

To The University of Wyoming

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This study sought to determine the degree to which experience, educational and professional preparation, and state certification influence the effectiveness of special education administrators. Special education administrators were asked to self-report proficiency levels on Council for Exceptional Children Preparation Standards Advanced Administrator of Special Education Specialist Set. Results of the study indicated that years of experience significantly impacted understanding of standards. The strengths and needs identified by the study could serve as essential information for future professional development for special education administrators in the state of Wyoming.

Proficiency of Special Education Administrators on CEC Standards

By

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Introduction

This paper begins with background information related to special education in general and special education administrators specifically. The status of special education administrators in Wyoming is also addressed. The subsequent section provides a statement of the problem of the lack of qualifications necessary to be a special education administrator in the state of Wyoming. The nature and purpose of the study, along with its significance is also discussed and the research questions follow.

Background

In 1975, Congress passed and President Gerald Ford signed into law the Education for All Handicapped Children Act mandating a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) for all students with disabilities. FAPE is defined as special education and related services provided at public expense in compliance with state educational agency standards and the child's individualized education program (§1401(9)). Since its original passage, the law has been renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), and amended four times, most recently in 2004. Each reauthorization has brought about a multitude of changes and new regulations, changing the focus and responsibilities of special education administrators.

The original law, P.L. 94-142 encouraged a two-system approach to education, special education was the sole responsibility of special education staff and administrators and general education was the responsibility of general education staff and administrators (Lashley, 2007). P.L. 94-142 had the following four specific purposes:

- Ensure that all children with disabilities have access to a free appropriate public education (FAPE), emphasizing special education and related services;

- Protect the rights of parents and children with disabilities;
- Assist schools to provide education for students with disabilities; and
- Assess the effectiveness of the effort to educate students with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2010).

P.L. 94-142 guided policies and procedures and served as the foundation for special education for over twenty years.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is expansive in both its breadth and its scope. Special education administrators are tasked with implementing the policies and procedures mandated by IDEA in their school districts (Lashley & Boscardin, 2003). Although the responsibilities of special education administrators are extensive, only approximately half of states require an endorsement or license for administrators in special education. According to a study by Boscardin, et al. (2010), only 27 states have special education administrative credentialing. “Some states have decided that the role of special education administrator is unimportant and have filled this position with administrators not trained in special education” (Lashley & Boscardin, 2003, p. 64). Wyoming does not require special education administrators to have a separate license, instead requiring only a principal endorsement on their state teaching certificate (Professional Teaching Standards Board, 2011).

Research Questions

1. *On which standards do special education administrators self-report the highest levels of proficiency in terms of understanding and performance; on which standards do special education administrators self-report the lowest levels of proficiency in terms of understanding and performance?*

2. *What are the differences between Wyoming and North Dakota special education administrators' self-ratings of understanding and performance on the 2012 Council for Exceptional Children Preparation Standards Advanced Administrator of Special Education Specialist Set?*
3. *What is the effect of degree area and endorsement status on special education administrators' self-ratings of understanding and performance on the 2012 Council for Exceptional Children Preparation Standards Advanced Administrator of Special Education Specialist Set?*
4. *What is the effect of years of special education administration experience on special education administrators' self-ratings of understanding and performance on the 2012 Council for Exceptional Children Preparation Standards Advanced Administrator of Special Education Specialist Set?*

Purpose of the Study

The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) developed standards for Special Education Administrators at the Advanced Level (2009), which addressed the following: Leadership and Policy, Program Development and Organization, Research and Inquiry, Evaluation, Professional Development and Ethical Practice, and Collaboration. These standards provide a framework for the knowledge and skills necessary for administrators in special education (Boscardin et al., 2009). The standards were updated in 2012 and were approved by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). The revised standards are organized around seven key ideas: assessment; curricular content knowledge; program, services, and outcomes; research and inquiry; leadership and policy; professional and ethical practice; and collaboration (CEC, 2014).

In 2015, all preparation programs will be required to use the new version of the standards.

Unfortunately, educational leadership programs nationwide pay minimal attention to exceptional student issues and few states require classes in special education to achieve licensure as an administrator (McHatton et al., 2010). Although it has been demonstrated that effective leadership has a significant impact on student achievement (Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003), often special education administrators do not possess the experience, knowledge, or skills necessary to be effective in their role. According to the Council for Exceptional Children, “the number of individuals practicing special education without appropriate preparation has continued to grow since about 1993” (2009, p. 7). As such, exploring the issue is critical across the country. This study focuses on the issue as it relates to Wyoming and North Dakota. Wyoming and North Dakota have a number of similarities, both states are rural, primarily homogeneous, and located in a geographically similar area. The one key difference, as related to this study, is the required qualifications of special education directors. This difference allows for two distinct groups for comparison.

According to education data from the Elementary and Secondary Information System (ELSI) 2011-2012 report, Wyoming had 80,816 students enrolled in public school, of which 11,990 were identified as students with disabilities (14.8%). North Dakota had 87,345 students enrolled in public school, of which 11,302 were identified as students with disabilities (12.9%). Although Wyoming has a slightly higher percentage of students with disabilities, both states’ rates are at or near the federal level of 12.9% (ELSI, 2011). There is a large difference in the number of school districts in each state,

Wyoming has 48 and North Dakota has 178. However, North Dakota divides its districts into 31 special education units, comprised of between 1 and 19 school districts, and a special education director oversees each unit. In Wyoming, each district has a director responsible for special education.

The University of Wyoming (UW) has the only post-graduate degree in the state of Wyoming and works closely with the Wyoming Professional Teaching Standards Board (PTSB) to align program and endorsement requirements. UW currently offers a Special Education Director Certificate program, which requires participants to complete both a Master's in Special Education and a Principal Certificate program through the University of Wyoming. Participants who complete the certificate program at UW can apply to receive a Program Director Endorsement through the Professional Teaching Standards Board. The Program Director endorsement is not specific to special education; rather it is a generic director endorsement, allowing an individual to serve as a director of a program or department at the district level. However, an individual is allowed to fill the position of Special Education Director with a principal endorsement (PTSB, 2011).

In 2000, North Dakota adopted a policy mandating only an individual holding a special education director credential may serve as a Special Education Director in the state (ND Special Education Director's Credential, Chapter 67-11-08). North Dakota identified seven standards required to receive a Special Education Director's Credential.

- a valid North Dakota educator's professional license;
- a master's degree in special education or a related field, excluding gifted and talented education;
- basic preparation in one area of special education;

- at least nine semester hours in more than one other area of special education, excluding gifted and talented;
- eight semester hours in school administration or a four semester hour internship in administration of special education and two semester hours in school administration;
- two years of professional education employment experience in special education, excluding gifted and talented; and
- written recommendations from two supervisors during the applicant's teaching experience.

The most significant difference between Wyoming and North Dakota as related to this study is Wyoming does not require separate licensure to serve as a special education administrator, while North Dakota requires certification as a Special Education Director.

The purpose of this study is to examine the degree to which experience, educational and professional preparation, and state certification influence the effectiveness of special education administrators. Special education administrators in Wyoming and North Dakota will be asked to rate their proficiency on standards based performance skills identified by the 2012 Council for Exceptional Children Preparation Standards Advanced Administrator of Special Education Specialist Set.

Through the examination of the self-reported proficiency of current Wyoming and North Dakota administrators of special education, information will be gained to better prepare future administrators in special education. Analyzing information on knowledge and skills identified as important for special education administrators can assist in the formation of criteria to develop a state endorsement for special education administrators.

This, in turn, will ensure more effective leadership in this crucial area. The research in this area is limited; hence this study will fill a gap in the body of research in special education administration.

Summary

Accountability pressures included in both IDEA and the No Child Left Behind act support the necessity of highly qualified administrators in special education. Currently, there is a lack of consistent requirements or qualifications for special education administrators, which can lead to a lack of effective leadership. In the next section, a review of the literature surrounding special education administrators is discussed.

Review of the Literature

This section begins with a general history and overview of special education in the United States, including legislation passed to protect the rights of individuals with disabilities. The author continues with a historical perspective of special education administration as it relates to the developing field. The section then examines the evolution of state licensure requirements for special education administrators. The author concludes this section detailing the establishment of standards for special education both in general and, more recently, for administrators of special education.

History and Overview of Special Education

Educating students with special needs has a long history in the United States, beginning decades before the passage of Public Law 94-142 in 1975. According to Bird (1997), “some form of public policy on the federal, state, and local levels had, in fact, long been in place by that time regarding specific groups of students with disabilities” (p. 49). Education for students with “differences” began in the late 1800s and early 1900s

with separate classes and programs for students with tuberculosis, polio, hearing and visual impairments, and those who were “feeble-minded” (Bird, 1997; Pazez & Yates, 2012).

As public school systems began educating students with special needs, a two-part system emerged, separating students with disabilities from their “normal” peers (Pazez & Yates, 2012). Special education continued in this manner until the Civil Rights Movement. Although *Brown vs. Board of Education* was a case about racial inequality; it had far reaching effects on the segregation of students with disabilities as well (Skiba et al., 2008; Pazez & Yates, 2012). Finally in 1975, in response to pressure from parents and disability groups around the country, Congress passed and President Gerald Ford signed into law the Education for All Handicapped Children Act mandating a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) for all students with disabilities.

Administrators of special education have played a key role in its development. It is believed the first special education administrator was employed in the New York City school system in the early 1900s to oversee classes, admit students, and hire teachers for programs for “atypical” students (Pazez & Yates, 2012). As the field of special education advanced, it became clear that traditional educational administrators were unprepared to deal with students with special needs and the complexity of special education “demanded an administrator with special or unique skill and experience” (p. 20).

Around the time of the passage of P.L. 94-142, university preparation programs for administrators of special education began to develop (Crockett, 2012). During the early years of these programs, the focus was on administering separate schools and programs, consistent with the service delivery model of the time. As the federal law was

implemented, roles and responsibilities, and subsequently administrator preparation, changed. The focus shifted to implementing the Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) and Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) provisions of the new law (Crockett). The recent change from a dual system to a more unified system has further changed the role of special education administrators (Boscardin, 2007). “It should also be noted that the role of the special education administrator has shifted dramatically since its inception, from one where the primary concern was on effective interventions to one where the dominant concern currently is litigation” (Lashley, 2003, p. 67).

Additional federal regulations have further changed the focus and responsibilities of special education administrators. The re-authorization of IDEA in 1997 mandated that students with disabilities be included in state and district assessments. This ensured that students with disabilities were being assessed alongside their typical peers (McLaughlin, Smith, & Wilkinson, 2012). With the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act in 2001, states were tasked with developing rigorous standards and schools were charged with ensuring that all students achieved proficiency on those standards, including students with disabilities. Increased accountability, in the form of adequate yearly progress, assigned sanctions for schools not meeting yearly targets for improving student performance in reading and math. Students with disabilities were also required to make adequate yearly progress and schools were penalized when that group did not achieve appropriate gains (Yell, Katsiyannas, & Shiner, 2006).

The implementation of provisions of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) raised serious issues for special education administrators. Purcell, East, and Rude (2005) reported findings from an online survey by the Council of Administrators of Special

Education (CASE), which revealed 96% of district special education administrators were struggling with NCLB requirements, specifically in the areas of adequate yearly progress (71%), highly qualified teachers (66%), and subgroup performance (64%). In the same study, 94 percent of special education administrators indicated that students with disabilities were the group that caused school districts to fail to meet adequate yearly progress. In addition to maintaining procedural compliance with federal special education regulations, special education administrators are now under pressure to ensure students with disabilities meet state standards and achieve adequate yearly progress (McLaughlin et al., 2012).

Requirements for Special Education Administrators

Although the role of special education administrator has been determined to be essential for a local education agency, required qualifications and licensure are inconsistent among states (Boscardin et al., 2010; Lashley & Boscardin, 2003; McHatton et al., 2010). This is not a recent issue, as evidenced by articles and studies from the 1960s and 1970s outlining the lack of consistent licensing requirements. Connor (1961), when writing about special education leaders, states, “criteria for leadership personnel were almost non-existent” (as cited in Whitworth & Hatley, 1979).

A study by Forgnone and Collings (1975) found only nine states required specific certification for directors of special education, eighteen states required general administration endorsements, and twenty-three states did not require any administrative certification. The authors contest, as special education grows more complex, the need for highly trained administrators becomes imperative. According to Whitworth and Hatley (1979), state certification procedures for special education administrators have a

substantial effect on the quality of district special education programs. However, their study found that twenty states had no licensure or endorsement requirements for this position.

Prillaman and Richardson attest “individual state certification endorsement requirements can provide an important mechanism for ensuring that potential special education administrators receive adequate preparation (1985, p. 232). In their study, conducted in 1985, they found that twenty-six states required certification or endorsement in special education administration and twenty states required a general administrative endorsement.

Although Prillaman and Richardson’s study demonstrated a marked increase in state licensing requirements for special education administrators from 1975-1985, Boscardin et al. (2010) found that only 27 states offered special education administration license, endorsement, or certification. In addition to providing information on state licensure, the authors also compiled the following data on requirements to obtain licensure in the 27 states;

- 22 states require a master’s degree, at a minimum;
- 14 states require internship or practicum hours;
- 6 states require a general education exam;
- 4 states require a special education exam;
- 13 of 23 states required prior teaching experience in special education; and
- 19 states require continuing professional development to maintain licensure.

Boscardin et al. (2010) contend that while some states have rigorous standards for special education administrators, others have no guidelines, allowing this critical position to be

filled by people with no experience or training in special education or special education administration.

As evidenced by the cited studies, in the early years of P.L. 94-142, states made progress in adopting more rigorous qualifications for special education directors, however that progress appeared to stall around 1985. Since that time there has been minimal growth in special education administration licensure requirements among the states.

Standards for Special Education Administrators

In 1922, a group of special education practitioners met and formed what would become the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC). In that first meeting, the group's primary goal was to establish standards for teachers of students with disabilities (Bird, 1997; Council for Exceptional Children, 2009). Furthering the work of the CEC, the Council of Administrators of Special Education (CASE) was developed in 1951 to represent the "interests and needs of administrators of programs for exceptional children" (Bird, 1997, p. 49). In 1962, the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE), charged a committee with determining the training and experience necessary for special education administrators and whether or not universities were adequately preparing future leaders (Boscardin & Lashley, 2012).

In 1966, the CEC issued standards for special education professionals. Those standards have been revised and published a number of times, most recently in 2009 (Council for Exceptional Children, 2009). In that year, CEC and CASE added advanced standards to address the role of the special education administrator. In addition to being

written for advanced practitioners, the new standards are leadership-focused and performance-based (Boscardin & Lashley, 2012).

CEC and CASE have aligned standards for administrators of special education with National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) standards (Boscardin, et al., 2009). “Professional standards provide a policy framework for the knowledge and skills, and in some instances dispositions, thought to be important to the development of professional identifies for leaders and administrators of special education” (p. 68).

The 2012 Council for Exceptional Children Advanced Special Education Administrator Specialty Set of Standards includes:

- Assessment;
- Curricular Content Knowledge;
- Programs, Services, and Outcomes;
- Research and Inquiry;
- Leadership and Policy;
- Professional and Ethical Practice; and
- Collaboration (Council for Exceptional Children, 2012).

Knowledge and skills items are identified for each standard. It is noted that the standards are consistent across special education, however specialty sets differentiate the content, context, and issues related to each specialty area.

With the passage of No Child Left Behind in 2001 and the reauthorization of IDEA in 2004, there is a new focus on standards in education. Both laws require teachers to be highly qualified, although interestingly, neither addresses the requirements to be

highly qualified as a special education administrator (Boscardin et al., 2009). Although CEC has developed competencies for administrators, there are no national standards for special education administrators, thereby leaving each state free to delineate their own standards (Lashley, 2003). In a study by Smith (2007), special education administrators surveyed believed that the skills and knowledge associated with their position aligned with the CEC standards, though few administrators were being evaluated using those standards.

Summary

This section began with a brief history and overview of special education beginning prior to P.L 94-142 and continuing through the passage of No Child Left Behind. The next section focused on the requirements for special education directors and the inconsistency among state certifications. Finally, the section concluded with a discussion on the development of standards for special education administrators.

Method

This study seeks to identify and compare variables that may contribute to a special education administrator's proficiency on standards. Since relationships among variables will be determined, a quantitative methodology was utilized. Based on the nature of the research questions, an ex post facto research design was used. The survey was based on the 2012 Council for Exceptional Children Preparation Standards Advanced Administrator of Special Education Specialist Set. Participants were asked to rate both their understanding and performance level on selected standards.

Research Questions

The following research questions were examined:

- 1. On which standards do special education administrators self-report the highest levels of proficiency in terms of understanding and performance; on which standards do special education administrators self-report the lowest levels of proficiency in terms of understanding and performance?*
- 2. What are the differences between Wyoming and North Dakota special education administrators' self-ratings of understanding and performance on the 2012 Council for Exceptional Children Preparation Standards Advanced Administrator of Special Education Specialist Set?*
- 3. What is the effect of degree area and endorsement status on special education administrators' self-ratings of understanding and performance on the 2012 Council for Exceptional Children Preparation Standards Advanced Administrator of Special Education Specialist Set?*
- 4. What is the effect of years of special education administration experience on special education administrators' self-ratings of understanding and performance on the 2012 Council for Exceptional Children Preparation Standards Advanced Administrator of Special Education Specialist Set?*

Survey Design

The survey (see Appendix A) consisted of twelve questions. The first question was used to gain consent for participation in the survey and described the purpose, target participants, confidentiality, and contact information for the University of Wyoming IRB administrator. The second question asked participants to rate their understanding of 13

standards using a 5-point Likert scale with one reflecting “No Understanding” and five reflecting “Advanced Understanding.” The third question asked participants to rate their performance on 16 activities related to the standards and also utilized a 5-point Likert scale with one representing “Not-Applicable” and five representing “Advanced Performance.” The next eight questions collected demographic information including years of experience, degree area, endorsement status, institutional accreditation, prior teaching experience, and gender. The final question was an open response regarding contributions to their success as a special education administrator.

Population

Participants for the study were recruited from school districts in Wyoming and North Dakota. Wyoming and North Dakota have a number of similarities and one key difference, the required qualifications of special education directors, which allows for two distinct groups for comparison. Wyoming does not have separate licensure requirements for special education administrators; North Dakota has required special education administrators to hold a Special Education Director Credential since 2000.

Although actual job titles vary, each school district or special education unit employed an individual or individuals to administer special education. Due to the limited number of administrators in each state, using a sampling procedure, such as random sampling, was not feasible. Instead, all special education administrators in both states were emailed a link to the survey. An email list was compiled using information obtained from the Wyoming Association of Special Education Administrators; the Wyoming Department of Education; and the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction Special Education Directory.

Data Collection

Approval from the Institutional Review Board was sought and received prior to beginning data collection (Appendix C). A panel of potential participants was set up through Qualtrics and those individuals were sent a brief introductory email (Appendix B) explaining the purpose of the study and providing contact information in case of questions. A link to the survey in Qualtrics was included in the email. Follow-up emails were sent weekly to individuals who had not yet participated for the next four weeks encouraging participation in the study.

Results

This section presents the results of the study conducted to determine the proficiency of special education administrators on the 2012 Council for Exceptional Children Preparation Standards Advanced Administrator of Special Education Specialist Set. After describing the characteristics of the respondents, analyses are organized by the research questions. Means, standard deviations, significance and effect sizes are reported.

Description of Respondents

Emails were sent to 29 special education administrators from North Dakota and 62 special education administrators from Wyoming. Thirty-seven administrators from Wyoming responded, more than 80% of the sample; and 9 administrators from North Dakota responded, accounting for almost 20% of the sample. A total of 93 emails were sent out and 53 participants started the survey. One participant did not give consent to participate, six consented but did not fill out any portion of the survey, and two participants submitted incomplete responses. The incomplete responses were included in the analysis of the data. Based on 46 responses, the response rate for the survey was

49.4%. Demographic data collected included years of experience as a special education administrator, degree area, endorsement status, institutional accreditation, prior teaching experience in special education or in a related service area, number of years of teaching experience, state, and gender. Descriptive statistics including frequencies and percentages were used to describe the sample. Table 1 displays demographic details for the study participants. Table 2 displays the number of participants who are endorsed as a director in each state.

Table 1
Frequencies and Percentages for Demographic Information

Characteristic	N	(%)
Years of Experience as a Special Education Administrator		
0-2	9	(19.6%)
3-5	7	(15.2%)
6-10	9	(19.6%)
11+	12	(26.1%)
No Response	9	(19.6%)
State		
Wyoming	37	(80.4%)
North Dakota	9	(19.5%)
Degree in Special Education		
Yes	34	(73.9%)
No	10	(21.7%)
No Response	2	(4.3%)
Degree in a Field Related to Special Education		
Yes	7	(15.2%)
No	3	(6.5%)
Not Applicable	36	(78.3%)
Endorsed as a Director of Special Education		
Yes	26	(56.5%)
No	18	(39.1%)
No Response	2	(4.3%)
Institutional Accreditation by CEC		
Yes	8	(17.4%)
No	10	(21.7%)
Don't Know	26	(56.5%)
No Response	2	(4.3%)
Prior Teaching Experience in Special Education		
Yes	40	(87.0%)
No	4	(8.7%)
No Response	2	(4.3%)
Gender		
Male	14	(30.4%)
Female	30	(65.2%)
No Response	2	(4.3%)

Table 2

Frequencies and Percentages for Endorsement Status by State

State	N	Endorsed as a Director	
		Yes (%)	No (%)
Wyoming	35	18 (51%)	17 (49%)
North Dakota	9	8 (89%)	1 (11%)

Note: N = 44; two participants did not respond to the question regarding endorsement status.

Of the 46 respondents, almost two-thirds were female. Eighty-nine percent of participants had a degree in special education or in a field related to special education and 87% of participants had experience teaching in special education prior to becoming an administrator. As shown in the table, years of experience as a director among participants was varied. Eighty-nine percent of respondents from North Dakota were endorsed as a director of special education in their state, as compared to only 51% of the respondents from Wyoming. The next section summarizes survey responses related to the research questions.

Understanding and Performance Ranked by Proficiency Level

On which standards do special education administrators self-report the highest levels of proficiency in terms of understanding and performance; on which standards do special education administrators self-report the lowest levels of proficiency in terms of understanding and performance?

Participants rated their understanding of 13 Council for Exceptional Children Preparation Standards Advanced Administrator of Special Education Specialist Set using the response options of none (1), limited (2), basic (3), proficient (4), and advanced (5).

The means for each of the 13 standards were calculated and ranked from highest to lowest (see Table 3). Participants rated ethical practices as they apply to the administration of special education highest in terms of understanding ($M = 4.43$, $SD = .58$), followed by understanding of laws, regulations, and policies as they apply to the provision of special education services ($M = 4.37$, $SD = .61$). Understanding of evaluation models used to determine the effectiveness of special education programs was rated the lowest ($M = 3.50$, $SD = .78$). The second lowest rating for understanding was in the area of impact of diversity on educational programming expectations ($M = 3.62$, $SD = .78$).

Table 3

Means and Standard Deviations for Understanding of Standards

Standard	<i>M</i>	<i>(SD)</i>
Ethical practices as they apply to the administration of special education	4.43	(.58)
Laws, regulations, and policies as they apply to the provision of special education services	4.37	(.61)
Services needed to support student access to the general curriculum	4.22	(.59)
Strategies to achieve positive school outcomes for students	4.15	(.60)
Fiscal policies as they apply to the provision of special education services	4.02	(.75)
Professional development practices that lead to improved outcomes for students	4.00	(.60)
Strategies to promote school engagement	3.93	(.53)
Strategies to facilitate communication between all stakeholders	3.85	(.60)

Strategies to increase collaboration among all stakeholders	3.78	(.59)
Evaluation models for special education personnel	3.76	(.64)
Strategies to improve advocacy at all levels	3.73	(.62)
Impact of diversity on educational programming expectations	3.62	(.78)
Evaluation models used to determine the effectiveness of special education programs	3.50	(.78)

Note: Response scale ranged from 1 (none) to 5 (advanced); $N = 46$.

Participants rated their performance on 16 activities related to the Council for Exceptional Children Preparation Standards Advanced Administrator of Special Education Specialist Set using the response options of not applicable (1), limited (2), basic (3), proficient (4), and advanced (5). The means for each of the 16 activities was calculated and ranked from highest to lowest (see Table 4). Participants rated collaborating with other administrators at the district level highest in terms of performance ($M = 4.35$, $SD = .57$), followed by applying current laws, regulations, and policies to the administration of special education services ($M = 4.32$, $SD = .74$). Developing seamless transitions across the education continuum from birth through adulthood ($M = 3.64$, $SD = .75$) and assisting in the implementation of technology for students with disabilities ($M = 3.64$, $SD = .75$) were rated the lowest in terms of performance.

Table 4

Means and Standard Deviations for Performance on Standards

Standard	<i>M</i>	<i>(SD)</i>
Collaborating with other administrators at the district level	4.35	(.57)
Applying current laws, regulations, and policies to the administration of special education services	4.32	(.74)
Collaborating with other administrators at the school level	4.23	(.61)
Implementing a flexible continuum of services based on effective practices	4.11	(.69)
Using data-based decision-making to improve instructional practices	4.09	(.64)
Evaluating special education personnel	4.05	(.57)
Participating in professional organizations to guide administrative practices	3.93	(.79)
Engaging in leadership practices that support shared decision-making	3.91	(.71)
Developing a budget for the provision of special education services	3.91	(.75)
Implementing professional development activities that lead to improved outcomes for students with disabilities	3.89	(.66)
Utilizing collaborative approaches for involving all stakeholders in the special education process	3.89	(.69)
Evaluating the effectiveness of special education programs	3.82	(.66)
Strengthening the role of parents in the special education process	3.75	(.62)

Implementing programs that contribute to the prevention of unnecessary referrals	3.73	(.59)
Developing seamless transitions across the education continuum from birth through adulthood	3.64	(.65)
Assisting in the implementation of technology for students with disabilities	3.64	(.75)

Note: Response scale ranged from 1 (not applicable) to 5 (advanced); $N = 46$.

Differences Between States

What are the differences between Wyoming and North Dakota special education administrators' self-ratings of understanding and performance on the 2012 Council for Exceptional Children Preparation Standards Advanced Administrator of Special Education Specialist Set? A scale was provided for rating understanding with possible responses of none (1), limited (2), basic (3), proficient (4), and advanced (5). Participants rated their understanding of 13 standards. The average score for all thirteen items was calculated, with a higher average indicating greater understanding. An independent t-test was used to compare means (see Table 5). On average, participants in Wyoming reported similar levels of understanding ($M = 3.96, SD = .38$) compared to participants in North Dakota ($M = 3.94, SD = .56$). The difference was not significant, $t(44) = .90, p = .191$; the effect size was small ($r = .01$), indicating that the practical impact of the state in which administrators worked was minimal.

Table 5

Ns, Means, and Standard Deviations for Understanding

State	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>(SD)</i>
Wyoming	37	3.96	(.38)
North Dakota	9	3.94	(.56)

Note: Response scale ranged from 1 (none) to 5 (advanced).

A scale was provided for rating performance with possible responses of not applicable (1), limited (2), basic (3), proficient (4), and advanced (5). Ratings of 1 (not applicable) were not factored into the analysis. Participants rated their performance on 16 activities related to the standards. The average score for all sixteen items was calculated, with a higher average indicating increased performance. An independent t-test was used to compare means (see Table 6). On average, participants in Wyoming reported similar levels of performance ($M = 3.96$, $SD = .45$) as participants in North Dakota ($M = 3.90$, $SD = .46$). The difference was not significant, $t(42) = .39$, $p = .911$, the effect size was small ($r = .06$), indicating that the practical impact of the state in which administrators worked was minimal.

Table 6

Ns, Means, and Standard Deviations for Performance

State	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>(SD)</i>
Wyoming	37	3.96	(.45)
North Dakota	9	3.90	(.46)

Note: Response scale ranged from 1 (not applicable) to 5 (advanced).

Effect of Degree Area and Endorsement Status

What is the effect of degree area and endorsement status on special education administrators' self-ratings of understanding and performance on the 2012 Council for Exceptional Children Preparation Standards Advanced Administrator of Special Education Specialist Set?

Using the average scores calculated for understanding and performance, the effect of having a degree in special education and being endorsed as a special education director was examined. An independent t-test was used to compare means in both areas (see Table 7). Participants with a degree in special education reported similar levels of understanding ($M = 4.03$, $SD = .39$) compared to participants without a degree in special education ($M = 3.72$, $SD = .44$). The difference was not significant, $t(42) = 2.15$, $p = .545$; however, the effect size was moderate ($r = .31$), indicating that there was some impact of having a degree in special education on understanding of standards. Participants with a degree in special education reported similar levels of performance ($M = 4.02$, $SD = .44$) compared to participants without a degree in special education ($M = 3.72$, $SD = .41$). The difference was not significant, $t(42) = 1.93$, $p = .666$; however, the effect size was moderate ($r = .29$), indicating that there was some impact of having a degree in special education on performance of standards.

Participants endorsed as a special education director reported similar levels of understanding ($M = 4.01$, $SD = .44$) compared to participants not endorsed as a special education director ($M = 3.88$, $SD = .38$). The difference was not significant, $t(42) = 1.00$, $p = .390$; the effect size was small ($r = .15$), indicating that the practical impact of endorsement status on understanding of standards was minimal. Participants endorsed as

a special education director reported similar levels of performance ($M = 3.98, SD = .48$) as participants not endorsed as a special education director ($M = 3.91, SD = .42$). The difference was not significant, $t(42) = .51, p = .307$; the effect size was small ($r = .08$), indicating that the practical impact of endorsement status on performance of standards was minimal.

Table 7

Ns, Means, and Standard Deviations for Understanding and Performance

Variable	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	(<i>SD</i>)
Understanding			
Degree in Special Education	34	4.03	(.39)
No Degree in Special Education	10	3.72	(.44)
Endorsed	26	4.01	(.44)
Not Endorsed	18	3.88	(.38)
Performance			
Degree in Special Education	34	4.02	(.44)
No Degree in Special Education	10	3.72	(.41)
Endorsed	26	3.98	(.48)
Not Endorsed	18	3.91	(.42)

Note: Understanding response scale ranged from 1 (none) to 5 (advanced). Performance response scale ranged from 1 (not applicable) to 5 (advanced). $N = 44$; two participants did not respond to this question.

Effect of Years of Experience as a Special Education Administrator

What is the effect of years of special education administration experience on special education administrators' self-ratings of understanding and performance on the 2012 Council for Exceptional Children Preparation Standards Advanced Administrator of Special Education Specialist Set?

Participants were grouped into 4 categories based on their number of years of experience as a special education administrator. The means and standard deviations are reported in Table 8.

Table 8

Ns, Means, and Standard Deviations for Understanding and Performance

Variable	<i>N</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>(SD)</i>
Understanding			
0-2 years	9	3.80	(.45)
3-5 years	7	4.01	(.29)
6-10 years	9	3.71	(.44)
11 + years	12	4.25	(.38)
Performance			
0-2 years	9	3.88	(.40)
3-5 years	7	3.97	(.34)
6-10 years	9	3.74	(.55)
11 + years	12	4.24	(.41)

Note: Understanding response scale ranged from 1 (none) to 5 (advanced). Performance response scale ranged from 1 (not applicable) to 5 (advanced). $N = 37$; 9 participants did not respond to this question.

Using the average scores calculated for understanding, the impact of administrative experience was calculated using a one-way ANOVA (see Table 9). Results indicated a significant difference in understanding among groups ($p = .017$). Post hoc comparisons using the Fisher LSD test revealed that participants with 11 or more years of experience reported a significantly greater understanding of standards compared to participants with two or less years of experience ($p = .015$) and participants with 6 to 10 years of experience ($p = .004$). The effect size was moderate ($r = .513$), indicating that there was some impact of administrative experience on understanding on standards.

Table 9

One-Way Analysis of Variance of Understanding Based on Years of Experience

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Between Groups	3	1.89	.63	3.93	.017
Within Groups	33	5.29	.16		
Total	36	7.18			

Using the average scores calculated for performance, the impact of administrative experience was calculated using a one-way ANOVA (see Table 10). Results did not indicate a significant difference among groups ($p = .080$), however the effect size was moderate ($r = .427$), indicating that there was some impact of administrative experience on performance of standards.

Table 10

One-Way Analysis of Variance of Performance Based on Years of Experience

Source	<i>df</i>	<i>SS</i>	<i>MS</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
Between Groups	3	1.41	.47	2.46	.080
Within Groups	33	6.32	.19		
Total	36	7.73			

Summary

This section presented the results of the study conducted to determine the proficiency of special education administrators on the 2012 Council for Exceptional Children Preparation Standards Advanced Administrator of Special Education Specialist Set. The sample included 46 special education administrators; 37 from Wyoming and 9 from North Dakota. A description of the respondents included years of experience as a special education administrator, degree area, endorsement status, institutional accreditation, prior teaching experience in special education or in a related service area, number of years of teaching experience, state, and gender.

Analysis of the data indicated years of experience as a special education administrator had a significant impact on self-rated understanding of CEC standards. There were no other significant findings, however three other analyses yielded moderate effect sizes; the impact of having a degree in special education had a noticeable impact on level of understanding and performance. Years of experience also had a moderate effect on performance, indicating that experience had a visible effect on performance.

Conclusions, limitations, recommendations, and suggestions for further research are discussed in the final section.

Discussion

Special education laws, regulations, and policies are expansive in both breadth and scope. Administrators in special education must have extensive knowledge in this area, yet many states, including Wyoming, do not have requirements for special education administrators, instead requiring only a general administrative endorsement or degree. Unfortunately, many educational leadership programs pay minimal attention to special education issues (McHatton et al., 2010). According to Frick, Faircloth, and Little (2012) the “omission or marginalization of special-education focused coursework in administrator preparation programs has far-reaching implications” (p. 211). This study and its analysis will assist in determining factors that contribute to a special education administrator’s proficiency.

The Council for Exceptional Children updated standards for special education administrators in 2012 and focused on seven key areas: assessment; curricular content knowledge; program, services, and outcomes; research and inquiry; leadership and policy; professional and ethical practice; and collaboration. This study utilized these standards to examine special education administrators’ beliefs about their proficiency in understanding and performance. The following section provides conclusions for the study. The conclusions are followed by limitations, recommendations, and suggestions for further research.

Conclusions

This project began with a review of background information and of the recent literature in the field of special education administration. From this review, a lack of consistent qualification requirements for special education administrators across the country, and specifically in Wyoming, was identified. A survey to collect information from special education administrators in Wyoming and North Dakota regarding their understanding and performance of standards was conducted. The two states were selected due to their differences in endorsement requirements for special education administrators. In the next sections, the research questions are referenced for further discussion of the study's conclusions.

Question 1. On which standards do special education administrators self-report the highest levels of proficiency in terms of understanding and performance; on which standards do special education administrators self-report the lowest levels of proficiency in terms of understanding and performance?

Special education administrators reported the highest level of understanding on ethical practices as they apply to the administration of special education. Laws, regulations, and policies as they apply to the provision of special education services were also rated highly in terms of understanding. This was not surprising due to the emphasis placed on compliance in special education. Special education administrators must remain current on laws, regulations, and policies in order to remain free of legal entanglement.

Special education administrators rated evaluation models used to determine the effectiveness of special education programs lowest in terms of understanding. This finding is similar to a study by Thompson & O'Brian (2007), which found that special

education administrators reported the greatest need for professional development in the area of monitoring student progress and outcomes. This continues to be an area of need as it is imperative to evaluate programs for students with disabilities to ensure that students are making progress. Special education administrators also rated the understanding of the impact of diversity on educational programming expectations low. This low rating may be explained by the homogenous nature of the states chosen for the survey. According to the US Census Bureau, in 2014 the population in North Dakota was reported as 89% white and Wyoming was reported as 93% white. Both states lack diversity in their general population; therefore it is not surprising that the impact of diversity on educational programming would be rated low by special education administrators.

Special education administrators rated collaborating with other administrators at the district level highest for performance. Collaboration among administrators is essential in order to bridge the gap between general and special education (Boscardin, 2007) as mandated by IDEA's provisions of least restrictive environment and inclusion in state assessments, and NCLB's requirements of adequate yearly progress. Similar to the ratings for understanding, applying current laws, regulations, and policies to the administration of special education services was also rated high for performance. Again, this was not surprising, given the emphasis and litigation surrounding procedural compliance in special education.

Special education directors rated assisting in the implementation of technology for students with disabilities lowest in terms of performance. In many districts, this may be a responsibility for other personnel, such as technology integrators or special education teachers, which may have contributed to a lower rating on this skill. Developing seamless

transitions across the education continuum from birth through adulthood was also rated low by special education directors. Transition may be an area that requires professional development and strategic planning to improve. Many times transition into and out of public school requires inter-agency collaboration, which can be difficult to coordinate.

Question 2. What are the differences between Wyoming and North Dakota special education administrators' self-ratings of understanding and performance on the 2012 Council for Exceptional Children Preparation Standards Advanced Administrator of Special Education Specialist Set?

Study results indicated no significant or practical difference in ratings of understanding or performance based on the state in which administrators worked. At the onset of the study, it was anticipated that there would be a difference between Wyoming and North Dakota administrator's self-reported proficiency levels due to the difference in the licensing requirements in each state. The results of this study could be attributed to the small number of respondents from North Dakota or the years of experience of the respondents from that state.

Question 3. What is the effect of degree area and endorsement status on special education administrators' self-ratings of understanding and performance on the 2012 Council for Exceptional Children Preparation Standards Advanced Administrator of Special Education Specialist Set?

Study results indicated that having a degree in special education did have some impact on both understanding and performance of standards. Administrators with a degree in special education did report higher levels in both areas compared to respondents without a degree in special education. Endorsement status had minimal

practical impact on self-ratings of understanding and performance on standards, which may indicate that the education and background of an administrator holds more importance than a state endorsement. Special education law is filled with acronyms and terms that often make it sound like a different language. Entering the role of special education administrator with no prior education or background in the nuances of policy and procedure can leave a new director struggling to manage the requirements of the position. Having the knowledge base provided by a background in special education may assist in an administrator's success, especially early in their careers when the learning curve can be steep.

Question 4. What is the effect of years of special education administration experience on special education administrators' self-ratings of understanding and performance on the 2012 Council for Exceptional Children Preparation Standards Advanced Administrator of Special Education Specialist Set?

Years of experience as a special education administrator had a significant impact on understanding of standards. Administrators with the greatest number of years of experience (11 or more) had significantly greater understanding than administrators with two or less years of experience. Interestingly, ratings of understanding for administrators with six to ten years of experience was also significantly lower than those with more than eleven, although the same is not true for the group of administrators with three to five years of experience, raising questions about other differences among those two groups.

Although the impact of years of experience was not significant, the effect size indicated there was some impact on performance on standards. This finding is not surprising, as knowledge and competency are typically gained over time and with

experience in a position. An area of concern related to this finding is the high rates of attrition among special education administrators nation-wide, findings of a study by Muller (2009) indicated that attrition of special education directors was a significant challenge for a majority of states. Since years of experience contribute to increased proficiency, retaining special education administrators must be a priority for state and local education agencies.

Limitations

Although the survey was sent to all Wyoming and North Dakota special education administrators, the response rate, especially for administrators in North Dakota, may not allow for generalization of the study results. In addition, due to the rural and homogeneous nature of the two states surveyed, results may not generalize to states with a larger, more diverse population. Another limitation of the study is the reliance on special education administrator's self-reporting of understanding and performance; proficiency levels, as viewed by supervisors or colleagues, may differ from a self-report.

Recommendations

The results of this study could help assist the University of Wyoming in developing a specific program for special education administrators, rather than relying on the general educational leadership program. Additionally, standards that were rated low by current administrators, including diversity, program evaluation models, transitions, reducing referrals, and technology could be integrated into current classes in Educational Leadership at the University of Wyoming in order to better prepare future leaders in special education. Building leaders, whose primary focus may be general education, still require knowledge in special education, as they are typically the primary contact for

parents and teachers. They would also benefit from additional special education coursework or related topics provided by the University. In addition, the Professional Teaching Standards Board may wish to utilize this study to develop state requirements specific to special education directors. Primary considerations may be ensuring directors have both a degree and teaching experience in special education.

Another way the research findings could be presented to educational leaders statewide is through Project ECHO. Utilizing the technology provided by Project ECHO could facilitate discussion and collaboration around special education topics among practicing administrators across the state of Wyoming. Presentations via Project ECHO could assist in providing targeted professional development and analysis of case studies to building level administrators. A primary area of focus could be in diversity. Diversity awareness extends further than race and ethnicity. Educational leaders in both general and special education need to view disability in the context of diversity and work to ensure programming is meeting their unique needs.

The Wyoming Department of Education (WDE) Division of Individual Learning and the Wyoming Association of Special Education Administrators (WASEA) may consider respondent results when planning future professional development and/or conference topics. A specific area of need is developing and implementing evaluation models to ensure special education programming is effective and meeting the diverse needs of students. Furthermore, since results of the study indicated that years of experience has a significant impact on understanding of standards, WDE and WASEA may want to explore the option of a mentoring program for new special education directors. Pairing early career directors with directors with many years in the field would

provide opportunities for collaboration and consultation while new directors are learning to navigate their position. Often the position of special education director can be isolating, as there is typically only one per district; a mentoring program would provide a sense of connectedness, while allowing new directors to use their more seasoned colleagues as sounding boards when questions or concerns arise.

Finally, agencies across the state of Wyoming must collaborate to ensure students have a seamless transition between agencies. The Department of Health, which oversees special education services for children birth through age five, and local school districts must work to ensure the needs of students and parents are being met as they transition to Kindergarten. Similarly, as students move through high school, schools must begin planning for post-secondary transition. Coordinating with agencies such as the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation and Wyoming Independent Living, among others, will assist students in developing the skills necessary to be productive adults. As students transition out of public school, either with a diploma or due to reaching the maximum age for services, school districts must assist students in working with their desired post-secondary agency whether that be a university, community college, vocational program, or the Department of Vocational Rehabilitation. Interagency collaboration may improve outcomes for students with disabilities across the state.

Suggestions for Further Research

The information presented in this study provides a starting point for future research in the area of special education administration. The findings and conclusions of this study lead to the following suggestions for further research:

- Future research may include ratings by supervisors, colleagues, or subordinates to determine if proficiency ratings are consistent.
- Researchers may want to focus on one particular standard area to examine in depth.
- Researchers could study early career special education administrators to guide professional development/support to assist this population.
- Researchers could conduct a qualitative study on high performing administrators to analyze specific skills or traits that lead to their success.

Summary

This study sought to determine the degree to which experience, educational and professional preparation, and state certification influence the effectiveness of special education administrators on 2012 Council for Exceptional Children Preparation Standards Advanced Administrator of Special Education Specialist Set. Results indicated that years of experience had a significant impact on understanding of standards. Additionally, having a degree in special education positively impacted understanding and performance ratings. Special education administrators' self-ratings on standards also identified strengths in collaboration; ethical practices; and laws, regulations, and policies, along with weaknesses in areas including impact of diversity, technology, evaluation models, and diversity.

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Appendix A

Special Education Administrator Survey

SECTION 1

Please rate your understanding of the following items as related to students with disabilities on a scale of 1 to 5

- 1 - No understanding
- 2 - Limited understanding
- 3 - Basic understanding
- 4 - Proficient understanding
- 5 - Advanced understanding

Evaluation models used to determine the effectiveness of special education programs

Evaluation models for special education personnel

Services needed to support student access to the general curriculum

Strategies to achieve positive school outcomes for students

Strategies to promote positive school engagement

Laws, regulations, and policies as they apply to the provision of special education services

Fiscal policies as they apply to the provision of special education services

Ethical practices as they apply to the administration of special education services

Professional development practices that lead to improved outcomes for students

Impact of diversity on educational programming expectations

Strategies to increase collaboration among all stakeholders

Strategies to facilitate communication among all stakeholders

Strategies to improve advocacy at all levels

SECTION 2

Please rate your level of performance on the following skills

- 1 – I do not perform this skill
- 2 – I perform this skill on a limited basis, but not with reliability
- 3 – I perform this skill at a basic level (can apply in some settings and situations)
- 4 – I perform this skill at a proficient level (can apply in most settings and situations)
- 5 – I perform this skill at an advanced level (can apply across all settings and situations)

Evaluating the effectiveness of special education programs

Evaluating special education personnel

Assisting in the implementation of technology for students with disabilities

Implementing a flexible continuum of services based on effective practices

Implementing programs that contribute to the prevention of unnecessary referrals

Using data-based decision-making to improve instructional practices

Participating in professional organizations to guide administrative practices

Applying current laws, regulations, and policies to the administration of special education services

Developing a budget for the provision of special education services

Implementing professional development activities that lead to improved outcomes for students with disabilities

Utilizing collaborative approaches for involving all stakeholders in the special education process

Strengthening the role of parents in the special education process

Developing seamless transitions across the education continuum from birth through adulthood

Engaging in leadership practices that support shared decision-making

Collaborating with other administrators at the school level

Collaborating with other administrators at the district level

SECTION 3
Demographic Information

How many years have you been a special education director/administrator?

Do you have a degree in special education?

Do you have a degree in a field related to special education?

Please specific degree area _____

Are you endorsed as a Director of Special Education in your state?

Prior to your current position, did you have teaching experience (including related services) in special education?

Number of years _____

Is your institution accredited by CEC? Yes No Don't Know

Gender

SECTION 4

What has assisted most with your success as a special education administrator?

Appendix B

Survey Cover Letter

Dear Colleagues

I am conducting a research study as a component of the requirements to complete my Doctor of Education through the University of Wyoming. The purpose of this study is to examine the degree to which experience, educational and professional preparation, and state certification influence the effectiveness of special education administrators. I am asking for you to please complete a short (10 minute) survey rating your knowledge and proficiency on standards based performance skills identified by the 2012 Council for Exceptional Children Preparation Standards Advanced Administrator of Special Education Specialist Set.

If you have questions regarding the survey, you can contact me at jami.clifford@scsd2.com or my research supervisor, Suzanne Young, at syoung@uwyo.edu.

Thank you for your assistance and participation.

Sincerely,

Jami Clifford
Special Education Compliance Facilitator
Sheridan County School District #2
Sheridan, WY

Follow this link to the Survey:

[\\${!://SurveyLink?d=Take the Survey}](#)

Or copy and paste the URL below into your internet browser:

[\\${!://SurveyURL}](#)

Follow the link to opt out of future emails:

[\\${!://OptOutLink?d=Click here to unsubscribe}](#)

Appendix C
IRB Approval Letter

UNIVERSITY
OF WYOMING

Colette Kuhfuss