


SPECIAL EDUCATION ELIGIBILITY: AN EXAMINATION OF THE DECISION-
MAKING PROCESS

by

Erin K. B. Kirkland
A Dissertation
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of
Doctor of Philosophy
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DEDICATION

This is dedicated in loving memory my father, Frank W. Boksan, for without him, I never would have come this far.

This is also dedicated in loving memory of my son, Robert, my love for whom has allowed me to continue.

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ABSTRACT

SPECIAL EDUCATION ELIGIBILITY: AN EXAMINATION OF THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

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George Mason University, 2012

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The purpose of this study was to investigate the influence of private practitioner and educational advocate opinions on school-based administrators' decision-making thought processes when making a recommendation for special education eligibility. Special education eligibility is a school-based team decision that involves multiple stakeholders. Using Multiple Stakeholder Theory and Social Network Theory, supporting research shows that an individual may attempt to align with a stakeholder external to the decision-making group in an attempt to alter the power differential in an effort to sway the decision in his or her favor. School-based administrators are faced with this situation when parents employ private practitioners or educational advocates to add their "expert power" to the special education eligibility decision-making context. As instructional leaders for their schools, administrators must maintain political neutrality so students are not erroneously over- or underidentified as educationally disabled. Research has shown

that leaders with greater efficacy beliefs are less influenced external agencies. School-based administrators ($N = 56$) with varying years of experience as special education administrators participated in this mixed methods study. Data were collected from a demographic survey, case vignettes, the School Administrators Efficacy Scale, and individual interviews. Private practitioner evaluations and educational advocate opinions had no significant influence on participating school-based administrators' recommendations for special education eligibility. When both are included among the data considered, a statistically significant relationship emerges but to a modest degree. Self-efficacy and years of experience as a special education administrator failed to be significant mediating variables in the relationship between the external factors (i.e. private practitioner evaluations and educational advocate opinions) and the school-based administrators' recommendations for special education eligibility. The majority of administrators reported that considering a combination of data, including school-based evaluations and teacher-provided classroom data, was most important information when considering a student's eligibility for special education services, and they cited other factors such as collegial support and relationships, team member communication, and their own focus on student advocacy to be the most influential factors on their decision-making processes.

1. INTRODUCTION

Background

School systems are political environments in which politically charged decisions are made (Tooms, Kretovics, & Smialek, 2007). One type of decision that must be made frequently and which often can be controversial is whether a student is eligible for special education services. Special education eligibility decisions are made by a team of individuals, all of whom have a stake in the outcome. As such, all team members have equivalent legitimate power in the decision-making process; however, the format of this decision is subject to differences (real or perceived) in expert power, thus leading to the decision's political charge. In an effort to increase his or her personal decision-making power, a stakeholder may elicit assistance from an external agency or individual in order to have greater influence over the other decision makers and, thus, the decision itself (Frooman, 1999; Neville & Megnuc, 2006; Rowley, 1997).

School-based administrators have to be both instructional leaders and political leaders for their respective schools, a role that necessitates frequent decision making, including special education eligibility (DiPaola, Tschannen-Moran, & Walther-Thomas, 2004; Rafoth & Foriska, 2006). As members of the decision-making team, administrators must balance the role of instructional leader and political leader by demonstrating the knowledge of and ability to interpret and apply special education laws, regulations, and

procedures while maintaining neutrality in making ethical decisions about students under the pressure of other stakeholder demands. The school-based administrator's ability to effectively maintain that balance is a function of his or her efficacy beliefs in his or her knowledge, skills, and abilities (Hannah, Avolio, Luthans, & Harms, 2008; Tooms et al., 2007; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004).

The Research Problem

The research regarding special education eligibility decision-making has been scant and has focused primarily on parent, teacher, and, to a limited extent, on school psychologist eligibility decision making (Abidin & Robinson, 2002; Algozzine & Ysseldyke, 1981, 1986; Barnett, 1988; Della Toffalo & Pedersen, 2005; McIntyre, 1990; Ysseldyke, Christenson, Pianta, & Algozzine, 1983). Little research has focused on the decision-making processes of school-based administrators in regard to special education eligibility. With school-based administrators being in a unique position to mediate the effects of external influences special education eligibility decisions, as both team members and sources of balance and neutrality, investigation into external influences on administrator decision making is warranted.

Rationale

The Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (2004) stipulates that the decision regarding whether a student is eligible to receive special education services is to be a *consensus* decision of the school-level eligibility team, which includes the school-based administrator. The decision is made after the team reviews relevant data (e.g. evaluation results, academic record, discipline reports) and compares that information

with the definition and eligibility criteria for the suspected disability. When decisions are made based on factors other than student-based data, students can be misidentified, which can lead to inappropriate educational placement, and can result in unintended consequences. Research has shown, however, that often decisions are made without reaching consensus and are not based on the data. External pressures such as advocacy groups and private practitioner diagnoses (Della Toffalo & Pederson, 2005; Furlong & Yanagida, 1985; Shepard, Smith, & Vojir, 1983) are often of greater influence on the decision, and it is not uncommon is for some members of the team to feel threatened by other members whom they perceive to have more power (Gutkin & Nemeth, 1997; Mehan, Hartwick, & Meihls, 1986; Ysseldyke, Algozzine, Richey, & Graden, 1982).

A child with a disability is currently defined by IDEA (2004) as a child with mental retardation [*sic* intellectual disability], hearing impairments (including deafness), speech or language impairments, visual impairments (including blindness), serious emotional disturbance, orthopedic impairments, autism, traumatic brain injury, other health impairments, or specific learning disabilities; and who, by reason thereof, needs special education and related services. (Sec. 602)

When students are evaluated by a school system and are found to have a qualifying educational disability, they become eligible to receive special education services.

According to Section 614 of IDEA (2004), the eligibility process for special education is outlined as a series of procedures that include: (a) screening, (b) prereferral interventions, (c) referral to special education, including assessment of learning and behavioral needs,

and (d) the eligibility determination. IDEA (2004) mandates that valid and reliable assessment measures and scientifically based intervention strategies be used, and that the process be overseen by a multidisciplinary team to include teachers and other specialists (e.g. school psychologists, counselors) to ensure appropriate identification and placement of students with disabilities so that their educational needs are met.

In Virginia, the procedures for determining the eligibility of a student for special education, as described by the *Regulations Governing Special Education Programs for Children With Disabilities in Virginia* (Virginia Department of Education [VDOE], 2010), indicate that the Local Education Agency (LEA) “shall draw upon information from a variety of sources (e.g. aptitude and achievement tests, teacher recommendations, parental input, etc.) and ensure that the information is documented and carefully considered” (p. 28). A student cannot be determined disabled if the determinant factor is a lack of instruction in reading or math, or limited English proficiency. The group making the eligibility decision is to work toward consensus regarding the eligibility determination, and a written summary of the deliberations must be signed by all members of the decision-making team. This team must include, but is not limited to, the LEA personnel representing the disciplines providing the assessments, the special education school-based administrator or designee, a teacher certified in special education, the student’s teacher or one qualified to teach a student of that age, and the parent(s) (VDOE, 2010).

In its 30th *Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of IDEA*, the most recent publication of special education enrollment data, the U.S. Office of Special

Education Programs (OSEP) (2008) reported that the number of students ages 6 to 21 years who were receiving services under Part B of IDEA represented approximately 9.1% (approximately 6,081,890 students) of the general U.S. population in that age group (Table 1). This is an increase of approximately 680,000 students ages 6 to 21 years who were served under Part B in 1997. The largest increase was seen in the 12 to 17 years age group, from 10.2% in 1997 to 11.6% in 2006.

Table 1

Number of Students Ages 6 Through 21 Served Under the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Part B, and Percentage of the Population Served, by Year: Fall 1997 Through Fall 2006

Year	Total served under Part B (ages 6 through 21)		Population ages 6 through 21 in the 50 states ^a and DC	Percentage ^b of the population ages 6 through 21 served under Part B in the 50 states, DC, and BIE schools
	For the 50 states, DC, BIE schools, PR, and the four outlying areas	For the 50 states, DC, and BIE schools		
1997	5,401,292	5,343,017	62,552,035	8.5
1998	5,541,166	5,488,001	63,763,580	8.6
1999	5,683,707	5,613,949	64,717,510	8.7
2000	5,775,722	5,705,177	65,323,415	8.7
2001	5,867,078	5,795,334	65,696,458	8.8
2002	5,959,282	5,893,038	65,845,492	8.9
2003	6,046,051	5,971,495	65,865,048	9.1
2004	6,118,437	6,033,425	65,871,265	9.2
2005	6,109,569	6,021,462	65,825,834	9.1
2006	6,081,890	5,986,644	66,002,955	9.1

Note. DC = District of Columbia, BIE = Bureau of Indian Education, PR = Puerto Rico. The four outlying areas are ---. Data sources: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, Data Analysis System (DANS), OMB #1820-0043: "Report of Children with Disabilities Receiving Special Education Under Part B of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, as Amended," 1997-2006. Data for the referenced year were updated as of July of the year following the referenced year. For actual Part B data used, go to Data Accountability Center, n.d. (<https://www.ideadata.org/Archive/ARCArchive.asp>). U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Census Bureau. Population data estimates for 1997 through 2000 were accessed January through November 2004 from <http://www.census.gov/popest/archives/EST90INTERCENSAL/STCH-Intercensal/STCH-ICEN1997.txt> through [STCH-ICEN2000.txt](http://www.census.gov/popest/archives/STCH-ICEN2000.txt). Population data estimates for 2001 through 2006 were accessed August 2007 from http://www.census.gov/popest/states/asrh/files/SC_EST2006_AGESEX_RES.csv. For actual Census data used, go to Data Accountability Center, n.d. (<https://www.ideadata.org/Archive/ARCArchive.asp>).

^aStudents served through the BIE are included in the population estimates of the individual states in which they reside. ^bPercentage was calculated by dividing the number of students ages 6 through 21 served under IDEA, Part B, by the estimated U.S. resident population ages 6 through 21 for that year, then multiplying the result by 100.

Of the 12 defined disability categories, the majority of students ages 6 to 21 years who were receiving services under Part B were identified with a Specific Learning Disability (44.6%), a full 25.5% difference between SLD and the next most common disability identification of Speech or Language Impairment (19.1%). The top five most

common disability identifications are as follows in order: Specific Learning Disability (44.6%), Speech or Language Impairment (19.1%), Other Health Impairments (9.9%), Intellectual Disabilities (8.6%), Emotional Disturbance (7.5%) (Figure 1).

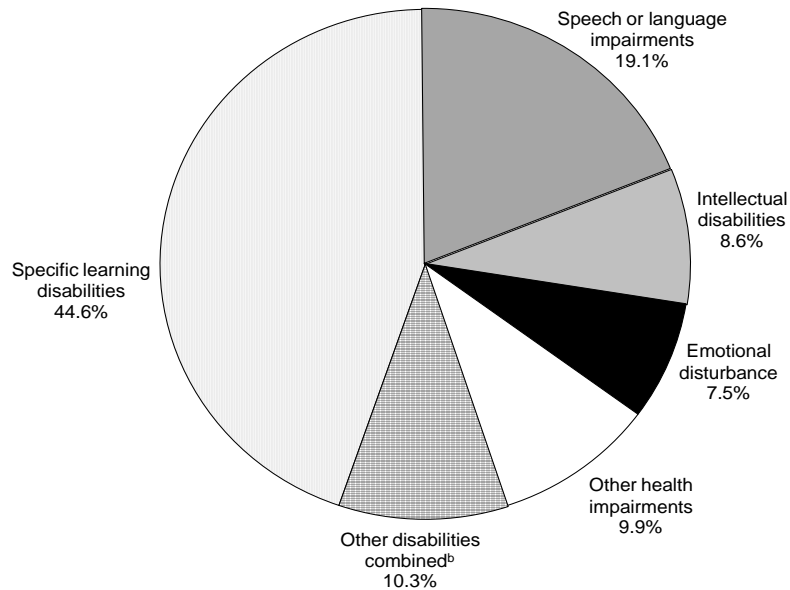


Figure 1. Percentage^a of students ages 6 through 21 served under Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Part B, by disability category: Fall 2006. Data sources: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, Data Analysis System (DANS), OMB #1820-0043: “Report of Children with Disabilities Receiving Special Education Under Part B of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, as Amended,” 2006. Data were updated as of July 15, 2007. For actual data used, go to Data Accountability Center, n.d. (<https://www.ideadata.org/Archive/ARCArchive.asp>). These data are for the 50 states, District of Columbia, Bureau of Indian Education schools, Puerto Rico, and the four outlying areas (----).

^aPercentage was calculated by dividing the number of students ages 6 through 21 served under IDEA, Part B, in the disability category by the total number of students ages 6 through 21 served under IDEA, Part B, then multiplying the result by 100. ^b“Other disabilities combined” includes autism (3.7%), deaf-blindness (less than 0.1%), developmental delay (1.4%), hearing impairments (1.2%), multiple disabilities (2.2%), orthopedic impairments (1%), traumatic brain injury (0.4%) and visual impairments (0.4%).

The disability categories that experienced an increase in the number of identified students ages 6 to 21 since 1997 were Other Health Impairments and Autism. For all other disability categories, the change was negligible, that is, < 0.1% (OSEP, 2008).

The Virginia Department of Education (VDOE, 2010) reports that Child Count Data for Part B under IDEA for students ages 6 through 21 in Virginia as of December 1, 2010, the most recent available data, shows that 145,336 students were receiving special education services. Of those students, 40.2% were identified as Other Health Impaired, 35.4% were identified with a Specific Learning Disability, 15.1% were identified with a Speech or Language Impairment, 7.4% as Autistic, 6.7% were identified with Intellectual Disabilities, 5.8% as Emotionally Disabled, and 1.0% as Developmentally Delayed. The remaining students included those with Visual and Hearing Impairments; Orthopedic Impairments; Deaf-Blindness; and Traumatic Brain Injuries, Multiple Disabilities, and Severe Disability, an additional category defined by the Virginia Regulations but not defined by IDEA 2004 (VDOE, 2010). Comparing the most recently published state and national data, Virginia reports that 12.6% of students enrolled in public school for the 2010-2011 school year were identified as receiving special education services (VDOE, 2010), higher than the 9.1% national average reported by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP, 2008).

IDEA is based on the requirement that students who have been identified under one or more of the above-mentioned disability categories, resulting in adverse impact on their educational performance, be provided with a free and appropriate public education (FAPE), and is intended to provide additional resources to ensure access to the general

curriculum equal to that of their peers who do not have disabilities (IDEA, 2004).

Students have access to the additional resources through special education provided they meet specifically established criteria (Florian et al., 2006). Whether a student meets the criteria is the decision of the members of the eligibility committee, each of whom has a stake in the outcome of the decision.

School-based decisions, such as special education eligibility, involve multiple stakeholders; therefore, when examining the decision-making process of one member of the stakeholder network, it is important to understand how members of that committee may be influenced. Such is the case when examining the decision-making process of a school-based administrator who is involved in determining a student's eligibility for special education services. Individual stakeholders may seek the opinions of other members of their social networks, who are external to the process, in order to increase their power to influence the decision. Other committee members' decisions, including the school-based administrator, may be influenced by the perceptions they have formed about these external opinions, despite school-based data and whether or not federally mandated eligibility criteria have been met. Research has shown that eligibility decisions often are made without reaching consensus due to a perceived imbalance of power by team members (Gutkin & Nemeth, 1997; Klingner & Harry, 2006). The school-based administrator's knowledge of special education policy and procedures and their efficacy beliefs regarding their skills as a special education administrator, however, may mitigate the extent to which they are influenced by external opinions. Influences of the external opinions could lead to misidentification and inappropriate educational placements for

students; therefore, research regarding how and to what extent external opinions influence the special education eligibility decision-making process could enable school-based administrators to manage the eligibility decision-making process to minimize inappropriate special education placements and maximize the effective placement of students who require and are eligible for special education services.

Purpose

The school-based administrator is responsible for defining special education implementation and planning through his or her vision, leadership, and authority (Lieber et al., 2000) and establishes values for the educational community (Praisner, 2003). School-based administrators are seen as cornerstones of good schools and key agents in program effectiveness (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004). Success of special education programs is contingent in part upon their self-efficacy in carrying out their role as special education administrator, as well as their knowledge of special education (Patterson, Marshall, & Bowling, 2000). The research regarding the role of the school-based administrator in special education decisions has many gaps, and the decision-making literature that does exist has focused primarily on the biases of parents, teachers, and school psychologists—other members of the eligibility committee—when making eligibility recommendations. While the literature frequently identifies the participation of school-based administrators as an important factor in team decision-making effectiveness (Rafoth & Foriska, 2006; Safran & Safran, 1997), the absence of research on the efficacy of the administrator in eligibility decisions represents a gap. As such, the focus of this

research was on the school-based administrator and his or her decision-making thought processes when making a placement recommendation.

School-based administrators with a greater understanding of the special education laws and the educational disability criteria that govern a student's eligibility for services, in addition to a solid knowledge of how educational disabilities differ from medical disabilities, should be able to offer more informed recommendations for eligibility that could lead to more appropriate educational programming for their students.

Administrators with greater knowledge of special education policies and practices are likely to report greater perceived self-efficacy regarding their role of special education administrator and, thus, are likely in a better position to resist stakeholder influences and may be more efficacious in their adherence to special education laws in striving to provide quality instructional leadership and service delivery to students with special needs. The purpose of the present research, then, was to examine the influence of external opinions—private practitioner diagnoses and educational advocate opinions—on the school-based administrator's decision-making thought processes when making special education eligibility recommendations, and how this process is mediated by their knowledge of special education and their self-efficacy as a special education administrator. The efficacy of the entire special education enterprise is contingent on a fair, unbiased, and well-informed eligibility decision process. Little is known about what kinds of information school leaders rely on in this process. Additionally, little is known about what influence external agents have on leaders' decision making, or whether or not they credential these experts or extant data brought to bear on the decision.

Research Procedures

Employing a mixed methods design, the present research sought to investigate those assumptions. From a large Northern Virginia school system, 56 principals and assistant principals, out of a total population of 176 school-based administrators, were asked to complete several measures, including case vignettes, a demographic survey, and a self-efficacy scale, to examine the level of influence the external opinions of private practitioners and educational advocates have on their recommendations for special education eligibility. Of those who completed the vignettes, survey, and self-efficacy scale, six administrators, chosen specifically for their educational and professional credentials, participated in interviews. Results of the survey and the one-way, repeated measures ANOVA and the correlation analyses are presented in later chapters followed by the axial coding analysis of the interview responses. Those analyses were guided by the following questions and hypotheses.

Research Questions

1. What type of information is most important to school-based administrators when making a special education eligibility decision?
2. Is there a difference in school-based administrators' special education eligibility recommendations with the inclusion of an external opinion?
3. Do decision-maker self-efficacy and years of experience contribute to the extent to which an external opinion influences school-based administrators' eligibility decisions?

4. How are school-based administrators' decision-making thought processes influenced by external opinions when making special education recommendations?

Research Hypotheses

1. School-based administrators credential a private practitioner's or an educational advocate's opinion as more important than other sources of information presented for consideration for special education eligibility.
2. There is a difference in school-based administrators' eligibility recommendations for special education based upon the presence of an external opinion.
3. The extent to which a school-based administrator's decision-making thought process is influenced by an external opinion will vary depending on the school-based administrator's years of experience and reported level of self-efficacy as a special education administrator.

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of the present study, the following terms will be used as defined:

- *Advocate*: an individual, hired by parents, to provide support and/or speak on their and their child's behalf when making educational programming decisions for that child.
- *Child With a Disability*: Per IDEA (2004),
a child with mental retardation, hearing impairments (including deafness), speech or language impairments, visual impairments

(including blindness), serious emotional disturbance, orthopedic impairments, autism, traumatic brain injury, other health impairments, or specific learning disabilities; and who, by reason thereof, needs special education and related services. (Sec. 602)

- *Eligibility Committee*: “a group of qualified professionals and the parent or parents of the child” (IDEA, 2004, Sec. 602).
- *External Opinion*: an opinion regarding a student’s educational functioning offered by a professional who is external to both the eligibility committee and the school system, and is sought out by parents to include in a special education eligibility decision, for example, a private practitioner diagnosis of a disability.
- *External Stakeholder*: an individual who is not typically a member of the Eligibility Committee making the decision, yet may have an indirect influence on eligibility decisions, for example a school board member, by reason that he or she is part of the social network of a Committee member that is directly or indirectly affected by school-based decisions and thus has a stake in the outcomes of those decisions.
- *Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE)*: an evaluation conducted by a qualified examiner or examiners who are not employed by the local educational agency responsible for the education of the child in question (Virginia Department of Education [VDOE], 2009, p.6).

- *Individualized Education Program (IEP)*: “a written statement for each child with a disability that is developed, reviewed, and revised in accordance with section 614(d) [of IDEA 2004 – Evaluations, Eligibility Determinations, Individualized Education Programs, and Educational Placements]” (IDEA, 2004, Sec. 602).
- *Internal Opinion*: the opinion put forth by any member of a special education eligibility committee regarding the educational functioning and disability status of the student in question.
- *Internal Stakeholder*: an individual who, by reason that he or she is a member of the Eligibility Committee or directly affected by the outcome of the eligibility decision, has a direct stake in the outcome of the decision.
- *Local Educational Agency (LEA)*: Per IDEA (2004),

In general...[LEA] means a public board of education or other public authority legally constituted within a State for either administrative control or direction of, or to perform a service function for, public elementary schools or secondary schools in a city, county, township, school district, or other political subdivision of a State, or for such combination of school districts or counties as are recognized in a State as an administrative agency for its public elementary schools or secondary schools. (Sec. 602)
- *Private Practitioner*: a licensed professional who provides medical or mental health examinations.

- *Social Influence*: “a change in belief, attitude, or behavior of a person (the target of influence), which results from the action of another person (an influencing agent)” (Raven, 2008, p. 1).
- *Social Network*: The relationship among social entities (Wasserman & Faust, 1994).
- *Social Power*: the potential for social influence; the ability of the agent or power figure to bring about a change in belief, attitude, or behavior of another person, using the resources available to him or her (Pierro, Cicero, & Raven, 2008; Raven, 2008).
- *Special Education*: Per IDEA (2004),
 specially designed instruction, at no cost to parents, to meet the
 unique needs of a child with a disability, including: instruction
 conducted in the classroom, in the home, in hospitals and
 institutions, and in other settings; and instruction in physical
 education. (Sec. 602)
- *Specialist*: a “person qualified to conduct diagnostic examinations of
 children, such as a school psychologist, speech-language pathologist,
 teacher of specific learning disabilities, or teacher of remedial reading”
 (VDOE, 2010).
- *Specific Learning Disability (SLD)*: Per IDEA (2004),
 a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes
 involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written,

that may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell or to do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. The term does not include learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage. (Sec. 602)

- *Stakeholder*: any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives (Freeman, 1994, p. 410).
- *Stakeholder Approach*: decision making takes into account the relationships that exist between the school and its stakeholders (i.e. parents, teachers, students, business leaders, community members, and government agencies).

Organization of Study

The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of external opinions—private practitioner diagnoses and the presence of advocates—on school-based administrators' decision-making thought processes when recommending eligibility for special education services. First, a review of the literature will be presented to provide a comprehensive overview of current research regarding disability identification, both in the context of the medical model and the educational model, the procedures for determining a student eligible for special education services, and school-based

administrator knowledge and training in special education. Additional research addressing the stakeholder approach to decision-making, its application to decision-making in education, and the use of power to influence decisions will be reviewed. Following a review of the relevant literature, procedures and methods used throughout the investigation will be described in detail. This section will include a description of the site selection, methods for participant recruitment, instrumentation, methods used for data collection and analysis, and validation procedures. Chapter 4 will present each of the analyses conducted for both the quantitative and qualitative portions of the study and the subsequent results. Finally, Chapter 5 will discuss the results within the context of the conceptual framework and guiding hypotheses, conclusions that can be drawn from those results, limitations, and the theoretical, research, and practical implications of the study.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The purpose of this study was to examine the influence of external opinions—private practitioner diagnoses and the presence of advocates—on school-based administrators’ decision-making thought processes when recommending eligibility for special education services. Research has shown that the inclusion of external influences, such as an educational advocate and private practitioner opinions, impacts a consensus decision as team members feel pressured to make a particular decision even if eligibility criteria are not met (Furlong & Yanagida, 1985; Shepard et al., 1983). Special education eligibility decisions are made by a multidisciplinary team and are, by design, open to the influence of multiple stakeholders. In a decision involving multiple stakeholders, individual stakeholders may seek opportunities to increase the probability that the decision will be made in their favor. One way to do this is to align with an external stakeholder, a relationship that would increase their own decision-making power. Advocating for their children’s educational needs, parents may choose this method by seeking assistance from a private practitioner or an educational advocate in an effort to influence the outcome of the special education eligibility decision. In turn, the outcome of the special education eligibility decision leads to instructional and placement decisions for the student in question, a concern of school-based administrators whose role it is to oversee the design, implementation, and evaluation of school programs. They fulfill this role while bound by law, policy, and professional obligation to be concerned with issues

of equity and fairness in delivering appropriate educational programs that are high quality, research-based, and high in academic standards and expectations for all children (Crockett, 2002; DiPaola et al., 2004). Thus, it is important to understand how they operate in what is, for all intents and purposes, a political decision-making context. This chapter will focus on the relevant literature and research concerning special education eligibility and multiple stakeholder decision making, including the roles of social networks, social power, parental advocacy, and school-based administrator knowledge of special education.

Overview of Special Education in the United States

Compulsory education laws have been in place since the early 1900s; however, children with disabilities had been routinely excluded from attending public schools and had only the options of staying home or being institutionalized. This remained common practice until 1975 when Congress passed the Education for All Handicapped Children Act or P.L. 94-142 (USDOE, 2006). This landmark legislation required public schools to provide a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) to all students with a broad range of disabilities, from speech impairments to mental retardation, alongside their nondisabled peers (USDOE, 2006). After multiple reauthorizations since 1975, the Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act, or IDEA as it is now known, has generated the delivery of services to millions of students who otherwise would have been denied access to an appropriate education. IDEA not only requires an education for these children, but provides for specially trained teachers and an individualized education

program tailored to the student's individual needs in the least restrictive environment (LRE) (Pardini, 2002).

When a student is suspected of having an educational disability, a multidisciplinary, psycho-educational evaluation process is initiated, as required by IDEA (2004), during which the student is evaluated by numerous school-based specialists (e.g. school psychologists, speech and language pathologists, educational diagnosticians) to determine his or her functioning in a variety of areas that are correlated with learning, such as cognitive development, academic achievement, and language development. The culmination of this process is the eligibility meeting during which a school-based, multidisciplinary team reviews the assessment results and other relevant data (e.g. student grades, standardized test scores, doctor's reports). The members of the team must then reach a consensus regarding whether the student meets the specific criteria as a student with an educational disability and, thus, is eligible to receive special education services (IDEA, 2004).

According to IDEA (2004), certain individuals are required to be present at the meeting, including the student's parent(s) or legal guardian(s), the student's classroom teacher or a teacher qualified to teach a student that age if the student does not have a regular classroom teacher, and at least one person qualified to conduct and interpret diagnostic assessments (e.g. school psychologist, speech pathologist, reading specialist). As in previous renditions of the law, the federal government deferred to the local education agencies (LEAs) regarding the decision to include additional members, and typically LEAs include the school-based administrator and a designated eligibility

coordinator, that is, a central office administrator, to chair the meeting (Wright & Wright, 2005). Having a vested interest, then, in the outcome of that decision, the individuals who comprise the eligibility committee are all considered stakeholders (Mellard, Deshler, & Barth, 2004) in the eligibility decision.

Micropolitics and Multiple Stakeholder Decision Making in Education

School systems have long been considered political systems, systems which are situated in bureaucratic governmental structures and are responsible for providing a public service amidst an environment in which they are dependent on diverse constituencies that often have competing demands. Like any other political system, officials in the school system must manage the conflict between constituencies and make decisions that pivot on power. Overt manifestations of that power come in the form of influence, direct or indirect. School politics concerns itself with the acquisition and exercise of that power (Malen, 1994).

When decisions are made in large, complex organizations like a school system, the decision typically involves a number of interest groups referred to as “stakeholders,” as each has its own stake in the outcome of the decision. Borrowing from research conducted in the field of business management, the term “stakeholders” has been defined in numerous ways: “constituents who have a legitimate claim on the firm” (Hill & Jones, 1992, p. 133), “groups to whom the corporation is responsible” (Alkhafaji, 1989, p. 36), and “those groups or individuals with whom the organization interacts or has interdependencies” (Carroll, 1993, p. 60). For the purposes of this research, the most commonly cited definition of *stakeholder*—“any group or individual who can affect or is

affected by the achievement of the organization's objectives" (Freeman, 1994, p. 410)—is used. Thus, the *stakeholder approach* to decision making recognizes the political atmosphere of the school system and takes into account the relationships that exist between the groups or stakeholders and the organization and the organization's response to those stakeholders (Frooman, 1999). The stakeholder approach, thus, concerns the school and its response to parents, teachers, students, business leaders, community members, government agencies, and so forth.

Stakeholders are identified by their possession of one or more of three salient characteristics: power—the ability of groups or individuals to influence others to do as they wish; legitimacy—stakeholders' rights to involve themselves in a particular organizational decision; and urgency—the time pressure imposed by the stakeholder regarding when the decision should be made (Brazer & Keller, 2006; Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997). Because the focus is examining the *influences* of external opinions on decision making, the present research concerns the characteristic of power. The power of a stakeholder is derived from the group's or individual's position, relationships, access to resources, or a combination with regard to the organization. Legitimacy evolves from the perception of the organization that the stakeholder's actions are desirable and appropriate within a structure of social norms and values (Neville & Menguc, 2006). Various combinations of these three attributes—power, legitimacy, and urgency—determine the amount of influence a stakeholder has over another (Brazer & Keller, 2006; Frooman, 1999).

Multiple stakeholder decisions often involve the use of social influence whereby an influencing agent, in an effort to achieve a desired outcome, attempts to change the belief, attitude, or behavior of another or others. Social power is the potential for that influence, and influencing agents use whatever resources are available to them to ensure the ability to bring about that change (Pierro et al., 2008; Raven, 2008). Social power is a central concept in understanding the relationships between individuals involved in multiple stakeholder decision making as it encompasses more than just the relationships between individuals and others in their social networks: It also includes the collective resources that are available among the membership in that network (Bordieu, 1986). If the influencing agent does not have enough social power individually, he or she may seek assistance from another social entity, and its accompanying resources, within his or her social network in the hopes of acquiring the social power necessary to influence the decision and sway the consensus in his or her direction.

Over the course of their research, French and Raven identified six bases of social power —Informational, Reward, Coercion, Legitimate, Expertise, and Referent—defined based on the relationship between the influencing agent and the target of that influence, thus, developing their Power/Interactional Model of Personal Influence (Raven, 2008). The types of power differ in how the change is implemented, how permanent the change is, and the ways in which the basis of power is established and maintained (Raven) (Table 2).

Table 2

French and Raven's Six Bases of Social Power

Power Base	Motivation of Target for Change	Change Socially Dependent?	Surveillance Necessary?
Informational	Information given on the necessity of the change	No	No
Reward	Incentive given to make the change	Yes	Yes
Coercive	Threat made to induce the change	Yes	Yes
Legitimate	Obligation to make the change	Yes	No
Expert	Belief in the expertise of the influencing agent	Yes	No
Referent	Identification with or admiration for the influencing agent	Yes	No

Note. Adapted from "The Bases of Power and the Power/Interaction Model of Interpersonal Influence," by B. H. Raven, 2008, *Analyses of Social Issues and Public Policy*, 8(1), pp. 1-22.

Informational power is based on the subordinates' (target of influences') belief that the information given by the superior (influencing agent) is correct regarding how the job should be done differently to be more effective. Coercive power is based on the subordinates' belief that a superior has the right to punish them if they fail to conform to the influence. Reward power is the belief that desired behavior (i.e. conformity) will be rewarded by the superior. Legitimate power is based on the subordinates' belief that the superior has the right to prescribe and control their behavior. Expert power is derived from the subordinates' belief that the superior has job experience and/or special knowledge and is an expert in a given area. Referent power is based on the subordinates' personal liking and admiration for the superior.

With informational power, cognitive change and acceptance by the subordinate is automatic and not contingent upon the nature of his or her relationship with the influencing agent, therefore, informational power is considered “socially independent” (Raven, 2008, p. 2). The other five bases of power are contingent upon the superior/subordinate relationship and are, therefore, considered “socially dependent” (p. 2). Further, reward and coercive power both require surveillance by the influencing agent as their success depends on the subordinate’s belief that his or her compliance is being monitored.

Each of the power bases can influence the others, and individuals acquire and use the various power bases to affect change in others’ behavior. For example, an influencing agent may be aware that his subordinate has a certain level of admiration for him (i.e. referent power); however, he is also aware that this power will not be enough to influence the subordinate to perform the desired behavior, therefore the influencing agent may then seek to increase his power of influence by offering the subordinate a reward (i.e. reward power). By adding reward power to his already acquired referent power, the influencing agent is able to increase his total power of influence over the subordinate to achieve the outcome he was seeking (Rahim, Antonioni, & Psenicka, 2001).

In the context of the special education eligibility decision, the two bases of power that are most relevant for the present discussion are legitimate power and expert power—each member has a legitimate stake in the decision, and each member has a different type of expertise in respect to the child in question. Because the special education eligibility decision is a *consensus* decision, the goal of any special education eligibility decision is

for the majority of the committee members to agree upon the outcome of the decision. Consensus decision making is a type of multiple stakeholder decision-making process that aims to be: (a) inclusive—all relevant stakeholders are involved in the decision, (b) participatory—all members of the committee actively participate in and provide input for the decision process, (c) cooperative—members should strive to reach the best possible decision for all members of the committee, and (d) egalitarian—to the extent possible, all members are afforded equal input to the process (i.e. they may present, amend, or veto decisions). Consensus decisions are, by design, less competitive than the traditional “majority rule” format, and advocates assert that commitment to carry out the decision is greater because each member has input and, therefore, an individual sense of obligation (Butler & Rothstein, 1987). Given that one of the assumptions of a consensus decision is that each member has an equal say, one could infer that each member of the special education eligibility committee enters into the decision-making context with equal levels of legitimate and expert power.

While it may be true that the individual members of the eligibility committee enter the decision-making process with inferred equal levels of legitimate and expert power, they also enter the process with differing perspectives and values in relation to the child’s needs (Hess, Molina, & Kozleski, 2006). Schools are found to view parental involvement in their children’s education based on a social hierarchy, whereby the school officials are the experts and the parents are the seekers of the expertise (Munn-Joseph & Gavin-Evans, 2008). Teachers find themselves caught in the middle of their dual role as an expert and the parents’ main support system and connection with the school, and

parents face the dichotomy between passive compliance with educational decisions and advocating for their children (Hess et al., 2006). IDEA is explicit in its intent to provide the opportunity for shared decision making regarding appropriate educational programming for students with disabilities, including the eligibility decision, but inevitably differences of opinion arise. When what is compliant with the law differs from what is perceived to be in the best interest of the child, conflict ensues, and research indicates that power is used by both parents and schools in attempts to resolve this conflict (Lake & Billingsley, 2000).

Multiple Stakeholders and Social Network Theory

Stakeholder theory concerns itself with describing and predicting how organizations will operate under various conditions or stakeholder influences, as the stakeholder perspective assumes that organizations are obligated to address the expectations of the stakeholders and will act accordingly (Rowley, 1997). Schools function similarly. Parents, teachers, community organizations, and so forth all have sets of expectations for the services provided by the schools, and all stakeholders bring with them varying degrees of needs, desires, and levels of influence in regard to school-based decisions to which the school-based administrator is obligated to respond (Brazer & Keller, 2006; Fullan, 2001). As each individual school is a product of the community in which it is located, schools differ on the set of stakeholders to whom they must respond. Further, schools do not typically respond to stakeholders on an individual basis, but respond to multiple influences from a network of stakeholders (Brazer & Keller, 2006).

Traditional multiple stakeholder theories (Brazer & Keller, 2006; Freeman, 1994; Mitchell et al., 1997) adequately describe the dynamics at work in the typical, dyadic organizational decision-making process; however, this “hub and spoke” conceptualization (Figure 2) does not fully capture the *social* nature of this process previously addressed—the type of stakeholder relationships that would be present in a special education eligibility decision-making process. Individual stakeholders attempt to influence others on the committee into forming a consensus in their favor during this negotiation of the final decision. Rowley’s (1997) Social Network Theory (SNT) adds the necessary component that makes the traditional dyadic perspective of stakeholder relationships into a multidimensional view that reflects stakeholder tendencies to form alliances when attempting to influence an organization, which more closely reflects the nature of the eligibility decision-making process.

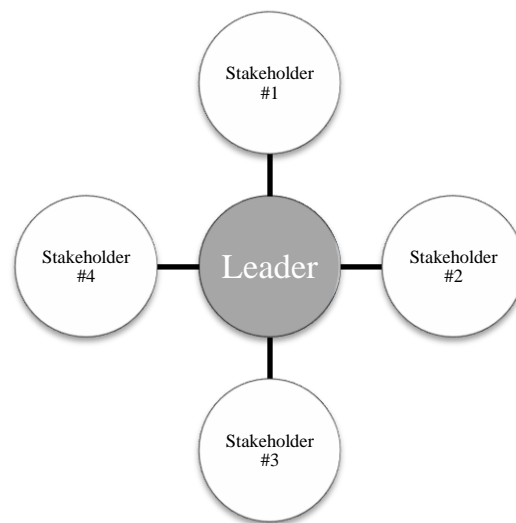


Figure 2. Traditional “hub and spoke” model of multiple stakeholder relationships.

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

As stakeholder relationships occur in a network of influences, stakeholders within an organization are likely to have direct and indirect relationships with one another. Any existing between-stakeholder relationship, then, can influence any particular stakeholder's behavior, which can, in turn, place demands on the organization itself (Neville & Megnuc, 2006). Furthermore, as illustrated in Figure 3, the organization is not always the focal point (or center) of its stakeholders, but can also serve as a stakeholder in a network for any other focal point that is relevant in the social system (Rowley, 1997). For example, if one stakeholder does not possess the power necessary to persuade the

leader to act in a certain way, that stakeholder may seek out another, more powerful stakeholder—internal or external to the organization—with whom there is a common goal or interest to join forces and increase the probability of influencing the leader’s decision.

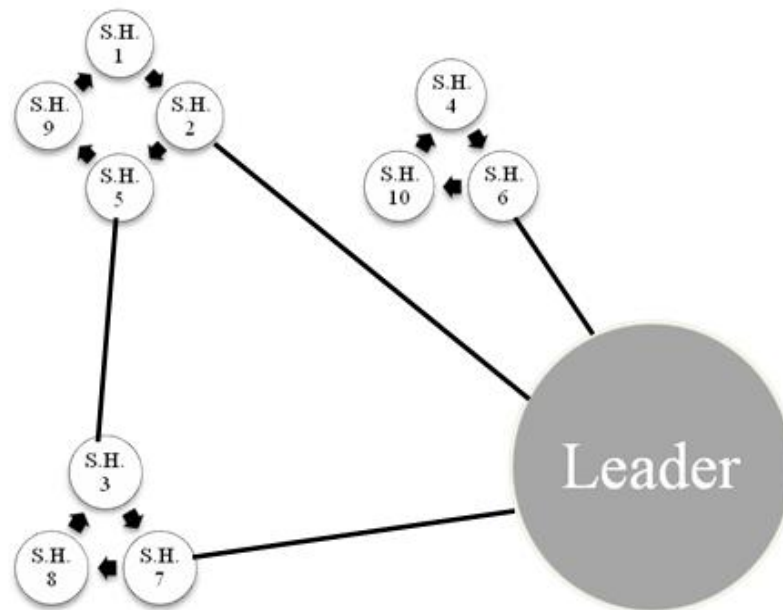


Figure 3. Representation of Rowley’s social network model of multiple stakeholder relationships. S.H. = stakeholder.

When individuals realize that they have goals in common with others, they form alliances called interest groups to collectively exert enough influence to sway a decision that they could not sway individually. Within the context of the interest group, individuals may now pool their resources, exchange them with decision-makers, and achieve their common goals (Neville & Megnuc, 2006). Thus a school system is better viewed as an organization of a network, or a web, of loosely connected subgroups with

diverse interests rather than one single group with common interests. Such a view takes into consideration the perpetual negotiations that take place between the interest groups within the school community (Bacharach & Mundell, 1993). SNT, then, illustrates how organizations are impacted by stakeholders and stakeholder groups who do not have a direct influence on the organization under normal circumstances but can affect how an organization behaves nonetheless (Rowley, 1997).

Multiple Stakeholder Theory and Special Education Eligibility

IDEA specifically stipulates that any child, aged 2 to 21 inclusive, whether enrolled in public school or not, who is suspected of having a disability, has the right to be evaluated to determine whether he or she qualifies for special education and related services. The referral for evaluation may be made by any source, for example, parents, teachers, a child study committee, or any other individuals who have direct knowledge of the child's developmental and/or educational functioning, and must be made to the special education director or designee from the Local Education Agency (LEA) (2004). Once the evaluation is completed, "a team of qualified professionals and the parent(s) of the child" (IDEA, 2004, p. 27), typically termed the "eligibility committee," convenes to make the decision regarding the child's eligibility for special education services. The language of IDEA indicates the federal government's intent to allow individual states and/or LEAs to determine which school-based individuals will ultimately comprise the eligibility committee. In Virginia, the State Department of Education (VDOE) has determined that the eligibility committee for each school system "shall include, but is not limited to, LEA personnel representing the disciplines providing the assessments, the

school-based special education administrator or designee, and the parent(s)” (VDOE, 2010, p. 28). The VDOE is also specific in that one of the eligibility committee members from the LEA must have either assessed or observed the child, and if the Committee suspects that the child has an educational disability, the group must also include the child’s regular teacher or a teacher who is qualified to teach a student that child’s age, and at least one person qualified to conduct diagnostic assessments, such as a speech-language pathologist or a school psychologist (VDOE, 2010). Other states have equivalent regulations governing LEA eligibility procedures which may be more or less specific than VDOE’s, but all must reflect the intent of IDEA.

Mellard et al. (2004) identified six key stakeholder groups who influence or are influenced by the eligibility decision: the student’s parents, school principals, general education teachers, special education teachers, specialists,¹ and directors of special education. All are considered internal stakeholders as they are directly impacted by the outcome of the eligibility decision. Parents are stakeholders because the decisions directly involve their children and their children’s education. Teachers are often the source of the referral for the special education evaluation, and their relationships with their students are at the core of education, automatically qualifying them as stakeholders (Ysseldyke, Vanderwood, & Shriner, 1997). Given their role in assessing students; their knowledge of student development, behavioral management, and learning processes; as well as their direct service delivery, specialists also have a stake in the eligibility decision. School-based administrators have a stake in special education eligibility

¹ Mellard et al. (2004) identified school psychologists in their list of stakeholders, but for purposes of this research, I use the more general term “specialists” to represent those qualified to conduct diagnostic assessments in an effort to adhere more closely to the language of IDEA 2004.

decisions due to their administrative involvement in the evaluation process; their staffing, supervision, and evaluation of their classroom teachers; the effectiveness of their instructional programming; and their central role in the school climate which includes how students with disabilities are viewed and served. The director of special education, whose interest may be represented by a central office-based administrative designee (e.g. eligibility coordinator), has a stake in the decision as the supervisor of special education programs and the enforcer of special education laws and policies throughout the entirety of his or her respective school system. Even school boards are considered stakeholders (internal) because they are the governing bodies with the ultimate authority over any school-based decision. They are elected or appointed by community residents and act on behalf of and in concert with those residents to ensure quality public education for the students of their community (Mellard et al., 2004).

Community advocacy groups and private health care practitioners may be considered stakeholders based on their relationships, direct or indirect, with the school. Private practitioners (e.g. physicians, psychologists, psychiatrists) evaluate and treat the children who attend the schools. Students may have medical or mental health conditions that require treatments recommended and/or provided by private practitioners that may have implications for the school. Community advocacy agencies are in the business of lobbying on behalf of students to ensure their equitable treatment in the public school system. As stated, private practitioners and community advocacy agencies are not, in and of themselves, stakeholders in school-based decisions. These social entities become stakeholders when they are solicited by parents to provide their opinions and

recommendations and advocate for their children regarding their educational needs in the context of their medical or mental health conditions.

These groups would thus be considered external stakeholders, as they are not typically members of the eligibility committee making the decision; however, they are all a part of the social networks to which the eligibility committee members belong. Based on SNT, individual members of the eligibility committee may be influenced by interactions within their social network, and these influences may impact the individual's eligibility decision. For example, parents who have a child who has been diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) may be influenced by information they have received from the diagnosing practitioner, and this information may then have an impact on how they make educational decisions for their child, including whether they believe their child should qualify for special education services.

Social Network Theory and Advocacy

Social networks produce support and provide leverage for individuals or groups in order to “get ahead” or change opportunities (Munn-Joseph & Gavin-Evans, 2008). Families often seek out these social networks because they feel there is a mismatch in power between themselves and the school. This perception may not necessarily be the result of current relationships, but also may be a result of previous relationships and experiences that serve as a point of reference from which they build family–school expectations (Munn-Joseph & Gavin-Evans). The intent of parental advocacy, then, is to change the status quo and correct the perceived power imbalance and injustices (Zaretsky, 2004). Parents seek justice in the form of equal opportunities to support their

children's individual needs (Hess et al., 2006). They struggle to obtain for their children what they believe are the educational experiences and opportunities to which they are rightfully entitled—experiences and opportunities provided to children without disabilities—and they quickly learn that connecting with networks of other parents who have children with disabilities is crucial in gaining the collective strength, or power, to achieve their goals in special education (Zaretsky, 2004).

As parents' roles in their children's education has evolved over the last several decades, the emphasis on empowerment and decision-making has increased (Hess et al., 2006). Often families with children who are experiencing academic, behavioral, or medical difficulties will access institutions or agencies (e.g. medical facilities, court systems, not-for-profit agencies) for information and assistance, and at times, for social power to increase their level of influence. Families want to play a role in the quality of their children's education, but are often unsure how, as they believe there is not enough communication between themselves and the school, and they become frustrated that their child's needs are not understood and/or met. When parents are unable to find a good match between what they perceive as their child's needs and what the school is offering, they feel their options are limited: They can either go along with the school's recommendations, they can remove their child from the situation altogether, or they can find a way to advocate for the services they feel their child needs to succeed in school. Advocacy takes various forms, but most often parents find empowerment through family, friends, and others in their social networks (Hess et al., 2006; Munn-Joseph & Gavin-Evans, 2008).

As it is rife with conflict, special education is a context in which parents commonly exercise advocacy for their children through their social networks. Conceptual understandings of special education and disabilities are informed by a variety of disciplines, primarily medical and social sciences, each with its own perceptions built on different scholarly traditions. When these perceptual differences collide with the practicalities of meeting stakeholder demands, conflict ensues (Zaretsky, 2004). School-based administrators and parents are foremost among those with a vested interest in disabilities and special education. The administrators are concerned with the daily operation and success of the educational programming in their schools, and parents seek to maximize the educational opportunities for their children. School-based administrators are focused on balancing the educational performance of students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment (LRE) per IDEA with ensuring that they are making the required progress under the mandates of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), while parents are more concerned with the practical issues regarding their child's education, such as placement options, curricular preferences, and program availability (Hess et al., 2006; Tincani, 2007).

Conflict between parents and schools typically occurs when each brings differing experiences and philosophies, and contrasting perspectives of special education programs, identification, and placement to the process, and much of this conflict is the result of a misunderstanding on the part of the parent regarding what school-based services are about (Tincani, 2007; Zaretsky, 2004). When an individual becomes ill, he or she goes to the doctor, is assessed, a diagnosis is made, and the doctor prescribes a

treatment. The individual follows the course of treatment and typically the individual returns to the level of physical functioning he or she had prior to becoming ill. When a student begins struggling in school, it stands to reason that one may think that solving his or her educational difficulties would be much like treating an illness: identify the illness and treat. This is the perspective many who do not work in the public school system have regarding how services are provided for students who are struggling in school or who may have been identified by an outside practitioner as having a disability; however, the legal obligations of IDEA are quite different from what one would expect from the medical community (Hackett, 2009).

Disabilities: The Medical Model Versus the Educational Model

In the United States, two systems exist that diagnose or classify a student as having a disability, one medical and one educational. In the medical community, a diagnosis is made by a private practitioner based on the criteria set forth in the *International Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems, Tenth Revision* (ICD-10-CM) or the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fourth Edition Text Revision* (DSM-IV-TR). Published by the World Health Organization (WHO), the ICD-10-CM is the international standard diagnostic classification system for all general epidemiological conditions and provides guidance for health management and treatment planning (WHO, 2007). The DSM-IV-TR, published by the American Psychiatric Association (2000), groups disorders into 16 major diagnostic classes, including “Disorders Usually First Diagnosed in Infancy, Childhood, or Adolescence,” the class that includes the majority of diagnoses that tend to have implications for

education and are most often considered during the special education eligibility process. Each disorder is accompanied by a specific set of diagnostic criteria and information regarding incidence, prevalence, co-occurring disorders, and decision trees for differential diagnoses. If a child meets the criteria for a disorder, he or she is given a diagnosis, each of which has a specific code that also corresponds with the ICD-10-CM.

If a student has been diagnosed with a medical or mental health condition or a disability, there are three possible outcomes regarding the impact on educational programming. The first is that there is no impact and nothing will change regarding the student's educational programming, as the diagnosed condition has very little or no implications for learning or the student's daily functioning in the school setting. In all likelihood, because there are no implications for learning, the school staff may never be aware of the condition, as awareness would not be necessary.

The second possible outcome is that the student may be eligible for a 504 Plan, an educational plan that provides accommodations for the student that may be necessary to reduce the impact that his or her diagnosed condition may have on educational functioning and performance. A 504 Plan is a product of Section 504 of the Americans With Disabilities Act of 1990, recently renamed the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) Amendments Act of 2008, and defines disability as follows: "With respect to an individual, a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities of such an individual; a record of such an impairment; or being regarded as having such an impairment" (p. 7). The ADA (2008) recognizes society's historical tendency to discriminate, intentionally or unintentionally, against individuals with

disabilities, thus preventing them from having equal access to those certain services, programs, activities, benefits, jobs, or other opportunities enjoyed by individuals who do not have disabilities. The goal of ADA (2008), then, is protect the rights of individuals with physical or mental disabilities to participate fully in all aspects of society. Within the school system, a 504 Plan ensures students with documented physical or medical impairments, as recognized in the DSM-IV-TR or ICD-10-CM, are not excluded from or denied access to educational services and activities on the basis of their impairment. A common example of an ADA accommodation is a wheelchair ramp leading into a building. The ramp allows access into the building and the services within for those individuals who use wheelchairs or who otherwise would not be capable physically of using stairs. Another example of an accommodation that may be provided in a 504 Plan is the use of an audio amplification system in the classroom for a student with a hearing impairment. For a student to qualify for a 504 Plan there is also an eligibility procedure that must be followed and specific criteria that must be met, the discussion of which is beyond the scope of the present research.

The third possibility, and the focus of this research, is special education. The student's disability may have an adverse impact on his or her educational performance to the extent that specialized instruction, that is, special education services, is warranted. The specification of "specialized instruction" is an important distinction between Section 504 accommodations and IDEA. In Section 504 of ADA (2008), an individual is regarded as disabled; however, he or she requires only certain accommodations to access the general education curriculum, not a specialized instructional plan. Students who are

eligible for services under IDEA are determined to have an educational disability that impairs their functioning to the extent that in order for them to have access to the general curriculum equal to that of their peers who do not have disabilities, significant adaptations must be made to the content, methodology, or delivery of instruction. These students may also require certain accommodations (e.g. assistive technology) in addition to the specialized instruction, but the nature of the instruction is key.

IDEA (2004) identifies 12 educational disabilities, each with a corresponding specific educational definition. Each state is then allowed the latitude to more specifically define these categories in accordance with their individual regulations that govern the provision of special education services in their state. For example, in Virginia, the VDOE (2010) adopted 14 disability categories—the 12 educational disabilities outlined in IDEA and as well as Developmental Delay to address delays in cognitive, communication, physical, adaptive skills, and social/emotional development affecting children ages two through six; and Multiple Disabilities to address those students who have multiple severe and distinct disabilities that require instructional services from more than one specialized program. For each disability, the same three eligibility criteria, as outlined in IDEA, must be met:

1. a disabling condition must be identified (thus meeting the IDEA criteria for a specific disability category),
2. the condition must significantly impact the student's educational functioning,
- and

3. as a result of the impact, the student requires specially designed instruction in order to access the general curriculum (IDEA, 2004).

IDEA (2004) also includes exclusionary stipulations whereby a student cannot be determined a student with a disability if he or she has not had appropriate instruction in reading, including the essential components of reading instruction that are outlined in No Child Left Behind 2001² (NCLB), appropriate instruction in math, or is a student with limited English proficiency. The three eligibility criteria must be met *and* the exclusionary stipulations must be ruled out in order to conclude that a student is eligible to receive special education services.

Important to understand is that although school-based diagnostic staff (e.g., a school psychologist) use assessment practices similar to those used by private practitioners and they consult the DSM-IV-TR when formulating an educational diagnosis, school systems ultimately are governed by the eligibility criteria outlined in IDEA, and meeting the criteria set forth therein is what qualifies a student to receive special education services. Additionally, although school systems may *consider* information obtained from a private practitioner when making special education eligibility decisions, the special education laws governing educational diagnoses and corresponding service delivery models do not provide for the interchangeability of private practitioner diagnoses with educational eligibility criteria (Della Toffalo & Pedersen, 2005). As a result, a child may be diagnosed with a disability based on DSM-IV-TR and/or ICD-10-CM criteria but may not qualify for special education services

² The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) is the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (1965) signed into law by President George W. Bush. NCLB is the federal statute that funds primary and secondary education.

under one of the IDEA categories (Dahle, 2003). Similarly, a student may qualify for special education services under one of the IDEA disability categories but may not have a medical diagnosis. Research suggests, however, that special education eligibility recommendations may be influenced by private practitioner diagnoses, as students are more likely to be found eligible for special education services when a private practitioner diagnosis is present—whether or not the eligibility criteria have been met using other data (Della Toffalo & Pedersen, 2005; deMesquita, 1992; Ysseldyke & Algozzine, 1982).

School-Based Administrator Self-Efficacy and Decision Making

Self-efficacy is defined as, “beliefs in one’s capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given attainments” (Bandura, 1997, p. 2) and is a central factor in the motivation and learning required to perform complex tasks effectively (Imants & DeBrabander, 1996). Self-efficacy beliefs are highly predictive of individual behavior; “Leadership efficacy is a specific form of efficacy associated with knowledge, skills, and abilities associated with leading others” (Hannah, Avolio, Luthans, & Harms, 2008, p. 669) and is differentiated from one’s self-confidence for other roles such as being a teacher or coach. School administrators with strong self-efficacy are found to be more adaptable and flexible when meeting situational demands or conditions (Hannah et al., 2008). Those administrators with low self-efficacy are more likely to be externally influenced as they perceive they are ineffectual in or lack the ability to control their environment (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004). Successful school leaders have a strong sense of self-efficacy. Efficacious leaders are persistent in their efforts to achieve school goals, even in the face of adversity, and student

achievement is both statistically and practically linked to the quality of the school administrator's leadership (McCollum & Kajs, 2007, 2009).

Individuals do not feel equally efficacious in all situations, therefore, self-efficacy beliefs are context specific (Bandura, 1997; Hannah et al., 2008; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004). Self-doubt can overrule the best of skills, and one's self-efficacy is easily influenced by past experiences that, in turn, impact one's perceptions about present task completion (Bandura, 1997). Administrators may have a strong sense of efficacy for their leadership in particular aspects of their role, but not in others, depending on their perceptions of success in similar tasks. Administrators with higher self-efficacy are more likely to rely upon the internally based expert and referent power when carrying out their roles than other external sources of power, such as coercive and positional power (Lyons & Murphy, 1994). Furthermore, those administrators who perceive low levels of self-efficacy are more likely to adopt faulty decision-making strategies (Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004).

Bandura (1977) identified four sources of influence on efficacy beliefs: (a) mastery experiences, (b) affective states, (c) vicarious learning, and (d) social persuasion. Of the four, mastery experiences are considered to be the most powerful source. An individual gains confidence through successes achieved in repeated participation in or practice with certain experiences. The more frequently an individual experiences success, the greater his or her level of perceived self-efficacy is for that task. The inverse is also true (Bandura, 1977; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004; Tschannen-Moran & McMaster, 2009). Administrative self-efficacy also is increased through coursework and experience

with students with disabilities, and a relationship has been found between principals' knowledge of special education and their practices (Crockett, 2002; Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2006).

School-Based Administrator Knowledge of Special Education

Within the context of a school community, numerous groups operate that have competing demands and even conflicting interests (Malen, 2001; Tincani, 2007). Effective leaders do not align with any one particular interest group, and to avoid such an alliance requires maintaining a position of neutrality in which the school-based administrator "understands the demands, goals, needs, and motivations" of each group that has an interest in the operation and success of the school (Brennan & Brennan, 1988, p. 16). In this role then, the school-based administrator is required to be the authority on school policy and procedure, maintain the educational climate of the school, and ultimately deal with the legal and ethical issues that surround and arise from implementing special education law. The school-based administrator must obey the law while making ethical decisions that concern the educational well-being of the students (Brennan & Brennan) in a context in which varied stakeholder influences must be accommodated to reach a consensus decision. Establishing a politically balanced school climate requires a competent administrator who is knowledgeable in both the fundamentals of and the current issues in special education (Wakeman et al., 2006).

As instructional leaders for their schools, school-based administrators set the stage for program success. Research indicates that the key variable of effective schools is educational leadership, and that school-based administrators have both a direct and an

indirect impact on student achievement by setting expectations, establishing school climate, and demonstrating leadership to the stakeholders; the success of special education programs is contingent upon the school-based administrator's knowledge of special education (Goor, Schwenn, & Boyer, 1997; Wakeman et al., 2006). The National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) is the national consortium of major stakeholders in educational leadership and policy (i.e. the American Association of School Administrators, the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, the Council of Chief State School Officers, the National Association of Elementary School Principals, the National Association of Secondary School Principals, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration, and the National School Boards Association) which touts three strategic initiatives: (a) national standards for school leaders, (b) accreditation standards and reviews of educational leadership preparation programs, and (c) advanced board certification for education leaders (NPBEA, 2008). *The Educational Leadership Policy Standards: ISLLC 2008*, or ISLLC 2008 as they are commonly known, are based on the latest research in educational policy and practice and are designed to “provide high-level guidance and insight about the traits, functions of work, and responsibilities expected of school and district leaders” (NPBEA, p. 5). The NPBEA published six standards which the consortium believes represent the salient themes for ensuring the success of all students (Table 3). Each of the six ISLLC standards, which begins with the phrase “An educational leader promotes the success of every student,” is broad in nature and

describes expected leadership qualities and their application to the academic success of the student body as a whole, and do not address their application to specific student population subgroups, such as students with disabilities, but the inclusion of all students is implied. As Standard 4 states, “An educational leader promotes the success of *every* [emphasis added] student by collaborating with faculty and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources” (NPBEA, 2008, p. 15).

Table 3

Educational Leadership Policy Standards: Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) 2008

Standard	<i>An education leader promotes the success of every student by:</i>
1	Facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by all stakeholders.
2	Advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to learning and staff professional growth.
3	Ensuring management of the organization, operation, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment.
4	Collaborating with faculty and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources.
5	Acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner.
6	Understanding, responding to, and influencing the political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context.

The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) is the largest international professional organization that is dedicated to promoting and improving education for students with exceptionalities. The CEC also has established six Advanced Content

Standards (ACS) for administrators of special education programs: (a) leadership and policy, (b) program development and organization, (c) research and inquiry, (d) student and program evaluation, (e) professional development and ethical practice, and (f) collaboration. The standards align with ISLLC 2008 (Table 4) and require leaders, upon completion of their administrator preparatory programs, to not only understand theories and philosophies that underscore educational programming for students with disabilities, but to understand the historical and social significance of laws, regulations, and policies (federal, state, and local) and how they relate to program administrative and service delivery for student with disabilities. Special education administrators are expected to demonstrate the ability to interpret, apply, and communicate these laws, regulations, and policies as a testament that they indeed have that knowledge (Council for Exceptional Children, 2009).

Table 4

Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) Advanced Core Standards (ACS) vs. Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) 2008

ACS	Standard	ISLLC 2008
Use educational research to improve instructional and intervention techniques and materials; foster an environment that supports instructional improvement; engage in action research.	1 ^a Research and Inquiry ^b	Facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a vision of learning that is shared and supported by all stakeholders.
Improve instructional programs at the school and system levels; develop procedures to improve management systems; design professional development to support the use of evidence-based practices; coordinate educational standards with the needs of children with exceptionalities to access challenging curriculum standards; use understanding of the effects of cultural social, and economic diversity and variations of individual development to help develop programs and services for individuals with exceptional needs.	2 Program Development and Organization	Advocating, nurturing, and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to learning and staff professional growth.
Design and implement research to evaluate the effectiveness of instructional practices and program goals, apply knowledge and skill at all stages of the evaluation process for student learning of the general education curriculum and individualized IEP [Individualized Education Program] goals.	3 Student and Program Evaluation	Ensuring management of the organization, operation, and resources for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment.
Understand the importance of collaboration and foster the integration of services for individuals with exceptionalities; understand the role of collaboration for internal and external stakeholders to promote understanding, resolve conflicts, and build consensus to provide services to these students and their families; understand the interactions of language, diversity, culture, and religion and use collaboration to enhance opportunities for individuals with exceptionalities.	4 Collaboration	Collaborating with faculty and community members, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources.

(continued)

Table 4. Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) Advanced Core Standards (ACS) vs. Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) 2008 (continued)

ACS	Standard	ISLLC 2008
Safeguard the legal rights of students, families, and personnel; plan, present, and evaluate professional development that focuses on effective practice; continuously broaden personal professional knowledge, including expertise to support student access to learning through effective teaching strategies, curriculum standards, and assistive technology.	5 Professional Development and Ethical Practice	Acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner.
Advocate for legal and ethical policy that supports high quality education for individuals with exceptional learning needs; provide leadership to create procedures that respect all individuals and positive and productive work environments.	6 Leadership and Policy	Understanding, responding to, and influencing the political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context.

Note. Sources: Council for Exceptional Children. (2009). *Advanced Standards for Special Education Administrators*. Retrieved from <http://www.cec.sped.org/Content/NavigationMenu/ProfessionalDevelopment/ProfessionalStandards/EthicsPracticeStandards/default.htm>; National Policy Board for Educational Administration. (2008). *Educational leadership policy standards: ISLLC 2008*. Washington, D.C.: Council of Chief State School Officers. ACS = *Advanced Core Standards*, ISLLC = Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium.
^aISLLC 2008 standard number. ^bACS standard title.

Research shows; however, that most school-based administrators lack the necessary and sufficient course and field work to be competent special education leaders (Lowe & Brigham, 2000; Patterson et al., 2000). Although school-based administrators typically begin their careers as teachers prior to their administrative appointments and therefore would have had coursework in and experience with instructing students, that coursework and experience would not necessarily have included instructing students with disabilities. Despite the established standards from both the NPBEA and the CEC, administration licensure programs incorporate little other than cursory attention to special education law into their course requirements. Most states have eliminated separate

certifications for special education administrators, and research indicates that many school leaders report having limited knowledge about special education law or the needs of students with disabilities, and feel unprepared to be special education leaders in their schools (Crockett, 2002; DiPaola et al., 2004; Lowe & Brigham, 2000; Sirotnik & Kimball, 1994).

Making administrative decisions regarding special education programming requires implementing IDEA with integrity, and school-based administrators hold the key to school-level compliance (Crockett, 2002; DiPaola et al., 2004). Appropriate preparation in the foundations of special education provides school-based administrators with an understanding of the instructional needs of students with disabilities and the legally correct options available for their educational benefit. Those administrators who indicate more knowledge are typically involved in more aspects of their special education programs, reflect on their experiences and practices, meet regularly with their special education teachers, provide more resource support for their special education teachers, and are more knowledgeable about the programs and services provided to students with disabilities (Wakeman et al., 2006).

Conclusion

Referencing the six bases of social power, Multiple Stakeholder Theory, and Social Network Theory, this chapter illustrates how the school-based administrator is part of a network of stakeholders, each of whom has a vested interest in the outcome of school-based decisions, including special education eligibility. Within the framework that has been laid out for this study, expert and legitimate power have been identified as the

sources of social power stakeholders possess that are most relevant in the special education eligibility decision-making context. Expert power is the source that parents will attempt to increase by aligning with external stakeholders in their social networks, such as educational advocates and private practitioners, in order to influence the eligibility decision in the direction they feel is most beneficial to their child's education. The school-based administrator, while a stakeholder, is expected in his or her role as instructional leader to remain neutral to stakeholder influences while attempting to maintain balance among the demands of the competing stakeholders when making school-based decisions.

This chapter also discussed the concept of self-efficacy as an individual's belief in his or her ability to successfully complete a task. Self-efficacy is context-specific, directly linked to the amount of knowledge and experience one has for a particular task, and is highly predictive of behavior. Leadership efficacy is a specific form of efficacy that has been shown to moderate the influence of external factors on leadership behavior, such as decision making. Figure 4 provides a visual representation of this conceptual framework.

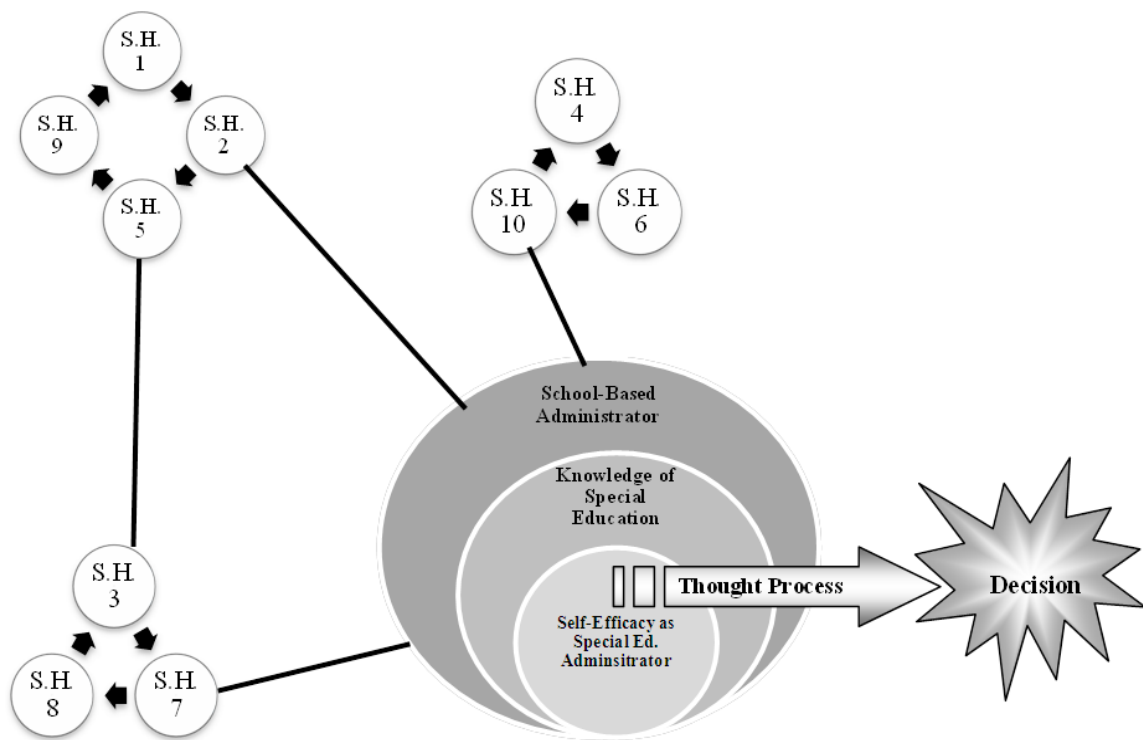


Figure 4. Conceptual framework for present study. S.H. = stakeholder.

School-based administrators who are involved in special education eligibility decisions are in a pivotal position, based on their instructional leadership role and their knowledge of and expertise with special education policies and procedures, to mediate the effects of external stakeholder influences. Existing literature has addressed the function of power in decision making and has examined the influence of both stakeholders and social networks in decision making, and some studies have focused on the decision-making practices of individual stakeholders, such as teachers and school psychologists, in regard to special education eligibility. The literature also has addressed the role of self-efficacy in the prediction of behavior; however, the theoretical concept of leadership efficacy is in its infancy and studies addressing school administrator efficacy

are few. No study has empirically examined all of these factors in one theoretical model. This framework attempts to combine all of these factors, using extant literature as a foundation and guide, to study the relationship between stakeholders and school-based administrator decisions as the relationship is moderated by administrator self-efficacy.

3. METHODOLOGY

The present research focused on school-based administrators' decision-making processes when determining whether a student is a student with an educational disability and requires special education services, and whether those thought processes are influenced by external factors, such as the opinion of a private practitioner or educational advocate. Through a review of the relevant literature, the previous chapter laid out the conceptual framework that supports the design of the study. In six sections, this chapter describes in detail the procedures and statistical methods used to collect and analyze data in order to answer the proposed research questions. The first section addresses the design of the study, including a review of the study's purpose and the research questions. The second section describes the participants in the study and the setting in which the study took place. The third section discusses the instruments used and how they relate to the variables and individual research questions. The fourth section discusses procedures followed prior to data collection, including approval from the governing research boards, the expert review, pilot study, recruitment, and measures to ensure confidentiality. This section also discusses in detail the formal data collection methods for both the quantitative and qualitative data. The fifth section describes how the quantitative and qualitative data were examined and compared in order to draw conclusions and identify implications. The final section addresses external validity and the generalizability of the results beyond the population assessed within the study.

Study Design

The study was a mixed methods design for which four methods of data collection were used: case vignettes, a demographic survey, a self-efficacy rating scale, and an interview. Each participant completed two case vignette analyses at a face-to-face meeting with the researcher. The demographic survey and self-efficacy rating scale were distributed after the first meeting via electronic format. The final step, the interview, took place during a second, scheduled, face-to-face meeting with each participant on a mutually agreed-upon day and time. The data collected from these measures were used to conduct a frequency analysis; a one-way, repeated measures ANOVA; a correlation; and individual interviews; results from which provided insight into school-based administrators' perspectives of private practitioner and educational advocate opinions and what factors influence their decision making in the context of special education eligibility.

Purpose

The purpose of the present research was to examine school-based administrators' decision-making thought processes in the context of special education eligibility when a private practitioner or an educational advocate opinion is present. The study examined the administrators' perceptions of the influence of the external opinions. Additionally, the study examined the relationship between the presence of a private practitioner or educational advocate opinion and administrator recommendation for special education eligibility with years of experience as a special education administrator as a predictor

variable and self-efficacy as a moderator variable. The study was designed to address the following questions:

1. What type of information is most important to school-based administrators when making a special education eligibility decision?
2. Is there a difference in school-based administrators' special education eligibility recommendations with the inclusion of an external opinion?
3. Do decision-maker self-efficacy and years of experience contribute to the extent to which an external opinion influences school-based administrators' eligibility decisions?
4. How are school-based administrators' decision-making thought processes influenced by external opinions when making special ed. recommendations?

Participants and Setting

Participant Demographics

The participant pool ($N = 56$) for the present study included school-based administrators (principals and assistant principals) within a large Northern Virginia school system. As per the school system's policy, one special education contact is identified per school and the individual is typically an assistant principal unless, due to the school's size, the school has only a principal. In those rare cases, the principal is then designated as his or her school's special education contact. As standard practice, principals in the school systems have prior experience as a special education contact. The special education contacts are responsible for all matters pertaining to special education

service and delivery in their respective schools, from the initial referral for evaluation through IEP development and implementation, inclusively.

School System Demographics

The subject PK-12 public school system includes 78 school facilities: 51 elementary schools, 13 middle schools, 12 high schools, and 2 instructional centers, with a total student population of 63,220 ([Subject School System], 2010a). The county's population is diverse, ranging from rural to urban; therefore, the schools vary widely in regard to demographics. Enrollment data indicates that approximately 57% of the students identify themselves as Caucasian, 15% as Asian or Pacific Islander, 15% as Hispanic, 7% Multiple Race, 5% as Black, not Hispanic, 1% as American Indian, and < 1% as Pacific Islander ([Subject School System], 2010b). Based on special education enrollment information compiled for the 2010 December 1 Child Count Data for Part B of IDEA for the subject school system, 10.6% students were receiving special education services, a percentage consistent with the national average (Table 5).

Table 5

Students in Subject School System Receiving Special Education Services Under the Individuals With Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA), Part B

Disability Category	Number of School System's Students Identified	Percentage of Identified Students
Autism	732	10.9
Developmental Delay	430	6.4
Deaf/Blind	1	0.0
Deafness	27	4.0
Emotional Disability	484	7.2
Hearing Impairment	87	1.3
Intellectual Disability	262	3.9
Multiple Disabilities	67	1.0
Orthopedic Impairment	67	1.0
Other Health Impairment	1,102	16.4
Speech or Language Impairment	1,377	20.5
Specific Learning Disability	2,043	30.4
Traumatic Brain Injury	13	0.2
Vision Impairment (Including Blindness)	27	0.4
<i>Total Special Education Population</i>	6,719	10.6

Note. Enrollment data as of December 1, 2010.

Instruments

Variables

The present research investigated the differences between four levels of an independent variable (i.e. external opinion) upon one dependent measure obtained from school-based administrators who participate as a member of the multidisciplinary team responsible for making special education eligibility decisions. One level of the independent variable was a control level in order to establish the primary effect of the independent variable on the dependent variable. The dependent variable is the

administrator's special education eligibility decision. In light of the levels of the independent variable, the dependent variable describes administrators' tendency to be influenced by an advocate's opinion or a private practitioner's opinion as represented by an Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE). Variables held constant included the student's demographic information and assessment data, the content of the advocate opinion, and the IEE data. Years of experience as a special education administrator, as measured by data reported on the demographic survey, served as a predictor variable, and self-efficacy, as measured by Factor 4 of the School Administrators' Efficacy Scale (SAES) (McCollum et al., 2006), served as a moderator variable. These variables were controlled for to determine the extent to which they contributed to administrators' eligibility decisions.

Materials

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

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

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

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

1. referral concern: the reason that a disability was suspected;
2. family/social history and psychosocial stressors: any events or circumstances in the student's developmental history (e.g. parental divorce, family history of disabilities) that may have relevance or be a contributing factor in the student's academic difficulties;
3. developmental history: illnesses or trauma at birth, adoption/foster care, delays in meeting developmental milestones, and so forth;
4. medical history: illnesses or accidents sustained at any point from birth to the current age;
5. education history: any information regarding preschools attended, school-generated academic data (e.g. grades, standardized test scores), discipline records, attendance records, and participating in extracurricular academic activities such as tutoring or other enrichment programs;
6. prior evaluations: any evaluations—medical, psychological, psychiatric, educational—that the student may have had, either by the school system or by outside practitioners;
7. teacher evaluations: the student's current teachers' narrative descriptions of the student's academic strengths and weaknesses and analyses of the student's response to any intervention strategies that may have been implemented in the classroom;
8. parent report: the parents' equivalent to the teacher evaluation;

9. observational data: information provided by the diagnostic staff or nonclassroom teacher school-based specialists regarding their observations of the student's behavior in his or her instructional setting;
10. current psychological and educational evaluations: diagnostic assessments of the student's cognitive processing, communication and language, adaptive, social, emotional, behavioral, and academic (reading, math, and written expression) functioning.

The second vignette (treatment condition) included the additional information of an independent educational evaluation (IEE), an educational advocate's opinion (ADV), or both (BOTH). For each vignette, an initial eligibility decision was made with which the parents of the student in question have disagreed and have asked that the case be taken to Administrative Review. All participants completed an analysis of the CON scenario and were randomly assigned one of the other three scenarios (IEE, ADV, or BOTH) to complete as well.

The presentation of the information followed the Administrative Review (AR) process used by the subject school system. The AR process is one that is unique to this school system, and thus is not required by law; however, the process is sufficiently similar to the typical eligibility process as it follows the eligibility process as outlined in the law, and for reasons described below, provides an advantageous context for addressing this current study's research questions. The AR process is, in essence, an internal appeal process that is initiated when parents disagree with a special education eligibility decision made on behalf of their children. In other words, at the original

eligibility meeting, the eligibility committee reached a consensus that the student in question either did or did not meet criteria as a student with an educational disability based on the current data, and the parents did not agree. As parents of a student in this public school system, they have the right to request an AR.

At the AR meeting, a new eligibility team reviews the original data and makes a consensus decision. The new team is comprised of the parents and the same school-based staff; however, the eligibility coordinator and the case-relevant diagnostic staff (e.g. school psychologist, educational diagnostician, speech pathologist) are different. The new members are individuals who have diagnostic and special education law expertise but who have no knowledge of the student other than the case information that is provided for them. The purpose of the new members on the team is to provide greater objectivity in the decision-making process. The parents may choose to bring an advocate or a lawyer with them for additional support although advocates and lawyers, by law, do not participate in the actual decision. The parents may also provide an Independent Education Evaluation (IEE) or can request that the school system provide one and include the additional information in the AR decision. An IEE is conducted by a private practitioner chosen by the parents but who meets qualification criteria established by the Local Education Agency (LEA). After reviewing the data, the new team can either uphold the original decision or it can make a different determination.

The AR process was chosen for the case vignettes in this study for several reasons. The AR process is a uniform process that, as previously stated, follows exactly the eligibility process as outlined in the law; therefore, all of the study participants

already would be familiar with the process. Additionally, the AR scenario is one that is initiated by the parents only due to their disagreement with the initial eligibility decision; therefore, it is often at this point when a private practitioner diagnosis (via the IEE) or an advocate is introduced to the eligibility decision-making process.

School Administrators Efficacy Scale (SAES). Developed by McCollum, Kajs, and Minter (2006a), the School Administrators' Efficacy Scale (SAES) is a self-report instrument that measures the confidence of school administrators in performing a variety of everyday administrative tasks. The SAES includes tasks that are derived from the published Educational Leader Constituent Council (ELCC)/Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards developed by the National Policy Board for Education Administration (NPBEA). The NPBEA established the ELCC/ISLLC standards in an effort to guide university preparation programs for school administrators (McCollum, Kajs, & Minter, 2006a). Respondents give a rating for statements that pertain to one of eight dimensions of school administrators' efficacy: Instructional Leadership and Staff Development, School Climate Development, Community Collaboration, Data-based Decision Making Aligned with Legal and Ethical Principles, Resource and Facility Management, Use of Community Resources, Communication in a Diverse Environment, and Development of School Vision. Examples of the statements include: "I am confident in my skills to lead staff to understand and respect the diversity of our student population;" "I am confident in my skills to involve families and community stakeholders in the decision-making process at our school;" and "I can make decisions within the boundaries of ethical and legal principles." The 49 items on the

SAES are scored on a summated rating scale with 1 = “not at all true of me,” to 7 = “completely true of me” (McCollum & Kajs, 2009). Internal consistency analyses using Cronbach’s Alpha reveal reliabilities for each subscale ranging from $\alpha = .81$ to $\alpha = .95$ (McCollum & Kajs, 2009; McCollum, Kajs, & Minter, 2006b). A subset of the 49 items on the questionnaire each statistically load to only one of the dimensions. In a factor analytic study of their scale, the authors completed reliability coefficients for each of the subscales. All correlations were found to be statistically significant at the $p = .01$ level, thus indicating that each subscale could be used as a separate measure of its identified dimension (McCollum & Kajs, 2007).

Because the present research focuses on a specific aspect of the role of the special education administrator, the researcher used only the dimension “Data-based Decision Making Aligned with Legal and Ethical Principles” to represent the self-efficacy variable, as the items on that dimension specifically pertain to the study’s purpose of examining influences on administrator decision making and the adherence to the legalities within the context of special education eligibility decision. For clarity’s sake, from this point, the dimension is referred to as “Factor 4” to remain consistent with the authors’ representation in their published descriptions of the scale (McCollum & Kajs, 2007, 2009). Table 6 lists the scale items that comprise Factor 4.

Table 6

School Administrators' Efficacy Scale (SAES) Items That Comprise Factor 4: "Data-Based Decision Making Aligned With Legal and Ethical Principles"

Item Number	Statement
38	I can make sound decisions regarding [special education] and am able to explain them based on professional, ethical, and legal principles.
39	I am confident in my ability to understand and evaluate education research that is related to [special education] programs and issues in my school.
40	I am confident in my ability to apply appropriate research methods in the school context.
41	I can explain to staff and parents the decision-making process of my school district [as it pertains to special education].
42	I can explain to staff and parents how the governance process of my school, [as it pertains to special education], is related to state and national institutions and politics.
43	I am confident in my ability to examine [special education] student performance data to extract the information necessary for campus improvement planning.
44	I can make [special education] decisions within the boundaries of ethical and legal principles.
46	I am able to explain the role of [special education] law and politics in shaping the school community.

Note. Items are scored on a seven-point Likert-type scale, with 1 = "Not at all true of me," 7 = "Completely true of me." Brackets added to denote adapted language (adapted with permission). Adapted from "School Administrator Efficacy: Assessment of Beliefs About Knowledge and Skills for Successful School leadership," by D. L. McCollum and I. T. Kajs. In S. Donahoo & R. C. Hunter (Eds.), *Advances in educational administration: Vol. 10. Teaching leaders to lead teachers: Educational administration in the era of constant crisis* (pp. 131-148). Oxford, UK: Elsevier. Also adapted from "Examining the Relationship Between School Administrators' Efficacy and Goal Orientations, by D. L. McCollum and I. T. Kajs, 2009, *Education Research Quarterly*, 32(3), pp. 29-46.

As self-efficacy is a concept that is context-specific (Bandura, 1977, 1997; Hannah et al., 2008; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004; Tschannen-Moran & McMaster, 2009), in order to glean more accurate construct-specific data, modifications to the test items were necessary for the present study. The SAES previously has been adapted to

address other contexts in education leadership (e.g. science), and has been shown to maintain strong reliability and validity (McCollum & Kajs, 2009). With permission from the authors (Appendix C), the researcher adapted the scale to place emphasis on the administrator's role in special education. For example, "I am confident in my understanding of the total instruction program in my school," was reworded to state, "I am confident in my understanding of the total special education instruction program in my school." All of the original wording of the items was maintained and modified only with descriptor words or phrases that tailored items to the special education context.

As the SAES is not published in a copyrighted format, the researcher converted the SAES, as well as the demographic survey, into an electronic format via a secure online survey construction tool utilized by the subject school system through Schoolwires, a provider of strategic online communication, website, and community management and productivity solutions for K-12 school systems. Through the survey construction tool, the researcher converted both the demographic survey and the School Administrators Efficacy Scale into the exact question format as the original versions and catalogued all of the resulting data into a downloadable MS Excel spreadsheet that could be used for later data analyses. All participants in this study had ready access to computers and the Internet in their respective schools and offices, so the electronic format allowed participants to complete the scale at their convenience. In addition, the researcher was able to catalogue information that indicated if and when a participant completed the survey and questionnaire. For instance, when the participant had not met his or her given

deadline, the researcher was able to contact the individual participant to remind him or her to complete the survey and questionnaire to help ensure that all data was collected.

Semi-structured interview. The interview used a semi-structured approach, so designed because of its utility in comparing and contrasting experiences and events and to examine the differences between events and data across participants (Maxwell, 2005), such as the eligibility process with and without private practitioner diagnoses and with and without an advocate present. The interviews also were topical because of the focus on a specific issue and process rather than on peoples' lives, and aspects of the eligibility decision-making process and alternatives to other perspectives were revealed that otherwise would not be known (Glesne, 2006) through the other data collection methods in this study. The interview was frontloaded with easier, more benign questions and then progressed into more difficult questions, a purposeful arrangement to allow the participant to gradually become comfortable with the interview process and content (Glesne, 2006). Additionally, probes were used to help clarify the participants' responses to ensure that their perspectives were captured as accurately as possible.

The interview began with questions regarding the participants' general education background, how long they have been an educator and administrator, what led them to pursue an administrative position, as well as their background with special education. The questions progressed to addressing their duties and responsibilities as an administrator and their confidence in carrying out those duties and responsibilities. The questions then targeted decision making, the administrators' experiences with and confidence in making school-based decisions as an individual and as part of team, and the political nature of

school-based decisions. Finally, the questions specifically targeted administrators' participation in special education eligibility decisions to elicit information regarding their perceptions of the group dynamics, their confidence level with their own role in the decision-making process, and their beliefs regarding the impact of external opinions—advocates and private practitioners—on both the group's and their own decision-making processes. The complete interview schedule is located in Appendix D

Procedures

Predata Collection Procedures

The researcher received approval from both the Office of Research for the subject public school system and the Human Subjects Research Board (HSRB) at George Mason University (Appendix E) prior to beginning any of the following procedures.

Expert review. Prior to using the vignettes for the study, an expert review was conducted to verify that the scenarios align with the type of information that is typically presented and reviewed in order to make a decision regarding a student's eligibility for special education. Five individuals with varying education-based professional backgrounds provided a review—three school psychologists and two educational diagnosticians—all of whom have experience with evaluating students for special education and/or participating in special education eligibility decisions. These individuals reviewed the information for accuracy, completeness, and the extent to which it mirrors reality in order to ensure the reliability of the case vignettes. The final vignettes used reflected the feedback received from the reviewers.

Pilot study. Prior to surveying the participants, the researcher conducted a pilot study with members of the diagnostic staff at the subject school system to determine the realism of the case vignette scenarios and to determine whether the information provided was sufficient to make an eligibility determination. Five school psychologists and educational diagnosticians who did not take part in the expert review participated in this pilot study. All members of the diagnostic staff have experience in diagnostic assessment of students with disabilities and participation in the special education eligibility process and the school system's Administrative Review process. They followed procedures similar to those that were used in the actual study. The pilot study participants answered questions regarding the realistic nature of the referral concerns, whether the amount of information in each of the data categories is sufficient and typical for making the eligibility decision, and the frequency of the inclusion of an IEE or an advocate. They also provided feedback regarding the process of the vignette analysis, such as clarity of directions and simplicity of response form. The researcher used the participants' feedback to identify vulnerabilities in the case vignette process and modified it accordingly to ensure the integrity of the formal study procedures.

Recruitment and confidentiality. In order to recruit participants, the researcher sent an initial interest email (Appendix F) to 176 current school-based administrators in which the study was introduced in a very cursory manner. The email included information about the researcher (a Ph.D. in education student concentrating in education leadership), the title of the study, and the basic time commitment for participation. The email was sent to all of the district's administrators, principals, and assistant principals,

regardless of their present status as special education contact, in order to recruit as many participants as possible who have had experience at some point in their careers as a school-based special education administrator. The researcher asked the administrators to reply to the email only if they had an interest in participating in the study and assured them that their response to the initial email was not commitment to participate but an indication that they were amenable to further contact via phone call or a face-to-face meeting during which they would receive more detailed information about the study and the participation requirements. Approximately three weeks after the initial email was sent, the researcher sent a second recruitment email (Appendix F) in an effort to gain additional participants. During the follow-up contact, 56 administrators who had indicated interest gave a verbal commitment to participate and scheduled a face-to-face meeting with the researcher so they could complete Part 1 of the study – the case vignette analysis.

At that initial face-to-face meeting, the researcher reviewed the details of the Informed Consent form (Appendix G) and the two initial parts of the study: the case vignette analysis, and the follow-up survey and self-efficacy questionnaire. The researcher also made the participants aware of a potential third part they may have to complete—the individual interview—if they were one of the six chosen to do so. Procedures to ensure confidentiality included the following: (a) all response forms and other collected data were given a code rather than identifying information; (b) through the use of an identification key, only the researcher was able to link the data to the participant's identity; and (c) only the researcher had access to the identification key. All

data and the response key were kept in a locked file, accessible only by the researcher. Further, interviews were conducted privately, in a small conference room or similar accommodation. The researcher obtained the participants' consent to participate in the first two parts of the study and their approval to be audiotaped if they were chosen for Part 3. Consent to being audiotaped for Part 3 had no bearing on their participation in the first two parts. Those who did not agree to being audiotaped simply were not chosen to be interviewed. In addition to the Informed Consent, participants were asked to sign a Nondisclosure Statement (Appendix G) in order to reduce potential bias to the results since all of the participants are colleagues; although they do not all work in the same school buildings as one another, they do work together on a regular basis. All participants were treated in accordance with the "Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct" (American Psychological Association, 2002).

Data Collection

Case vignette, SAES, and demographic survey. After obtaining participant consent individually in person, the researcher gave each participant the case vignette packet which had both the control vignette (CON) and one of the treatment condition vignettes that included either (a) Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE), (b) an educational advocate's opinion (ADV), or (c) both (BOTH). The CON had neither IEE nor ADV information. Table 7 illustrates the distribution of the case vignettes among participants.

Table 7

Distribution of Case Vignettes

Vignette	Condition	Recipients
Scenario A	No External Opinion (CON)	All Participants
Scenario B	Advocate Opinion (ADV)	1/3 Participants
Scenario C	Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE)	1/3 Participants
Scenario D	Advocate and IEE (BOTH)	1/3 Participants

Note. $N = 56$.

The researcher also provided a copy of the diagnostic criteria for Specific Learning Disability, as outlined in the Virginia Regulations Governing Students with Disabilities (Virginia Department of Education, 2009), a diagnostic evaluation score classification interpretation chart for reference, and a response form on which they rated the statement, “This student qualifies for special education services,” on a scale from one (1) to five (5), where the ratings were as follows: 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Undecided, 4 = Agree, and 5 = Strongly Agree.

The researcher asked the participants to read the instructions for completing the vignette analysis and ask any clarifying questions if necessary. Participants could ask any clarifying questions about the case data, however, they were not permitted to ask questions regarding interpretation of the data or the researcher’s opinion. Once a participant completed the case vignette analysis, the researcher sent an email to him or her that included a link to the online survey and questionnaire, a deadline for completing the survey and questionnaire (i.e. two weeks from the date the case vignette was completed), and instructions should he or she prefer to complete the survey and

questionnaire in paper/pencil format. The purpose for giving the SAES after the vignette analysis and on a different occasion was to reduce any bias that engaging in such an evaluative decision-making task may have had on the participants' assessment of their efficacy and vice versa.

Interviews. Of the 56 administrators who participated in the first two parts of the study, the researcher chose 6 for the interviews, specifically 2 each from the elementary, middle, and high school levels and with varied backgrounds and years of experience as a school-based special education administrator to provide a cross section of the participant pool. The researcher scheduled mutually agreeable meeting times with the participants for the interviews. The interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes on average, and an interview protocol was used as a guide, primarily to keep the interview on track and focused and to ensure the chronology of the questions. The researcher used an iRiver MP3 player to record the interview sessions and took notes to help generate probing questions, note observations regarding body language and nonverbal cues from the participant, and record category ideas for later analysis. The researcher uploaded the MP3 files to her laptop and used a transcription program, Express Scribe, to transcribe each interview. The researcher then provided the participants a hard copy of their transcript to review the information and hand write any corrections, additions, or deletions they felt necessary. Once the data was analyzed, the recordings were deleted and the transcripts were shredded.

Validity of the interviews was addressed in a variety of ways. According to Maxwell (1992), three types of validity threats are central in qualitative research:

descriptive, interpretive, and theoretical validity. Descriptive threats typically evolve from inaccurate reporting of the data, whether interviews or observations, and result from distortions in what the researcher heard or observed (Maxwell, 1992). In this study, the researcher guarded against descriptive threats by first audio-recording the interviews so that the participants' words were recorded verbatim. Also, during the interviews, the researcher asked clarifying questions and relied on the technique of reflective listening, also termed "respondent validation" (Maxwell, 2005), whereby she would rephrase in her own words what the participant had said to obtain the participant's confirmation that he or she was correctly understood. Once the interviews were transcribed into Microsoft Word files, the researcher reviewed the transcripts while listening to the recording to ensure accuracy of the transcription. Additionally, by providing each participant a copy of the transcription from his or her interview to make changes and clarify the accuracy of their statements, the researcher ensured that the participants' perspectives were captured as they intended to present them (Maxwell, 2005).

Guarding against interpretive threats required the most vigilance. Interpretive threats are the result of imposing one's own framework or meaning on someone else's words or actions rather than reporting the perspective of those being studied (Maxwell, 1992). The professional background of the researcher includes positions as a school psychologist and an eligibility coordinator, both roles which require interpreting assessment data and participating in the eligibility decision-making process while working alongside many of the administrators participating in the study. Personal and emotional involvement in the topic being studied requires awareness of biases and control

of reactivity within the interview setting on the part of the researcher so as not to influence the participants' responses (Maxwell, 2005). To minimize these effects, the researcher took the following precautions:

1. Notes were made along the way to keep feelings in check and to maximize objectivity,
2. lists of assumptions were made against which intended questions were to be compared to guard against those that may be leading,
3. the informed consent statement was constructed as explicitly as possible so that the interviewees were aware of exactly in what they were participating,
4. communication with the participants was maintained throughout the process to decrease any anxieties they had, and
5. participants reviewed their transcribed interviews to add to, clarify, and/or delete anything they did not want included in the study.

These steps also helped to minimize the threat of researcher theoretical biases, so that other explanations for why participants made the decisions they did were not discounted.

Analyses

Quantitative

Research question 1. The question, "What type of information is most important to school-based administrators when making a special education eligibility decision" was answered using the responses to the survey question, "Please choose which piece of information you feel to be the most important *for you* when making an eligibility decision," where the choices were: (a) an Advocate's Opinion, (b) a Private Evaluation

(e.g. IEE), or (c) Other. Participants were asked to specify the type of information if they choose “Other.” The most important piece of information used for decision making was determined by frequency data and calculating percentages. The category of information chosen by the highest percentage of respondents was considered the most important.

Research question 2. To answer “Is there a difference in school-based administrators’ special education eligibility recommendations with the inclusion of an external opinion,” a one-way, repeated measures Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was calculated using the Likert-type ratings to the statement, “This student is eligible for special education as a student with a Specific Learning Disability” upon analyzing the case vignettes. These ratings were considered the administrators’ eligibility decisions. Ratings for the CON scenario were compared to their ratings for IEE, ADV, and BOTH to determine if there were differences in their decision responses with the inclusion of an educational advocate, an independent educational evaluation, or both compared to when there is no external opinion included. Effect sizes were calculated for each of these comparisons and will be reviewed in Chapter 4.

Research question 3. A standard multiple regression analysis was conducted to answer “Do decision-maker self-efficacy and years of experience contribute to the extent to which an external opinion influences school-based administrators’ eligibility decisions?” The variable “self-efficacy” was represented by the mean scores from the responses on Factor 4 of the SAES, and years of experience as a special education administrator were determined by participant responses on the survey. A regression analysis was calculated to determine if years of experience contributed to the prediction

of the participant's decision (i.e. CON, IEE, ADV, BOTH mean scores). Self-efficacy (i.e. mean SAES Factor 4 scores) was added to determine if the variable had a moderating effect on the relationship between the presence of an external opinion and the school-based administrators' eligibility decisions on the case vignette analysis.

Qualitative

Research question 4. Through data collected from the semi-structured interviews, the researcher sought to answer, "How are school-based administrators' decision-making thought processes influenced by external opinions when making special education eligibility recommendations?" The researcher used a comparative analysis method for analyzing the data because the goal of this study was to describe the phenomenon of the eligibility decision-making process from the perspective of the administrators. Initially, open coding of the participants' statements was completed to attach conceptual labels to the participants' statements and make comparisons (Maxwell 2005) between them. Once these codes were generated, axial coding was used, first to identify common themes that connected the various conceptual labels, then to connect the common themes and further reduce them to distinct broad categories that captured the essence of the special education eligibility process according to the participants (Glesne, 2006; Maxwell & Miller, 2008).

After the researcher transcribed the interviews, she reviewed the transcripts several times to generate some initial categories. Chunks of data from the original transcript, including as much content around the data to maintain substantial meaning (Glesne, 2006), were used to create new documents in order to generate emic categories.

After completing this process for each interview, the researcher reviewed the chunks of data, one interview at a time, and grouped them together with other chunks that seemed to refer to the same topic or theme. Themes evident in all six interviews were grouped together under broad connecting categories.

External Validity

External validity is the result of the extent to which the results of a particular study can be generalized beyond the parameters of the study to other populations or situations. As special education eligibility criteria are federally mandated and therefore apply to all school systems in the United States, results obtained from the case vignette analyses likely will have some utility beyond the subject school's system to the extent that administrators are required to participate in the special education eligibility decision-making process. Although IDEA requires an administrator be part of the eligibility team, the interpretation of "administrator" varies from state to state and school system to school system. Conversely, inferences regarding administrator-specific justifications for their decisions divulged in the individual interviews cannot be made beyond the school system in which they were generated, although they may provide some insight into the possible influences on a school-based administrator's decision-making process in regard to special education eligibility. This study was conducted with the understanding that the subject school system may not be "typical" in any way or related to any other context, for example, an urban district, but it is typical of many large, suburban districts in the nation, has a growing student population that is becoming increasingly diverse, and may relate well to a good many school systems nationwide.

4. RESULTS

To this point, this study has established the need to examine the phenomenon of the special education eligibility decision-making process, particularly from the perspective of the school-based special education administrator. The special education eligibility decision includes a number of stakeholders with varying interests in the outcome of the decision, and one aspect of the school-based administrator's role is to apply special education law and policy in daily practice, including within decision making, and to do so as impartially as possible (Brennan & Brennan, 1988; Council for Exceptional Children, 2009; NPBEA, 2008). Using a mixed-methods design, this chapter is an inquiry into: (a) what of the information presented for special education eligibility the school-based administrators find most important, (b) if private practitioner diagnoses and educational advocate opinions have any influence on the administrators' recommendations for special education eligibility, and (c) if years of experience or self-efficacy as a special education administrator mediate those influences.

This chapter consists of three sections: descriptions of the participants, the data analyses and findings, and a discussion of the conclusions drawn from these analyses. The first section provides details regarding the sample of volunteer participants in the quantitative portion of the study and those participants who were chosen from that sample to be interviewed for the qualitative portion. The second section presents the data analyses and findings in two parts: quantitative and qualitative. The quantitative data and analyses pertain to the first three research questions and are presented in that manner.

This part includes data from the demographic survey, the case vignettes, and the School Administrators Efficacy Scale, and discusses the results of the frequency analysis, the ANOVA, and the multiple regression. The qualitative data and analysis includes information gathered from individual interviews with school-based administrators and the themes generated from systematic coding of that data to address the fourth research question. The final section offers concluding commentary through integrating the data from the analyses and what they reveal in light of the study's purpose.

Participants

The researcher chose school-based special education administrators, both former and current, to participate in the study, as they serve as the special education points of contact and are directly responsible for carrying out and participating in special education procedures and processes for their individual schools, including special education eligibility meetings. The number of participants for both the quantitative and qualitative portions of the study was small but adequate for an appropriate and meaningful study (Creswell, 1998; Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007).

Quantitative

The sample consists of 56 school-based administrators employed by the county school system. Table 8 illustrates the participants' demographic backgrounds, including gender, their current positions, the grade level of students they serve, and their qualifications regarding special education instruction. Participant responses on the demographic questionnaire indicated that 44.6% were male and 55.4 % were female. Just over 80% were currently assistant principals, approximately 18% were principals, and

one individual recently had retired from her position as a middle school assistant principal. Of those 56 participants, just over 66% presently served at the elementary school level, 16% at the middle school level, and almost 18 % at the high school level. This breakdown roughly parallels the ratio of schools per level to total number of schools within the county school system; therefore, the participant sample provides an adequate cross section of the county's school-based administrators. In terms of their individual backgrounds, 34% had been special education teachers, almost 29% have current special education certification through the state of Virginia, and approximately 21% have earned degrees specifically in special education.

Table 8

Gender, Position, School Level, and Special Education Background of Participants

Characteristics	<i>n</i>	Percentage
Gender		
Male	25	44.6
Female	31	55.4
Current Position		
Assistant Principal	45	80.3
Principal	10	17.9
Retired	1	< 1.0
School Level		
Elementary School	37	66.1
Middle School	9	16.1
High School	10	17.8
Special Education Background		
Special Education Teacher	19	33.9
Special Education Certified	16	28.6
Special Education Degree	12	21.4

Note. *N* = 56.

Qualitative

From the sample of 56 individuals who participated in the quantitative portion of the study, the researcher chose 6 administrators (2 from each level—elementary, middle, and high school) who agreed to be interviewed to gather more specific data regarding their experiences as a special education administrator, their experiences with and approach to decision making, their perceptions of the impact of politics on education and the special education eligibility decision-making process, as well as their perceptions of the inclusion of private practitioner and educational advocate opinions in that process. All six participants were current school-based special education administrators for their respective schools and were chosen purposefully to provide a varied cross section of

credentials and experience at each of the elementary, middle, and high school levels.

Table 9 provides a summary of demographic characteristics for the interviewees based on their responses on the demographic survey from the first part of the study.

Table 9

Demographic Characteristics of Administrators Interviewed

Characteristics	<i>n</i>	Percentage
Gender		
Male	2	33.3
Female	4	66.7
Special Education Teacher		
Yes	4	66.7
No	2	33.3
Years as Special Education Administrator		
0-5	3	50.0
6-10	2	33.3
11-15	0	
16-20	0	
20-25	1	16.7
26-30	0	

Note. *N* = 6.

The first interviewee was a male high school assistant principal (HS1) who began his career by receiving an undergraduate degree in both math and physical education with the goal of teaching and coaching. Having gotten his first job at a residential hospital for children, he “fell into special education that way,” and began pursuing a teaching endorsement in special education. Ultimately he earned advanced degrees in education administration. HS1 has been an administrator for 25 years.

The second interviewee had been a high school principal and special education administrator (HS2) for four years. She began her career as an elementary school P.E.

teacher then moved to the high school level. After teaching for close to 10 years, she was encouraged by colleagues to pursue administration, ultimately earning advanced degrees.

From the middle school level, the third interviewee was a female assistant principal (MS1) who began her teaching career teaching home economics. After a brief hiatus working in the hospitality industry she returned to education. While serving as acting middle school dean on several occasions, she decided to pursue an advanced degree in administration. She has been in her current position for six years.

Also a middle school assistant principal, the fourth interviewee (MS2) was presently in his 19th year of education. Inspired by his great aunt who was his math teacher and principal at the parochial school he attended, MS2 began his career as an English teacher. He then pursued teaching special education students with emotional disabilities both in the public school system and through a residential day program. He began administration as a middle school dean before becoming an assistant principal. MS2 was presently pursuing an advanced degree in education administration and had been his school's special education administrator for three years.

The fifth interviewee, ES1, was a female elementary school assistant principal who had been an administrator for two years. Beginning as an undergraduate she pursued special education, earning her degree as a psychology major and special education minor. She taught at the middle school level for several years, served as her school's special education department chair and administrative designee, and earned an advanced degree in educational administration. She had been an assistant principal for approximately one year.

The final interviewee was a female elementary school assistant principal (ES2) who earned her undergraduate degree in English then a master's degree in elementary education. She taught at the elementary level for about 10 years in prior to working for the present county school system. She was approached by her own administrators to pursue administration, and seeing it as a "natural progression," pursued a higher degree and endorsement in education administration. She had been an elementary school assistant principal and special education contact for approximately five years.

Data Analysis and Findings

In this section, the data are presented first for the quantitative analyses, then the qualitative analysis, and are presented in correspondence to the research question they address. The section closes with a discussion of the conclusions that can be drawn from the results.

Quantitative Analyses

Research question 1. The study's first hypothesis asserts that school-based administrators credential a private practitioner's or an educational advocate's opinion as more important than other sources of information presented for consideration for special education eligibility. To examine this assertion, the researcher asked the question: "What type of information is most important to school-based administrators when making a special education eligibility decision." Data to answer this question were gathered from the responses on the demographic survey. The researcher asked the participants to provide an answer to the statement, "Please indicate which piece of information you feel to be the most important *for you* when making an eligibility decision." Participants were

to choose: (a) an advocate's opinion, (b) a private evaluation/diagnosis (e.g. IEE), or (c) other, please specify (e.g. educational evaluation, grades, referral question). Data were filtered into nine different categories: School Diagnostic Evaluations, Teacher-Provided Information, Parent Report, Private Practitioner Evaluations, Educational Advocate Opinions, Scholastic Data, Intervention Outcomes, A Combination of Data Types, and All Information Provided. Teacher-Provided Information included information such as teacher comments and class work samples, and Scholastic Data included the types of information housed in a student's cumulative file (e.g. report cards and standardized test results). A Combination of Data Types (e.g. school-based evaluations *and* teacher report) included responses in which the participant chose more than one type of the first seven types but did not indicate that *all* information was necessary to make a decision. A frequency analysis of the participants' responses was completed to determine which piece of information administrators find most important when making special education eligibility recommendations. The type of data that yielded the highest percentage was considered the most important.

"A Combination of Data Types" presented was the most often cited by the participants as the most important type of information to them when making a special education eligibility decision. Specifically, the frequency analysis showed that 42.2% of participants chose this response as the most important in their decision making. School Diagnostic Evaluations was the second most-selected type of information with 21.4% of participants citing such information as the most important when making their special education eligibility decisions. The least cited types of information (0.0%) were

information provided by the parents (i.e. Parent Report) or the educational advocate (i.e. Educational Advocate Opinion). While parent and advocate information were cited in combination with other types of information and, thus, categorized under “A Combination of Data Types,” none of the participants cited either as the single most important type of information necessary for special education eligibility decision making. Table 10 shows the frequency distribution for all nine categories of information.

Table 10

Type of Information Reported by Participants as “Most Important” for Eligibility Decisions

Information Type	<i>f</i>
School Diagnostic Evaluations	21.4
Teacher-Provided Information	3.6
Parent Report	0.0
Private Practitioner Evaluations	2.1
Educational Advocate Opinion	0.0
Scholastic Data	14.3
Intervention Outcomes	2.1
Combination of Data Types	42.2
All Information Presented	14.3

Note. *N* = 56. Data reported as percentages.

Research question 2. For the second research question, “Is there a difference in school-based administrators’ special education eligibility recommendations with the inclusion of an external opinion,” the researcher conducted a one-way repeated measures ANOVA to compare participants’ responses to the case vignette analyses. This question was posed to address the study’s second hypothesis, “there is a difference in school-based

administrators' eligibility recommendations for special education eligibility based upon the presence of an external opinion.” For this part of the study, participants read two case vignettes—one without an external opinion included that served as a control and one that included the external opinion of a private practitioner, an educational advocate, or both—and then provided a special education eligibility recommendation for each in the form of a rating on a Likert-type scale. The ratings for the statement, “This student is eligible for special education as a student with a Specific Learning Disability,” ranged from one to five (1 = “Strongly Disagree”, 5 = “Strongly Agree”).

Due to the small sample size in each of the experimental groups, the researcher combined the participants' responses to the experimental vignette (IEE, ADV, and BOTH) into one factor score (COMBSCOR) to run the analysis. The researcher then compared the mean CON (i.e. responses to the control vignette) score to the mean COMBSCOR. As only two conditions were used in the analysis, sphericity was assumed.

Results showed a significant main effect indicating that participants were more likely to change their responses when given the additional data from independent educational evaluations and educational advocates (Wilks' Lambda = .91, $F(1, 55) = 5.19$, $p < .05$, multivariate partial eta squared = .09). The researcher also was interested to see if there was a significant effect for the type of external opinion presented for special education eligibility. Using a Bonferroni adjustment, the researcher ran multiple comparisons between participant case vignette responses to the control condition (CON) and each of the experimental conditions (IEE, ADV, BOTH). Descriptive statistics for each comparison are presented in Table 11. No significant effects were revealed in the

comparison between CON and IEE, indicating that the inclusion of an independent educational evaluation alone did not necessarily result in the participants changing their eligibility decisions (Wilks' Lambda = .94, $F(1, 18) = .98$, $p = .34$, multivariate partial eta squared = .06). The same held for the other two conditions: ADV (Wilks' Lambda = .90, $F(1, 17) = 1.64$, $p = .22$, multivariate partial eta squared = .10) or for BOTH (Wilks' Lambda = .91, $F(1, 18) = 1.56$, $p = .23$, multivariate partial eta squared = .09). However, it is worthwhile to note that the mean difference between the IEE condition and the CON condition was the largest (1.21), suggesting that information from an Independent Education Evaluation may carry more weight, although not to a statistically significant degree, in decision making than the opinion of an educational advocate.

Table 11

Descriptive Statistics for Case Vignettes by Condition

Comparison	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	95% Confidence		Cohen's <i>d</i>
			Lower	Upper	
CON ^a	1.88	.51	1.74	2.01	1.27
COMBSCOR	2.91	1.12	2.62	3.21	
Mean Difference	1.03				
CON ^b	1.95	.40	1.74	2.15	1.66
IEE	3.16	1.01	2.67	3.67	
Mean difference	1.21				
CON ^c	1.83	.71	1.48	2.19	1.01
ADV	2.78	1.17	2.21	3.35	
Mean difference	.95				
CON ^d	1.84	.37	1.65	2.03	1.22
BOTH	2.79	1.18	2.19	3.39	
Mean difference	.95				

Note. CON = control condition, IEE = independent educational evaluation, ADV = educational advocate's opinion, BOTH = both IEE and ADV, COMBSCOR = combination of ADV, IEE, and BOTH.

^a*n* = 56. ^b*n* = 19. ^c*n* = 18. ^d*n* = 19.

Overall, it is noteworthy that in combining all three scenarios, administrators were more likely to determine that the student was eligible. Although lack of statistical significance for the individual comparisons was likely a result of limited sample size, the researcher computed Cohen's *d* scores (Table 12) for each of the comparisons to determine effect sizes of each of the conditions. Interestingly, the computation generated substantial effect sizes for each of the conditions. Further, the standard deviations were larger for the treatment conditions, suggesting more homogeneity of opinion in the

control condition and greater disparity for each treatment condition. In other words, addition of advocate or independent evaluation data created less consensus across administrators. This data suggests that the inclusion of the Independent Educational Evaluation and the educational advocate opinion may have had more influence on the participants' responses than the analysis fully revealed, and the level of influence varied across participants.

Research question 3. A multiple regression analysis was designed to address the study's third research question: "Do decision-maker self-efficacy and years of experience contribute to the extent to which an external opinion influences school-based administrators' eligibility decisions?" The hypothesis supporting this question was, "the extent to which a school-based administrator's decision-making thought process is influenced by an external opinion will vary depending on the school-based administrator's years of experience as a special education administrator and level of knowledge of special education laws and policies."

Table 12 shows the breakdown of administrator years of experience by treatment group for both the total number of years they had as a school-based administrator, and how many they had specifically as a special education administrator. The majority of the participants had one to five total years of experience as a school-based administrator with approximately 46% of all participants falling in this category. The least number (5.4%) of participants had greater than 20 years experience as a school-based administrator. As for years experience as a special education administrator, again, the majority of the participants (53.4%) had between one and five years of experience with only one

participant having greater than 20 years experience. Additionally, the mean and standard deviation were calculated for participant responses to the questions that comprise Factor 4, and the results suggest that, in general, participants reported a relatively high level of self-efficacy ($M = 5.84$, $SD = 0.76$).

Table 12

Years of Experience by Group

Group	Years Experience				
	1-5	6-10	11-15	16-20	20+
Administrator					
IEE (<i>n</i> = 19)	7 (36.8)	7 (36.8)	5 (26.3)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
ADV (<i>n</i> = 18)	10 (55.6)	3 (16.7)	4 (22.2)	1 (5.6)	0 (0.0)
BOTH (<i>n</i> = 19)	9 (47.4)	5 (26.3)	1 (5.3)	1 (5.3)	2 (10.5)
Total (<i>N</i> = 56)	26 (46.4)	15 (26.8)	10 (17.9)	2 (3.6)	2 (3.6)
Special Education Administrator					
IEE (<i>n</i> = 19)	10 (52.6)	5 (26.3)	4 (21.1)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
ADV (<i>n</i> = 18)	10 (55.6)	5 (27.8)	2 (11.1)	1 (5.6)	0 (0.0)
BOTH (<i>n</i> = 19)	10 (52.6)	5 (26.3)	2 (26.3)	1 (5.3)	1 (5.3)
Total (<i>N</i> = 56)	30 (53.4)	15 (26.8)	8 (14.3)	2 (3.6)	1 (1.8)

Note. Percentages are reported in parentheses. IEE = independent educational evaluation, ADV = educational advocate's opinion, BOTH = both IEE and ADV.

The researcher's intention was to run multiple regression analysis using the COMBSCOR of administrator responses to the case vignettes as the dependent, and DumIEE, DumADV, Years of Experience as Special Education Administrator, and Self-Efficacy as predictor variables to answer the question. Prior to running the regression analysis, the researcher conducted a simple Pearson correlation to determine the degree of association between the participants' responses to the case vignettes, their years of experience, and their reported self-efficacy, if any. Based on the results, there is no significant association between participant responses and years of experience or self-efficacy (Table 13). Due to lack of significance, the researcher chose not to proceed with the multiple regression analysis.

Table 13

Correlations Between Combined Administrator Responses to Case Vignettes, Years Experience as a Special Education Administrator, and Self-Efficacy

		Years Experience	Self-Efficacy
COMBSCOR	Pearson <i>r</i>	.15	-.13
	Significance	.29	.35
	<i>N</i>	56	56

Note. I IEE = independent educational evaluation, ADV = educational advocate's opinion, BOTH = both IEE and ADV, COMBSCOR = combination of ADV, IEE, and BOTH.

While neither years of experience as a special education administrator nor self-efficacy appeared to be associated with the participants' responses to the case vignettes, the directionality of their correlations is interesting. The positive relationship for years of experience suggests that the more experience an administrator has, the more likely he or she will be to provide an "eligible" recommendation. The negative weight for efficacy suggests that the more efficacious the administrator feels, the less likely he or she is to change his or her recommendation based on the additional information from a private practitioner or the educational advocate.

Qualitative Analysis

Research question 4. Also to address the third hypothesis, data were collected from the responses to questions 1-10 of the Interview Protocol given by the six administrators who were interviewed to answer the question, "How are school-based administrators' decision-making thought processes influenced by external opinions when making special education recommendations?"

Because the goal of this study was to describe the phenomenon of the eligibility decision-making process from the perspective of the school-based special education

administrators, the researcher used a comparative analysis method for analyzing the data. After transcribing the interviews, the researcher read through the transcripts several times while writing down some initial etic categories using the interview questions as a guide. The researcher then began open coding of the participants' statements based on the categories generated: Experience and Preparation, Administrative Role, Politics in Education, Decision-Making Style, Self-Efficacy, and External Opinions. Using hard copies of the transcripts, the researcher highlighted chunks of data while including adequate content around the data to maintain substantial meaning (Glesne, 2006) to generate emic categories. The researcher then reread each transcript several times to attach descriptive codes to the participants' statements in order to make comparisons (Maxwell & Miller, 2008) between them. The descriptive coding technique generated 35 distinct codes which represented phenomena noted within and across participant interview responses for all interview questions. Table 14 provides an overview of how each of the descriptive labels relates to each of the six predetermined categories.

Table 14

Categories and Descriptive Labels

Categories	Experience and Preparation	Administrator Role	Politics
Subcategories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication • Administrative support • Collegial support • Continuous learning process • Leadership as a natural progression • Knowledge and understanding • Special education training • Student interest/advocacy • Relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication facilitator • Administrator support • Student interest • Problem solving • Decision making • Mediator • Information dissemination • Constant learning process • Information collection • Program coordinating • Process monitoring • Reliance on others • Relationships 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationships • Communication • Power games • Image and perceptions • Emotions • Control • Parental influence • Monetary influence • Influence on decision making • Student interest/advocacy
Categories	Decision-Making Style	Self-Efficacy	External Opinions
Subcategories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consensus building • Collaboration • Relationships • Communication • Principles and morals • Student interest/advocacy • Policies and regulations • Expectations • Information seeking • Administrator support • Collegial support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication • Knowledge and understanding • Trust • Relationships • Reliance on others • Special education experience • Special education training • Policies and regulations • Collegial support • Administrator support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Image and perceptions • Trust • Emotions • Purchased opinions • Supplemental information • Parental support • Communication • Relationships • Collaboration • Alternative perspectives • Student interest/advocacy

Private practitioner evaluations. In examining the descriptive codes generated for the category “External Opinions,” findings suggest that, in general, private practitioner evaluations were viewed as supplemental information to consider when determining special education eligibility but were not viewed as an influencing factor for an administrator’s eligibility recommendation. The participants consistently reported that they were open to the information provided from a private evaluation and found it useful when providing interventions and classroom accommodations for students when necessary. For example, MS2 stated, “Private evaluations; I don’t disagree with those at all because for me that’s just more information to be looked at,” and HS1 reported,

In my experience in child studies, it’s nice when a parent says, “Oh, we had some private testing done and this is what they found,”...the recommendations are generally things every good teacher should do anyway...in the child study process I think it’s very helpful.

In regard to having the information for the eligibility decision, HS2 stated,

We honor them just as a professional courtesy...but as far as having that being the end all be all in determining whether or not the student is eligible for services...that decision should be based solely on the county’s data and assessments, not an outside source.

Several of the participants indicated that there were circumstances that caused them to question the validity of private evaluations as well. ES1 noted that she has read private evaluators’ reports that include glaring errors regarding the student. She stated,

While private evaluations very well may provide good information, I've seen many private evaluations that have had the wrong child's name in it, or might start talking about another child in depth still using that child's name but using the wrong information.

HS1 remarked,

a lot of times I do feel it's kind of a template when you see testing when it's from the same people. The back page you could interchange with, you know, several kids that they tested and you're getting the same things, suggesting a cookie-cutter approach to the assessments. Remarks given by ES2 suggested a similar perspective, "Oftentimes families will tend to use similar private evaluators, so then you get to know the evaluator's writing style...the evaluator's report style...and then [question] the validity of those reports."

Educational advocates. Collectively, the opinion of an educational advocate was viewed as a source of child and/or parental support but also was not considered an influencing factor on the administrator's eligibility recommendation. Several of the participants remarked that they viewed the advocate's opinion as just another perspective to consider. MS1 stated in regard to the presence of an advocate at an eligibility meeting, "I don't think it will change anything. I think it's another voice, another person at the table with another perspective worth listening to." According to HS1,

I don't feel a need to set [an advocate's attendance] up as any big deal because I am open to hear what they want to say and what they recommend. If I don't agree, I will tell them that I don't agree and move on.

ES2 stated, “[Advocates] are here for the best interest of the child. That’s their goal...so [it’s] finding a way to understand that perspective and take that again into consideration with all the other data we’ve collected about the child.” As for the perception of an advocate as support for the child and/or the parent, from her perspective, ES2 remarked, “I have to constantly remind myself that the advocates are here to support and to defend the child just as the parent in a support position.” HS2 stated,

Students and parents have the right to bring someone in if they’re not in a position to voice their own concerns, and if they’re not confident in knowing what their rights are as a parent. By all means, bring someone in who can better voice that for you and who is in a better position to communicate that with the school.

From MS1’s point of view, “With regard to advocates, I have had very few contentious meetings at eligibility with advocates. I think, ultimately, the ones that have come to eligibility are being hired by the parents because the parents don’t understand.”

Additionally, however, the consensus of the participants was that having an advocate at an eligibility meeting is often seen, particularly by their staff, as a detriment to the process. The most commonly cited drawback was that the presence of an advocate makes people feel defensive. From HS1’s perspective, “As far as advocates...it always seems like it’s an automatic, you know, makes people defensive...I think because of people having so many negative experiences they automatically feel it’s going to be negative.” ES1 stated, “My experience is that the advocate tends to, for lack of a better word, pick at the teachers.... I take offense on my teachers’ behalf.” For MS2, “When I see an advocate, I am automatically ticked off personally from the school’s perspective. I

see a lack of trust that we can do the things appropriately for their child.” Participants also were in agreement that often having an advocate present had a negative impact on the parent–school relationship. ES1 stated,

I think the influence is very heavy on the parent, and then, for us to have a more collaborative relationship with the parents with [advocates] in place makes it a little more difficult. Really the most important thing is that we can work side by side with the parent to help their students...it sometimes creates a bit of a barrier.

A similar sentiment was reported by MS1,

I think ultimately, too, the ones that have come to eligibility are being hired by the parents because the parents don’t understand, and maybe they feel that we’re trying to deprive their child of something. It’s a matter of me trying to build that rapport and trust of the parents.

Only one participant noted direct influence of an advocate on the decision-making process itself. HS1 stated,

I don’t think it affects things as much as it would in an eligibility process, you know, where [the advocates] are pushing for a child to be eligible, I think there are times when an eligibility committee says, “Okay, you know what? We’re gonna do this,” you know, not because the advocate is right but because of the hassle of it.

One theme that emerged for both private practitioner evaluations and educational advocates was the notion that, in both cases, the services provided are being paid for by the parents, which leads to skepticism on the part of the administrators and school staff as

to the validity of the opinions that are being purported by those agencies. From HS2's perspective,

I also think that some companies, they...you pay and they'll give you what you are looking for in some regards. If you go in saying, "I think my child has this. Here's a check for so much money." Oh, how about that? "We think your child has this." So, I don't know how accurate those things are.

ES1 remarked, "The other problem I have with [advocates] is that these parents are paying them by the hour so they have no problem trying to have a meeting for three hours. We've had a lot of heated discussions." MS2 expressed the most skepticism, stating,

Advocates...they're getting paid, so I'm not really sure whose best interest they're looking out for. If they were doing this on a volunteer basis, I think I'd probably look at that as a different role. I have yet to come across someone who's done it without getting paid.

Related connecting themes. Subsequent to the development of the descriptive labels noted above, the researcher conducted an axial coding process to identify any common themes that connected the predetermined categories. Once identified, the themes were further reduced to broad emic categories that could illustrate the nature of their role as a decision maker from the special education administrators' perspective. The goal was to identify what factors did, in fact, come into play for administrators when making special education eligibility decisions. From this analysis, four broad themes emerged: support, communication, relationships, and student advocacy. Data overall indicates that

these four factors are not mutually exclusive but are interconnected, a connection that is salient across the participants' entire role as administrators, not just as decision makers. For the purposes of the current research, the focus of the analysis remains on the role of decision making.

Findings suggested that in order for administrators to feel confident in their role as decision makers, receiving support from their own administrators and administrative team was essential. For example, HS1 commented on his current school,

In other situations I wouldn't have been comfortable in making decisions even being confident in what I was going to do because of the atmosphere at the school. Here it is definitely supporting and I know that I'm going to be backed by others and I know that we all have a feel for what the others would do.

HS2 had a similar comment in regard to her administration, "Most decisions [the administrative team is] supported on. I would say [for] the majority we have full support by the principal." Specific to his decision-making style, MS2 commented on support he receives from both his school administrators as well as other administrators,

I pick as many brains as I can, predominantly outside of the building. I mean, I pick [the principal's] brain or [the other assistant principal's] brain, but I do try to use other APs [assistant principals], principals, friends at other counties, siblings who are educators, central office staff...I try to accumulate as much guidance and suggestions as possible and then make the best decision based on what I've got.

For as much support as they sought for themselves, administrators also aimed to incorporate the same type and level of support into their role as an administrator for their

staff to facilitate quality decision making. Both elementary school administrators were pointed in describing the importance they placed on this aspect of their role. ES1 stated, “What is probably one of the biggest parts of my job...as a special ed. administrator, I think it’s important just to work closely with your special ed. teachers in your building.” She described an example specific to the intervention process prior to a student being evaluated for special education eligibility,

It’s important for me to touch base with the teacher between the time of setting [an intervention plan] and setting a follow-up [meeting] to make sure interventions are in place and she has the support system needed. Then, when we come back to the table, to make sure she’s bringing data...from there you would determine, “Are [we] going to continue interventions? Are we going to sign off to test?”

ES2 expressed a similar sentiment describing her perception of administrative support as a motivating force:

As an administrator of special education then you share [your philosophy] with the staff—whether that’s general education staff or special education staff—you kind of constantly get on your soap box, so to speak, and tell them, “This is what I believe in and this is where we are going to take it. This is how we are going to deal with each other as we go.” You don’t have to have all the answers, you just have to be willing and open to hear all opinions and ideas...and make some good decisions based on that.

Underscoring the importance of administrative support, MS1 commented on her experience as a special education administrator when that support was lacking:

I don't feel like nonspecial ed. administrators know what they are talking about. You know, when I did that [special education] leadership cohort, it was just sort of a resounding theme where [classmates] would say, "My AP...she was a P.E. teacher. She doesn't know anything about special ed. They don't care." I just can't believe other people don't advocate for the special ed. department because, in my opinion, it's one of the most important departments in the school.... I think special ed. is exhausting, and we really have to support our people. It's one of the hardest jobs out there.

Communication also was cited frequently by the administrators as an integral factor in decision making, not only when making special education eligibility decisions, but when making any decisions in their role as an administrator. Comments also pointed to the impact, positive and negative, that communication has on the other three themes identified: support, relationships, and student advocacy. ES2 emphasized her opinion of the importance of communication at her school,

I think it's really important to continually—and it happens here—to communicate the special education needs not only to the special ed. team and the general ed. teachers that have the children in the classrooms but to the whole building. It's really important to continually share information with each other about what's going on with the children.

She went on to explain how constant and open communication aided in her support of her staff,

I think it's very important to share, and knowing that I share with the staff at the beginning of the year...that they can come to [me] to talk about the children that are in the classroom. I have an open door policy.

ES1's comments mirrored those of ES2 in regard to her support of her special education staff as she spoke of meeting with her teachers on a monthly basis to communicate any new information disseminated from the central office, to provide them feedback on their work, and to answer any questions and address their concerns. She referred to her role as special education administrator as, "One of the biggest parts of my job," and went on further to say,

I think it's important to work closely with your special ed. teachers in your building.... It's important for me to touch base with the teacher between the time of setting the plan and sending a follow-up to make sure interventions are in place and [teachers] have the support system needed.

Participants also expressed the importance of maintaining communication with parents when making decisions regarding students. MS2 explained, "You want parents on your side because you want their support at home." Whether eligibility decisions or IEP decisions, MS1 indicated, "it's a matter of me trying to build that rapport and trust of the parents." ES1 described the necessity of parental communication during the entire process leading to eligibility for special education,

Working with any parents that might have questions about whether or not they want to pursue a child study...you are constantly hearing what people have to say and they are asking for your advice and input. Talking to parents beforehand to get their input to make sure that when we get to the table we kind of, you know, make sure that everybody is on the same page.

Participants also touted good communication as necessary to build the strong working relationships for effective decision making. A common theme among the participants was their tendency to communicate with multiple people to assist in their own decision-making efforts. MS2 stated that he tries “to accumulate as much guidance and suggestions as possible and then make the best decision with what I’ve got.” The same was true for ES2, as she stated, “The more information I can gather from the people who have the most information to provide...is how I make my decisions.” For HS2, her self-efficacy for decision making comes from consulting with others as she stated, “[I am] more confident if it’s a decision not made solely on my own...but to make an informed decision after having a conversation with other folks? Very confident.” ES1 referred to predecision communication as “an ongoing thing [that] doesn’t always happen at the table because you are informing people and communicating along the way.”

Data also suggest that administrators believe that in order for them to be effective in their decision making, building those strong working relationships with the others involved is key. Participants noted that, whether making individual or group decisions, if prior positive relationships and rapport have not been built, negative consequences can occur and collaborative decision making is impeded. In regard to her opinion on decision

making, ES2 commented, “I think you need to have a good rapport with one another. Be flexible with one another.... I think that it’s very important to not only have a professional relationship but a personal relationship in some capacity.” MS1 described her decision making style as a “consensus maker,” explaining,

I always try to include everybody but that’s just my personality...when it impacts kids or staff and it’s a serious decision like discipline or maybe placement in another program, I wouldn’t just make that decision without asking for input. I do take the staff’s input very seriously.

Comments made by MS2 show that the importance of relationship building goes beyond those relationships made with the staff:

My best parts of the day are when I am interacting with the teachers and students...probably more the students than anything else, but that’s what makes the day. I always find time to...you know lunch duty is a huge time for me because I get to mess around with the kids and they get to mess back. You know, it’s relationship building.

With regard to the special education eligibility, comments frequently referenced the relationships among the team members, both school-based members and nonschool-based members, and how they influenced the decision-making process. For the team at his school, HS1 stated,

I feel confident in the group that we have...that I am going to get the right answer, and that we’re not going to make a decision without completely accurate information.... I’ve been fortunate to have really good people that I’ve worked

with. I feel like that, you know, there is that camaraderie with the team and [the] ability to talk things through.

ES2's comments about her team were similar, "It's just a comfort level with each other. That comfort allows you to also present other information that another team member may not have seen before and then, more importantly, other team members are more receptive." Her comments suggest that a positive relationship allows team members to feel comfortable in presenting their opinions without fear of criticism. She went further to explain:

I find when you put yourself in a position of vulnerability by giving out information at a personal level, people are more forgiving and flexible with each other because then they realize it's not just "me, eligibility coordinator," or "me, school psychologist." It's "me, person." When we are at that personal human level then the dynamics of any team...people are going to be productive because you've gotten over that, "I don't know you, you don't know me" thing. That human dynamics piece is important.

MS1 described her perspective of her role as an eligibility team member,

[The eligibility coordinators] try to keep it much like a committee. I try to follow suit with that. I never try to domineer or say, "That's incorrect." It's just not my personality to do that, to be a dominant outspoken person like that. I try to be part of the committee.

She further added her take on her responsibility in building relationships with parents for effective decision making:

It's a matter of me trying to build that rapport and that trust of parents.... You always have to look at the background of where some of these parents are coming from because some of them are coming from situations at the elementary level where things were contentious and they had to fight for things and maybe it wasn't a good rapport with the past school. I understand. They are doing what parents feel they need to do—fight for their kid.

The most consistent underlying theme throughout all of the interviews was the administrators' strong sense of responsibility in being an advocate for their students in every decision they made, not just those related to special education eligibility. Each of the administrators revealed this sentiment to an extent when speaking of their decisions to enter education as a profession and referenced student advocacy as a steadfast guide for their decision making throughout their careers as educators. For several of the administrators, teaching was a goal from childhood. Both ES1 and MS2 were encouraged into education by family members. ES1 noted that while "growing up...I always wanted to be a teacher," and she was encouraged by her mother to pursue special education in particular. MS2 stated, "My great aunt was a Sister of St. Joseph and at my Catholic high school, she was my principal and math teacher. I think she probably led me down that path." For HS2, her relationships with her own teachers led her to education as a profession, "I decided to go into education because I had really close connections and relationships with my teachers in school. It was something to look forward to everyday. I loved learning." MS1 expressed, "Always the dream was to teach." The decision to enter education was more that of common sense for HS1, as he stated, "I got my undergrad in

math and physical education, so it was my thought to teach and coach.” ES2’s path was a bit more circuitous but with the goal of pursuing elementary education remaining fixed,

I ended up majoring in English because [my undergraduate university] didn’t have elementary education, which is why at that point I decided that it would really be my interest. Then I went to [another university] in Pennsylvania and got my master’s degree in elementary ed.”

In explaining her decision to leave the classroom and pursue administration, she stated:

I’ve always loved elementary. I’m sure if you spoke to any administrator they will always tell you the same thing—you just wanted to make that difference. You could make a difference in the life of 25 to 30 children on a daily basis. You never understood or could understand at the time the magnitude the person above you could make. Then once you see that world, then it’s just very enticing. The idea that you could dramatically affect 100 children, 500 children, 675 children in their days and how you could set that culture...it was such a draw on me.

The data shows that the participants have carried their student-centered perspectives with them as they have evolved from teachers to administrators, a perspective they carry with them no matter the circumstance or context, regardless of how many years they have been educators. In regard to decision making in general, MS2 stated:

You want to do what is best for the kid in your decisions and that should guide everything. It’s hard sometimes to back away from that when people feel boxed into a corner and they get defensive and it’s about them as opposed to the kid. So

then you've got some of your decision-making deals with trying to keep people calm and focused on the right thing, which is the kids.

A number of the administrators referenced student advocacy when describing their perspectives of the influence of politics on decision making in education. In reference to her own decision making, MS1 stated, "I don't feel any political stuff influences me in terms of decision making. For me it's emotional, my decision making. I'm always trying to look at what's best for the child; more child-focused than politically focused." MS2 expressed a similar sentiment, "I don't see [making decisions] as political. When I go into a meeting, I have my policies to fall back on. Any decisions I make are for the one purpose which is, 'What does the kid need.'" ES2 cited core values as her guide in decision making:

You have to have a core set of beliefs for yourself, and you pretty much stick to that. Those are your guiding principles that you live by—"This is what I believe about children." "This is our mission statement."—I stick to that.

Others expressed their perspectives in terms of how others' decisions, those stakeholders external to the individual school (e.g. central office administrators, school board), impact decision making at the school level. HS1 expressed,

I think that sometimes we are pushed to do things that aren't appropriate just based on how it looks, and I think that principals have a lot of pressure, political pressure...it's not really for the benefit of the student. It's for the benefit of the school.

HS2's comments echoed those of HS1, as she stated, "It's frustrating that people who are not in the school system, not in the schools working with the kids, they are making the decisions, political-based decisions, and it's not always in the best interest of kids at large."

Specific to special education eligibility decisions, again, administrators cited student advocacy as a guide. HS2 commented regarding the dynamics of the eligibility team when making decisions, "In my experience, people are quite respectful of one another and their opinions and what they're presenting because everyone is there for the same reason—we have the student's best interest in mind." In regard to more challenging cases where the data may not be completely clear about the presence of an educational disability, MS2 commented on what he feels influences his and the team's decision, "There are times where I think decisions are made because they are close enough to grey that we can do what's in the kid's best interest." Both ES2 and MS1 commented regarding their approach to eligibility decisions when advocates or private evaluators are present in an effort to influence the team's decision. ES2 stated, "To the best of your ability, you try to remind yourself, 'This is the best interest of the child. This is the best interest of the child.'" MS1 declared:

What I always look from is the lens of, "I do what's best for the child." Parents might be looking at it differently than I do. They bring advocates, I've had advocates, the NAACP, you name it, attend meetings, and they all have different issues and agendas to push. For me, I constantly try to reiterate that the decision we are making is in the best interest of the child and back it up with data and

examples to prove it...being able to methodically go through why we make those decisions...it's not to slam the kid or treat them unjustly. It's for what is in the best interest of that child.

A few of the administrators spoke to their approach to the special education eligibility decision in general with comments that seemed to capture the overall sentiment of the participants and illustrated what may influence them the most when making those decisions. ES1 stated:

I try to stay away from people seeing me as the decision maker in that role because that's not the case. There's not one person at the table that has more weight than anybody else in that decision-making process. I've heard people say to me, "Well, you are the administrator, so you make the decision." That's really not what it is about. It's about a committee—a team making that decision together.

According to ES2:

When you get into this position, you have to look at the big picture. You have to be able to hear the voices of the teachers, to hear the voices of the parents, to hear the voices of the experts in the field of psychology or the educational diagnosticians or the guidance counselors or the reading specialists or the ELL [English Language Learning] teacher. I think you need to be able to take all of that information and synthesize it; be able to make some solid decisions about what's going on in that child's life and make that child more successful than he or she is currently.

Punctuating his perspective of his decision-making role, MS2 stated, “I think as long as I have been in the public schools, the one guiding role has never changed. My job has always been to look out for [the] individual kid. And I’d always stand my ground with that.”

Conclusions

Quantitative data presented in this chapter suggests that school-based special education administrators regard the consideration of data from multiple sources as most important when making special education eligibility decisions. The data also indicated that neither information from a private practitioner nor the opinion of an educational advocate individually have a significant influence on administrators’ recommendations for a student’s eligibility for special education services. When data were combined for all treatment conditions, however, the results reached statistical and effect sizes were large for each of the individual conditions. This suggests there may be more influence from the external opinions than was fully realized in the overall analysis. The quantitative data also suggest that neither the administrators’ reported self-efficacy nor their years of experience as a special education administrator had any predictive impact on their eligibility recommendations, although there is some evidence to suggest that more experienced administrators are more likely to recommend eligibility given the additional information from a private practitioner and/or an educational advocate, and those administrators who are more self-efficacious are less likely to change their eligibility recommendations in light of the additional information.

Data from the interviews shows that administrators report that they are influenced very little, if at all, by the inclusion of private practitioner reports and educational advocate opinions among the information used to make a special education eligibility determination. Administrators view both as merely additional information that lends different perspectives to consider during the eligibility decision-making process. They report finding private practitioner evaluations as having more utility when formulating classroom-based intervention strategies and they view educational advocates as being more functional for parents in providing them support throughout the various processes related to special education. Further, the general consensus among the administrators was that they remain skeptical about the intentions of the private practitioners and educational advocates. The feeling was that because of the financial relationship between those agencies and the parents, the external opinions were more likely to be biased in the direction of the parents' desires rather than formulated on the basis of accuracy of fact.

Subsequent analysis of the interview data revealed four factors cited as having influence on the administrators' decision-making processes when making special education eligibility recommendations: support, communication, relationships, and student advocacy. Administrators obtained confidence in their own decision making when they had the support from their administrators, both at the school and central office levels, as well as the teams with which they worked, and they strove to provide this same support for their faculty and staff. Open communication was touted as very important in helping to ensure that all stakeholders involved in the decision were on the same page in order to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of the decisions made. The open

communication and, therefore, effective and efficient decisions were fostered through the relationships built between decision stakeholders. The pervasive sentiment is that positive rapport yields positive outcomes. Finally, administrators felt their ultimate responsibility was to advocate for students, therefore, for every decision that they made, student benefit is their primary priority.

5. DISCUSSION

This study focused on how stakeholders who are external to the school system influence school-based administrator decision making. Specifically, this study examined private practitioner evaluations and educational advocate opinions on school-based administrators' decision-making thought processes when making eligibility recommendations for special education services. Chapter 4 presented the findings generated from the quantitative and qualitative data analyses. This chapter presents the comparison between the literature that served as the basis for the theoretical framework for the study and the current findings. A demographic survey, a case vignette analysis, a questionnaire, and interviews all served as data to answer four research questions posed to examine external influences on school-based special education administrators' decision-making processes. Thus, this chapter will discuss the findings gleaned from the data analyses relative to the research questions as well as their overall applicability to the field of education leadership, as well as implications for research and practice.

Summary and Discussion of Findings

Chapter 2 presented the conceptual framework which guided the development of the four research questions designed to test three hypotheses. This section will briefly review that framework and discuss the research questions and corresponding hypotheses in the context of the literature that supported each hypothesis, and then briefly summarize the findings for each hypothesis.

Conceptual Framework—Revisited

Multiple Stakeholder and Social Network Theories were used to describe the relationship between an external opinion and the school-based administrator's special education eligibility recommendation. School-based decisions, including special education eligibility, involve multiple stakeholders. Every member of the team that makes the eligibility decision, including the administrator, is a stakeholder in that decision. Every member of the team, including the school-based administrator, is also a member of a social network, a network that influences the eligibility decision. In their advocacy efforts for their children, sometimes parents will use their social network connections, such as hiring an educational advocate or seeking a private evaluation, when they feel they need to alter the power differential to influence the eligibility decision in their favor. Figure 5 illustrates the assumption of the present study: Administrators with a greater understanding of the special education laws and the educational disability criteria that govern a student's eligibility for services and with higher reported self-efficacy regarding special education may be less influenced by external stakeholder opinions (i.e. educational advocates or private practitioners) when making eligibility recommendations. In other words, the administrator's decision-making thought processes when an external opinion is present will be predicted by their knowledge of special education and moderated by their perceived self-efficacy as a special education administrator.

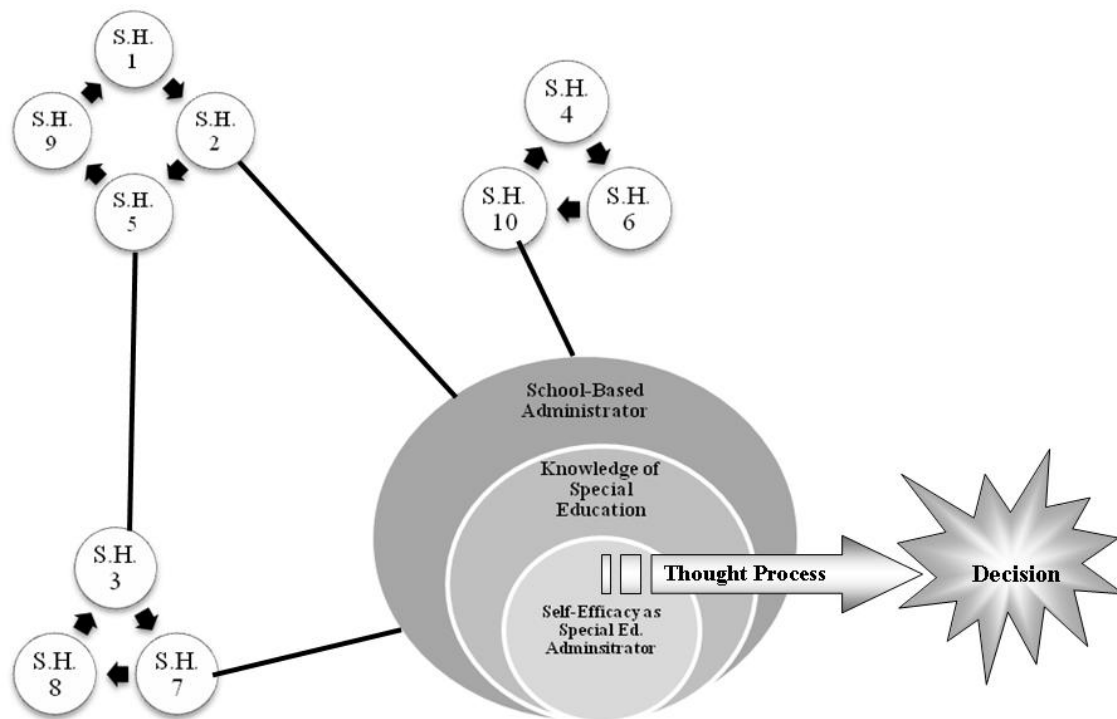


Figure 5. Conceptual framework for present study – revisited. S.H. = stakeholder.

Research Question One: Most Important Information

The first research question focused on the level of importance the school administrator assigns to the different types of data that are presented for a special education eligibility decision:

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

The literature indicates that in multiple stakeholder decisions, individual stakeholders will draw upon the resources in their social networks in order to increase their social power and thus their ability to influence the decision in order to achieve a desired outcome (Bordieu, 1986; Pierro et al., 2008; Rahim et al., 2001). In the context of a

special education eligibility decision, parents will do just that by seeking evaluations from a private practitioner and/or enlisting the services of an educational advocate (Zaretsky, 2004). Thus, the following hypothesis was tested related to research question one:

H₁: School-based administrators credential a private practitioner's or an educational advocate's opinion as more important than other sources of information presented for consideration for special education eligibility.

On the demographic survey, participating administrators were asked to identify the type of information they found to be most important to make an eligibility determination, the idea being that administrators would choose the type of information they believed to possess the most power to influence their eligibility decision. The frequency analysis conducted yielded two important insights. First, the majority of administrators identified not one but a combination of data types they believed to provide the most important data to make the decision. This suggests that they do not view any one source of information as having power over any other source (e.g. private practitioner vs. teacher), but believe that in order to make a decision one must draw upon multiple sources of information, giving each equal consideration.

The second insight is specific to parental power. None of the administrators chose parent information as the single most important piece of data considered for the decision. Additionally, while parent information was often included among other data types when administrators chose combinations of data, in no case did an administrator indicate "parent information" in combination with an educational advocate's opinion or a private

practitioner's evaluation to the exclusion of other data types. This result seems to suggest that administrators do not credential private practitioner and educational advocate opinions as more important than other sources of data such as school-based evaluations and teacher input.

While the outcome for this analysis does not support H_1 , the implications are significant. According to the *Regulations for Governing Special Education Programs for Children With Disabilities in Virginia* (VDOE, 2010):

1. In interpreting evaluation data for the purpose of determining if a child is a child with a disability and determining the education needs of the child, the local education agency shall:
 - a. Draw upon information from a variety of sources, including aptitude and achievement testing, parent input, and teacher recommendations, as well as information about the child's physical condition, social or cultural background, and adaptive behavior; and
 - b. Ensure that information from all these sources is documented and carefully considered. (p. 28)

As the regulations state that the eligibility group is to consider data from a variety of sources to determine eligibility for special education services, the implications of the findings suggest that the administrators are, indeed, acting within both the spirit and the letter of the law.

Research Question Two: External Opinion Effect on Recommendation

The remaining three questions addressed factors that influence school administrators' thought processes when making recommendations for special education eligibility. Question two focused specifically on the influence of two external stakeholders: private practitioner evaluations and educational advocate opinions:

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

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

H₂: There is a difference in school-based administrators' eligibility recommendations for special education eligibility based upon the presence of an external opinion.

The one-way repeated-measures ANOVA yielded results that indicated a significant difference in administrators' recommendations for special education eligibility when an external opinion (i.e. private practitioner evaluation and educational advocate opinion) was present versus when no external opinion was included among the information to consider. A follow-up analysis indicated that no significant difference in administrators' recommendations was revealed with the inclusion of either a private practitioner evaluation or an educational advocate opinion, individually, although a greater difference was noted with the inclusion of a private practitioner evaluation. The result, however, could have been more the function of quantity of data under consideration rather than the specific data source. Further, the stronger relationship between the eligibility recommendation and the private practitioner evaluation over that with the educational advocate opinion seems to suggest a bias toward objective data versus subjective data, a possible topic for future research.

Overall, the results partially support H₂ in that participating administrators tended to change their eligibility recommendations with the presence of an external opinion. While the ANOVA did not ferret out significant results for the individual conditions, the fact that a significant main effect that was revealed when all conditions were combined coupled with the large effect sizes for each of the treatment conditions suggests external opinions may very well have some level of influence on administrator recommendations.

The small sample size for each of the individual conditions may account for the lack of robust results; however, another possibility is that the statistical procedures used for the present study were not sensitive enough to detect the true degree of influence.

Research Question Three: Self-Efficacy and Years of Experience

A multiple regression analysis addressed the third research question:

3. Do decision-maker self-efficacy and years of experience contribute to the extent to which an external opinion influences school-based administrators' eligibility decisions?

Research in leadership self-efficacy shows that an administrator's self-efficacy is directly tied to the level of confidence, knowledge, and skills he or she has in a particular context, and those who perceive themselves as ineffectual are more likely to rely on external rather than internal bases of power when making decisions (Hannah et al., 2008; Tschannen-Moran & Gareis, 2004). Despite the expectations regarding knowledge of special education issues, policies, and procedures that come with being a school instructional leader, research shows that school-based administrators received little to no training in special education, either on the job or through their coursework and certification programs (Council for Exceptional Children, 2009; Crockett, 2002; DiPaola et al., 2004; ISLLC, 1996; Lowe & Brigham, 2000; Patterson et al., 2000). The following hypothesis was tested:

- H₃: The extent to which a school-based administrator's decision-making thought process is influenced by an external opinion will vary depending on the

school-based administrator's years of experience as a special education administrator and level of knowledge of special education laws and policies.

The results for the multiple regressions did not support H_3 as they did not indicate a statistically significant relationship between school-based administrators' eligibility recommendations and years of experience or reported self-efficacy. These results suggest the amount of knowledge and experience administrators have and their confidence in their knowledge and skills as special education administrators have no bearing on whether they are influenced by a private practitioner evaluation or the opinion of an educational advocate. Results did, however, suggest that the more years of experience an administrator has, the more likely he or she is to recommend the student be eligible for services. Additionally, those administrators who reported a higher level of self-efficacy were less likely to change their eligibility recommendations in light of the inclusion of a private practitioner evaluation or an educational advocate opinion. Future research is needed to determine the reason behind each of these findings. In the case of greater years of experience, one could hypothesize that with more years comes less diligence to procedures and regulations or less willingness to defend against the pressure of the external stakeholder. The administrator's tendency to not change his or her eligibility recommendation may not be truly a function of perceived self-efficacy but other factors such as negative experience or central office-level administrative influence.

Research Question Four: Perspectives of External Opinions

The fourth research question focuses on aspects of the eligibility decision-making process from the administrators' perspectives that otherwise would not be known (Glesne, 2006) through the limited scope of the survey and questionnaire:

4. How are school-based administrators' decision-making thought processes influenced by external opinions when making special education recommendations?

This question was answered using data from individual interviews with six school-based administrators who also had completed the first part of the study and were purposefully chosen based on their educational background and the number of years they had served as a special education administrator in order to provide a varied sample.

Results of the axial coding of the interview data corroborate the results from both the one-way-repeated measures ANOVA and the multiple regressions. Administrators interviewed reported being influenced very little, if at all, by evaluations conducted by private practitioners or by the opinions of educational advocates when they made recommendations for special education eligibility. Most perceived both sources of information as mere additions to the data already provided for consideration by school diagnostic staff, teachers, and parents. In general, administrators welcomed the additional perspectives to those already on the table but admitted their skepticism of the validity of those external perspectives based on the fiduciary nature of the relationship with the parents of the child in question. These sentiments were expressed by administrators who were relatively new to their positions (< 5 years) as well as seasoned veterans, regardless

of educational background (i.e. special education degree/certification vs. no special education degree/certification). Administrators seemed to value the additional information provided to assist them in making a sound eligibility recommendation but did not generally feel swayed by those external opinions.

Analysis of the interview results yielded additional information regarding factors that did have an influence on school-based administrators' decision making, and based on the level of commonality suggested by coding of the data, the influence of these four factors is significant. Support (both administrative and collegial), communication, relationships, and student advocacy all emerged as major themes throughout all of the interviews. According to administrator reports, these four factors hold not only for special education eligibility decisions, but decision-making in other contexts as well (discipline, instructional practices, etc.).

Administrative and collegial support. Participating administrators relied heavily on the support they received from others with whom they worked when making decisions, whether the support came from a staff member, colleague, or higher level administrators. They felt the more comfortable they were in being able to solicit advice, opinions, and expertise, the more they were able to incorporate the feedback into their own decision-making thought processes and make a decision in which they were confident, particularly when the decision involved a situation outside their area of expertise. Some even commented on situations in which they had to make decisions and were not provided with the needed support or were even criticized for the decisions they made and how that impacted their own confidence. Administrators also recognized the

need for them to give that same support to others, especially their staff, so that quality decisions are made in the best interest of the children they serve.

Open communication. Repeatedly, administrators spoke of their practice of keeping lines of communication open for the purpose of making sound, well-reasoned decisions. They spoke of their tendency to continually solicit feedback from others, including relevant authorities outside of their building, to aid in their decision making. Administrators also emphasized the importance of continually sharing information with their staff and parents to ensure everyone involved with a particular student was on the same page when making educational decisions. Some spoke of instances when the lines of communication broke down and the negative consequences it had, particularly for the students. Poor communication can lead to misunderstandings and have a negative impact on relationships and trust built between administrators and staff, staff and students, and school and parents and lead to poor decision making to the ultimate detriment of the students.

Relationships. Strong, positive relationships also were emphasized as being important when making any type of decision, particularly in the context of group decisions like special education eligibility. From their perspective, participating administrators spoke of the constant pull from multiple directions to function as an advocate—whether for staff, parents, or students—but also the need, as an administrator, to function in other capacities such as mediator and “firefighter.” When a decision was necessary in the face of competing needs or demands, it seems decisions happened more

efficiently and productively when the administrators had a strong, positive relationship with the stakeholders involved.

Student advocacy. Participating administrators also were consistent in their message that for effective decisions to be made, student advocacy had to remain the central focus, and they strove with every decision to maintain that focus. They viewed their role as the primary student advocate, and despite the nature, context, or the dynamics of the decision at hand, they strove to keep the conversation geared toward the best interest of the student. Administrators reported being frustrated by decisions that were made beyond their control, such as those in the political arena, that were not in the best interest of the education of the children, and despite them, their job was to ensure minimal impact on their students.

Limitations

A number of limitations were present in this study, and this section will describe those limitations in regard to several different aspects of the study as a whole: the measurement devices and analyses chosen, the study's design and internal validity considerations, and external validity and generalizability beyond the context of the study.

Measurement and Analyses

The first category of limitations involves the measures used to collect data and the analyses of that data. To begin, to measure the variable of self-efficacy, administrators were asked to complete the School Administrator Efficacy Scale (SAES) (McCollum & Kajs, 2007, 2009). Although the SAES itself has an established strength in validity and reliability in a variety of contexts (McCollum & Kajs, 2009), it is still a self-report

measure, a data collection method which brings with it inherent limitations, namely rater bias. As with any self-report measure, responses are limited by the honesty of the rater. The participants' responses may have been biased by their perceptions of what they believed the researcher wanted their responses to be and/or their relationship with the researcher, and not based on what was truthful.

Another measurement limitation was in the use of "years of experience" as measure of "knowledge." The assumption was that those administrators with more years of experience as a special education administrator would have greater knowledge of special education laws and procedures. An extension to that assumption was that those administrators who also were certified special education teachers and/or had special education degrees would have greater knowledge than those who came into their role as administrator from a general education background. While there may be some truth to this assumption, the study did not account for differences in motivation and interest that could impact individual knowledge. For instance, an administrator from a general education background, knowing that his or her knowledge of special education was limited and coming into a position that is heavily involved in special education, may be motivated to learn as much as possible in order to carry out that part of his or her duties. Likewise, an administrator who has a special education background may come into the position thinking his or her present level of knowledge is sufficient. Although likely a challenge, future research may incorporate a more accurate measure of knowledge and/or control for internal factors such as motivation and interest.

The participants from the study were pooled from one school system, and while the system is comparatively large with nearly 200 school-based administrators, the final sample only included approximately 25% of available administrators. The 56 administrators who participated allowed for a viable study (Creswell, 1998; Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007) with moderately significant results, however, a repeat of the study with a much larger participant pool would be ideal and would hopefully replicate the results with greater statistical power.

Finally, some of the data obtained during the course of examining data for Research Question 2 seemed to suggest that there exists more influence from the external opinions than the overall analysis indicated. While sample size may be a contributing factor, the possibility also exists that the statistical methods chosen may have lacked the sensitivity necessary to fully uncover the degree of impact. Therefore, a follow-up study using a different statistical approach may be prudent.

Design and Internal Validity

The study also has a few limitations to its design and internal validity. First, the purpose of the study was to examine external influences on school administrators' decision making in regard to special education eligibility. Another way of describing this purpose using the language of multiple stakeholder theory was to determine if the administrator's decision-making behavior changed with a perceived increase of expert power on the part of the parents when they ally with an educational advocate or a private practitioner. The irony here, then, is that the study sought to examine a similar phenomenon that serves as a threat to internal validity. As the researcher is an Eligibility

Coordinator and a trained school psychologist for the same county in which the study took place, and by virtue of this position is an expert on educational disabilities and the laws which underscore special education eligibility, the administrators who participated in the study may have been influenced in a number of ways to have biased the data. First, when making eligibility decisions during the case vignette analysis, the administrators may have made the decision they thought the *researcher* wanted them to make rather than deciding based on what they truly thought. Second, when completing the self-efficacy scale, although they completed the scale online outside the presence of the researcher, they may have overreported their confidence in their skills as a special education administrator so as to disguise from an Eligibility Coordinator with whom they work any vulnerability they may feel. Finally, those administrators who participated in the personal interviews may have been less than forthcoming regarding their opinions on the eligibility process and decision-making context in an effort to maintain a positive working relationship with the researcher once the research had been completed. A repeat of this study would likely yield stronger results if a convenience sample were not used and the researcher had no previous or current working relationship with the participants. Additionally, the researcher may have completed field observations to substantiate claims made by administrators during their interviews and thus validate their accuracy.

Another threat to internal validity was the context in which the administrators had to make their eligibility decisions during the case vignette analysis. Eligibility for special education is a group decision not made by an individual person, a design that was purposeful by the lawmakers so that the decision regarding the need for special education

was not made by one person nor was based on one source of data. In the present study, while there were multiple sources of data, the administrators were asked to be the sole decision-maker, a situation to which they were not accustomed. Therefore, unforeseen factors that were the function of the change in context may have impacted the results (e.g. discomfort in making the decision outside of a group discussion). While the present study attempted to minimize the impact of this context change by using the familiar scenario of an Administrative Review in which to present the vignettes, a situation where a group decision already has been made with the participant serving to make the final eligibility recommendation, a repeat of the study likely should incorporate a case analysis method that closer replicates the group decision-making process. Interestingly, a number of the participants commented during the administration of the case vignette analysis portion of the study that they wished they could discuss their thoughts with someone before making a final decision.

External Validity and Generalizability

Finally, there are limitations to the study that involve generalizability of the results. First, the study was conducted in the context of only one school system. While IDEA and individual state governments are explicit in what must be incorporated in the eligibility decision and who must be involved in making that decision, the LEA is given the final authority on how IDEA and their state special education regulations are carried out within their jurisdiction, therefore, eligibility procedures vary from system to system.

An example of procedural differences was an integral part of the present study. The case vignette analysis was presented in the context of an Administrative Review,

which is an appeal procedure for parents who disagree with the original eligibility decision. The AR process is unique to the subject school system and is not a required component of procedural safeguards outlined in IDEA or the Virginia Regulations. IDEA and the Virginia Regulations only outline procedures for mediation or due process should a parent be in disagreement with a school-based decision such as eligibility. The school system's county incorporated the AR as an additional step to attempt to mitigate parent-school disagreements before they elevated to the level of mediation. Another example of a procedural difference is the use of an Eligibility Coordinator as done in the subject school system's county. Not all LEAs use a central office administrator, such as an Eligibility Coordinator, to chair special education eligibility meetings as they are not required by law. Some LEAs place the responsibility solely on the school-based administrator to carry out the role of the eligibility decision facilitator. In other jurisdictions the school psychologist is often given the responsibility. A difference in the role responsibilities of the various eligibility team members (e.g. school-based administrator as administrator *and* facilitator of the team decision) can lead to a difference in perspective on a number of factors that may influence the final decision: the importance of the individual types of data up for consideration, legitimate and expert power of the other team members as well as external stakeholders involved, their own legitimate and expert power, and even factors that are not supposed to influence the decision such as staff availability and budgetary constraints. The study should be replicated using a much broader participant pool that incorporates administrators from

other LEAs both inside and outside of Virginia that will capture variations in procedures and perspectives and thus lead to greater generalizability.

The case vignette analysis used in the present study also limited the participants to consider only one disability category when making their eligibility decisions. IDEA defines 14 educational disabilities with qualifying criteria, all of which theoretically could be considered during an eligibility decision. Specific Learning Disability was used in the present study purposefully because of it being the most commonly considered category and the controversy regarding how it is defined. Measures used to identify a specific learning disability (e.g. measures of cognitive processing and standardized achievement tests) are those with which most educators, including administrators, are familiar. Other disability categories (e.g. Emotional Disability, Autism, Orthopedic Impairment) involve conditions that are often identified or diagnosed by professionals external to the school system by methods that are not familiar to administrators. As such, the results of the study may be hard to generalize to eligibility decisions that involve consideration of other categories such as the abovementioned. If a student has been diagnosed with a mental or physical condition by a professional outside of the school system, the external opinion may be seen to carry more weight with other types of disabilities based on perception of expert power possibly altering the administrators' decision-making behavior. Future research, then, should include the other disability categories to see if results of the present study can be replicated.

Implications

Theoretical and Research

For the most part, the results do not uphold the hypotheses of this study, and therefore, do not completely conform to the theoretical framework set forth herein; however, several important implications still are evident from the work. This study provides valuable fodder for research in the areas of the special education eligibility decision-making process, administrator decision making, self-efficacy, and the parent–school relationship.

First, this study indicates that school-based special education administrators by and large are not systematically influenced by the inclusion of an external opinion regarding special education eligibility, and that they tend to rely on information from multiple sources when making their eligibility recommendations. Second, while the study rules out private practitioner diagnoses and educational advocate opinions as factors having any special influence on the administrators' decision-making process, several factors were identified by administrators as having an influence on how they make decisions. Results were consistent with the tenets of Social Network Theory. Administrators repeatedly and consistently reported that when making decisions regarding special education eligibility, they relied heavily on the opinions and expertise of the other team members. Further, administrators reported they frequently sought the advice and opinions of colleagues and their own administrators in an effort to acquire additional knowledge to help them make sound decisions regardless of the type of school-based decision they were making. In order to clarify the importance and degree of

influence of various actors, future research should examine perceived support, communication, and collegial relationships as factors in the decision-making practices of educational leaders.

While administrator self-efficacy was only part of the theoretical framework guiding this study and not its primary focus, the study yielded interesting results that appeared to run counter to prior self-efficacy research. Well-established in self-efficacy research is the notion that one's knowledge and experience with a particular skill or job function are contributing factors to one's self-efficacy with performing that skill or job function (Bandura, 1977, 1997; Hannah et al., 2008; Tschannen-Moran & McMaster, 2009). The present study, in contrast, suggests that an administrator's years of experience as a special education administrator had little relationship with reported self-efficacy for that job function. The researcher acknowledges above that the use of "years of experience" as a measure of "knowledge" in the study is limited; however, the results still suggest factors other than knowledge may be more significant predictors of data-based legal and ethical decision making for school administrators.

Practical

Within the context of the special education eligibility decision, the most practical implication of the present study is the knowledge that participating administrators did not appear to credential any single source of influence, but rather considered a variety of factors, including the opinions of private practitioners and educational advocates. This suggests that administrators were meeting their implicit role expectations of balancing the demands of stakeholders involved in school-based decisions while remaining student-

focused. Further, by their own report, they welcomed the external opinions as additional information to consider. This not only speaks to the administrators' perspective of the importance of considering information from multiple sources and not just taking one source of information at face value before making a decision, but also to their willingness to collaborate with the external stakeholders the parents invited to the discussion when making decisions regarding the educational needs of their students.

Furthermore, by maintaining a legal and ethical balance and not becoming unduly influenced by one stakeholder or another, administrators can help to ensure that special education eligibility decisions are, indeed, made based on the relevant data and established eligibility criteria. This helps to ensure decisions are made in the best interest of the students and students are not erroneously over- or underidentified as students with disabilities.

Finally, the present study highlights some important factors that impact administrator decision making in terms of their application to educational leadership and leadership training programs. Given that the data was collected within the context of only one school system, one may view the study through the lens that this system is a representative model of well-defined and implemented policies and procedures. Gathering further information regarding staff training and development practices used by this school system could assist leaders in other school systems in providing training opportunities for their staff that could yield efficacious special education practices in their jurisdictions. Additionally, current and future educational leaders could benefit from understanding how factors such as collegial and administrative support, communication,

relationships, and student advocacy will impact their day-to-day functioning, both positively and negatively, so they may develop strategies to ensure effective and productive decision making during their tenure as administrators.

Conclusions

The general conclusions of the study are that individually, private practitioner evaluations and educational advocate opinions had no significant influence on participating school-based administrators' recommendations for special education eligibility. When both are included among the data considered, a statistically significant relationship emerges but to a modest degree. Self-efficacy and years of experience as a special education administrator failed to be significant mediating variables in the relationship between the external factors (i.e. private practitioner evaluations and educational advocate opinions) and the school-based administrators' recommendations for special education eligibility. The majority of administrators reported that considering a combination of data, including school-based evaluations and teacher-provided classroom data, was most important information when considering a student's eligibility for special education services, and they cited other factors such as collegial support and relationships, team member communication, and their own focus on student advocacy to be the most influential factors on their decision-making processes.

The present research serves as a good beginning in examining how administrators' thought processes are influenced by external sources. The study also highlighted several factors that influence administrator decision making that may be worth further investigation. Participating administrators appeared to be much less

influenced by external stakeholders to the decision-making process than they were by *internal* stakeholders, such as their team members, colleagues, and superiors. This study is also a good beginning point for examining the special education eligibility decision-making process. Current and prior research focused on decision-making behaviors of individual team members (i.e. administrators, teachers, and school psychologists), yet the actual eligibility decision is a *group* decision. Information gleaned from the present study suggests that examining group dynamics, such as group efficacy, as well as influences on those group dynamics, may be another lens through which to focus research on the special education eligibility decision-making process.

APPENDICES

Appendix A. Demographic Survey

Protocol #: _____

Participant #: _____

Please complete the following:

Current Position: _____

Type of school (circle one): Elementary Intermediate Middle High

Years as an administrator _____

Years as special education administrator _____

Years teaching _____

Years teaching special education _____

How many years did you teach before becoming an administrator? _____

Gender: M F

Did you ever teach special education? Y N

Are you certified to teach special education? Y N

Do you have a degree in special education? Y N

Please indicate which piece of information you feel to be the most important *for you* when making an eligibility decision:

1. An advocate's opinion _____
2. A private evaluation/diagnosis (e.g. IEE) _____
3. Other, please specify (e.g. educational eval., grades, referral question, etc.) _____

Appendix B. Case Vignettes

CASE VIGNETTE #1: CURRENT CASE DATA

1. **Referral Concern** Specific Learning Disability suspected based on concern regarding possible visual and auditory processing deficiencies.
2. **Family/Social History and Psychosocial Stressors** Twelve-year-old, female, sixth grade student; younger of two children in intact family; mother is a lawyer and father works for the Federal Government; born in Virginia; paternal uncle received speech/language services as a child
3. **Developmental History** Pregnancy and birth unremarkable; described as an “easygoing baby and active toddler” who is friendly and outgoing; met developmental milestones age-appropriately; no significant sleep problems; picky eater; currently adjusting well to puberty
4. **Medical History** At 4 years old, fell off a swing and required 6 stitches in her chin; allergies to pet dander; wears glasses for nearsightedness; no medications or counseling; no concerns with hearing or vision
5. **Educational History** Attended structured preschool beginning at age 6 months until enrolled in kindergarten; entered full-day kindergarten at a private academy; began first grade in public school where second grade teacher noted difficulty committing math facts to memory; referred to Child Study Team and began receiving interventions and accommodations to target math skills; continued concern throughout elementary school regarding ability to apply math concepts; evaluated for special education in fourth grade, found “not eligible.”

Standardized Assessments: 5th Grade SOLs: Reading = 456; Math = 394; Science = 405; 4th Grade SOLs: Reading = 420; Math = 415; 3rd Grade SOLs: Reading = 432; Math = 383; Science = 405

Grades: 5th Grade (Final): Reading = A; Written Language = A; Math = C+; Social Studies = B; Science = B

4th Grade (Final): Reading = A; Written Language = A-; Math = B-; Social Studies = A-; Science = A-

3rd Grade (Final): Reading = A; Math = B-; Written Language = A; Social Studies = A; Science = A-

Child Study Interventions: Shortened assignments; extra math worksheets sent home; chunked math tests; extended time for math tests and quizzes; allow corrections of missed problems on tests for partial credit

6. **Previous Evaluation(s)** Psychoeducational Evaluation (completed in 4th grade): Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, Third Edition (WISC-III) – Full Scale IQ = 98; Verbal IQ = 102; Performance IQ = 89; Woodcock-Johnson Tests of Achievement-III – Reading Composite = 108; Math Composite = 88; Written Language Composite = 95; noted evidence of mild anxiety and learning problems rated to fall in the “Clinically Significant” range by parents and teacher
7. **Parent Report** Student is a personable, hardworking student who lacks confidence academically and needs a lot of reassurance. She is respectful toward adults and willing to help out, and is well-liked by her peers. Active in sports and the school’s chorus. She is well-behaved and completes her chores with reminders. Parents are concerned about daughter’s difficulties in math impacting her self-esteem. She is often frustrated when completing homework and will make self-deprecating remarks (e.g. “I’m so dumb.”).
8. **Teacher Evaluation(s)**

Language Arts – Participates well, typically prepared for class, completes all assignments, exemplary work habits, gets along well with other students and teachers, no behavioral, medical, or speech/language concerns, current grade = 92%;

Math – Seems that she has not yet mastered all basic math skills and struggles to learn higher level concepts as a result, lacks confidence, completes all assignments but is not apt to participate in class discussions; pleasant and polite, gets along well with peers and adults, no behavioral, medical, or speech/language concerns, current grade = 83%;

Social Studies – Good, solid student, completes all assignments, hard worker, gets along well with teachers and students, no behavioral, medical, or speech/language concerns, current grade = 95%;

Science 6 – Works well with others and participates in discussions, consistent and solid work habits, respectful of adults and well-liked by classmates, no behavioral, medical, or speech/language concerns, current grade = 91%.
9. **Observational Data** Classroom observation (completed by school psychologist as part of sped evaluation) – observation during math class, appeared quiet and attentive, did not readily volunteer in class discussion of new concept that was introduced that day, overall demonstration of appropriate classroom behaviors; Psychological Evaluation (testing behaviors) – cooperative, sociable, easily engaged in conversation, good sense of humor, motivated, attentive, attempted all tasks presented, demonstrated a consistent effort; Educational Evaluation (testing behaviors) – Sociable and cooperative, appeared to lack confidence particularly with math tasks, frequently asked questions about performance, became quieter over the course of the testing session.

10. Current Evaluation Data

Psychological Evaluation:

Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, Fourth Ed. (WISC-IV)

Full Scale IQ = 100 90-110 = Average Range

Verbal Comprehension Index = 105

Working Memory Index = 92

Perceptual Reasoning Index = 82

Processing Speed Index = 94

Woodcock-Johnson Tests of Cognitive Abilities-III

Long-Term Retrieval SS = 99

Auditory Processing SS = 112

Beery-Buktenica Developmental Test of Visual-Motor Integration

VMI SS = 87

Behavior Assessment System for Children, Second Ed. (BASC-2)

Parent Rating Scales:

Learning Problems = 74

All other scales **Average**

Teacher Rating Scales:

Withdrawal = 62+ (S.S.); 58 (L.A.); 63+ (Math)

Learning Problems = 57 (S.S.); 54 (L.A.); 68+ (Math)

All other scales **Average**

Self-Report Scales: * Significant; + At-Risk

Anxiety = 77* Attention Problems = 48

Sense of Inadequacy = 83 * Social Stress = 53

Attitude to Teachers = 47 Interpersonal Relations = 56

Locus of Control = 54 Self-Reliance = 32+

All other scales **Average**

Conclusions: Results suggest low average/average intellectual functioning with a relative weakness in perceptual reasoning ability. Auditory processing and long-term retrieval skills appear to be intact. Visual-motor integration skills are below average. Based on

self-report, student appears to be experiencing some anxiety and a sense of inadequacy that are both significant for her age and seems to lack confidence in her abilities.

Educational Evaluation:

Wechsler Individual Achievement Test, Second Ed. (WIAT-II)

Reading Composite = 110 90-110 = Average Range

Math Composite = 89

Written Language Composite = 106

Oral Language Composite = 115

Woodcock-Johnson Tests of Achievement – III (Form B)

Phoneme-Grapheme Knowledge SS = 93

Math Fluency SS = 92

Gray Oral Reading Test –Fourth Edition

Oral Reading Quotient = 108

Test of Written Language, Third Edition

Spontaneous Writing Composite = 99

Comprehensive Test of Phonological Processing (CTOPP)

Phonological Awareness SS = 103

Phonological Memory SS = 101

Rapid Naming SS = 101

It was the examiner's opinion that these results were a valid assessment of the student's current academic skills. Work habits and attention were conducive for task completion. Noted lack of confidence when completing math tasks and a need to be encouraged to attempt more challenging items.

CASE VIGNETTE #2: CURRENT CASE DATA

1. **Referral Concern** Specific Learning Disability suspected based on concern regarding possible visual and auditory processing deficiencies.
2. **Family/Social History and Psychosocial Stressors** Thirteen-year-old, eighth grade, male student. Second oldest of five children in intact family; mother is a stay-at-home mother and father is a physician; born and lived in another state in the Northwest until this year; no family history of learning difficulties or abuse of any kind.
3. **Developmental History** 3½ weeks premature with no postnatal complications; described as “angry baby and toddler” who demonstrated a strong preference for male adults; met developmental milestones age-appropriately; had significant sleep problems as an infant but grew out of them; currently adjusting well to puberty
4. **Medical History** At 3 years old he sustained an injury that required treatment by an ENT; at 8½ years old broke his arm after falling off the top bunk bed; no hearing or vision concerns; no medications or counseling; a psychiatrist co-worker of father’s suggested he may have ADHD
5. **Educational History** At age 3 years old, he attended a Methodist preschool; attended ½-day Montessori preschool at age 4 years old where a teacher suggested he be watched for dyslexia due to a tendency to write in mirror image and read words backwards; entered full-day kindergarten at same Montessori school at age 5 years; attended a private college prep academy for half of first grade; attended a charter school for the second half of first grade through sixth grade; he repeated sixth grade; entered public school for seventh grade

Standardized Assessments: 7th Grade SOLs: Reading = 396; Math = 451; 6th Grade SOLs: Reading = 403 & 397; Math = 419 & 424; 5th Grade SOLs: Reading = 383; Math = 430; Science = 424

Grades: 7th Grade (Final): Language Arts = C+; Math = B; U.S. History = B; Science = B+
 6th Grade (Final): Language Arts = D; Math = C+; Social Studies = D; Science = C
 6th Grade (Final): Language Arts = B; Math = B+; Social Studies = C; Science = B
 5th Grade (Final): Reading = C; Math = A-; Written Language = B; Social Studies = B; Science = A

Child Study Interventions: Preferential seating; shortened assignments; shortened spelling lists; extended time for writing assignments; peer tutor; parents provided outside tutoring during both 6th grade years.

6. **Previous Evaluation(s)** Psychoeducational Evaluation (completed in 3rd grade): Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, Third Edition (WISC-III) – Full Scale IQ = 104; Verbal IQ = 98; Performance IQ = 111; Woodcock-Johnson Tests of Achievement-III – Reading Composite = 81; Math Composite = 93; Written Language Composite = 91; noted evidence of difficulty focusing and sustaining attention to task, impulsive tendencies, and high activity level, but no formal diagnosis of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), diagnosis of a reading disorder and noted that student “could qualify for special education under category of ‘specific learning disability.’”
7. **Parent Report** Student is a creative, happy-go-lucky, good-tempered young man who becomes frustrated when things do not go his way. He makes friends easily but does not always recognize that he has them. He is respectful toward adults and willing to help out. He enjoys building things, playing outside, and participating in Boy Scouts. He is well-behaved and completes his chores. Parents are concerned about their son “shutting down” when he gets frustrated with his school work and his tendency to call himself “stupid” when he cannot figure something out. They report he is not hyperactive but needs to be “constructively active.”
8. **Teacher Evaluation(s)**

Language Arts – Participates well, typically prepared for class, completes all assignments except reading log, does not do well on spelling quizzes, work habits usually very good, gets along well with other students and teachers, no behavioral, medical, or speech/language concerns, current grade = 84%;

Math – has mastered basic skills but struggles with concepts beyond, eager to learn, completes all assignments, pleasant and polite, gets along well with peers and adults, no behavioral, medical, or speech/language concerns, current grade = 82%;

History – very good at paying attention, has completed all but two assignments, struggles with tests/quizzes, works hard, gets along well with teachers and students, no behavioral, medical, or speech/language concerns, current grade = 77%;

Physical Science – works well in groups and likes to share ideas, can easily get distracted but is easily redirected, consistent and solid work habits, has many friends and fits in well with all students, respectful of adults and open to sharing his thoughts with teachers, no behavioral, medical, or speech/language concerns, current grade = 88%.
9. **Observational Data** Classroom observation (completed by school psychologist as part of sped evaluation)– observation during language arts class, appeared quiet and conscientious, followed directions, worked on the assignment, was attentive, and demonstrated appropriate classroom behaviors; Psychological Evaluation (testing behaviors) – cooperative, sociable, easily engaged in conversation, good sense of humor, motivated, attentive but less so during more challenging items, attempted all tasks presented, demonstrated a consistent effort; Educational Evaluation (testing behaviors) – reluctant to engage on conversation, observably uncomfortable with evaluation process, seemed to lack confidence in academic abilities, extremely reluctant to attempt to answer items he did not automatically know, made comments such as, “I don’t comprehend well,” “I don’t like reading,” limited his responses to items he thought were easy despite encouragement.

10. Current Evaluation Data

Psychological Evaluation:

Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, Fourth Ed. (WISC-IV)

Full Scale IQ = 87 90-110 = Average Range

Verbal Comprehension Index = 96

Working Memory Index = 88

Perceptual Reasoning Index = 86

Processing Speed Index = 85

Woodcock-Johnson Tests of Cognitive Abilities-III

Long-Term Retrieval SS = 93

Auditory Processing SS = 103

Beery-Buktenica Developmental Test of Visual-Motor Integration

VMI SS = 89

Behavior Assessment System for Children, Second Ed. (BASC-2)

Teacher Rating Scales:

Learning Problems = 64+; 62+; 71*

Attention Problems = 59; 63+; 60+

Functional communication = 37+; 41; 35+

All other scales **Average**

Self-Report Scales: * Significant; + At-Risk

Anxiety = 77* Attention Problems = 69+

Sense of Inadequacy = 83* Social Stress = 68+

Attitude to Teachers = 67+ Interpersonal Relations = 34+

Locus of Control = 64+ Self-Reliance = 32+

All other scales **Average**

Conclusions: Results suggest low average/average intellectual functioning with no specific strengths or weaknesses. Auditory processing and long-term retrieval skills appear to be intact and visual-motor integration skills are commensurate with his overall ability. Based on self-report, student appears to be experiencing some anxiety and a sense of inadequacy that are both significant for his age.

Educational Evaluation:

Wechsler Individual Achievement Test, Second Ed. (WIAT-II)

Reading Composite = 72 90-110 = Average Range

Math Composite = 72

Written Language Composite = 77

Oral Language Composite = 96

Woodcock-Johnson Tests of Achievement – III (Form B)

Phoneme-Grapheme Knowledge SS = 81

Math Fluency SS = 81

Gray Oral Reading Test –Fourth Edition

Oral Reading Quotient = 64

Test of Written Language, Third Edition

Spontaneous Writing Composite = 83

Comprehensive Test of Phonological Processing (CTOPP)

Phonological Awareness SS = 85

Phonological Memory SS = 85

Rapid Naming SS = 82

It was the examiner's opinion that these results were depressed due to student's unwillingness to answer challenging items and his tendency to be overly negative about his ability to complete academic tasks.

Despite any impact his attitude had on his performance on the evaluation, the student appeared to struggle with several academic areas.

11. Independent Educational Evaluation (completed 5 months after school evaluation)

Behavioral Observations (during testing)-Charming and likeable; cooperative and diligent; testing considered valid and reliable.

Psychological Evaluation:

Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children, Fourth Ed. (WISC-IV)

FSIQ = 92

Verbal Comprehension Index = 94

Working Memory Index = 94

Perceptual Reasoning Index = 94

Processing Speed Index = 85

Beery-Buktenica Developmental Test of Visual Motor Integration

VMI SS = 95

Behavior Rating of Executive Functioning (BRIEF)

Global Executive Composite = 52 (Average); all scales fall in the Average range

Children's Memory Scale (CMS)

General Memory = 105

Visual Immediate Recall SS = 85

all other scales fall in the Average range for both visual and verbal memory

Conners Parent Rating Scales

Inattention = 61 (Mildly Elevated)

Learning Problems = 74 (Very Elevated)

All other scales fall in the Average range

Child Behavior Checklist (completed by parents)

Attention Problems = 64 (At-Risk);

Social Problems = 63 (At-Risk);

Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Problems = 69 (At-Risk);

All other scales fall in the Average range.

Continuous Performance Test (CPT)

Not indicative of a clinical attention disorder

Educational Evaluation:

Woodcock-Johnson Tests of Achievement, Third Ed. (WJ-III)

Broad Reading SS = 85

Basic Reading Skills SS = 87

Reading Comprehension SS = 80

Broad Math SS = 80

Math Calculation Skills SS = 86

Math Reasoning SS = 92

Broad Written Language SS = 89

Spelling SS = 95

Written Expression SS = 87

Diagnostic impression: Visual Processing Learning Disability; Specific Learning Disability in Reading – “Student should be eligible for an IEP through the public school system to provide him with accommodations and modifications in the learning so he can best reach his potential. He has both a processing learning disability (visual processing) as well as a specific educational learning disability in reading.”

12. Educational Advocate Opinion

An educational consultant was hired by the family to advocate for their child's educational needs and she is present at the Administrative Review meeting. Her opinion is as follows: "[The student] clearly presents with a visual processing disorder which is affecting his ability to comprehend what he reads. His slow reading pace impedes his ability to keep up with the rest of his class and meet grade level expectations. Difficulty with reading comprehension affects him in all content areas, particularly in science and social studies based on the amount of reading required and the higher level concepts that are learned in those subjects. He meets the criteria for a learning disability in reading, and without an IEP, he will not be able to meet grade-level expectations or pass his SOLs."

Specific learning disability: means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, that may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell or to do mathematical calculations, including conditions such as perceptual disabilities, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia.

Specific learning disability does not include learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor disabilities; of intellectual disabilities; of emotional disabilities; of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage. (§ 22.1-213 of the Code of Virginia; 34 CFR 300.8(c)(10))

Dyslexia is distinguished from other learning disabilities due to its weakness occurring at the phonological level. Dyslexia is a specific learning disability that is neurobiological in origin. It is characterized by difficulties with accurate and/or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in the phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction. Secondary consequences may include problems in reading comprehension and reduced reading experience that can impede growth of vocabulary and background knowledge.

CRITERIA: A child with a Specific Learning Disability who requires special education and related services will meet ALL of the following criteria.

1. The child does not achieve adequately for the child's age or to meet Virginia-approved, grade-level standards in *one or more* of the following areas when provided with learning experiences and instruction appropriate for the child's age or Virginia standards:
 - Oral expression
 - Listening comprehension
 - Written expression
 - Reading Comprehension
 - Basic reading skills
 - Reading fluency skills
 - Mathematical calculations
 - Mathematical problem solving
2. The child does not make sufficient progress to meet age or Virginia-approved grade-level standards in one or more of the areas identified above when using a process based on the child's response to scientific, research-based intervention child exhibits a pattern of strengths and weaknesses in performance, achievement, or both, relative to age, Virginia-approved, grade-level standards; **OR** intellectual development that is determined by the group to be relevant to the identification of a specific learning disability, using appropriate assessments.
3. The committee considered the relevant behavior noted during the classroom observation and the relationship of that behavior to the student's academic functioning.
4. The findings of underachievement and relevant pattern of strengths and weaknesses, identified above, are not **primarily the result of** any of the following exclusionary factors:
 - Visual, hearing, or motor disability
 - Intellectual disability
 - Emotional disability

- Environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage
 - Limited English proficiency
5. Lack of appropriate instruction in reading, including the essential components of reading instruction – phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary development, reading fluency, oral reading skills, and reading comprehension strategies – has been ruled out as the determinant factor in the eligibility decision.
 6. Lack of appropriate instruction in math has been ruled out as the determinant factor in the eligibility decision.
 7. Specially designed instruction is required to meet the unique needs that result from the child's disability and to ensure access to the general curriculum. The nature of the instruction requires significant adaptation to the content, methodology, or delivery of instruction that cannot be reasonably provided solely through general education.

Appendix C. Documentation Pertaining to the School Administrators Efficacy Scale (SAES)

PERMISSION TO USE SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS EFFICACY SCALE (SAES)

Erin Kirkland - RE: SAES Permission

From: "Daniel Mccollum" <DMcCollum@umuc.edu>
To: "Erin Kirkland" <Erin.Kirkland@loudoun.k12.va.us>
Date: 9/23/2009 2:13 PM
Subject: RE: SAES Permission

Hi Erin,
Thanks for your inquiry. Feel free to use the scale, so long as you include the appropriate referencing information in your paper. If you would share your findings with me upon completion of your study that would be great. Best of luck with your endeavor.
Dan

Dan McCollum, Ph.D.
Senior Outcomes Assessment Associate
Institutional Planning, Research, and Accountability
University of Maryland University College
3501 University Boulevard East, SFSC 4214
Adelphi, Maryland 20783
Email: dmccollum@umuc.edu
Phone: 301-985-7585

SELF-EFFICACY SCALE EMAIL

Dear participant,

You have completed the case vignette analysis, and as previously discussed, you are to complete a follow-up rating scale. Unless you have agreed and are chosen to participate in a face-to-face interview, the rating scale will be the final step in your participation in my dissertation research. If you wish to complete the rating scale online, please click the link below and follow the instructions given. You will need the following access code: __. If you would prefer to complete a paper version of the rating scale, please respond to this email indicating such, and a paper copy along with instructions and a return envelope will be mailed to you. The rating scale should take approximately 20 minutes to complete. Whether you complete the online or the paper version, your responses will remain completely confidential, and no identifying information will be associated with your responses in any way. You must complete the survey for your data to be valid and included in my dissertation.

Please complete the rating scale by **June 30**, and let me know if you have trouble accessing the online survey.

Thank you again for your participation in and assistance with my dissertation. Your help is greatly appreciated.

Erin Kirkland
[link to survey]

Appendix D. Interview Schedule

QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. Please describe your career in education.
 - a. Probe: What led you to education and ultimately to pursue administration?
2. Please describe your role and experience as a special education administrator.
3. What preparation did you have for becoming a special education administrator, and are you confident in your role based on your preparation and experience?
4. As an administrator, decision making is a regular part of your role. Please talk about your experience as a decision maker, both individually and as part of a team.
5. Please describe your perspective of the political influences on decision making in education.
6. How do politics play a role in special education decisions?
7. How would you describe your role as part of the special education eligibility decision?
8. How confident are you in your ability to make eligibility decisions and to what do you contribute that confidence?
9. How would you describe the dynamics of the eligibility decision-making context?
10. Please describe your perspective of private evaluations and advocates as they relate to the special education eligibility decision.

**Appendix E. Research Board Approval: Subject School System and
George Mason University**

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

TO: Erin Kirkland

FROM: [REDACTED] Assistant Superintendent for Instruction [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] Director of Research [REDACTED]

RE: Research Request

Date: November 30, 2009

Your request to conduct a study of the special education eligibility decision-making process has been approved.

As a courtesy to [REDACTED] and the participants in your research, please provide a copy of your study and subsequent findings to the Research Office.

Contact [REDACTED] Director of Research, if you have any questions.

Good luck with your project.


Cc: [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]



Office of Research Subject Protections

Research 1 Building, 4400 University Drive, MS 4C6, Fairfax, Virginia 22030
Phone: 703-993-4121; Fax: 703-993-9590

TO: Scott Bauer, College of Education and Human Development

FROM: Sandra M. Sanford, RN, MSN, CIP 
Director, Office of Research Subject Protections

PROTOCOL NO.: 6709 Research Category: Doctoral Dissertation

PROPOSAL NO.: N/A

TITLE: Special Education Eligibility: An Examination of the Decision-Making Process

DATE: January 8, 2010

Cc: Erin Kirkland

On 1/8/2010, the George Mason University Human Subjects Review Board (GMU HSRB) reviewed and approved the above-cited protocol following expedited review procedures.

Please note the following:

1. A copy of the final approved consent document is attached. You must use this copy with the HSRB stamp of approval for your research. Please keep copies of the signed consent forms used for this research for three years after the completion of the research.
2. **Any modification to your research (including the protocol, consent, advertisements, instruments, funding, etc.) must be submitted to the Office of Research Subject Protections for review and approval prior to implementation.**
3. Any adverse events or unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects including problems involving confidentiality of the data identifying the participants must be reported to Office of Research Subject Protections and reviewed by the HSRB.

The anniversary date of this study is 1/7/2011. **You may not collect data beyond that date without GMU HSRB approval.** A continuing review form must be completed and submitted to the Office of Research Subject Protections 30 days prior to the anniversary date or upon completion of the project. A copy of the continuing review form is attached. In addition, prior to that date, the Office of Research Subject Protections will send you a reminder regarding continuing review procedures.


If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at 703-993-4015.



Office of Research Subject Protections

Research 1 Building, 4400 University Drive, MS 4C6, Fairfax, Virginia 22030
Phone: 703-993-4121; Fax: 703-993-9590

TO: Scott Bauer, College of Education and Human Development

FROM: Sandra M. Sanford, RN, MSN, CIB 
Director, Office of Research Subject Protections

PROTOCOL NO.: 6709 Research Category: Doctoral Dissertation

PROPOSAL NO.: N/A

TITLE: Special Education Eligibility: An Examination of the Decision-Making Process

DATE: April 5, 2010

Cc: Erin Kirkland

On April 5, 2010, the George Mason University Human Subjects Review Board (GMU HSRB) reviewed and approved the amendment dated March 16, 2010 for the above-cited protocol following expedited review procedures.

You may proceed with data collection. **Please note that any further modifications to your research must be submitted to the Office of Research Subject Protections for review and approval prior to implementation.** Any adverse events or unanticipated problems involving risks to subjects including problems involving confidentiality of the data identifying the participants must be reported to the GMU Office of Research Subject Protections and reviewed by the GMU HSRB.

The anniversary date of this study is January 7, 2011. You may not collect data beyond that date without GMU HSRB approval. A continuing review form must be completed and returned to the Office of Research Subject Protections prior to the anniversary date, or upon completion of the project. A copy of the continuing review form is attached. In addition prior to that date, the GMU Office of Research Subject Protections will send a letter to you regarding continuing review procedures.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at 703-993-4015.

Appendix F. Recruitment Emails

RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Hi everyone,

I am writing because I need your help. I am finishing my Ph.D. in education at George Mason University where my concentration is education leadership, and I am in the process of completing my dissertation. My dissertation, entitled, "Special Education Eligibility: An Examination of the Decision-Making Process," centers on special education administrators and decision making. I am in need of participants for my study, which is why I am turning to you for assistance, as you either are current special education contacts or may have previous experience as a school-based special education administrator.

Participation in the study involves two separate events that, cumulatively, will take approximately an hour and a half of your time and are completed at your convenience. If you are interested in participating and would like to assist me in completing my degree, please respond to this email. Please note that your email response of interest *is not* a commitment to participate in the study, only an indication of interest after which I will follow up with you either by phone or face-to-face to explain the study further and allow you to decide at that point whether you wish to participate.

I appreciate your consideration and look forward to hearing from you.

Thank you,
Erin Kirkland

FOLLOW-UP RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Hi all,

A few weeks ago I sent you an email calling for volunteers to participate in my dissertation research, as I am completing my Ph.D. through George Mason University. A number of you responded, and I thank you for your assistance. I am, however, in great need of additional participants in order to have a valid study.

My study centers on special education administration and decision making, and I am looking for current school-based administrators who either are or previously have been a special education administrator for their school and, thus, have been involved in special education decisions. Participation in the study involves two separate events that will, cumulatively, take approximately an hour and a half of your time at the most. Both events would be completed at your convenience. Since I am hoping to have my data collected by the end of August, we can certainly wait until school lets out before scheduling, as I know that right now is a very busy time.

Please email me and let me know of your interest. Your email response *is not* a commitment to participate, as I will follow up with you via phone or face-to-face to provide further details regarding participation requirements. At that time you can decide if you wish to participate and we will schedule a time to complete the activity.

Thank you so much for your consideration. I truly appreciate any assistance you can offer.

Thank you,
Erin Kirkland

Appendix G. Consent Documentation

Special Education Eligibility: An Examination of the Decision-Making Process

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

RESEARCH PROCEDURES

This research is being conducted to examine factors that influence the special education eligibility decision-making process. If you agree to participate, you will be asked to read and analyze case vignettes and give a recommendation for special education eligibility, and complete a survey of information regarding your experience. The initial case vignette analysis will be done during a face-to-face meeting at a mutually agreed upon day and time at your convenience and should take approximately 45 minutes to complete. Following the first meeting, you will be sent an email with instructions on how to complete the questionnaire, either in electronic or paper format, and a time frame in which to complete it. This questionnaire should take approximately 30 minutes to complete. Finally, you may be selected at random to complete a follow-up face-to-face interview with the researcher to be completed at a later, mutually agreed upon, date, again at your convenience. The interview is estimated to take approximately 60 minutes to complete.

RISKS

There are no foreseeable risks for participating in this research.

BENEFITS

There are no direct benefits to you. This research will further understanding of educational leaders' decision-making related to special education eligibility decisions.

CONFIDENTIALITY

The data in this study will be confidential, and the procedures to ensure confidentiality include the following: (1) your name will not be included on the response form and other collected data; (2) a code will be placed on the response form and other collected data; (3) through the use of an identification key, only the researcher will be able to link your data to your identity; and (4) only the researcher will have access to the identification key. All data and the response key will be kept in a locked file, accessible only by the researcher. For the computer generated questionnaire, while it is understood that no computer transmission can be perfectly secure, reasonable efforts will be made to protect the confidentiality of your transmission. Should you be chosen for and agree to participate in a follow-up interview, confidentiality will be maintained in the same manner as outlined above. In addition, interviews will be conducted privately, in a small

conference room, your office, or similar accommodation. You will be provided with a copy of the interview protocol in advance so you may determine the acceptability of the questions before answering them, and the interviews will be audiotaped and transcribed to ensure integrity. Once the interviews are transcribed, you will be asked to review the transcription in order to clarify, make changes to, and/or validate the information in order to ensure accuracy. Once the interview transcripts are verified by you, the audiotapes will be destroyed and properly disposed. Upon completion of the research, hard copies of interview transcripts will be shredded and electronic files of the transcripts will be deleted.

PARTICIPATION

Your participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time and for any reason. If you decide not to participate or if you withdraw from the study, there is no penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. There are no costs to you or any other party.

Please initial **one** of the following statements:

☐ I agree to be audiotaped ☐ I do not agree to be audiotaped

CONTACT

This research is being conducted Erin Kirkland, Ph.D. candidate at the College of Education and Human Development, George Mason University, as a part of her dissertation research. She may be reached at xxxx or xxx-xxx-xxxx. The project is being supervised by Dr. Scott Bauer, who may be reached at xxx-xxx-xxxx, or by e-mail at xxxxx@xxxxx.xxx, for questions or to report a research-related problem. You may contact the George Mason University Office of Research Subject Protections at 703-993-4121 if you have questions or comments regarding your rights as a participant in the research.

This research has been reviewed according to George Mason University procedures and [xxxxxxx xxxxxx public school system] governing your participation in this research.

CONSENT

I have read this form and agree to participate in this study.

Name

Date of Signature
Version date: 01/08/2010

STATEMENT OF NONDISCLOSURE

I, _____, agree to not disclose the details of the exercises I have completed, nor will I discuss the purpose behind the exercises to individuals other than the researcher.

Signature

Date

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CURRICULUM VITAE

Erin Kirkland grew up in Washington, Pennsylvania, and graduated valedictorian from McGuffey High School in Claysville, PA, in 1992. Graduating cum laude, she received her Bachelor of Arts degree in psychology from Washington and Jefferson College in 1996 where she also was inducted into Psi Chi, National Honor Society for Psychology. Kirkland obtained her Master of Science degree in clinical psychology from Loyola University in Maryland in 1998, and her Education Specialist degree in school psychology from James Madison University in 2001. Kirkland is a Nationally Certified School Psychologist, a distinction which she has held for 11 years. She served as school psychologist for Frederick County Public Schools, Virginia, for four years and three years for her current school system in Virginia. Presently, Kirkland holds an administrative position as an Eligibility Coordinator.