

## Special Education Administrators' Ability to Operate to Optimum Effectiveness

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**Abstract.** The current study attempts to identify the reasons that special education administrators are able to operate to optimum effectiveness and barriers that prevent this in the current educational climate. Quantitative data was collected through surveys from special education administrators in the state of Texas. Descriptive statistics and the Friedman Test were used to analyze the data. The top three reasons special education administrators were able to operate to optimum effectiveness are sufficient knowledge concerning special education, support from central administration, and professional background and education while the barriers were insufficient number of staff, lack of time, and insufficient financial resources.

**Keywords:** special education administrator; perceptions; effectiveness; quantitative; Friedman Test

### Introduction

Special education administrators have a diverse and complex role in overseeing the individualized educational programs for students with disabilities. Decisions made by special education administrators impact every aspect of the special education program within a school district (Gore, 1995) and every decision made by special education administrators is subject to challenge unlike other administrative decisions (Tate, 2010). Increasing demands on special education administrators to meet the complex needs of students with disabilities, extensive budget cuts, accountability requirements of No Child Left Behind (NCLB), severe shortages of qualified staff, and possible litigation regarding the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) calls for effective practices in the administration of special education programs (Tate, 2010). Gore (1995) described effective special education leadership as "a balancing act, advocating for the best possible services, empowering staff, acknowledging the needs of parents, and collaborating with other administrators" (p. 3). Various factors have been identified through past research that can influence special education administrators' ability to operate to optimum effectiveness.

In a seminal study conducted by Kohl and Marro (1971), special education administrators were asked to identify roadblocks that kept them from using their time effectively in the administration of special education. Administrators considered central office demands as the primary roadblock followed by lack of administrative assistance, finances, clerical help, program facilities, and office space or facilities. As noted by Kohl and Marro (1971), five of the six reasons dealt with resources while the primary reason focused on organizational demands. An additional question asked by Kohl and Marro (1971) concerned effectiveness, "If you could 'wave a magic wand,' what one thing would you want to have to increase your effectiveness as a special education administrator?" The responses inherently identified nine areas of concern by order of frequency: insufficient staff; limited time to consult, supervise, and develop new programs; limited financial resources for instructional materials, staff, and new programs; need for development of adequate knowledge base in the areas of supervision, placement and identification of students with disabilities, general administrative practices, and self-improvement; improved communication between parents, community, staff and administrators; the need for line authority vs. staff status to facilitate more control of programs, participation in policy decisions, and effective supervision; inadequate equipment and facilities for special education programs; organizational issues regarding student services and placement, identification, and coordination of services; limited opportunities to conduct field research and lack of research upon which to base decisions; and miscellaneous reasons (Kohl & Marro, 1971; Marro & Kohl, 1972). Kohl and Marro (1971) reported that prior to their study "little evidence exists that effectiveness has been a research concern in special education administration" and "the answers provided to the question on administrative effectiveness in this study do little to compensate for this lack of research data" (Kohl & Marro, 1971, p. 301).

Prillaman and Richardson (1985) reported that special education administrators must develop a thorough understanding of the rules and regulations associated with special education since they are responsible for interpreting outcomes of court cases, which can impact the school district's local policy and practice. The importance of being able to interpret the law, assess the impact of court cases on special education services and ensure compliance with the law cannot be understated (Crockett 2002; Valesky & Hirth, 1992; Palladino, 2008). Without this knowledge, decisions may lead to costly and time-consuming litigation (Valesky & Hirth, 1992; Tate, 2010). Evidence-based leadership practices can be enhanced by increasing special education administrators' knowledge base and skills which should improve educational outcomes for students with disabilities (Boscardin, 2005; Boscardin, Weir & Kusek, 2010).

Collins (2007) noted special education administrators need to be resourceful and display interpersonal skills that include risk-taking, building relationships, communication, and humor. Effective communication skills are needed in the areas of negotiation and mediation with the ability to see the big picture and to think out of the box. Special education administrators who are effective leaders collaborate with others to achieve success and assure accessibility to quality educational programs for all students (DiPaola &

Walther-Thomas, 2003; Lashley & Boscardin, 2003). Effective special education administrators support ongoing progress monitoring, thorough academic planning, data-based decisions and the use of evidence-based practices by teachers (Boscardin, 2004; DiPaola, Tschannen-Moran, & Walther-Thomas, 2004).

Consistently, the reported challenge for special education administrators is the recruitment and retention of highly qualified special educators since they directly impact educational outcomes for students with disabilities (DiPaola, Tschannen-Moran, & Walther-Thomas, 2004; Lashley & Boscardin, 2003; Palladino, 2008; Seltzer, 2011; Tate, 2010). Concerning the selection of staff, Ebmeier, Beutel, and Dugan (2010) noted “no other single activity is as critical to operating an efficient and effective school” (p. 84). A critical component for retaining qualified staff is administrative support (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Lashley & Boscardin, 2003).

Due to the numerous responsibilities assigned to a special education administrator such as general administrative tasks (i.e. managing a budget, supervising and evaluating staff, compiling local, state, and federal reports), making program decisions, supervising provision of services, empowering teachers to use research-based strategies, and addressing parental demands, special education administration can be seen as “a daunting challenge” (Arick & Krug, 1993; Palladino, 2008, p. 158; Tate, 2010). There have been significant changes in the roles and responsibilities of the special education administrator since the initial study by Kohl & Marro (1971) which raises the question of what roadblocks exist for today’s special education administrator to operate effectively. Patterned after the Kohl and Marro (1971) study, the purpose of the current study was to identify the reasons that special education administrators are able to operate to optimum effectiveness and the barriers that prevent this in the current educational climate.

## **Methodology**

In order to examine the perceptions of special education administrators’ ability to operate to optimum effectiveness, the 2013-2014 Texas Council of Administrators of Special Education (TCASE) Directory was used to determine the population sample. The TCASE Directory is a comprehensive list of special education administrators in the state of Texas currently serving in school districts and Regional Education Service Center (ESC) Directors who provide support to special education administrators and oversee staff development within their regions. Since Regional ESC Directors are not directly responsible to an educational cooperative or school district, they were not included in the population sample for this study.

The TCASE Directory was used to compile a list of e-mail addresses for special education administrators in the state of Texas. Special education administrators were initially contacted in the form of an e-mail that contained the following information: (a) explanation and purpose of the study, (b) participants in the study, (c) description of procedures, (d) instrumentation utilized, (e) potential risks, (f) participation and benefits (g) link to survey through PsychData, (h) contact information, (i) and an opportunity to contact the researcher if there were any questions. E-mails were sent using the “blind cc” to protect confidentiality and grouped by region. Two follow-up e-mails were sent

as reminders to the special education administrators asking them to complete the survey. The first reminder was sent two days after the initial contact e-mail and the second reminder was sent one week from the initial contact e-mail.

In the Kohl and Marro (1971) study, two questions were asked of special education administrators, "What is the main condition or 'roadblock' that keeps you from attaining the ideal time distribution?" and "If you could 'wave a magic wand,' what one thing would you want to have to increase your effectiveness as a special education administrator?" In the final report by Kohl and Marro (1971), suggestions were made for further investigations to enhance the knowledge pool regarding special education administrators. This information was used to create a survey with updated information. In the current study, special education administrators were asked to "Identify the top three reasons why you feel that you can operate to optimum effectiveness" and "Identify the top three reasons why you feel that you cannot operate to optimum effectiveness." To support a longitudinal comparison, participants were provided a list of select choice responses that were generated in the Kohl and Marro (1971) study, as well as, the option to provide additional responses. The survey was reviewed by a committee, which included individuals who had prior experience as public school administrators for content and clarity.

Surveys were distributed to 515 special education administrators across the state of Texas. A total of 176 surveys were completed online using the link to PsychData. Twenty-four surveys were removed from analysis due to lack of completion leaving a total of 152. The initial return rate for surveys was 35% with only 29.5% of total surveys used in the evaluation of results. Roughly one out of three special education administrators in the state of Texas responded to the survey request.

Seventy-three percent of respondents were special education administrators employed by a local school district and 23.7% were employed by an educational cooperative unit. The remaining special education administrators were employed by a countywide school district, in a shared services agreement, State School for the Deaf, or State School for the Blind and Visually Impaired. Of the respondents, 11.2% were from urban school districts, 27.6% from suburban school districts, and 61.2% from rural school districts. The majority of special education administrator responses were from females with only 14.5% from males. Approximately, 18% of special education administrators held a doctorate degree and 65.1% held a master's degree with additional coursework. The most common certification held by special education administrators was mid-management/principal certification (77.6%) while the second most common certification was that of special education teacher at 73.7%.

For purposes of this study, a non-experimental research design was utilized through survey methodology and quantitative data collected to identify existing background characteristics and obtain perceptions of special education administrators' ability to operate to optimum effectiveness in the state of Texas. The Statistical Package of Social Scientists (SPSS) 18 program was used to analyze results of the survey. Frequency, percentage tables, and cross-tabulation were used for categorical data. Descriptive statistics and the Friedman Test were used to analyze the data and determine the mean rank for each reason identified by special education administrators in school districts from the state of Texas.

The Friedman Test provides information regarding the difference in the ranks of three or more independent groups. Post-hoc testing for Friedman two-way analysis of variance on rank means was utilized to provide additional information (Marascuilo & McSweeney, 1977).

## Results

Special education administrators were asked to identify the top three reasons they could operate to optimum effectiveness and the reasons they could not operate to optimum effectiveness. Multiple-choice answers were provided with an opportunity to express an additional reason that was not listed. Table 1 includes the reasons special education administrators felt they could operate to optimum effectiveness by mean rank order. The top three reasons noted by special education administrators to operate to optimum effectiveness were: (a) sufficient knowledge concerning special education, state and federal laws, budget, etc.; (b) support from central administration; and (c) professional background and education prepared them for the job. The three reasons with the lowest mean were: (a) opportunity to do field research utilizing innovative studies at the local level, (b) adequate facilities and sufficient equipment, and (c) adequate research data upon which to base decision.

**Table 1: Reasons Able to Operate to Optimum Effectiveness**

	Reasons	Mean Rank
1.	Sufficient knowledge concerning special education, state and federal laws, budget, etc.	9.48
2.	Support from central administration	8.75
3.	Professional background and education prepared you for job	7.94
4.	Effective communication	7.54
5.	Sufficient number of staff	7.33
6.	Have authority to participate in policy decisions, better control of programs, and more effective supervision of personnel	7.23
7.	Sufficient financial resources	6.91
8.	Effective organization of special service units, pupil placement, identification of students, and coordination between general and special education	6.69
9.	Effective time management	6.28
10.	Opportunities to be involved in general education activities	5.88
11.	Adequate research data upon which to base decisions	5.80
12.	Adequate facilities and sufficient equipment	5.65
13.	Opportunity to do field research utilizing innovative studies at the local level	5.52
Friedman Test: $X^2(12) = 332.36, p = .001$		

Each reason for why special education administrators were able to work to optimum effectiveness in Table 1 was numbered to assist in comparisons between rank means. Numbers in Group I and Group J of Table 2 represent the reasons listed in Table 1. Each pair of reasons from Group I and Group J was contrasted with a confidence interval. An interval that included zero was considered non-significant. Table 2 shows the results of post-hoc testing for Friedman two-way analysis of variance on rank means. Only the pair of reasons that were considered statistically significant at the .05 significance level is listed in Table 2. When two reasons differ with  $p < .05$ , one reason ranked higher than the other reason. Mean ranks that are in bold represent the reason that is ranked higher than the other. The higher the mean rank the more important the reason in allowing the special education administrators to operate to optimum effectiveness. The primary reason special education administrators were able to operate to optimum effectiveness was due to sufficient knowledge concerning special education, state and federal laws, budget, etc. There was a significant difference between this reason and nine other reasons which shows the importance of special education administrators having a strong knowledge base concerning special education and related topics. The second highest reason was support from central administration which was significantly different from the six lowest reasons identified.

**Table 2: Pairwise Comparisons of Reasons Able to Operate to Optimum Effectiveness**

Group I	Mean Rank	Group J	Mean Rank	LL	UL	Result
1	<b>9.48</b>	6	7.23	0.20	4.30	$p < .05$
1	<b>9.48</b>	8	6.69	0.74	4.84	$p < .05$
1	<b>9.48</b>	10	5.88	1.55	5.65	$p < .05$
1	<b>9.48</b>	11	5.80	1.63	5.73	$p < .05$
1	<b>9.48</b>	12	5.65	1.78	5.88	$p < .05$
1	<b>9.48</b>	13	5.52	1.91	6.01	$p < .05$
2	<b>8.75</b>	8	6.69	0.01	4.11	$p < .05$
2	<b>8.75</b>	10	5.88	0.82	4.92	$p < .05$
2	<b>8.75</b>	11	5.80	0.90	5.00	$p < .05$
2	<b>8.75</b>	12	5.65	1.05	5.15	$p < .05$
2	<b>8.75</b>	13	5.52	1.18	5.28	$p < .05$
3	<b>7.94</b>	10	5.88	0.01	4.11	$p < .05$
3	<b>7.94</b>	11	5.80	0.09	4.19	$p < .05$
3	<b>7.94</b>	12	5.65	0.24	4.34	$p < .05$
3	<b>7.94</b>	13	5.52	0.37	4.47	$p < .05$
5	7.33	1	<b>9.48</b>	-4.20	-0.10	$p < .05$
7	6.91	1	<b>9.48</b>	-4.62	-0.52	$p < .05$
9	6.28	1	<b>9.48</b>	-5.25	-1.15	$p < .05$
9	6.28	2	<b>8.75</b>	-4.52	-0.42	$p < .05$

Table 3 presents reasons special education administrators could not operate to optimum effectiveness. The top three reasons identified by special education administrators were: (a) insufficient number of staff, (b) lack of time, and (c) insufficient financial resources while the three lowest reasons based on mean rank order were: (a) inadequate preparation for the job, (b) inadequate research data upon which to base decisions, and (c) lack of opportunity to do field research utilizing innovative studies at the local level.

**Table 3: Reasons Unable to Operate to Optimum Effectiveness**

	Reasons	Mean Rank
1.	Insufficient number of staff	8.88
2.	Lack of time	8.71
3.	Insufficient financial resources	8.54
4.	Organizational problems such as ineffective special service units, pupil placement, categorical labeling of students, and lack of coordination between general and special education	7.78
5.	Need more authority to participate in policy decisions, have better control of programs, and be more effective supervising personnel	6.86
6.	Central administration demands	6.83
7.	Need for better communication	6.72
8.	Outmoded facilities and/or insufficient equipment	6.46
9.	Time spent on general education activities	6.21
10.	Need for additional knowledge	6.04
11.	Lack of opportunity to do field research utilizing innovative studies at the local level	6.02
12.	Inadequate research data upon which to base decisions	6.00
13.	Inadequate preparation for the job	5.95
Friedman Test: $X^2(12) = 290.30, p = .001$		

Each reason special education administrators gave regarding why they were unable to work to optimum effectiveness in Table 3 was numbered to assist in comparisons between rank means. Numbers in Group I and Group J of Table 4 represent the reasons listed in Table 3. Each pair of reasons from Group I and Group J was contrasted with a confidence interval. An interval that included zero was considered non-significant. Table 4 shows the results of post-hoc testing for Friedman two-way analysis of variance on rank means. Only the pair of reasons that were considered statistically significant at the .05 significance level are listed in Table 4. When two reasons differ with  $p < .05$ , one reason ranked higher than the other reason. Mean ranks that are in bold represent the reason that is ranked higher than the other. The higher the mean rank the more important the reason in preventing special education administrators from

operating to optimum effectiveness. The primary reason special education administrators were unable to operate to optimum effectiveness was due to insufficient number of staff. There was a significant difference between the top three reasons why special education administrators were unable to operate to optimum effectiveness and the six lowest reasons identified.

**Table 4: Pairwise Comparison Reasons Unable to Operate to Optimum Effectiveness**

Group I	Mean Rank	Group J	Mean Rank	LL	UL	Result
1	<b>8.88</b>	6	6.83	0.00	4.10	$p < .05$
1	<b>8.88</b>	7	6.72	0.11	4.21	$p < .05$
1	<b>8.88</b>	8	6.46	0.37	4.47	$p < .05$
1	<b>8.88</b>	9	6.21	0.62	4.72	$p < .05$
1	<b>8.88</b>	10	6.04	0.79	4.89	$p < .05$
1	<b>8.88</b>	11	6.02	0.81	4.91	$p < .05$
1	<b>8.88</b>	12	6.00	0.83	4.93	$p < .05$
1	<b>8.88</b>	13	5.95	0.88	4.98	$p < .05$
2	<b>8.71</b>	8	6.46	0.20	4.30	$p < .05$
2	<b>8.71</b>	9	6.21	0.45	4.55	$p < .05$
2	<b>8.71</b>	10	6.04	0.62	4.72	$p < .05$
2	<b>8.71</b>	11	6.02	0.64	4.74	$p < .05$
2	<b>8.71</b>	12	6.00	0.66	4.76	$p < .05$
2	<b>8.71</b>	13	5.95	0.71	4.81	$p < .05$
3	<b>8.54</b>	8	6.46	0.03	4.13	$p < .05$
3	<b>8.54</b>	9	6.21	0.28	4.38	$p < .05$
3	<b>8.54</b>	10	6.04	0.45	4.55	$p < .05$
3	<b>8.54</b>	11	6.02	0.47	4.57	$p < .05$
3	<b>8.54</b>	12	6.00	0.49	4.59	$p < .05$
3	<b>8.54</b>	13	5.95	0.54	4.64	$p < .05$

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to identify the reasons that special education administrators are able to operate to optimum effectiveness and the barriers that prevent this in the current educational climate. Two of the primary reasons noted by special education administrators for being able to operate to optimum effectiveness was sufficient knowledge concerning special education, state and federal laws, budget, etc. and having the necessary professional background and education that prepared them for the job. Since the field of special education leadership is multifaceted and complex, a strong knowledge base of the numerous areas such as local and federal policies, finance, program development, personnel, and interpersonal skills is needed. The special education administrators in the current study appear to have a sufficient knowledge base and educational background to meet the demands of the job. The results of this study were different from the study conducted by Kohl and



Marro (1971) where special education administrators reported the need for additional knowledge as one of the primary areas of concerns. Due to the ever changing educational climate, there is a need for ongoing professional development to maintain a sufficient knowledge base concerning special education and ongoing support from central administration. Rayner, Gunter & Powers (2002) reported individuals working in special education perceived a high need for continuing education specifically in leadership and management. While Pardy and Bryan (2015) indicated that the lack of functional knowledge and expertise could lead to failure in the position.

The secondary reason special education administrators noted for why they were able to operate to optimum effectiveness was support from central administration. Special education administrators in the current study appear to have greater support from central administration than reported by Kohl and Marro (1971). When special education administrators were asked by Kohl and Marro (1971) to identify roadblocks that kept them from using their time effectively, the responses focused on resources such as lack of administrative assistance, finances, clerical help, program facilities, and office space or facilities with the primary reason being central office demands. Central administration demands were listed in the current study as one of the reasons special education administrators were not able to operate to optimum effectiveness though it was not a primary reason of concern. Central administration can provide support to special education administrators by recognizing the importance of having sufficient staff, allowing special education administrators the time needed to oversee special programs and staff, and providing sufficient financial resources.

Kohl and Marro (1971) sought special education administrators' opinions regarding ways to increase their ability to operate effectively by asking "...what one thing would you want to have to increase your effectiveness as a special education administrator?" Special education administrators identified nine areas of need or concern in the Kohl and Marro (1971) study. The top three areas of concern noted by Kohl and Marro (1971) were the top three reasons identified in the current study for why special education administrators were not able to operate to optimum effectiveness: (a) insufficient number of staff, (b) lack of time, and (c) insufficient financial resources. Insufficient staff, limited financial resources, and lack of time appear to be ongoing reasons for why special education administrators are unable to operate to optimum effectiveness. This will require special education administrators to find creative solutions for meeting the unique needs of individuals with disabilities utilizing the staff and financial resources available to them.

The reasons identified in the current study that had the least impact on special education administrators operating to optimum effectiveness were research data upon which to base decisions and opportunities to do field research utilizing innovative studies at the local level. The overall pattern suggests that the use and purpose of research have little impact on special education administrators whether good or bad which suggests the importance of research for the advancement of educational practices for students with disabilities has not been realized by special education administrators.

## Limitations and Future Research

The data collection period for survey responses was two-weeks. Though the majority of responses occurred within six hours of notification, additional time to collect data may have resulted in a higher participation rate. This was applicable to the initial notification and the two reminders seeking participation in the study.

Only special education administrators within the state of Texas were contacted to be a part of this study. Therefore, results may not be generalized across other states. Each special education administrator who was contacted had access to e-mail and the internet. However, some special education administrators may have preferred a pencil and paper format to an electronic format. Having the opportunity to establish rapport with an individual through an electronic format can be more difficult and result in decreased number of respondents.

Future research is needed in the effectiveness of special education administrators from different career paths and the impact they have on educational outcomes for students with disabilities, placements for students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment, staff retention, and financial management.

Results of this study indicate that for special education administrators to be effective, he or she should be knowledgeable concerning special education, state and federal laws, and budget; have central administration support; and have sufficient education and professional background in the areas of special education and administration. Special education administrators reported that having the opportunity to do field research utilizing innovative studies at the local level, having adequate facilities and sufficient equipment, and having adequate research data upon which to base decisions contributed the least to operating to optimum effectiveness.

Data from this study can provide information in the development of training programs and supports that help target leadership skills that are necessary to address accountability, evidence-based practices, and inclusion of students with disabilities in the general education setting, as well as, other current issues.

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