe these school leaders was limited to attending faculty meetings and shadowing them, when appropriate, as they performed their daily administrative roles and responsibilities. Despite these limitations, I was able to observe four out of the six school leaders performing their job responsibilities. I observed CB and Lindy twice and Sarah and RH three times throughout the duration of the study. Van did not feel comfortable with me on his campus due to concerns regarding his role on campus and confidentiality pertaining to

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the students he served. To allow me to gain an understanding about his role on campus, Van maintained an hourly inventory of his day for two days, which was recorded as a written running log. Vintage promised to provide me with the opportunity to attend faculty meetings, observe her performing administrative duties, and shadow her throughout her day. Despite several emails and phone calls, however, she did not reply; therefore, my involvement with her was limited to our two interviews.

Although there are several limitations to interviewing elites, there are also many advantages. Elites provide valuable information because of the positions they hold (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). These school leaders provided an overview of their school campus and its relationship to other organizations within the educational system. They were familiar with organizational, financial, and political structures within and outside their schools. They also provided insight into the histories, policies, and everyday lived experiences within their schools. Consistent with Marshall and Rossman (2011), each of these school leaders served as sources of quality information and provided valuable "insight and meaning to the interview through their specific perspectives" (p. 104).

RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY AND BIAS

"Given multiple cues, with multiple meanings for multiple audiences, accurate perception of 'the object' seems like a doomed intention. Making sense of that object, however, seems more plausible and likely." –Weick, 1995, p. 57

As the primary research instrument, my personal role served as a limitation in this study. The goal of a phenomenological researcher is to provide "a report on things as

they appear to be as encountered in the field and documented in the field text, rather than as the researcher would have them be" (Cohen, 2000 p. 86). Although I took precautions to minimize my potential bias throughout data collection and analysis, it was inevitable that some bias was present during the different stages of this study. Some of the areas in which my bias was a factor were as follows: choosing a research problem, formalizing my research questions, searching for relevant literature, choosing a qualitative method, selecting participants, selecting interview questions, and deciding how to report the findings.

For example, as a former special education teacher and doctoral student majoring in special education administration, my research bias was influenced by factors such as my past experiences, knowledge base, and personal context in relation to special education. These experiences influenced aspects of the study's development such as a focusing on a research problem and choosing research questions. As a doctoral student, I was exposed to empirical literature throughout my coursework that influenced my thinking on the topic of special education leadership. As a graduate from a HQPPP, my expectations of what could or should have been included in the program may have biased my interpretation of the findings. For example, throughout our interviews, participants continued to reference the "school case study." Hearing this term, or HQPPP activity, did not prompt me to ask further clarification questions regarding an explanation of a school case study due to my existing knowledge and experience conducting a school case study. Due to the personal and professional experiences acknowledged above and the positions

held within the field of special education, both as a teacher, teacher educator, and graduate from a HQPPP, I cannot expunge my bias entirely from this study.

At the same time, my biase(s) as a research should not be viewed in a negative light. Incorporating a researcher's identity and experience throughout their research has "gained wide theoretical and philosophical support" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 38) in qualitative research. The question was how to incorporate my identity as a researcher most productively throughout the research design. Having a knowledge ebase and experience as a special education teacher, doctoral student, and participant in a HQPPP allowed fme to apply my understanding of special education and special education law, qualitative research methods, and the potential context of situations described the graduates of a HQPPP throughout the study.

To understand how researchers' values and expectations influence their analysis and conclusions, Maxwell (2005) suggests they write an *identity memo* that explains their possible biases and the ways in which they will deal with them throughout the study. Previous to this study, one of my methodology courses required a similar component, whereby we were asked to write a memo of our professional and personal background. Throughout data collection and data analysis, I revisited my identity memo and examined my biases against my interpretations and conclusions. Moreover, I discussed findings with other graduate students, the inter-raters, and my dissertation chair, which was invaluable for checking my "own biases and assumptions and flaws" and my "logic or methods" (Maxwell, 2005, p. 112). The findings were also compared to existing literature in which sensemaking was employed as a theoretical framework.

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Recommendations for Future Research

Due to the paucity of research that looks at the sensemaking of school leaders throughout policy implementation (Coburn, 2005; Saltrick, 2010; Spillane et al., 2002; Spillane, 2004), particularly in the context of implementing inclusive education policy, a number of possibilities for future research are advanced.

EFFECTS OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION POLICY ON STUDENTS AND STUDENT OUTCOMES

Investigating the effects of inclusive education policy on student outcomes was outside the scope of this study. Findings from this study revealed that school leaders draw from their knowledge, experiences, and personal contexts when they attempt to make sense of inclusive education policy and implement the policy based on their sensemaking efforts. Future research could focus on how their knowledge, experiences, and personal contexts interact and intersect in that process and, ultimately, how their enactment of inclusive education policy impacts school outcomes as well as student outcomes—for students with disabilities as well as their nondisabled peers. Both qualitative and quantitative methods could be employed to investigate policy outcomes, in order to establish a robust literature base to inform policy, practice, and future research.

For example, the school leaders in this study tended to justify their actions with the plausible explanation (Weick, 1995) of what was "best" or "right" for students. Because investigating the outcomes of their actions was beyond the scope of this study, future researchers might examine the extent to which school leaders who act in ways that

they perceive as "best" or "right" for students are truly doing so. In Frick, Fairthcloth, and Little's (2012) investigation of principals' use of the moral principle, "the best interest of the student", they found that principals viewed the work of acting in the best interest of the child differently than acting in the best interest of the group. The research team identified a "tension between equality and equity" (p. 22) that existed among the principals. Rather than considering the best interest and needs of the individual student, their deliberations, decisions, and consequent actions conformed to a greater concern *for all students* and took "center stage in the daily operations of their schools" (p. 22). In contrast, several of the school leaders in this study perceived the intent of the "best interest of the student" model to apply to each *individual* student and held differing perceptions of what was "best" or "right" for students. Future studies could replicate studies previously conducted. In addition to examining principal preparation programs in general, researchers may wish to contrast school leaders who have graduated from HQPPPs and examine potential differences that may be prevalent in school leaders' perceptions of what is in the "best interest of the student" and the consequential outcomes of their actions.

EXEMPLARY PRINCIPAL PREPARATION PROGRAMS COMPONENTS

Further investigation concerning the identified components of an exemplary principalship program in relation to how the graduates of these programs are working to meet the needs of *all* students—including students with disabilities--on their campuses is suggested. One of the components of an exemplary program is curriculum coherence

(Orr, 2011); therefore, principal preparation programs need to consider the extent to which special education should be included as part of the content covered within their program's curriculum; that is, what content should be included and how and when it should be included.

As noted earlier in this chapter, *what* is included in a principalship program is just as important as *how* it is included. Future research should examine (a) the extent to which the requirement of special education and special education law courses throughout principal preparation program curriculum influences the knowledge, experiences, and personal contexts of their graduates; and (b) how these courses were incorporated throughout the curriculum. For example, were special education and special education law courses required? Were topics regarding special education and special education law embedded throughout the program curriculum? Were they embedded within internships, projects, and other activities?

Finally, the outcomes of such programs should be evaluated. For example, researchers might ask the following questions: "What are the outcomes for schools and students when special education and special education law have been included in an exemplary program's curriculum? What are the differences in current school leaders' sensemaking of inclusive education policy if they graduated from a program that required a special education course versus a program that did not require a special education course? Is there a difference in the perspectives of current school leaders who received special education training as a separate course or special education embedded throughout the program's curriculum?" Future investigations could inform principal preparation

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programs in regard to the extent to which they should include special education in their

curricula, and with regard to what is important to include in order to produce inclusive

school leaders.

INVESTIGATING REFLECTIVE EXPERIENCES

Reflection is an important component of an exemplary program (Darling-

Hammond et al., 2007; Darling-Hammond et al., 2010; Marshall & Oliva, 2006; Orr,

2011; Orr & Orphanos, 2011; Ovando & Hutto, 1999). Given the value these school

leaders placed on the opportunity to reflect on their professional and personal identities,

prior actions and experiences, and priorities as school leaders, it would be helpful to

investigate the perceptions of school leaders reflecting on their HQPPP at various

intervals (e.g., every 5 years) in their professional careers. Findings from this type of

inquiry may provide educational administration programs feedback regarding certain

components of their exemplary principal preparation programs.

EMPLOYING SENSEMAKING AS A THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

As school leaders continue their administrative practice in the midst of an an era

of high-stakes accountability, an evolving and diverse student body, and policies that

push for equitable and excellent public schools to promote the success of all students, it

will be important to continue to examine how and why school leaders make sense of and

enact inclusive education policy in the ways that they do. Future research should apply

sensemaking as a theoretical framework to investigate how school leaders make sense of

inclusive education policy. The sensemaking framework in this study allowed for a

systematic analysis of a large amount of qualitative data. Furthermore, the complexity

surrounding the topics of inclusive education policy, FAPE, LRE, testing, and graduation

requirements made sensemaking the ideal framework (Weick, 1995). How school

leaders make sense of federal special education policy mandates in an era of

accountability is a new and under-researched topic. Future research in this area is needed

to understand how and why school leaders make their decisions related to students with

disabilities. Administrators, as well, could replicate this study via an action-research

approach within and/or across departments to help their teachers make sense of inclusive

education policy, identify "holes" that exist in their teachers' understanding of the policy,

and work with key stakeholders within their school and the district to design appropriate

professional development training relevant to key principles of IDEA (2004) such as

providing students with disabilities with a FAPE within the LRE.

Conclusion

"In short, what is necessary in sensemaking is a good story" –Weick, 1995, p. 60.

The findings of this study suggest that these six school leaders' sensemaking of

inclusive education policy was influenced by three factors: knowledge, experiences, and

personal contexts. Each of these three factors were situated within the context of the

school leaders' constructed identities. If the school leader perceived his or her role as a

leader for special education, he or she was more inclined to seek special education and

special education law content knowledge, ensure their campus staff attained and

maintained the capacity to meet the needs of all students, and continuously searched for specific experiences and opportunities that they could make available to themselves and others that required them to grapple with difficult issues related to special education. In doing so, they were more inclined to attempt to effect deeper-level change on their school campuses.

Ensuring that school leaders construct and perceive their identities as leaders for *all* students has been and still proves to be a goal for principal preparation programs, especially for those including aspects of social justice leadership. As stated by Pazey and Cole (2012),

> Disability can no longer be excluded from conversations of social justice, educational reform, and equitable schooling. It, like its relatives race, gender, and class, must all come together as integral points of any discussion or debate about change, inclusion, and the education of *all* students. Knowledge and expertise of special education and special education law are powerful forces and tools that can supplement and strengthen equality and equity of opportunity in our schools. That will only happen if they are part of the conversation. (p. 264).

The lived experiences as perceived by these school leaders throughout their sensemaking of inclusive education policy may have revealed much more about the importance of the inclusion of special education and special education law as well as how it was included as part of the conversation throughout their preparation.

Throughout this study, these six school leaders shared their stories related to their sensemaking of inclusive education policy and how they strove to meet the needs of all students on their campuses. Their stories provide others the opportunity to make sense of their actions in the hopes that they will contribute their own inputs in the interests of sensemaking. Weick (1995) continues,

> A good story, like a workable cause map, shows patterns that could
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> be created anew in the interest of more order and sense in the
>
> future. The stories are templates. They are products of previous
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> efforts at sensemaking. They explain. And they energize. And
>
> those are two important properties of sensemaking. (p. 61).

Like a good story, the intent of this study is to attempt to share and *explain* the lived experiences as perceived by these six school leaders in the hopes that they will *energize* others to grapple with difficult ideas and concepts of inclusive education and effective leadership, question theory and practice, and further explore what it is that school leaders need to be become socially just leaders for *all* students.

Although the focus of this study was not to evaluate the HQPPP, it was evident that their experiences and knowledge gained throughout their preparation influenced their sensemaking of inclusive policy, construction of their professional identities, and how they perceived themselves as leaders on their respective campuses. Because of the heavy influence of the HQPPP components throughout these school leaders' sensemaking of inclusive education policy, it is important to not only consider what we include

throughout principal preparation program curriculum, experiential activities, and projects, but also how we include it.

APPENDIX A

Cover letter, Demographic survey, Invitation to participate in interviews

Cover Letter – Demographic Survey

How School Leaders Make Sense of Inclusive Education Policies: A Qualitative Exploration of Current Texas School Administrators

As a graduate of a high-quality principalship program, you are being asked to participate in a study that explores how current school leaders who are graduates of a university-based "high-quality" principalship program make sense of inclusive education policy and legal mandates in order to promote an inclusive school culture. Specifically, you will be asked to provide information regarding (a) your lived experiences in regards to special education on you campus, (b) how you make sense of inclusive education policy demands at your school; and (c) supports that you believe help you to navigate the complexity of implementing inclusive education policy on your campus.

This study and the overall findings are important because they will add to empirical literature regarding the importance of special education throughout school leader preparation and the influence on achievement of all students. Second, they will illuminate how school leaders negotiate the complexity of their new roles and responsibilities as leaders for special education as well as how they author their own interpretation of critical special education policies and legal mandates. Third, they will also expand empirical knowledge related to the use of a unique approach for examining how school leaders make sense of inclusive education policy within state and federal mandates. Finally, findings from this study may assist and further inform educational administration departments, program directors, and researchers when evaluating the effectiveness of their graduate-level administrator preparation programs on students with special needs.

A description of the study is provided below. Please read the information below and ask any questions you might have before deciding whether or not to take part. Your participation is entirely voluntary. You can refuse to participate without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You can stop your participation at any time and your refusal will not impact current or future relationships with UT Austin or participating sites. To do so, simply tell the researcher you wish to stop participation. Any information provided for this study will be coded so that no personally identifying information is recognizable or visible.

Total estimated time expected for your participation in the survey is fifteen to twenty maximum.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explores how current school leaders who are graduates of a university-based "high-quality" principalship program make sense of inclusive education policy and legal mandates in order to promote an inclusive school culture. The research questions guiding this study are as follows:

1. What are the lived experiences of current school leaders who are graduates of a "high-quality" principalship program in regards to special education on their campuses?
2. How have current school leaders who are graduates of a "high-quality" principalship program made sense of inclusive education policy demands at their schools?
3. How do current school leaders who are graduates of a "high-quality" principalship program interpret supports that enable them to navigate the complexity of inclusive education policy on their campuses?

Potential Risks of Participation in the Study:

The potential for loss of confidentiality is minimal and no greater than everyday life. To minimize the potential risk for loss of confidentiality, however, all data will be maintained on a computer that has a password-required code to gain access to the data. Codenames will be used to maintain the anonymity of the site and all participants. If you wish to discuss the information above, you may ask questions via reply to this email or call the Principal Investigator listed on the front page of this form.

Benefits of Participation in the Study:

This study will explore your perceptions of your learning experiences and how you have used what you have learned while participating in a "high-quality" school-leader preparation program throughout your sensemaking of inclusive education policy. The results of this study will assist the researcher in understanding how your attitudes, perceptions, and thinking are influencing your current practice in regards to serving students with disabilities. Although several studies have explored how school leaders make sense of aspects of educational policy, there is a lack of research on the process that school leaders go through to make sense of inclusive education policy such as the mandates embedded within the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004.

Compensation: There is no compensation provided for participation in the study nor are there any costs to participants for participation in the research.

Confidentiality and Privacy Protections:

- The information resulting form your participation may be made available to other researchers in the future for research purposes not detailed within this consent form. In these cases, the data will contain no identifying information that could associate you with it, or with your participation in any study.

- Any information that is obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission. Pseudonyms will be used to maintain the anonymity of your responses.

- A written report that summarizes the findings of the study will be presented at area, regional, state, and/or national conferences. Information obtained from this study may be given to the directors of the "high-quality" principalship program. Information provided, however, will be used solely for the future development and improvement of the program.

- Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your future relations with the University of Texas at Austin or the "high-quality" principalship program. If you decide to participate, you are free to decide to discontinue participation at any time.

The **records** of this study will be stored securely and kept confidential. Authorized persons from the University of Texas at Austin and members of the Institutional Review Board have the legal right to review the research records and will protect the **confidentiality** of those records to the extent permitted by law. Throughout the study, the researchers will notify you of new information that may become available and that might affect your decision to remain in the study.

Contacts and Questions:

If you have any questions about the study, please ask now. If you have questions later, want additional information, or wish to withdraw your participation, please call the researchers conducting the study. Their names, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses are at the top of this page. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, complaints, concerns, or questions about the research, please contact Meagan Sumbera, principal investigator, at 361-648-2417 or meagansumbera@yahoo.com. Also, you can contact, anonymously if you wish, the Office of Research Support at (512) 471-8871, or e-mail: orsc@uts.cc.utexas.edu.

You may keep the copy of this consent form.

You are making a decision about participation in this study. Your decision to complete this survey indicates that you have read the information provided above and have decided

to participate in the study. You may discontinue participation at any time. Please note that **your willingness to complete the online/attached survey denotes that you are granting consent to participate in the study and permission for the researchers who are conducting this study to use your answers to address the research questions for this study**.

If you choose to complete the survey, please click on the Survey Monkey link at the bottom of the email. Thank you for your time and participation.

Demographic Survey and Invitation to Participate in Interviews

1. What was your job title prior to the start of the University-Based Principal Preparation Program? (select all that apply)

   a. Elementary school teacher
   b. Middle school teacher
   c. High school teacher
   d. Counselor
   e. Curriculum specialist
   f. Instructional facilitator
   g. Department chair
   h. Building administrator
   i. Coach
   j. Other

2. How many years were you in this/these position(s)?

3. What is your current job title?

   a. Elementary school teacher
   b. Middle school teacher
   c. High school teacher
   d. Counselor
   e. Curriculum specialist
   f. Instructional facilitator
   g. Department chair
   h. Building administrator
   i. Coach
   j. Other

4. How many years have you been in your current position?
5. What is your gender?
   a. Male
   b. Female
6. What is your age?
7. What is your race?
   a. White
   b. White, non-Hispanic
   c. African American
   d. Hispanic
   e. Asian-Pacific Islander

      f.   Native American

      g.   Other

8.   What is the highest level of education you have completed?

      a.   Bachelors

      b.   Masters

      c.   Doctorate

9.   Which of the following describes your school level in which you are currently employed?

      a.   Early Childhood

      b.   Elementary

      c.   Middle

      d.   High School

10. Which of the following best describes the location where you are currently employed?

      a.   Rural

      b.   Suburban

      c.   Urban

      d.   Other

11. What is the percentage of students served in special education at your school in which you are currently employed?

12. Would you be willing to participate in two interviews for about 60-90 minutes throughout the duration of this study?

      a.   Yes – If yes, please provide your name, email, and phone number

      b.   No

Thank you for your time today.

APPENDIX B

First Interview Protocol

Date:
Location:
Participant Codename:
School:

Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this study. Before we start, I'd like to remind you of the plan for this study. For the purpose of this study, I will be conducting at least two interviews with you.. In this first interview, I'd like to learn a little about your career thus far and this school, and then focus on your role as a leader. The interview will be recorded, and afterwards, transcribed. I will share the transcriptions with you so that you can verify that your comments were recorded accurately.

After this first interview, I would like to have another conversation with you to explore more deeply into issues that were raised in this first conversation. Throughout this transcription, you will only be associated with a codename that I have given you. Your school will only be identified by an assigned codename as well. You are free to withdraw from participation in this study at any time.

Do you have any questions about this study, or your role or rights as a participant?

Part I. Career History

I'm interested in learning about your career as an educator.

1. How long have you been a principal/assistant principal/curriculum specialist/special education department chair or administrator/school leader at SCHOOLCODE?
2. Can you tell me what it's been like?
3. Has your experience at SCHOOLCODE changed over time?
4. What other schools have you worked at before this one?
   a. How did that/those experiences shape your leadership here?
5. Looking back on it, what would you say led you to become a principal?
6. Please tell me about your leadership preparation (if necessary, ask about college experience and advanced degrees)
   a. How did that/those experiences throughout your leadership preparation influence how you meet the needs of all of your students at SCHOOLCODE?
   b. Did your leadership preparation include coursework with a focus on special education?
   c. Has what you learned influenced your role as a leader on your campus?
   c. How?

    d. Can you give me an example?

7. Please tell me about any significant professional development experiences that you feel have influenced your outlook as a school leader.
8. Tell me about your training and experiences with students with disabilities. [personal/professional/formal or informal]
    a. How have your experiences and/or training shaped your leadership here?

Part II. School Issues

9. Tell me about your school (mission/vision/demographics/staff/community/students/programs/etc.)
10. When you first became principal at SCHOOLCODE what were your priorities? [list on a piece of paper]
11.   These days, what are the main things you would LIKE to focus on? [list…]
    a, Why these things?
12. Regarding special education responsibilities, what things do you find you HAVE TO address these days? [list…]
    a. Where do these demands come from?
13. Do you find you can manage all these things? If not, what is your process for sorting them out?
    a. What goes through your mind?
    b. With whom do you talk to about these things?
    c. What steps do you take to figure things out?

[these next questions may wait until the 2nd interview]

14. What are your thoughts about the rating your SCHOOLCODE was given by the State Department of Education (DOE)?
15. What did you do when you got those ratings?
16. How did you address the rating and/or what did you talk to your campus advisory council and/or staff about?
17. How do you think the students, staff, parents, community, and leadership team influence the ratings or academic success at your school?
18. How do you think training, school programs, curriculum, and policy mandates have influenced the ratings or academic success at your school?
19. Have the ratings prompted any particular new initiatives at your school?
    a. If so, how would you describe them?
    b. Where did these ideas come from?
    c. How would you describe your role in identifying these initiatives?

Thank you for your time today. I value your thoughtful response to these questions.
I look forward to speaking with you again in more depth soon.

Second Interview Protocol - Example

Date: March 25, 2013
Location: Coffee Shop
Participant Pseudonym: Van Wilder
School: South High

Thank you so much for agreeing to participate in this study. Before we start, I'd like to remind you of the plan for this study. In this second interview, I would like to explore more deeply into issues that were raised in this first conversation. The interview will be recorded, and afterwards, transcribed. I will share the transcriptions with you so that you can verify that your comments were recorded accurately.

Throughout this transcription, you will only be associated with a pseudonym that you have chosen. Your school will only be identified by a pseudonym as well. You are free to withdraw from participation in this study at any time.

Do you have any questions about this study, or your role or rights as a participant?

From 1st Interview:

1. Did you have any thoughts after the first interview you want to share?

2. You talked about your aspirations of being the type of leader that you saw in your district special education director in Phoenix, can you tell me more about this? Can you tell me about what you are doing now to reach your aspirations?

      A. What are your greatest strengths as a leader? Examples?

      B. What are your biggest areas of growth as a leader? Examples?

3. You spoke about the importance of meeting the needs of your students by "doing what is best for the child" and "providing a FAPE;" Can you tell me more about that? What does this mean to you?

      A. How does your job impact students with disabilities on your campus? What about students without disabilities?

      B. Do you ever find you to need to ignore priorities set by others (state, district, school) in order to accomplish what you feel is important?

4. You also talked about the disconnect between your role on campus and the role of the principals on your campus, have you thought a little more about this since we spoke? What do you think the impact of this is on the staff? Students? School culture?

5. You also spoke about the lens in which you have developed since your time spent with the principalship program, how has that lens shaped your current role on campus? How has it influenced how you do your job?

6. You talked about the importance of school culture; can you tell me a little bit more about the culture on your campus? Can you give me an example of this?

      A. How does the school culture impact work with students with disabilities?

      B. How do you respond to principals/teachers/parents/students positive or negative attitudes/perceptions/view towards students with disabilities?

      C. Who are the people who can change the culture on your campus?

7. You spoke about a lack of communication regarding expectations and the impact that it has had on the teachers and the school year; have you thought more about that since we spoke? What expectations were communicated…about your job… to administrators about your job…. to faculty about your job? What does lack of communication mean to you?

New Questions: Addresses 2ⁿᵈ & 3ʳᵈ Research Questions

1. We hear a lot about inclusive education policy these days. What is your definition of inclusive education policy?

2. How has your notion of inclusive education policy shaped your leadership practice and your vision for your school? Your students?

3. As a leader in your current school, in what situations, if any, do you find views on inclusive education policy most challenged?

4. Can you think back to an incident at [South High] in which you perceived the *inclusive education policy* demands on the school as being particularity memorable or pronounced –perhaps even in conflict with one another?

      A. How did the situation present itself to you? How did you experience the situation? What was your initial response?

B. Was the conflict resolved (or the complexity managed)? If so, how would you describe the process by which this happened?

C. Did your response change over time?

D. What did you learn from this experience?

E. How would you describe your relationship with this situation now?

F. What does *conflict* mean to you?

5. How do you set goals for yourself and your school?

6. What is your perception of the way other educators in your school understand the complexity of these demands?

7. How did you perceive your role in helping others in your school understand these demands? [*How do you decide what you will handle and what you will delegate?]*

8. How do you like to work with others? (Sharing ideas with others? Them sharing with you?)

9. What have you learned from dealing with conflict from others?

10. We have talked a lot today about challenges and conflict. What support(s) to you use to manage challenges & conflict? [course material/data/people/etc] Why this/these?

Thank you for your time today. I value your thoughtful response to these questions.

APPENDIX C

Permission to Use Interview Protocol

Subject:	Re: protocol
From:	Susan Saltrick (ssaltrick@gmail.com)
To:	meagansumbera@yahoo.com;
Date:	Friday, June 29, 2012 12:46 PM

you are so welcome, Meagan. Your email made my day. Thanks again and again, I wish you much success in your dissertation journey!

Susan

On Fri, Jun 29, 2012 at 10:29 AM, Meagan Sumbera <meagansumbera@yahoo.com> wrote:

Dr. Saltrick,

Wow what an honor! Thank you for writing me! I have truly enjoyed reading your dissertation! Dr. Richard Reddick is my methodologist and he utilized the Maxwell book in our qualitative class. You are the perfect model for how to be reflexive throughout your writing! I am so appreciative for your permission to use your protocol... reading your work has been a HUGE help to me and I wanted to thank you again. I am just jumping for joy! Thank you again...and again... what an honor!

Sincerely,

Meagan Sumbera

From: Susan Saltrick <ssaltrick@gmail.com>
To: MEAGANSUMBERA@YAHOO.COM
Sent: Friday, June 29, 2012 12:00 PM
Subject: protocol

Hi Meagan,

Thanks so much for your kind words! It's such a thrill to know someone other than my committee has read my dissertation :-)

Of course, you are welcome to use my protocol. And thank you for the attribution.

All best wishes on your work!

Susan

APPENDIX D

Characteristics of the "High Quality" Principal Preparation Program (HQPPP) and

Exemplary Program Components

Exemplary Program Components	Supported by Research	"High-Quality" Principal Preparation Program (HQPPP)
Research-based	Darling-Hammond & LaPointe (2007) Darling-Hammond et al. (2007) Davis et al. (2005) Kowalski (2009) Leithwood (1996) Orr (2011) Orr & Orphanos (2011)	HQPPP program content focuses on researched-based topics such as: distributed leadership, collaborative decision making, building community culture, socio and cultural awareness.
Well-defined Theory of Leadership	Grogan & Andrews (2010) Leithwood (1996) Marshall & Oliva (2006) Orr (2011) Orr and Orphanos (2011)	**Social Justice Leadership**, **Instructional Leadership**, **Change Theories**, **Critical Race Theory** (Involvement in Courageous Conversation, see Singleton & Linton, 2006 and completion of racial

Exemplary Program Components	Supported by Research	"High-Quality" Principal Preparation Program (HQPPP)
		autobiography).
Curriculum Coherence	Darling-Hammond et al. (2007) Davis et al. (2005) Jackson & Kelley (2002) Leithwood (1996) Orr (2011) Orr & Barber (2007) Orr & Orphanos (2011) Vornburg & Davis (1997)	Application of state and national standards [The Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) and the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELLC)]. Required Courses: (a) education law; (b) instructional supervision; (c) teacher evaluation; (d) data-based decision making; (e) class, race, and gender; (f) school-business management; (g) bilingual education and programs; (h) **special populations**; and (i) processes and procedures in **special education administration.**

Exemplary Program Components	Supported by Research	"High-Quality" Principal Preparation Program (HQPPP)
Vision	Jackson & Kelley (2002)	Educational platform (see Ovando & Hutto, 1999), developed vision statement, and participated in art making.
Field-based Internship	Darling-Hammond et al., (2007) Darling-Hammond et al., (2010) Davis et al. (2005) Jackson & Kelley (2002) Leithwood (1996) Orr (2011) Orr & Orphanos (2011) Vornburg & Davis (1997)	1 year required internship
Problem-based Learning	Darling-Hammond et al. (2007)	Self-directed school study, equity audits (see Skrla et al., 2004), and

Exemplary Program Components	Supported by Research	"High-Quality" Principal Preparation Program (HQPPP)
	Darling-Hammond et al., (2010)	case studies (see Stader, 2006).
	Davis et al. (2005)	
	Grogan & Andrews (2002)	
	Leithwood (1996)	
Cohort model	Darling-Hammond et al. (2007)	15-24 Members in each closed-cohort, 2-day transition camp, establish group norms.
	Darling-Hammond et al. (2010)	
	Davis et al. (2005)	
	Greenlee & Karanxha, (2010)	
	Jackson & Kelley (2002)	
	Marshall & Oliva (2006)	
	Orr (2011)	
	Orr & Orphanos (2011)	
	Vornburg & Davis	

Exemplary Program Components	Supported by Research	"High-Quality" Principal Preparation Program (HQPPP)
	(1997)	
Mentors	Darling-Hammond et al. (2007)	"Three Way Mentorship"
	Davis et al. (2005)	1. University based Mentor
	Orr (2011)	2. Cognitive Coach
	Orr & Orphanos (2011)	3. Campus Mentor
	Vornburg & Davis (1997)	
Reflective Practice	Darling-Hammond et al. (2007)	Reflective journals and blogs
	Darling-Hammond et al. (2010)	
	Marshall & Oliva (2006)	
	Orr (2011)	
	Orr & Orphanos (2011)	
Recruitment	Darling-Hammond at al.	Requirements for candidates:

Exemplary Program Components	Supported by Research	"High-Quality" Principal Preparation Program (HQPPP)
	(2007)	Must receive a nomination, attend
	Darling-Hammond et al.	an informational session,
	(2010)	complete application and
	Jackson & Kelley (2002)	portfolio, and receive an on-site
	Vornburg & Davis	observation with interview.
	(1997)	Fifteen to twenty-four members
		are selected annually.
Feedback and Reflections	Styron & LeMire (2009)	Feedback gathered through
	Orr (2011)	journal reflections, leadership
	Orr & Orphanos (2011)	platform, blogs, and reflection
	Ovando & Hutto (1999)	papers throughout the program.
Knowledgeable Faculty	Orr (2011)	HQPPP faculty has extensive
	Orr & Orphanos (2011)	research and/or administrative
	Jackson & Kelley (2002)	experience in the following areas:
		clinical supervision; principals of

Exemplary Program Components	Supported by Research	"High-Quality" Principal Preparation Program (HQPPP)
		effective teaching; critical, change, and leadership theories; data-based decision-making, and education law.
Educational Partnerships	Breault & Breault (2010) Grogan & Andrews (2002) Jackson & Kelley (2002)	School study Cognitive Coach Campus mentor Professional conferences
Portfolios	Tucker et al. (2003) Knoeppel & Logan (2011)	Required for certification

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