

K-12 General Educator and Special Educator Knowledge and Preparedness in Special Education

Law

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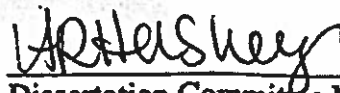
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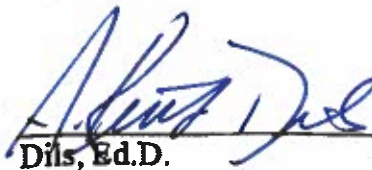
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ABSTRACT

Together, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act protect students with disabilities from discrimination and ensure that services are received in order to access the general education curriculum. K-12 general education teachers and special education teachers are among the most critical individuals in implementing the federal laws that protect students with disabilities in the school setting. Despite the shift to inclusive practices that is safeguarded by extensive procedures subject to litigation, past research has revealed a gap between educator knowledge and preparedness to implement special education law in the classroom. The purpose of the research was to answer the research questions, “What undergraduate preparation and professional development training do K-12 general educators and special educators receive regarding IDEA and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, in one public school district?” and “To what extent are K-12 general education and special education teachers familiar with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, in one public school district?” To obtain this information, a qualitative study was conducted consisting of a 10-question open-ended survey which was distributed to 10 general education teachers and 10 special education teachers in one public school district. Survey data was analyzed using an open-coding method. Three major findings emerged from the data and were categorized into themes. Theme one concluded that educator’s obtain knowledge of IDEA and Section 504 mainly by means of professional development and through a district administrator. Secondly, educators identify the main components of IDEA as being FAPE, LRE, IEPs, and parental involvement. The tertiary theme revealed educator’s identify the main component of Section 504 to be protection from discrimination for students with disabilities. Findings suggest that teachers may receive more training and coursework geared towards The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act when

compared to Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. Additionally, years of experience seemed to have little impact on knowledge and preparedness pertaining to special education federal law.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my husband and son. My husband, Dakota, who chooses to love and support me every single day. You are the best thing that has happened to me in this life. I could never have done this without you. To my son, Wilder, and any children that may follow. I hope that this inspires you to persevere in the face of adversity and follow your dreams fearlessly. Above all else, I want you to know that you are my greatest accomplishment. My favorite and most important title will forever be “Mom”.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	2
DEDICATION.....	4
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	5
LIST OF FIGURES.....	7
Introduction.....	8
Statement of Problem.....	8
Existing Research.....	9
Organizational Context.....	11
Significance of Study.....	12
Statement of Purpose and Research Questions.....	14
Definition of Terms.....	15
Conclusion.....	16
Literature Review.....	18
Introduction.....	18
Purpose of Study.....	18
Special Education Law.....	19
Historical Overview.....	20
IDEA.....	22
Section 504.....	24
Teacher Preparation Programs.....	26
Teacher Training.....	28
Application of Law.....	29
Conclusion.....	30
Methodology.....	32
Demographics.....	33
Participants.....	34
Procedures.....	35
Data Analysis.....	38
Site Permission.....	38
Presentation of Results.....	39
Limitations.....	39
Conclusion.....	40
Results and Findings.....	42
Introduction.....	42
Qualitative Results.....	43
Themes.....	57

Theme 2: Educator's identify the main components of IDEA as being FAPE, LRE, IEPs, and parental involvement.....	58
Theme 3: Educator's identify the main component of Section 504 to be protection from discrimination for students with disabilities.....	59
Conclusion.....	59
Conclusions and Recommendations.....	61
Interpretation of the Findings.....	62
Research Question 1.....	62
Research Question 2.....	63
Limitations.....	64
Implications.....	65
Conclusions.....	66
Recommendations.....	67
References.....	69
Appendix A.....	74
Appendix B.....	76

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
1 Educators' tasks related to implementation of Federal Special Education Law.....	14
2 Years of Service as an Educator.....	44
3 Educator Content Area.....	45
4 IDEA Undergraduate Preparation.....	46
5 Section 504 Undergraduate Preparation.....	47
6 Section 504 and IDEA Training and Guidance.....	48
7 Obtainment of IDEA and Section 504 Knowledge.....	49
8 Key Components of IDEA.....	51
9 Key Components of Section 504.....	54
10 Confidence in Implementation.....	56
11 Opportunity to Elaborate.....	57

Chapter 1

Introduction

The field of education is becoming increasingly more litigious. The litigiousness stems from the legally binding nature of special education documents such as Individualized Education Programs (IEPS), 504 Plans, and Positive Behavior Support Plans (PBSP). In accordance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), students with disabilities must be located and identified by their local school district and provided a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) (Lewis et al., 2021). IDEA protects students with disabilities, mandating that special education services must be evidence based, data driven, and implemented as outlined throughout the student's document. The general education teacher and special education teacher, both members of the IEP team, are often on the front lines of implementation of legally binding documents (O'Connor et al., 2016). Due to the rise in students receiving special education services in the inclusive setting, it is not uncommon for general education teachers to play an equally crucial role in providing appropriate services. Educators are tasked with implementation of education law and acting as representatives in the court alongside Local Education Agencies (LEA).

Statement of Problem

Special education services in the United States are driven by federal law. Specifically, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (Section 504) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) set the standard for educating students with disabilities (Summers et al., 2020). Despite the large role educators play in the implementation of IDEA and Section 504 in the classroom, there is a large disconnect in their education and professional development

training in congruence with the law. The lack of instruction in K-12 special education and general education undergraduate teacher preparation programs, paired with minimal on the job training, is contributing to teachers entering the classroom, and continuing in their careers, with insufficient legal literacy (Horner et al., 2020).

Obtaining knowledge in federal special education law is essential in preparing educators to appropriately carry out their job duties, serve students with disabilities, and avoid the litigious nature of special education. As educators develop and implement student's Individualized Education Programs (IEP), it is essential that they do so without engaging in errors that could lead to a denial of the student's Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) (Yell et al., 2016). Errors made to a student's programming can not only impact a student's educational success, but it can also lead to legal action being taken against the school district (Yell et al., 2016). Due to the K-12 educators' impact and involvement in carrying out tasks related to Section 504 and IDEA, it is imperative that they have obtained sufficient knowledge in these areas prior to entering the classroom and receive cyclical opportunities to expand and remain relevant on this content throughout the course of their career.

Existing Research

Educators are expected to carry out tasks that expand well past their traditional role of instructional practices. General education teachers and special education teachers' daily jobs duties include implementing student's Individualized Education Programs. Student's special education programming must be carried out in accordance with federal special education laws. In the United States, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act are the two federal laws that govern educational institutions. IDEA was written to ensure individuals with disabilities have a right to a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) within the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) (Zirkel, 2020). Section 504

of the Rehabilitation Act is a civil rights law that outlines, in a much broader sense, the rights of individuals with disabilities and ensures that they cannot be excluded or discriminated against based on their mental or physical disability (Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, 1973).

Together, and in conjunction with state laws, IDEA and Section 504 ensure students with disabilities are able to meaningful access the general education classroom and curriculum.

Despite the immense presence of federal special education laws throughout a teacher's career, K-12 undergraduate teacher preparation programs are reported to provide insufficient training surrounding this topic. According to Militello and Schimmel (2008), "Although many states have a standard or competency related to school law, these standards are often broad and vague" (p. 99). Instead, the emphasis of university, bachelor's level special education programs, seems to be placed on instructional practice, overlooking the vastness of job duties involved in a teaching career, including those related to IDEA and Section 504.

Educator's career preparation extends beyond their undergraduate coursework. As teacher's enter the field of education, they quickly become immersed in professional development training that is often mandated by state laws. The Pennsylvania Department of Education, (2019) exemplifies this, requiring that educators must acquire 180 professional development credits across five years of teaching for their Pennsylvania State Teaching Certificate to stay active. Even with mandated training, education professionals do not report obtaining knowledge of IDEA or Section 504 through professional development. Instead, teachers report most of their knowledge in federal special education law is acquired from their co-workers (Militello & Schimmel, 2008). These professional development opportunities could be used as a starting point to target and improve legal literacy among educators.

In the field, legal knowledge in education manifests as both instructional and non-instructional tasks that must be carried out by educators. Special educators take the brunt of

many non-instructional tasks related to legal literacy including the writing of special education documents. While writing these documents, special education teachers must ensure that they are compliant with state and federal guidelines. Regular and special education teachers must provide instruction with appropriate accommodations and modifications that are outlined in student IEPs. If IEPs, PBSPs, and 504 plans are not carried out as written in the document the IEP is not being implemented and consequently, is in violation of the law. Current research concludes ongoing teacher training regarding components of IEP writing to be effective in increasing IEP compliance (Rosas et al., 2009) (Jacaruso, 1994). Providing teachers with the appropriate training increases their ability to implement federal law in their field work (Rosas et al., 2009).

Organizational Context

Educators carry out tasks daily that heavily rely on their knowledge of federal special education law (Rosas et al., 2009). The writing of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), Re-evaluation Reports, Positive Behavior Support Plans, and 504 plans, as well as ongoing data collection on annual IEP goals, behavior and academic data, and implementation of special education documents, are all examples of tasks driven by federal law. While both general education and special education teachers are expected to implement such tasks in alignment to the federal laws, many enter the field of education, and continue throughout their careers with insufficient knowledge pertaining to Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (Summers et al., 2020).

The analysis gauges educator preparation in school law as well as their legal literacy, in efforts to improve K-12 undergraduate general education and special education teacher preparation programs and district professional development content. Through the unveiling of areas in need of improvement and substantiation in special educator coursework and training, findings can be used to ensure that educators will enter the classroom prepared to fulfill their

special education tasks, and with a more comprehensive understanding of federal special education law.

Significance of Study

Students with disabilities are becoming increasingly more included in the general education environment. Due to the shift of inclusive practices, the task of implementing IEPs and 504 plans falls on both the general education and special education teachers (Francisco et al., 2020). In addition to the implementation of services, teachers often spearhead in the identification of students in need of special education services. As the educational pendulum swings to a more inclusive environment, it becomes progressively more essential for teachers to be well informed in the laws and regulations they are expected to fulfill (O'Connor et al., 2016). This study examined the extent to which teachers have been trained to carry out the implementation of law as well as their foundational understanding of federal special education law.

Educators are expected to carry out many tasks related to the implementation of federal special education law (Markelz et al., 2022). Special education teachers are assigned caseloads of students. For each student on their caseload, they are expected to write re-evaluation reports every two to three years, Individualized Education Programs yearly, and when appropriate, they complete Positive Behavior Support Plans, and 504 Plans, among many other legally binding documents. In addition to the completion of these documents, special educators collect ongoing data on student academic progress and IEP goal progress monitoring data. Based on this data, they are responsible for the reporting of each student's progress, updating the student's programming and IEP goals, and conducting annual IEP meetings.

General education teachers also play a vital role and are significant members of the IEP team (O'Connor et al., 2016). Data collection for IEP goals will often occur in the general

education classroom, falling into the hands of the student's classroom teacher. General education teachers are responsible for ongoing IEP goal data collection and the fulfillment of special education services as they are outlined in the student's IEPs and other relevant documents. It is not uncommon for a teacher to have multiple students receiving special education services in their classroom each year. The teacher is then responsible for implementing many different and individualized modifications to the curriculum and accommodations to the environment for each student.

The tasks described in this chapter aligns with the importance of educators being well versed in federal special education law. While teachers are given many tasks related to the implementation of the law, undergraduate teacher preparation programs often fail in providing adequate coursework relating to this matter (Summers et al., 2020). Rather than dedicating entire courses to instruction in laws that protect students with disabilities, the history of these laws are often a brief element taught as part of a more comprehensive university class (Horner et al., 2020). The gap in what is being taught at the university level, and the duties that teachers are expected to fulfill in the classroom, lead to misconceptions and ill understanding surrounding special education law among educators.

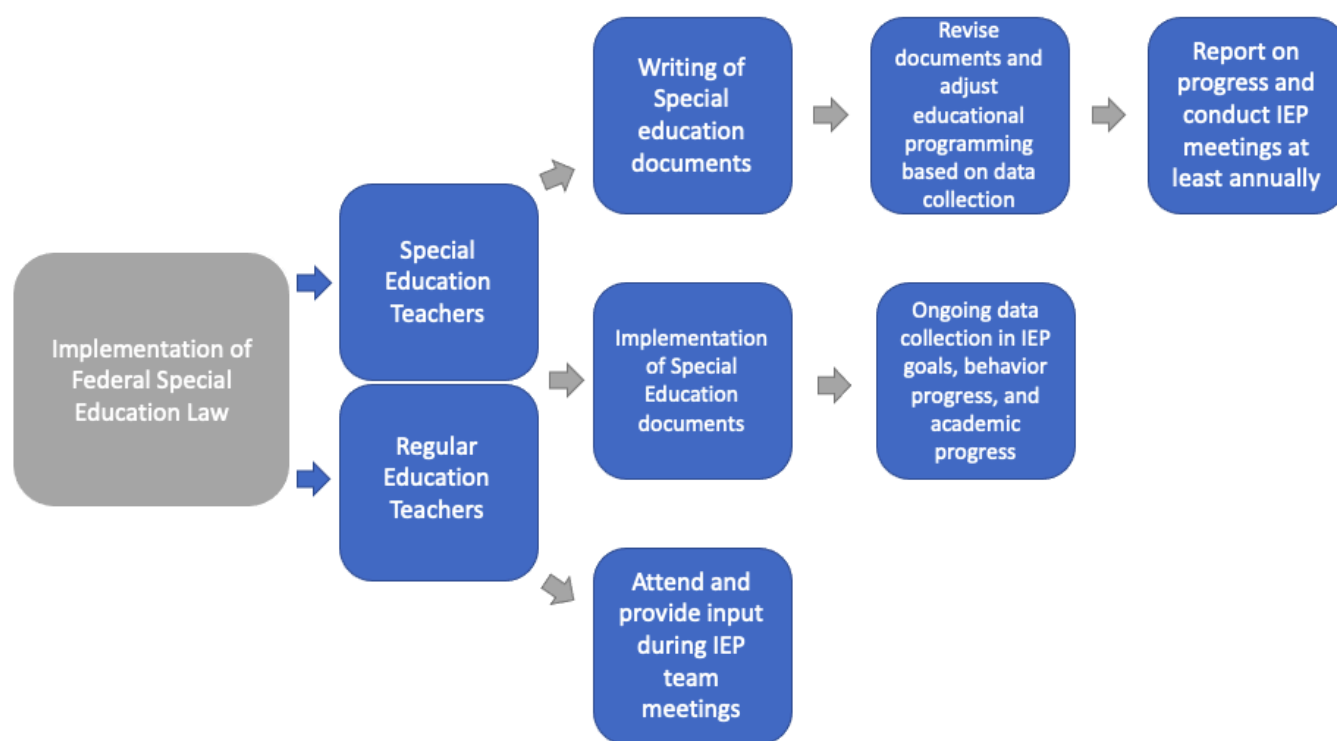
Beyond university coursework, teachers are mandated to participate in professional development sessions throughout the school year, and sometimes in the summer months (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2019). Professional development training can cover a wide variety of topics pertaining to teacher duties. Because today's teachers cover a wide range of tasks from daily parent communication to instructional strategies it would be nearly impossible to provide teachers with sufficient training in each aspect of their job on a yearly basis. It can be determined then that professional development training related to special education law may be brief, if provided at all.

Teachers face the limitations of the all-encompassing nature of their jobs despite being provided with adequate training. Research pertaining to teacher knowledge and preparedness in federal law exists but proves to be limited. Teacher preparation programs and professional development courses could improve their coursework if further research is done illuminating teachers' lack of legal literacy in comparison to their daily job tasks associated with the law.

Educator's implementation of federal special education law outlined in Figure 1:

Figure 1

Educators' tasks related to implementation of Federal Special Education Law



Statement of Purpose and Research Questions

This study aims to explore educator's knowledge regarding federal special education law and civil rights law and their preparation to provide services to children identified with

disabilities. Educators are asked to take on many diverse tasks each day. Despite the implementation of special education law being an essential component of their job function, many fall short in their understanding of the law. This could be due to a lack of sufficient education revolving around IDEA and Section 504 in K-12 undergraduate teacher preparation programs and training. This study examined teacher's preparedness and knowledge in special education law by addressing the following research questions:

Research Question 1: What undergraduate preparation and professional development training do K-12 general educators and special educators receive regarding IDEA and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act in one public school district?

Research Question 2: To what extent are K-12 general education and special education teachers familiar with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act in one public school district?

Definition of Terms

Child Find: The process of identifying students with disabilities and evaluating their need for special education services (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004).

Individualized Education Program (IEP): A legally binding document outlining a student's educational programming and services based on their unique and specific needs (Francisco et al., 2020).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA): Federal special education law written to ensure individuals with disabilities have a right to a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) within the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) (Zirkel, 2020).

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE): requires students receiving special education services be educated in the general education environment with their peers without disabilities, "to the maximum extent appropriate" (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004).

Modifications: Changes made to the curriculum to meet student needs (Francisco et al., 2020).

Professional Development: Continuing education for educators (Militello & Schimmel, 2008).

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act: Federal special education law that outlines the rights of individuals with disabilities and ensures that they cannot be excluded or discriminated against based on their mental or physical disability (Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, 1973).

Teacher preparation programs: College and university coursework for future educators and pre-service teachers (Militello & Schimmel, 2008).

Federal Special Education Law: Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (Horner et al., 2020).

Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE): Ensures that individuals with disabilities are afforded the same educational opportunities as their non-disabled peers (Francisco et al., 2020).

504 Plan: Eliminates barriers to accessing an appropriate education under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (Spiel et al., 2014).

Conclusion

Educational shifts occur throughout history as new research is unveiled and, as Local Education Agencies aim to better meet the needs of students. In modern day education, administrators and educators view Special Education as a service rather than a location. Students with disabilities are protected against discrimination and are guaranteed the right to a free and appropriate public education within the least restrictive environment, as outlined in Section 504 and IDEA. Therefore, Special Education services and accommodations are often provided to students in the general education classroom, when appropriate.

The shift to inclusive practices has involved general education teachers as equally important members of the IEP team, alongside the special education teacher. Therefore, both the general education and special education teachers implement federal special education law daily

through their contributions of writing and implementing special education documents. Despite implementation of federal special education law being a daily job duty for educators, many report a lack of understanding and training regarding legal literacy. The disconnect between educator knowledge and the law can have serious implications for the well-being of students with disabilities and can lead to legal action being taken against LEAs (Yell et al., 2016). Consequently, it is imperative that teachers are being educated on the components that drive Section 504 and IDEA in order to be able to successfully carry out the law in the school setting.

In conclusion, current research trends reveal a lack of legal literacy among K-12 general educators and special educators. As teacher training in federal law increases, so does their ability to implement federal law in the classroom (Rosas et al., 2009). In Chapter 2, the research will expose literature that demonstrates the obvious gap in educator preparation and knowledge surrounding IDEA and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Introduction

The field of education revolves heavily around the implementation of state and federal education laws. Disability advocacy has played a fundamental role in the movement to education being rich with litigation (Pisacone, 2022). Each day, special educators are faced with creating and implementing documents that are legally binding and must be compliant with federal laws and regulations. Christle and Yell (2010) explain, “Procedural requirements obligate school-based teams to follow the strictures of the law when developing students’ IEPs (p.111). Additionally, students are often receiving special education services within the inclusive general education classroom, leaving much of the implementation of their services in the hands of general education classroom teachers (Horner et al., 2020). Even though the education system has become increasingly more litigious, school preparation programs seem to lack adequate training in special education law. As a result, educators often demonstrate a lack of understanding or knowledge of federal law as it relates to special education (Markelz et al., 2022). An understanding and a preparedness to implement federal law is an essential component of the daily tasks and job function of today’s educators.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to determine educator’s knowledge and preparedness to implement special education law in the classroom and during non-instructional tasks such as creation of Special Education documents. Educators are tasked with applying federal laws IDEA and Section 504 in their classroom despite existing research that suggests educators are ill

prepared to do so. A qualitative research study seeks to explore educators' knowledge and preparedness in special education federal law in one public school district by means of open-ended survey questions. The following research questions were addressed, “What preparation and training do educators receive regarding federal special education law IDEA and civil rights law Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act in one public school district?” and, “To what extent are teachers familiar with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act in one public school district?”

Inclusive education has become the expectation for all students, including students who are protected against discrimination under Section 504, and students who are receiving special education services through IDEA. Though inclusion of students with disabilities is outlined in special education federal law, teacher candidates often have a limited understanding of how to implement inclusive practices (Gülay & Altun, 2023). Preparedness to implement inclusive practices related to special education federal law largely depends on teacher training (Dignath et al., 2022). Undergraduate coursework varies across universities and often leaves teacher candidates with little or no training on the matter (Dignath et al., 2022). Results of the study could be used to assist universities and districts in recognizing the training needs of current and future K-12 general educators and special educators in an effort to better equip teachers to carry out practices and policies related to IDEA and Section 504.

Special Education Law

Two laws protect students with disabilities, The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (Section 504). The intention of the two federal laws is to ensure equity for students with disabilities (University of Colorado at Boulder et al., 2023). On a national scale, millions of students are eligible and receive accommodations, services, and support under Section 504 and IDEA (University of Colorado at Boulder et al.,

2023). While each law outlines separate regulations, educators at times implement policy from each simultaneously to support students with disabilities. Together, and in conjunction with state laws, IDEA and Section 504 ensure equal opportunity for students with disabilities and drive special education services in the United States (Horner et al., 2020).

Historical Overview

Students with disabilities have historically been treated unfairly, oftentimes being excluded or segregated within the public school system. Prior to 1975, unfair treatment manifested in two distinct ways. The first manifestation of inadequate education for students with disabilities was the complete exclusion from public schools, and the second being an education within the public school that did not appropriately address their needs (Katsiyanni et al., 2001). A shift began to occur in the 1950's and 1960's in conjunction with the civil rights movement. During this time, parents and advocates sought justice for equal and appropriate education for students with disabilities through the court system (Katsiyanni et al., 2021). *Brown vs. the Board of Education* was perhaps the first landmark case in a series of undertakings. While *Brown vs. the Board of Education* sought equality for African Americans, the decision would eventually become the basis for advocacy groups to argue for the same equality for people with disabilities (Yell et al., 1998).

Brown vs. the Board of Education was just the beginning of a movement that would pave the path to equality for students with disabilities. Two pivotal cases followed in the 1970's, *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Citizens (PARC) vs. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* and *Mills vs. Board of Education*, which together, federally established the right for students with disabilities to receive an education (Kasiyanni et al., 2021). These landmark cases, along with

many other similar cases across the nation, would become the basis of federal legislation addressing the equality and educational rights for people with disabilities.

In the midst of many landmark cases came the substantive effort to protect students with disabilities. According to Yell et al., (1998) “In 1973, the first major effort to protect persons with disabilities against discrimination based on their disabilities took place when Congress passed Section 504 of the Rehabilitation” (p. 314). While the purpose outlined in the original proposal of Section 504 was murky, in 1974, amendments were made to ensure protections against discrimination of students with disabilities (Yell et al., 1998).

The Education for all Handicapped Children Act, often referred to as Public Law 94-142 (P.L. 94-142), passed in 1975, led to some major improvements for children with disabilities. Several requirements existed within the parameters of P.L. 94-142 including Child Find, Individualized Education Programs, Least Restrictive Environment, Nondiscriminatory Assessment, Related Services, Due Process, Funding, and a free appropriate public education (Smith, 2005).

In 1990, amendments made to P.L. 94-142 resulted in a name change of the act to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Other amendments initiated during this time included the addition of Autism and Traumatic Brain Injury as disability categories eligible for services under IDEA, and the requirement of transition services no later than age 16, which would later be changed to age 14 in the 1997 amendments (Smith, 2005). The most recent reauthorization of IDEA took place in 2004. While the 2004 reauthorization of IDEA included many significant changes included but not limited to the requirement for special education teachers to be highly qualified, full funding, and eligibility requirements for students identified

with a learning disability, the premise of the law has largely remained static. The next section will outline the current status of IDEA and its driving forces.

IDEA

IDEA was written to ensure individuals with disabilities have a right to a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) within the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) (Zirkel, 2020). Historically, students with disabilities have not been given the same educational and extra-curricular opportunities as students without disabilities (Francisco et al., 2020). The right to FAPE under IDEA ensures that students who are identified with one of the 13 disability categories outlined in IDEA, have the same access to a meaningful and appropriate education through program modifications and accommodations designed to meet their unique needs. The University of Colorado at Boulder (2023) explains, “IDEA provides funding to states, and as a condition of accepting IDEA funding, states are required to comply with the law’s requirements (p. 7).

The Least Restrictive Environment (LRE), according to the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (2004), requires students receiving special education services be educated in the general education environment with their peers without disabilities, “to the maximum extent appropriate” additionally, “separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the general educational environment occurs only when the nature or severity of the disability of a child is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily” (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004). Prior to being placed in the Least Restrictive Environment, students with disabilities must be “identified, located, and evaluated” on an ongoing basis (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 2004).

A key factor of LRE is the concept of inclusion. Inclusion refers to the education of students receiving special education services under IDEA within the general education classroom

alongside their typically developing and same aged peers (Monahan et al., 2023). While inclusive education has proven to be beneficial for all involved, students with disabilities are likely to suffer if educators are not competently trained and knowledgeable in the law (Monahan et al., 2023). Gülay and Altun (2023) further explain the importance of teacher involvement and implementation of inclusive practices related to IDEA stating, “teachers need to take an active role in the successful realization of inclusive education as they interact with students closely and for a long time” (p.456).

Several other components exist to provide students with special education services within the parameters of IDEA. First, the need to locate, identify and evaluate students with disabilities is known as Child Find. Child find is the process of identifying students with disabilities and evaluating their need for special education services (Zirkel, 2020). If the student is found to be eligible for special education services, the Special Education teacher’s next step is to draft, share, and implement an Individualized Education Program (IEP). This is the first step in the Special Education process, and where educators' knowledge should begin regarding special education law. Next, parent participation is another significant piece that is unique to IDEA.

Unlike Section 504, IDEA mandates the need for parent involvement in the IEP process. Parental involvement is required throughout the entirety of the process, including but not limited to, the evaluation, IEP meetings, and placement decisions (Katsiyanni et al., 2021) More specifically, IDEA recognizes parental involvement as expanded beyond parents, and includes guardians or relatives with whom the child resides (Hyatt, 2007). Additionally, IDEA requires that students receiving services must have access to related services. Related services refer to the services that are necessary to be carried out in order for a student to demonstrate success from the special education services they are receiving (Smith, 2005).

IEPs are the written document that outlines exactly how a student will access FAPE with the least restrictive environment in accordance with IDEA. General education teachers and general education teachers are considered to be members of the IEP team and are therefore responsible for creating and carrying out student IEPs. Procedural safeguards are a driving factor of IDEA and ensure that districts remain consistent in their development and implementation of student IEPs (Christle & Yell, 2010). Developing IEPs is one of several non-instructional tasks educators participate in related to IDEA (Scholl, 2021). Being well versed in the strict guidelines of procedurally sound documents is imperative to remain in compliance with the federal guidelines and to ensure that the student is demonstrating meaningful educational benefit (Christle & Yell, 2010). Procedurally sound IEPs should, in turn yield a unique educational experience that will meet the student's needs. Therefore, the development of compliant and data-driven documents is directly correlated to the educational benefit and progress of the student (Yell et al., 2020).

Section 504

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act is a civil right law that outlines, in a much broader sense, the rights of individuals with disabilities and ensures that they cannot be excluded or discriminated against based on their mental or physical disability (Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, 1973). While Section 504 doesn't offer the same complex safeguards, its protections extend to primary education, secondary education, and encompass higher education programs that receive federal funding (University of Colorado at Boulder et al., 2023). It is possible for students to qualify for services under only Section 504 if their disability is not included as one of the 13 disability categories outlined in IDEA. Additionally, students can qualify under solely IDEA, or qualify for services under both section 504 and IDEA, depending on the nature of their disability (Horner et al., 2020).

Students who qualify for a 504 plan must first be identified as having a disability that limits one or more major life activities (Brinkman, 2023). Next, the multi-disciplinary team will determine if a 504 plan is needed to provide accommodations that will ensure access to the general education curriculum (Brinkman, 2023). Section 504, unlike IDEA, does not require legal guardians to be included as members of a team or to be involved in developing the plan (University of Colorado at Boulder et al., 2023). While district administrators typically lead the multidisciplinary teams, classroom teachers are held responsible for implementation of the 504 plan. According to Shaw and Madaus (2008), “Because Section 504 is a civil rights law, responsibility for its implementation involves a range of school-based professionals, including administrators, general education teachers, school counselors, school psychologists, and special education teachers” (p226). On the basis of the law however, the superintendent is held accountable to ensure their district is compliant with Section 504 (Brinkman, 2023). Dobson (2013) simply states, “if accommodations or modifications are not being met, the student’s school may be in violation of the law (p.3)”

While Section 504 is a civil rights law that protects students with disabilities against discrimination, it does not provide students with access to special education services in the same way as IDEA. Instead, Section 504 ensures that a student is able to access the general education curriculum through accommodations to the environment and modifications to the curriculum (Dobson, 2013). University of Colorado at Boulder et al., (2023) eloquently clarifies “In this sense, Section 504 is more about fulfilling the promise of anti-discrimination, removing barriers, and promoting access to education comparable to students without disabilities, as opposed to IDEA’s emphasis on the provision of educational services and supports” (p.9). While 504 plans do not have to be laid out in writing (University of Colorado at Boulder et al., 2013), it is

imperative that accommodations and modifications outlined within the plan are explicitly aligned to student needs (Dobson, 2013).

While more students are covered under the basis of IDEA than just solely Section 504 alone, students with 504 service agreements continue to rise based on most recent data (Zirkel, 2023). As these numbers rise, so does the need for educators to be prepared to implement the agreement. Regardless of under which law(s), the student is eligible to receive services, educators are among the most essential persons in carrying out their legally binding special education documents and programming.

Teacher Preparation Programs

Teacher preparation programs are typically presented as undergraduate level college courses, followed by a portion of training that occurs in the field under the direction of a cooperating teacher. Teacher training that occurs in the classroom is most often referred to as student teaching. Research points to hands- on experiences being a key component to teachers' sense of preparedness (Livers et al., 2021). Despite this, university coursework has been known to heavily focus on instructional practices with little emphasis or experiences surrounding special education law.

The same emphasis on instructional practices tends to occur during student teaching placements. As noted by Summers et al. (2020), “student teaching requires students to become proficient in lesson planning and classroom discipline. It is less likely that teacher candidates feel the same pressing need to be fluent in how the law applies to the classroom” (p.335).

Additionally, 85% of teachers reported never having taken a course regarding school law during their preparation coursework (Militello & Schimmel, 2008). Another study conducted by O'Connor et al., (2016) found that only 19% of the teachers that were surveyed had courses related to both Section 504 and IDEA during their college coursework. Overall, teachers lack a

sense of preparedness to support students with disabilities (Livers et al., 2021) The lack in preparation of legal literacy at the undergraduate level has long lasting ramification as teachers progress throughout their careers.

Livers et al., (2021) highlights, “Due to the connection of teacher candidate concerns and sense of preparedness to their pedagogy and content usage as in-service teachers, it is important for teacher educators to consider the influences of teacher preparation on teacher candidates’ sense of preparedness and concerns.” While some educational institutions have course requirements that include special education law, they seem to be missing the mark or heavily outweighed by courses related to instructional practices. For students who have been educated in law, they either have demonstrated a lack of retention of the information or have lacked generalization of the information into their field work as a teacher. Horner et al., (2020) examined pre-service teachers' knowledge of IDEA and Section 504 to determine the effects of coursework related to Special Educator Law on Preservice teacher’s knowledge of the law. Horner et al. (2020) found that while many pre-service teachers lacked coursework pertaining to the law, teachers who reported being instructed in IDEA and Section 504 only scored slightly higher and still landed at a chance level of knowledge on an online survey. Similarly, O’Connor et al. (2016) reported teachers who did take coursework pertaining to special education law scored 68% correct on the administered questionnaire which was only two percent (66% total) higher than those who did not receive instruction in Section 504 and IDEA. Consequently, the research concluded that regardless of taking coursework on special education law, pre-service teachers, as well as teachers in the field, demonstrate an overwhelming lack of knowledge on the subject.

Teacher Training

Both general education and special education teachers are responsible for implementing the policies and practices outlined in Federal special education law. Summers et al. (2020) shine a light on this, stating, “When teachers enter a preK-12 classroom in a public school they represent not only themselves, their school, and school district, but – legally speaking – also the state” (p.330) Despite the importance of acquiring knowledge to implement IDEA and Section 504 with the classroom, only 43% of teachers surveyed by O’Conner et al., (2016) demonstrated a general understanding of IDEA. Similarly, data from one study found that school personnel lack the knowledge of Section 504 to ensure that students protected under this law are being provided with equal access (Shaw & Madaus, 2008). Though they are lacking this knowledge, Militello and Schimmel (2008) explain, “Based on what we found that teachers know, do not know, and want to know, it is clear there is no lack of desire to be informed (p. 100). With the proven lack of understanding of special education law, ongoing professional development and training opportunities for educators could be effective in combating insufficient understanding.

Educators who are certified in the state of Pennsylvania are mandated to obtain 180 professional development credits every 5 years. Despite this requirement, teachers do not acquire most of their knowledge through professional development training opportunities. A survey conducted by Militello and Schimmel (2008) found, “The majority of the teachers (52%) listed one source as a moderate or substantial source of information: other teachers. The second-closest source of legal information was school administration (45%)” (p.99). Gathering legal information through means of colleagues and administrators does not typically equate to an adequate understanding of Special Education laws. Misinformation regarding law is being shared amongst educators and is yet another reason why teacher training and preparation is imperative in obtaining legal literacy within the field (Militello & Schimmel, 2008).

Less research exists regarding the amount and the effectiveness of professional development in-service teachers receive in special education law. Rather than expecting pre-service teachers to comprehend and apply to school in their future classroom, it may be more effective to provide on-going training to teachers as part of a professional development course in applied educational settings (Summers et al., 2020). It can be assumed that the more legally literate teachers become, the less litigious special education will be.

Application of Law

Knowledge of special education law is essential for adequate implementation to occur from educators. Implementing special education law occurs via instructional and non-instructional tasks. Carrying out non-instructional tasks with legal literacy is especially true for special education teachers. Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) are legally binding documents that must be written in compliance with state and federal laws. Francisco et al. (2020) explains, “the document contains pertinent information about the child’s background, capabilities, learning needs, accommodations needed, and goals and objectives to be achieved” and “the quality of the IEP (i.e., goals and objectives set) affects the quality of a child’s education” (p.7). Though creating special education documents is a large part of a special education teacher job, it is yet another area that lacks sufficient training.

Educators must be exposed to hands-on learning experiences in order to feel a sense of preparedness to carry out educational tasks and support students (Liver, 2021). The same can be applied to the development of Special Education documents such as IEPs. Jacaruso (1994), conducted a study analyzing the effectiveness of an IEP writing workshop. The study consisted of special education teacher’s IEP that were found to be out of compliance according to the State Department of Education. Holding frequent educational workshops for teachers in writing measurable annual goals proved to be effective in increasing IEP compliance (Jacaruso, 1994).

Furthermore, Jacaruso (1994), illuminates the importance of intervening prior to non-compliance taking place. With the proper training and resources, it can be concluded that legal literacy and compliance of educational documents increases substantially. Therefore, training for pre-services and in-service teachers is vital and should be occurring at a much higher rate.

An ongoing cycle of litigation and legislation exists in special education and has ultimately led to the inclusive education system that exists today (Pisacone, 2022) While compliance of special education documents tends to occur more at the state level, implementation of the documents aligns with both state and federal laws. A main concept of IDEA outlines that students with disabilities have the right to a Free and Appropriate Public Education must be educated within the least restrictive environment. As a result, IEPs are often implemented within the general education classroom alongside the students' same-aged peers, when the multidisciplinary team finds this to be an appropriate placement. Increased legal literacy in teachers can lead to effective implementation of instructional and non-instructional practices related to IDEA (Militello & Schimmel, 2008).

Conclusion

Education for students with disabilities was not always accessible or guaranteed. It wasn't until the civil right movement that parents and advocacy groups gained momentum and the needle began to move toward inclusive education of students with disabilities. Many court cases over the span of several years led to legislation that would eventually evolve into federal laws we know today that protect students with disabilities from discrimination and ensure their access to an education that meets their unique needs.

IDEA and Section 504 are federal laws that must be applied in schools by educators. The laws highlight the importance of students with disabilities having equal rights in education and ensuring appropriate educational and services. While these laws drive education services, the

field has become increasingly litigious over the years. In the face of litigiousness, educators are expected to be representative of the court in carrying out such laws (Summers et al., 2020).

Errors to the development and implementation of student IEPs can lead to legal action being taken against the district (Christle & Yell, 2010).

Though Section 504 does not outline procedural safeguards in the same way as IDEA, the U.S Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights seeks to ensure that entities who receive local funding are compliant with Section 504 (University of Colorado at Boulder, 2023). Despite this fact, many educators enter the field with limited knowledge and pre-service training on the subject. If educators lack awareness and knowledge surrounding federal law, this can have a lasting negative impact on students with disabilities (Monahan et al., 2023).

With the shift to inclusive education, the law now requires students receiving special education services and/or accommodations under Section 504 and IDEA to be included with their peers to the greatest extent possible. While the educational pendulum swings to inclusive practices, it becomes increasingly more imperative to ensure the educators are informed in special education law, and prepared to implement it accordingly, academic preparation programs must improve the quantity and quality of special education law courses (Markelz et al., 2022).

As stated by Livers et al., (2021), "Teacher preparation programs should examine how they support teacher candidates in planning and implementing accommodations and modifications" (p.47). Research shows ongoing training for pre-service teachers enhances the quality of the special education documents along with their ability to implement documents that align to state and federal guidelines (Summers et al., 2020). Forthcoming chapters will outline research methods with the purpose of investigating one school district's preparedness and literacy in special education law.

Chapter 3

Methodology

This study aimed to analyze educators' legal literacy and preparedness to implement federal special education laws. The purpose of this study was to determine if teacher preparation programs and school professional development training adequately prepare teachers to understand and carry out tasks relating to Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Identifying barriers within educational programs and school training can aid in improvements to educational courses and content related to special education law. In turn, this research aimed to improve legal courses and training, leading to well-equipped and legally literate teachers.

Participants of the study included K-12 general education teachers and special education teachers. The sample was taken from one public school district. Participants were chosen at random by the district's Director of Special Education and included 10 general educators and 10 special educators from various buildings within the school district. In order to validate the study, at least 5 special education teachers and 5 general education teachers were needed to complete the survey.

Due to the open-ended nature of the questions being posed, a qualitative research study was conducted. The survey presented to the participants included open-ended questions in order to obtain information and identify themes related to their proficiency and special education law. Specifically, the survey questions sought to obtain information regarding participants'

knowledge of Section 504 and IDEA. This study aimed to pinpoint similarities in participants responses to answer the posed research question. In addition to the open-ended questions pertaining to special education law, the survey also posed demographic questions to participants to gain insight on their role and years of experience as an educator. The responses were analyzed to determine the impact of educators' role and years of experience in their knowledge of and confidence in implementation of the federal laws in the classroom.

Demographics

Research for this study was conducted at Rock View School District. The district comprises two elementary schools and one Middle-High School. The participants of this study spanned across educators from all buildings within the district. Rock View School District serves approximately 1,363 students with 19.6% of those students receiving special education services. Of the 19.6% of students receiving special education services, 86.1% percent of students receive services in the general education classroom for 80% or more of the school day. Additionally, 6 percent of students receive services inside the general education classroom for less than 40% of the day, and 4.4 percent of students receive special education services in settings outside of the general education classroom.

The district employs approximately 106 teachers, with 92 of those staff employed as general education teachers, and 14 as special education teachers. Administratively, both elementary schools are each equipped with a Principal and School Psychologist. The school Psychologist at the elementary school also serves students at Rock View Middle School and Rock View High School. Additionally, Rock View High School and Middle School each house their own Principals. Overseeing the administrative team at the district is the school Superintendent, the Assistant Superintendent, and the Assistant to the Superintendent/ Director of Student Services.

Special education services and programs at Rock View School District include full time and supplemental Autistic Support/Life Skills Support classrooms, Itinerant Autistic Support, Emotional Support, Learning Support, and Speech/Language Support services. Rock View School District promotes inclusive education and the Least Restrictive Environment. Students receiving an itinerant level of services receive most of their special education support within the general education classroom. Students who receive full time and supplemental Autistic Support and Life Skills Support are included in the general education classroom for periods of time that are most appropriate for their ability and functioning level such as specials, lunch, recess, and homeroom. The inclusive nature of the district implies the involvement of both general education and special education teachers in the implementation of student IEPs and special education programming, a noteworthy component in the selection of the site.

Participants

Special education and general education teachers were surveyed on their knowledge of and preparedness in special education school law. Data was obtained from participants from a survey created through a Google Form. 10 special education teachers and 10 general education teachers received the Google Form survey. The study aimed for a sample size of 10-14 participants including both the general and special educator population. The selection of special education teachers and general education teachers was determined to be appropriate in order to acquire and identify purposeful and accurate themes among educators. It was essential to the study that an equal or comparable number of special educators and regular educators completed the survey aiming to illuminate central similarities and differences among the participants' responses.

While the survey was distributed equally among regular education and special education teachers, several hypotheses were formed surrounding the data. First, it was hypothesized that

more special education teachers would complete the survey than general education teachers due to a familiarity surrounding the topic. Additionally, a 70% completion rate of the surveys was anticipated.

Of the 20 participants that were distributed the survey, 8 special educators, and 6 regular educators completed the survey in the allotted time frame. Completion rate among the participants was consistent with the hypothesis. It was determined that sufficient data had been obtained from the submission of 14 Google Surveys.

Procedures

Permission was gained to conduct research at Rock View School District's through the district's Superintendent. Following support from the Rock View School District, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) application was submitted, and permission was granted to begin the study.

Next, a letter was emailed to each of the potential participants. The intent of the letter was to initiate educators' interest in participation, disclose details of the study, and outline confidentiality as it pertains to the research. The letter also contained a link to participate in the study through completion of the survey. Potential participants of the study included teachers of the general education population and teachers of the special education population. The letters were delivered to all the potential participants which included 10 general education teachers and 10 special education teachers which were chosen at random by the Director of Special education.

Next, the study began through qualitative data collection via a Google Form. Participants were asked open ended questions pertaining to their expertise and preparation in school law. An open-ended survey was chosen as the method for data collection in order to glean the most accurate understanding of special education law among differing educators in the field. Through the open-ended nature of the questions, the study aimed to make connections and illuminate

differences between the participants' responses. Through a qualitative research design, the research set out to discover meaningful themes among the participants' experiences.

The open-ended survey was distributed as a Google Form for several reasons. First, Google Forms were a method familiar and could be created and modified based on the outlined research questions. Additionally, Google Forms allows for the participants' responses to be easily accessed and reviewed, while simultaneously upholding a high level of security and confidentiality. Next, Google Forms can be distributed via email, effectively reaching all participants of the study. Finally, this method was chosen as the form of data collection due to the user-friendly nature of the method and Google being a familiar platform and method of surveying among the site's participants.

Figure 2. Research Procedures

The figure below outlines the questions provided to participants through the Google Form:

1. How many years have you been an educator?
 1. 0-5
 2. 6-10
 3. 11-15
 4. 16+
2. Choose the title that best describes your content area.
 1. Special Education Teacher
 2. General education Teacher
3. During your undergraduate teacher preparation program, did you take coursework pertaining to Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)?
 1. Yes
 2. No

3. Unsure
4. During your undergraduate teacher preparation program, did you take coursework pertaining to Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Program?
 1. Yes
 2. No
 3. Unsure
5. Up to this point in your career, do you feel that you have been provided with adequate coursework, training, and guidance in federal law pertaining to section 504 and IDEA?
 1. Yes
 2. No
6. How have you obtained your current knowledge of IDEA and Section 504? (example: college courses, student teacher, professional development, friend, colleague, administrator, the internet).
 1. Open ended
7. Describe in detail the key components that make up IDEA.
 1. Open ended
8. Describe in detail the main components that drive Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act.
 1. Open ended
9. How confident are you in implementing IDEA and Section 504 in the classroom?
 1. Open ended
10. OPTIONAL: If you would like to elaborate on your responses, please leave additional comments below.

Data Analysis

A qualitative study was conducted to identify themes and patterns related to the educator's legal literacy. Open coding was the method utilized to identify themes throughout the survey data. Open coding refers to a manual and flexible approach used to determine themes based on the language used by participants throughout their survey responses (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Through analysis of the survey results, the study attempts to find similar and contrasting patterns among special education and general education teachers responses pertaining to their undergraduate coursework, career training, and current understanding of school law. Additionally, it was examined how educators are trained in legal matters, how this may impact their understanding of the law, and their confidence in implementation. In addition to the open-ended questions, multiple choice questions were analyzed using the same open-coded method and applied to determine the impact of educator's role and years of experience regarding their survey responses. Surveys were distributed to participants and investigated via Google Forms. Upon participant completion, the data were automatically graphed through Google Forms.

Security measures were taken to ensure confidentiality of all participants and protection of survey data. Data collected was saved securely in a personal password protected computer. Additionally, a unique password was required to access the completed surveys in a Google account system. At the completion of all surveys, data were reviewed and analyzed. Data gathered from the surveys will only be used for educational and informational purposes with participants names omitted.

Site Permission

Prior to conducting research, site permission was gained from Rock View School District. A request was submitted to the district's superintendent. The Superintendent granted support for

the study to be completed and directed the researcher to the district's Assistant Superintendent and Assistant to the Superintendent to obtain the necessary information to proceed. The administrative team granted formal approval for the study to be conducted at Rock View School District.

Presentation of Results

Upon completion of data collection and analysis, results will be presented to school district administration and distributed to participants upon request. Administration will have the opportunity to access the results in order to share with district personnel and utilize for career training and professional development purposes. Upon inquiry, participants will receive access to the graphic demonstration of results, through means of district emails. Email addresses used will be in correspondence with the emails used for survey distribution. Furthermore, a copy of the completed dissertation may be provided to participants once the research is compiled and approved through the dissertation defense process.

Limitations

Throughout the data collection process, participants were asked questions regarding their educational background of special education law. Due to participants being chosen at random by the Director of Special Education, the age range and years of experience of participants varied. Therefore, some participants reportedly were farther removed from schooling, which could have resulted in having trouble recalling the education related to IDEA and Section 504. This may have potentially skewed results or caused faulty reporting if participants recalled incorrect information.

Additional limitations include the researcher's relationship with participants, specifically the special education staff at Rock View School District. The researcher previously taught as a special education teacher at the district over the span of four and a half school years. Personal

relationships to the researcher may cause pressure to perform in a specific manner on the distributed survey questions. Furthermore, participants may have been enticed to reach out to the researcher regarding their thoughts or opinions related to the survey, thus breaching the confidential nature of the study.

Due to the nature of professional development sessions for special education teachers, and ongoing knowledge acquired during on-the-job training it was expected that special education teachers may report a better understanding of IDEA and Section 504. General education teachers on the other hand, may not have participated in professional development of training related to special education law, and therefore may demonstrate lower levels of legal literacy. A lack of legal literacy among regular educators may also be attributed to minimal coursework related to special education throughout their educational experience.

Upon completion of data collection and analysis, results may be shared with participants and administrators of the school district upon request. The research study aimed to improve educational resources for educators in order to promote an increased understanding of special education law. Results could be used by administrators to drive future professional development sessions in the school district.

Conclusion

A qualitative research study was conducted to determine educator's knowledge and preparedness in special education law. Data for the study were collected through means of a 10 question open-ended survey to obtain information related to educators' knowledge of federal special education laws including Section 504 and IDEA. Open-ended questions are posed to identify participants' knowledge and preparedness to implement IDEA and Section 504. Additionally, demographic questions sought to expose educator's roles and experience levels and any correlations that may exist between demographics and participants knowledge of the content.

Surveys were distributed through school district email as a Google Form. Once data has been obtained and analyzed and defended, findings will be exported, graphed, and reported to school district officials and participants of the study upon request.

Open coding was the method used for analyzing survey data and to unveil the voice of participants. Open coding is a manual and flexible approach used to determine themes based on the language used by participants throughout their survey responses (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). All information obtained and pertaining to the study at hand were secured on a password locked computer. Depending on school district interest, further information can be shared with staff members and stakeholders upon administrator request.

Chapter 4

Results and Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine K-12 educator knowledge in the federal laws that protect students with disabilities and drive Special Education services in the United States, in order to explore their preparedness to implement Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in the school setting. A qualitative methodology was used to conduct this study in order to answer the following research questions: “What preparation and training do educators receive regarding federal special education law IDEA and civil rights law Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act in one public school district?” and, “To what extent are teachers familiar with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act in one public school district?” The study sought to answer these questions due to the belief that findings could shine a light on the importance of undergraduate college coursework as well as district professional development for K-12 educators.

Potential participants, which included ten K-12 general education teachers and 10 K-12 special education teachers, were asked to complete a 10-question survey that was distributed to them by means of district email. All survey responses were obtained within the two-week frame outlined within the participant informational email. The minimum number of participants needed to validate the study was five regular education and five special education teachers. At the conclusion of the two-week time frame, eight special education teachers, and six general education teachers completed the survey. The survey consisted of five multiple choice questions and five open ended questions, the last open-ended question being an opportunity for participants

to elaborate on their responses. While six general education teachers completed the survey, four completed the open-ended questions expanding on their knowledge and preparedness of Section 504 and IDEA. Of the two general education teachers that did not expand on their knowledge of special education law, both reported a lack of preparedness in either their college coursework or professional development training. Surveys were completed by participants on an individual basis and were free of time constraints.

The study was conducted using a qualitative methodology. Qualitative research seeks to reveal major themes within the data. Themes throughout the survey data were illuminated by means of open coding. Open coding refers to a manual and flexible approach used to determine themes based on the language used by participants throughout their survey responses (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). This chapter outlines the findings of the survey results, and answers the research questions: What preparation and training do educators receive regarding federal special education law IDEA and civil rights law Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act? And, to what extent are teachers familiar with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act?

Qualitative Results

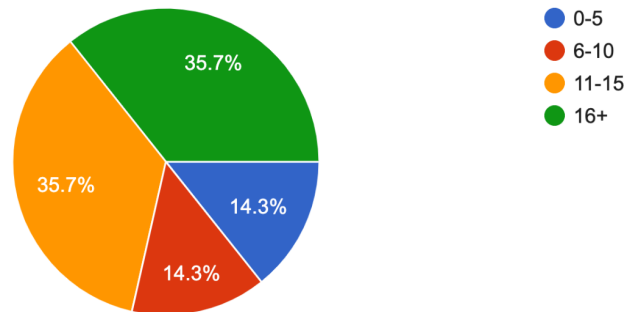
Data was collected from participants by means of a Google survey sent via district email. The survey was provided to 20 potential participants, 10 special education teachers and 10 general education teachers grades K-12. The potential participants were chosen randomly by the Director of Special Education. The first question on the survey consisted of a demographic question regarding the educator's years of service, ranging from zero to more than sixteen years of experience as an educator. Responses varied significantly and were representative of all four categorical ranges provided to participants. Interestingly, years of experience seemed to have less of an impact on educator knowledge of Section 504 and IDEA when compared to their role as an

educator. In other words, a special education teacher with zero to five years of experience seemed to consistently demonstrate a higher level of legal literacy than a general education teacher with six to 16+ years of experience.

Figure 2

Years of Service as an Educator

How many years have you been an educator?
14 responses



It was hypothesized that more special education teachers would complete the survey than general education teachers. This theory stemmed from the familiarity of special education teachers with the survey content. Additionally, it was assumed that special education teachers would feel more confident with their knowledge of the information and therefore, would be more inclined to complete the survey in efforts to demonstrate their understanding. Conversely, general education teachers may feel uncomfortable completing the survey if there is a perceived lack of knowledge on the topic. This hypothesis was correct as eight special education teachers completed the survey, and six general education teachers completed the survey. Additionally, two

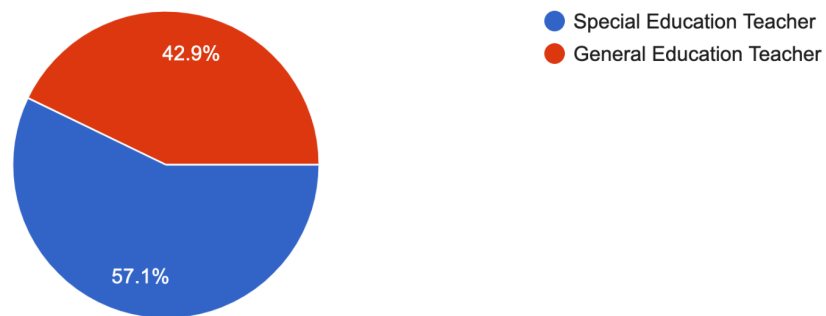
general education teachers did not provide context on the open-ended questions, suggesting and further supporting their self-reported lack of knowledge and training on the topic.

Figure 3

Educator Content Area

Choose the title that best describes your content area.

14 responses



The next question probed the preparation educators felt they received pertaining to their undergraduate college coursework. One general education teacher with 16+ years of experience reported being unsure if they took coursework relating to IDEA. Two general education and two special education teachers responded “no” reporting not having taken courses related to IDEA. Nine of the fourteen participants reported having taken courses pertaining to IDEA. Of these nine participants that responded “yes”, three were general education teachers and six were special education teachers.

Figure 4*IDEA Undergraduate Preparation*

During your undergraduate teacher preparation program, did you take coursework pertaining to Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)?

14 responses

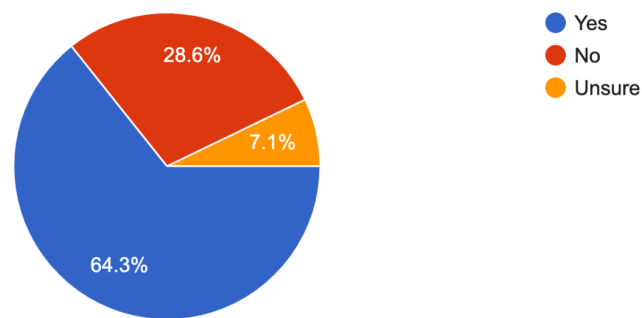
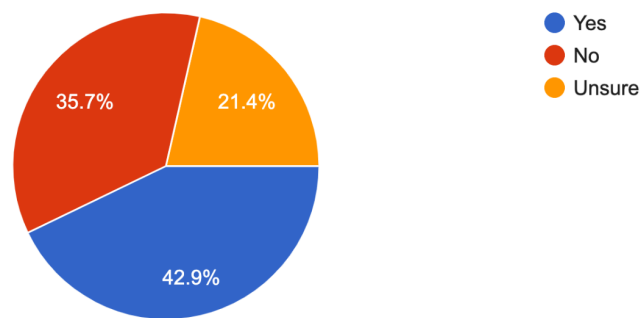


Figure five below shows the undergraduate preparation that teachers reportedly received concerning Section 504. Three answered “unsure.” All three participants that responded with “unsure” reportedly had 16+ years of experience and consisted of one special educator and two general educators. Three special education teachers and two general educators reported “no” with varying years of experience. Six total participants reported yes, four special education teachers reported yes and two general education teachers.

Figure 5*Section 504 Undergraduate Preparation*

During your undergraduate teacher preparation program, did you take coursework pertaining to Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (Section 504)?

14 responses

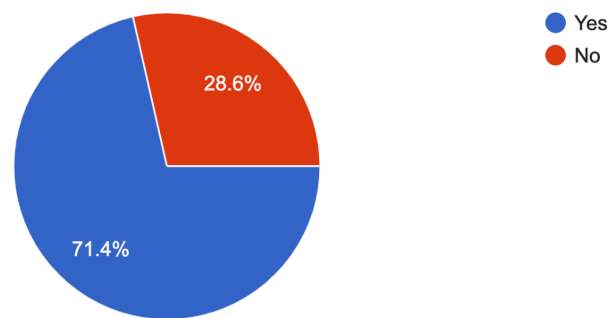


A total of 10 participants felt that they have been provided with adequate coursework, training, and guidance in federal law pertaining to Section 504 and IDEA. Six out of 10 of the participants who responded yes were special education teachers with four being general education teachers. Participants reportedly not having received adequate training up to this point in their career were split; two being general education teachers and two being special education teachers.

Figure 6*Section 504 and IDEA Training and Guidance*

Up to this point in your career, do you feel that you have been provided with adequate coursework, training, and guidance in federal law pertaining to Section 504 and IDEA?

14 responses



Following questions pertaining to their undergraduate coursework, participants were asked how they've obtained their current knowledge of IDEA and Section 504. 100% of participants provided a response to the first open-ended question. Of the 14 respondents, 12 of the participants mentioned professional development or district training as a source of knowledge. With 86% of respondents reporting professional training as their source of knowledge, this was the most commonly reported theme. The second most commonly reported theme among participants was obtaining knowledge from an administrator, totaling 57% of respondents. Five participants reportedly obtained their knowledge pertaining to special education law from online research or reading. College courses, both undergraduate and graduate, were mentioned as sources of knowledge by seven total participants. Two participants

mentioned colleagues in their response. Finally, seven percent of respondents reported having obtained knowledge from student teaching, student teachers, or social media.

Figure 7

Obtainment of IDEA and Section 504 Knowledge

How have you obtained your current knowledge of IDEA and Section 504? (example: college courses, student teacher, professional development, friend, colleague, administrator, the internet).

14 responses

District confidentiality training

Undergraduate and graduate courses, professional development, administrator

District training, student teachers

Graduate Coursework, PD trainings at school district with District Administrator

Grad college courses, Supervisor, professional development, the internet, social media

Professional development

Professional Development, Friends and Colleagues, administrators, the internet

Professional Development - Administrator

College courses, student teaching, professional development, and administrator.

College courses (more focused on the overall definition and of these items) and district professional development opportunities (more focus on how these items shape the "why" behind the things we do)

College courses; Trainings by various resources (district, IU, PaTTAN, PDE, etc.); Meetings / trainings with district administrator over the years; Some research on the internet if additional information needs to be researched

Internet, pd

Colleague

Mentor who is the Director of Special Education, personal research, personal professional reading

Figure eight below outlines the responses of participants when asked to describe the key components of IDEA. All 12 responses specified an appropriate education, free and appropriate education, or FAPE, as a key component of IDEA. The next most common theme among participant responses was the Individualized Education Program of IEP with 58% of responses. 50% of participants included Least Restrictive Environment or LRE and parental involvement in their response. The term “evaluation” was included in 42% of responses. Procedural Safeguards was mentioned by 33% of participants. 25% of participants addressed special education as part of their open-ended response. Less commonly mentioned themes included early intervention and student involvement which was only declared by 17% of participants. The least commonly mentioned items included FERPA, equal opportunity, measurable annual goals, related services, and inclusion which accounted for only eight percent of participant responses.

Figure 8***Key Components of IDEA***

Describe in detail the key components that make up IDEA.

12 responses

free, appropriate education for students with disabilities that addresses their needs

Free appropriate education, appropriate evaluation, Individual Education Programs

While following federal and state regulations, public education entities must provide students with an appropriate education that is in the least restrictive environment.

IDEA is a law that ensures a free and appropriate public education for children with disabilities. The law governs how state and public agencies provide early intervention, special education, and related services. The law ensures that the rights of children with disabilities and their parents are protected, and that children and families are provided proper supports throughout the time the child is receiving special education services.

- ~ FAPE
- ~ LRE
- ~ Protected by rights / procedural safeguards
- ~ Parent must be involved / have input
- ~ IEP developed if qualifications are met

FAPE, FERPA, Confidentiality, Equal Opportunity, and Inclusion

FAPE (Free Appropriate Education)- IDEA gives eligible students with disabilities the right to FAPE.

Evaluation- IDEA requires that the student must receive an evaluation before providing special education services to them. Does the student qualify as a child with a disability, and if so, determine the educational needs of the child.

LRE (Least Restrictive Environment)- Children with an IEP must be educated with their non-disabled peers to the maximum extent possible.

IEP (Individualized Education Program)- A written plan of services for the education of students that have disabilities or are gifted.

Procedural Safeguards- Ensure that the rights of students with disabilities and their parents are protected. Procedural Safeguards also ensures that they have access to the information needed to participate in the process.

Parent and student participation- Schools must ensure that parents have the opportunity to be active participants in each step of the special education process.

Federal legislation that gives the right to persons with disabilities a free and appropriate education.

Individualized Education Plans - making sure they are truly individualized

Free and appropriate education

Identifying and evaluating students appropriately

Least Restrictive environment - Staffing issues should not affect LRE

Parents participate in all parts of the evaluation and services

Making sure the entire team is aware of the laws and deadlines

FAPE, Nondiscriminatory Evaluation, IEP, LRE, Parental involvement, LRE

There are several components that make up IDEA. FAPE or Free and Appropriate Public Education makes up one component. FAPE means that public education is provided to parents at no cost. This is provided to students from preschool through high school. Appropriate Evaluation is another component to IDEA. This component explains that before special education services are provided each student must receive an evaluation. The evaluation must have parent permission and the evaluation must include a variety of tools. It should not be based on one single measure or assessment. The person administering the evaluation must be trained knowledgeable. If a student qualifies for special education, there is a minimum of three years in between the evaluation and a reevaluation. Another component includes IEP or an Individualized Education Plan that is devised by a team at least once per year. The IEP must contain measurable annual goals that are written at a year out or where the student's skills are to be in a year. Parents are involved in the IEP process. Another component is to ensure parents have opportunities to actively participate in each step of the special education process. Parents and students (when of transition age) are to be included in the process and have a voice as member(s) of team. The final component is the Procedural Safeguards. These safeguards exist to ensure the rights of the student and parents. Parents are entitled to review their child's records.

FAPE, IEP, Least Restrictive Environment, Procedural Safeguards, Early Intervention

Following the open-ended question pertaining to the key components of IDEA, participants were asked to describe in detail the key components of Section 504. Similarly, 12 of the 14 respondents addressed this open-ended question. Various topics were revealed by participants as presumed key components of Section 504. The most prominent theme included the protection of students with disabilities from discrimination which was mentioned by fifty percent of participant responses. Accommodations were incorporated as a key component of Section 504 by thirty three percent of participants and modifications by 25% of participants. Parent involvement was included in 17% of responses. Other responses, accounting for eight percent of responses included, FAPE, LRE, procedural safeguards, not as detailed as IEPs, student's that don't qualify for IEPs, eligibility documentation, services and supports, goals and objectives, staff responsibilities, review and update procedures, meet needs of students with disabilities, medical services, behavioral services, student involvement, general education teacher implementation, and service agreement.

Figure 9***Key Components of Section 504***

Describe in detail the main components that drive Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act.

12 responses

can't discriminate against students with disabilities regarding programs and benefits (and it has to do with funding somehow)

It prohibits discrimination of students with disabilities and we must be adequately meeting the needs of students with disabilities.

Students are protected from discrimination based on their disability.

Section 504 protects individuals from discrimination based on their disability. It ensures that individuals with disabilities have equal rights and opportunities.

~FAPE

~ LRE

~ Protected by rights / procedural safeguards

~ Parent must be involved / have input

~ 504 developed if certain qualifications are met

~ 504 plans are not as detailed as IEP's

Protection for medical services/behavioral services and needed accommodations in order for the child to be successful

A child has a disability that is shown to considerably limit his or her education performance. A child with a disability is one who has a physical or mental impairment that limits major life activities. Some examples are caring for one's self, walking, seeing, etc. Accommodations for the child could be accessibility, classroom adjustments and curriculum modifications.

Section 504 of the rehabilitation act protects the civil rights of students with a disability

I do not know much about 504. Just that's it's a way to bring down any barriers that a student without an IEP may have during school hours (medical, emotional, physical, etc.)

No exclusion or denying individuals with disabilities equal opportunity to receive services

504 Plans are usually put in place when a student does not qualify for an IEP. A 504 Service Agreement is put in place if a student has a physical or mental impairment the limits one of more life activity and or have a record of such impairment as well as be regarded as having such an impairment. A 504 Plan include specific aids, services and accommodations a student is expected to receive and the persons responsible. The plan should focus on what services the student will need , based on disability and who within the school setting will have the primary responsibility for implementing the services. A general education teacher is responsible for following and implementing the plan. Section 504 plans provide accommodations not modifications.

Eligibility Documentation, Accommodations and Modifications, Services and Supports, Goals and Objectives, Staff Responsibilities, Review and Update Procedures, Parent and Student Involvement & Procedural Safeguards

Only 11 of the 14 participants provided a response to their confidence of implementation of IDEA and Section 504 in the classroom setting. Most participants stated that they felt confident or very confident implementing Section 504 and IDEA in the classroom. This accounted for 81% of responses. Only one participant stated that they feel slightly confident in the implementation of Section 504 and IDEA, and only one stated that they do not feel confident in its implementation.

Figure 10*Confidence in Implementation*

How confident are you in implementing IDEA and Section 504 in the classroom?

12 responses

Very confident

60% confident

I advocate for all students in my classroom/district, however, truthfully, I am not confident that I am implementing IDEA and Section 504 100 percent of the time with 100 percent accuracy. However, I aim to do what I feel is the best for students, and what I am capable of doing with the resources that are available.

Very confident - I am a special education provider, so it is my job to educate children with disabilities and to advocate for them across all school environments.

Very~ I have been in special education for 24 years

Slightly confident

I feel I am confident as I have administrators and co-teachers to turn to if I have questions

I am very confident in implementing IDEA in my classroom and fight often to make sure it's appropriate.

I am confident in implementing IDEA. I feel I could use more guidance with Section 504.

I am confident in implementing IDEA and Section 504 plan.

I feel confident. However, I appreciate the district and administration continuing to provide professional development on implementing IDEA and 504s in the classroom.

The last survey question provided participants with an opportunity to elaborate on any of their responses. Only one participant chose to elaborate on their response. In summary, the participant feels as though general education teachers are not provided with adequate training in special education laws. Therefore, general educators are not prepared to be involved in IEP

development and implementation. No other information was gleaned from this question based on the lack of participant participation. Additionally, this response seemed to be an outlier of the study as a major finding revealed participants having sufficient training and knowledge of the law.

Figure 11

Opportunity to Elaborate

If you would like to elaborate on your responses, please leave additional comments below.

5 responses

N/A

In my tenure as a general education teacher and district administrator, I feel as though general education teachers are NOT given enough training in special education. This leads to a line drawn in the sand between special education and general education teachers, where it a common belief that the special education teachers are fully responsible for the special education students on their caseload.

I also believe that general education teachers would gain more knowledge and insight about their students if they assisted the special education teachers with IEP development.

Teacher prep programs do not do enough to teach undergraduate students in education courses about special education. I have an undergraduate degree in elementary education and have taken well over 60 master level course credits in education. I have NEVER taken a special education course. I also recieved a K-12 principal certification, without having to take a special education course.

No additional comments

Themes

Results of the survey revealed educator's knowledge of IDEA and Section 504, where they reportedly obtained their knowledge, and their confidence of implementation of IDEA and Section 504 in the classroom. Responses illuminated several themes among the survey results. The first overarching theme pertained to how participants obtained knowledge of IDEA and Section 504. The open-coded survey results revealed the following:

Theme 1: Educator's obtain knowledge of IDEA and Section 504 mainly by means of professional development and through a district administrator.

Theme 2: Educator's identify the main components of IDEA as being FAPE, LRE, IEPs, and parental involvement.

Theme 3: Educator's identify the main component of Section 504 to be protection from discrimination for students with disabilities.

The remainder of this chapter discusses these themes in greater detail.

Theme 1: Educator' Obtain Knowledge of IDEA and Section 504 by means of professional development and through a district administrator.

The first theme that was presented through the survey results was the way in which educator's obtain their knowledge of Section 504 and IDEA. Contrary to previous research on this topic, professional development was included as a means for obtaining knowledge regardless of teachers' role as a special educator, or general educator, or their years of experience in education. It should also be noted that most responses included other means of obtaining in addition to professional development training. Overall, however, obtaining knowledge by means of district facilitated professional development was consistent among participant responses. While this finding is telling in how the participants in one public school district obtained their knowledge, this theme is not able to be generalized due to the small poll of participants.

Theme 2: Educator's identify the main components of IDEA as being FAPE, LRE, IEPs, and parental involvement.

Survey responses proved educators to be knowledgeable of several driving factors that comprise IDEA. The most commonly reported terms regarding IDEA included free and appropriate public education or FAPE, the least restrictive environment of LRE, individualized education programs or IEPs, and parental involvement. Of the participants who responded to the

open-ended question, educators proved to be knowledgeable in IDEA regardless of their role as a special education teacher or general education teacher. However, two general educators failed to elaborate on their knowledge of IDEA. Of the two general education teachers that did not expand on their knowledge of special education law, both reported a lack of preparedness in either their college coursework or professional development training.

Theme 3: Educator's identify the main component of Section 504 to be protection from discrimination for students with disabilities.

Section 504, as previously mentioned, is a civil service law that protects individuals with disabilities from discrimination. Participants of the study proved to have a general understanding of Section 504 as protection from discrimination was identified as the main component that comprises section 504 in the survey responses. Similar to the probing question regarding IDEA, two general education teachers omitted this response. Of the participants that responded however, demographic data did not seem to have an impact on educator's understanding of Section 504.

Conclusion

This qualitative research study sought to answer the questions "What preparation and training do educators receive regarding federal special education law IDEA and civil rights law Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act in one public school district?" and, "To what extent are teachers familiar with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act in one public school district?" Survey results illuminated common themes among each participant's responses which in turn addressed each research question.

14 participants responded to the survey, eight being special education teachers and six general education teachers. The study proved valid as five general education teachers and five special education teachers needed to respond in order to validate the survey. Other demographic

information revealed a variety of experience levels amongst participants which ranged from zero to 16 plus years of experience. Interestingly, years of experience seemed to have less of an impact on educator knowledge of Section 504 and IDEA when compared to their role as an educator.

Chapter 5 discusses the implications of each theme, summarizes results and findings, and identifies limitations.

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Recommendations

Introduction

This study aimed to investigate educators' knowledge regarding federal special education law and their preparation to provide services to students with disabilities. The study explored this by seeking to answer the following research questions:

Research Question 1: What undergraduate preparation and professional development training do K-12 general educators and special educators receive regarding IDEA and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act in one public school district?

Research Question 2: To what extent are K-12 general education and special education teachers familiar with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act in one public school district?

Results of the study yielded several findings that aid in answering the research questions. Findings were identified and synthesized into three main themes:

Theme 1: Educators obtain knowledge of IDEA and Section 504 mainly by means of professional development and through a district administrator.

Theme 2: Educators identify the main components of IDEA as being FAPE, LRE, IEPs, and parental involvement.

Theme 3: Educators identify the main component of Section 504 to be protection from discrimination for students with disabilities.

While chapter four identifies themes within participant responses, chapter 5 discusses and draws conclusions connected to each theme, answers the proposed research questions based on qualitative survey data, states limitations, and makes recommendations for future research. As stated in chapter one, the problem surrounding this research includes teachers entering the

workforce being ill prepared to carry out policies and practices relating to Section 504 and IDEA. Previous research has revealed a lack of instruction in K-12 special education and general education undergraduate teacher preparation programs, paired with minimal on the job training, to be a contributing factor to teachers entering the classroom, and continuing in their careers, with insufficient legal literacy (Horner et al., 2020). Contrary to previously conducted research, the survey results from this research indicate educators to have been sufficiently trained in special education law and in turn, demonstrate an adequate understanding of the components that makeup IDEA and Section 504. More specifically, conclusions drawn from this research study include three main themes relating to how educators have obtained legal knowledge, educator's knowledge of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and educator's knowledge of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. The following discussion outlines these themes and draws conclusions from the research.

Interpretation of the Findings

Findings from the study reveal K-12 special educators and general educators to have a basic understanding of IDEA and Section 504 based on their ability to identify key components of each law. Additional findings suggest that educator's feel prepared to implement IDEA and Section 504, though educator's report more preparation pertaining to IDEA compared to Section 504. Findings also support that teacher's feel confident in carrying out tasks related to federal special education law in the classroom.

Research Question 1

Research question one examines K-12 general educators' and special educators' undergraduate and professional training pertaining to IDEA and Section 504. Open-ended survey questions aimed to reveal both the quantity of training received by educators and sought to determine how training was delivered. The majority of participants reported having adequate

undergraduate coursework pertaining to IDEA. According to survey results, educator roles seemed to have no impact on IDEA coursework. On the other hand, results were mixed when asked the same question pertaining to Section 504. Educators seemed to have undergone less preparation in Section 504 as part of their undergraduate coursework. Once again, the roles of the educator had little impact as three special education teachers and two general educators reported not having received sufficient coursework. Though results revealed educators having less preparation in their undergraduate coursework in Section 504 compared to IDEA, participant responses revealed that most educators in one public school district report adequate undergraduate preparation in special education law.

Another major finding of the study highlighted how participants reportedly gained their knowledge base of federal special education law. Results revealed that participants obtained legal literacy mainly by means of district-initiated professional development to be their main source of knowledge for both IDEA and section 504. Similarly to previously mentioned responses, educator experience level did not seem to impact how legal knowledge was obtained.

Research Question 2

Two major findings addressed research question two, which examines K-12 general educator's and special educator's knowledge of Section 504 and IDEA. The second major finding revealed educators to have a sufficient understanding of IDEA as they identified the main components to be FAPE, LRE, IEPs, and parental involvement. Each of the identified components are significant to IDEA.

Comparably, theme three revealed educators to have a sufficient understanding of Section 504. Section 504 is a civil service law that protects individuals with disabilities from discrimination. Participants of the study proved to have a general understanding of Section 504.

The most reported description of Section 504 was found to be protection from discrimination for students with disabilities, which aligns to the purpose of the civil service law.

The basis of these responses revealed participants to have at least a basic understanding of both IDEA and Section 504. Additionally, results suggest that K-12 educators in one public school district are confident in implementing IDEA and Section 504 in the classroom. Participant survey responses addressed the research questions associated with this study. Though contrary to previous research on this topic, results found educators to be both knowledgeable and prepared to implement IDEA and Section 504 in the classroom. Participants identified key components that drive both special education laws and reported ample training related to the content area. The next section will discuss limitations of the study.

Limitations

Prior to conducting the research study, it was anticipated that using a former place of employment as a sample could pose some limitations. Though this was previously identified as a potential limitation, it was hypothesized incorrectly as participants engaged in the research study without having contact with the researcher. One hypothesized limitation rang true however, as it was anticipated that the sample may have a strong understanding of federal special education law knowing the historically strong nature of the district's professional development staff training. Including a larger sample with a variety of professional development experiences could have impacted the results of the survey. Therefore, the sample being limited to one public school district proves to be a limitation of the study.

Next, the lack of open-ended responses from each participant was identified to be a limitation. While the study required five special educators and five general educators to participate in the survey in order to validate the research study, participation exceeded the minimum requirements. However, while there were 14 total participants, several omitted

responses to open ended questions. Specifically, questions seven, eight, and nine, recorded a total of 12 responses. It could be assumed that participants chose not to respond to these open-ended questions due to a lack of understanding and a lack of confidence in implementing Section 504 and IDEA. Additionally, only one participant chose to elaborate on their responses, which comprised the last survey question. Therefore, having a one hundred percent response rate could have swayed the major findings of this study or revealed outliers to the findings.

Finally, the study provided limited opportunity for participants to respond and engage with the survey. The survey consisted of 10 questions, with five multiple choice questions and five open-ended questions. A longer survey could have possibly gleaned more information regarding educator's knowledge and preparedness in special education law.

Implications

The findings discussed in this chapter suggest that K-12 general educators and special educators in one public school district reported having had coursework pertaining to IDEA (64%). On the other hand, results were lower when asked the same question pertaining to Section 504 (43%). Majority of participants (71%) reported having had sufficient training in both laws up to this point in their career. Additionally, 86% of respondents reported obtaining their knowledge by means of district facilitated professional development. An equal number of general education teachers and general education teachers reported not having adequate undergraduate coursework, implying the need for more coursework regardless of the type of teacher preparation program. It can also be implied that due to the complex procedures and practices that comprise IDEA, educators receive more coursework and training in IDEA when compared to Section 504. This finding may imply that additional coursework is needed at the undergraduate level to prepare educators prior to entering the field. These findings should be considered by district administrators and university staff when developing training and coursework.

Throughout the survey's open-ended questions, two general education teachers omitted responses, thus failing to expand on their knowledge of IDEA and Section 504. The same participants reported a lack of training in federal special education law. This implies that general education teachers may receive less training than special education teachers pertaining to IDEA and Section 504. General educators may also have a lesser knowledge base of legal literacy when compared to special educators.

Findings also support educator's to be knowledgeable in federal special education law. All participants seemed to demonstrate a basic understanding of IDEA and Section 504 based on the content of their responses. While the findings discussed in this section contradict existing evidence suggesting that educators are lacking sufficient legal literacy, these findings are not able to be generalized due to the sample size being limited to one public school district.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to determine educator's knowledge and preparedness to implement special education law in the classroom and during non-instructional tasks. The research sought to answer the questions, "What preparation and training do educators receive regarding federal special education law IDEA and civil rights law Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act in one public school district?" and, "To what extent are teachers familiar with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act in one public school district?" A qualitative study was conducted, and data collected via an anonymous, ten question electronic survey. Thorough data analysis revealed educators to have adequate training in federal special education laws and sufficient knowledge pertaining to both Section 504 and IDEA.

Another major finding of the study revealed educators in one public school district to have obtained their knowledge of special education law from the district facilitated professional

development. This should be considered by university leaders when planning coursework. Additionally, because the sample was limited to one public school district it should be assumed that not all educator's would share the same quality and quantity of professional development opportunities provided by their district. Findings can also be used to support district administrative staff in their planning for professional development coursework for their staff.

Recommendations

The intention for answering the research questions associated with this study was to illuminate any gaps that exist between educator's knowledge and preparedness in special education law in effort to assist university teacher preparation programs and district leaders in their coursework and training development and planning. The study identifies the means by which educator's obtain knowledge pertaining to legal literacy and their confidence in implementation. Upon conclusion of the study, several factors have been identified that contribute to the need for further research pertaining to educators' knowledge and preparedness in special education law.

First, this study's poll was limited to one public school district with 20 potential participants. It is recommended that future studies include a larger sample size of K-12 general education and special education teachers by including a sample size taken from a larger poll. The sample size could be expanded to multiple schools/ districts. Another option would be to include a sample that includes schools across various states. Additional research on the topic is necessary to account for generalization of results.

Additionally, this study examined educator knowledge and preparedness of special education law through ten survey questions. Five of the questions that comprised the survey consisted of multiple-choice demographic questions. Only four of the ten survey questions probed participants on their knowledge and preparedness on special education law. The last

question allowed for participants to elaborate on their responses but only one chose to do so. Further research is needed to delve deeper into the topic of teacher knowledge and preparedness in federal education law. Future studies would benefit from the inclusion of a multitude of open-ended questions, assessing various aspects of an educator's knowledge of IDEA and Section 504. It would also be advantageous to examine educators' knowledge of Section 504 and IDEA on an individual basis and in greater detail.

Future research could be enhanced by adjusting the study in several ways. Expanding the depth and breadth of the survey as well as including a larger sample size of participants could result in a more thorough understanding of educator's legal literacy. It is also recommended that further studies require participants to respond to each survey to reduce the need for interpretation of omitted responses.

This study revealed the extent to which educators are knowledgeable in Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. Additionally, the study highlights the means by which educators obtain their legal literacy. Results yielded from survey data may be used to drive LEA and university coursework and professional development. Further studies surrounding this topic should consider casting a wider net in various capacities to encompass a larger sample size and deeper understanding of educators' knowledge of special education law.

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Appendix A

Google Form Survey Questions: K-12 General Educator and Special Educator Knowledge and Preparedness in Special Education Law

The figure below outlines the questions provided to participants through the Google Form:

11. How many years have you been an educator?

1. 0-5
2. 6-10
3. 11-15
4. 16+

12. Choose the title that best describes your content area.

1. Special Education Teacher
2. General education Teacher

13. During your undergraduate teacher preparation program, did you take coursework pertaining to Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)?

1. Yes
2. No
3. Unsure

14. During your undergraduate teacher preparation program, did you take coursework pertaining to Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Program?

1. Yes
2. No
3. Unsure

15. Up to this point in your career, do you feel that you have been provided with adequate coursework, training, and guidance in federal law pertaining to section 504 and IDEA?

1. Yes

2. No

16. How have you obtained your current knowledge of IDEA and Section 504? (example: college courses, student teacher, professional development, friend, colleague, administrator, the internet).

1. Open ended

17. Describe in detail the key components that make up IDEA.

1. Open ended

18. Describe in detail the main components that drive Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act.

1. Open ended

19. How confident are you in implementing IDEA and Section 504 in the classroom?

1. Open ended

20. OPTIONAL: If you would like to elaborate on your responses, please leave additional comments below.

Appendix B

Informational Letter



RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMATIONAL LETTER

K-12 General Educator and Special Educator Knowledge and Preparedness in Special Education Law

Principal Investigator: Dr. Richael Barger-Anderson, [richael.barger- ander@sru.edu](mailto:richael.barger-ander@sru.edu), 724.738.2873

Co- Investigator: Kelley McBroom, M.S., kam1071@sru.edu, 724.331.8586

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to participate in a research study. Individuals must hold a valid Pennsylvania K-12 teaching certification to participate. Taking part in this research project is voluntary.

Important Information about the Research Study

Things you should know:

- The purpose of the study is to examine educators' knowledge and preparedness to carry out federal special education law. If you choose to participate, you will be asked to complete a Google Form survey. The survey will take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete.
- Risks or discomforts from this research are minimal, if any, but could include: Participants could experience undue influence due to the researcher being a former colleague of some participants. Other risks include loss of time. However, procedures for the study are outlined as part of this informational letter, the expected time completion of the survey has been explicitly outlined above (10-15 minutes to complete), and participation in this research study is completely voluntary.
- The study will provide participants the opportunity to gain a better understanding of educators' understanding of federal special education law and the importance for college coursework and district professional development coursework to emphasize IDEA and Section 504.
- Taking part in this research project is voluntary. You do not have to participate, and you can stop at any time.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research project.

What is the Study About and Why are We Doing it?

The purpose of this study is to analyze educator knowledge in special education federal laws including Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, in one public school district.

What Will Happen if You Take Part in This Study?

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to complete a Google Form Survey within 2 weeks. The Google Form Survey will be sent by link via district email. We expect this to take approximately 10-15 minutes to complete. This information will not be linked to any other data and will be used solely for the purpose of the co-investigators doctoral dissertation.

How Could You Benefit From This Study?

Participants will have the opportunity to share their knowledge pertaining to IDEA and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, knowing that other educators may learn more about federal education law from this research study.

What Risks Might Result From Being in This Study?

You might experience some risks from being in this study. They are: Participants could experience undue influence due to the researcher being a former colleague of some participants. Other risks include loss of time. However, procedures for the study are outlined as part of this informational letter, the expected time completion of the survey has been explicitly outlined above (10-15 minutes to complete), and participation in this research study is completely voluntary.

How Will We Protect Your Information?

We plan to publish the results of this study. To protect your privacy, we will not include information that could directly identify you.

What Will Happen to the Information We Collect About You After the Study is Over?

We will not keep your research data to use for future research or other purposes. Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be deleted from the research data as part of the project.

What Other Choices do I Have if I Don't Take Part in this Study?

If you choose not to participate, there are no alternatives.

Your Participation in this Research is Voluntary

It is totally up to you to decide to be in this research study. Participating in this study is voluntary. Even if you decide to be part of the study now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer. If you decide to withdraw before this study is completed, no data or information you have provided will be included in the research.

Contact Information for the Study Team and Questions about the Research

If you have questions about this research, you may contact Principal Investigator: Dr. Richael Barger-Anderson, richael.barger-ander@sru.edu, 724.738.2873

Contact Information for Questions about Your Rights as a Research Participant

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the following:

Institutional Review Board
Slippery Rock University
104 Maltby, Suite 302
Slippery Rock, PA 16057
Phone: (724)738-4846
Email: irb@sru.edu

Your Consent

Before agreeing to be part of the research, please be sure that you understand what the study is about. If you have any questions about the study later, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I understand what the study is about and my questions so far have been answered. I agree to take part in this study. I understand that I can withdraw at any time. You indicate your voluntary agreement to participate by completing the Google Survey.