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A Mixed-Methods Study of the Suspension/Expulsion and Graduation Rates of Missouri
Public High School Special Education Students

by

Matthew F. Glazer

A Dissertation submitted to the Education Faculty of Lindenwood University

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

degree of

Doctor of Education

School of Education

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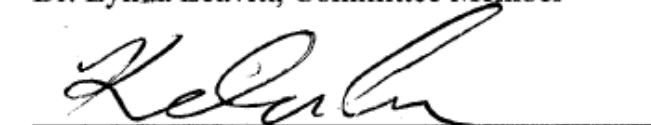
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11/11/2016
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Date



Dr. Kevin Winslow, Committee Member

11/11/2016
Date

Declaration of Originality

I do hereby declare and attest to the fact that this is an original study based solely upon my own scholarly work here at Lindenwood University and that I have not submitted it for any other college or university course or degree here or elsewhere.

Full Legal Name: Matthew F. Glazer

Signature: Matthew F. Glazer Date: 11/11/2016

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Abstract

The researcher conducted a study focused on the suspension/expulsion and graduation rates of Missouri public high school special education students. The goal was to determine if these areas of focus influenced one another. Analysis occurred through the use of secondary data from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education within the following school years: 2012-2013, 2013-2014, and 2014-2015. Additionally, public school personnel received online surveys via SurveyMonkey.

The four hypotheses targeted the following: a difference between public high school special education students and graduation rates, the number of students with disabilities suspended/expelled, the graduation rates of non-suspended/expelled special education students, and the suspension/expulsion rates of special education students compared to general education students. Analysis revealed during all three school years studied, differences existed. This was especially important for hypothesis three which was about the graduation rates of non-suspended/expelled special education students to suspended/expelled special education students. Results proved to be significantly different.

School personnel responded to four research survey questions. The first and second survey questions focused on the perceptions of staff and the suspension/expulsion rates of public high school students with and without disabilities. Survey question three asked staff who worked with students with disabilities what their viewpoints were about their graduation rates. The fourth survey question requested that public school employees write about interventions for high school special education students that would be more successful than suspension/expulsion. The last survey question asked public school

personnel what the necessary supports were in order to be successful when working with special education students. The results revealed a range of staff perceptions. Staff responses included minimal concerns on the research topics to desiring the research topics become a major area of focus.

As an outcome of all results, the researcher suggested conducting additional data analyses, both quantitative and qualitative, distributing surveys during a different or extended time period, and adding interviews to the process. The researcher believed additional information would provide greater insights on suspension/expulsion and graduation rates and help public school employees determine ways to decrease one, while increasing the other.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Background of the Study

The number of students with disabilities who attended public high schools increased over time. Near the end of the first decade of the 21st century, over six million students received special education services (Swanson, 2008). Swanson (2008) stated, “That constitutes about nine percent of the nation’s school-age population. Nearly one-third of those students with disabilities are of traditional high school age (14 to 17)” (p. 3). As a result, the more secondary students with disabilities there were, the more likely behavioral concerns emerged in the classroom. “A recent report from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2) found that about one in five secondary-age students with disabilities do exhibit problems with appropriately controlling behavior or fighting with classmates” (Swanson, 2008, p. 14). After an incident such as this occurred, school-based consequences often included suspension or expulsion of the student. Flannery (2014) explained, 20% of special education students experienced suspension during a school year, as compared to 10% of students without disabilities (para. 5). Consequently, students who received special education services experienced a decrease in high school graduation rates. According to Diament (2015a), between 85% and 90% of students with disabilities exhibited the capability of completing the graduation requirements to receive a high school diploma (para. 2) and in 2013, only six out of 10 students with disabilities graduated (para. 2). Based on the information from then-existing research, this researcher chose to analyze the relationship between the suspension/expulsion and graduation rates of Missouri public high school special education students.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this project was to determine a potential relationship between the suspension/expulsion rates and graduation rates of secondary, special education students who attended public schools in the state of Missouri in grades nine through twelve. The researcher conducted an investigation of secondary data obtained from the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MODESE) within the following school years: 2012-2013, 2013-2014, and 2014-2015. Furthermore, the researcher created and distributed a survey to school district personnel, to obtain feedback about the connection, or lack thereof, between the suspension/expulsion rates and graduation rates of special education students in the state of Missouri.

At the time of this study, investigation revealed previous research existed on the studied topics individually; however, no research existed on both topics in the state of Missouri. For example, according to the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) Office for Civil Rights (2014), research about school discipline revealed, “Students with disabilities served by IDEA are more than twice as likely to receive one or more out-of-school suspension as students without disabilities” (p. 3). The study also included a state-by-state comparison of these percentages during the 2011-2012 school year. In Missouri, the number of suspended students without an educational disability was 7%, as compared to the 13% of students with disabilities who were suspended (p. 16). The researcher found this statistic further supported the need to determine if a relationship existed between the suspension/expulsion rates and graduation rates of students with disabilities in grades nine through twelve who attended public high schools in the state of Missouri.

The researcher found previous studies specifically targeted on the graduation rates of students who received special education services. Yettick and Lloyd (2015) explained, “In every state, graduation rates are lower for students with disabilities than for the student population at large” (p. 18). The researchers further noted, in the state of Mississippi only 23% of the students with disabilities graduated on time (p.18), which was the lowest graduation rate in the country for students with disabilities (p. 18).

Researchers in Florida analyzed suspension and graduation rates and revealed:

About three-fourths of Florida 9th graders who were never suspended out of school as freshmen graduated from high school, compared with a 52 percent graduation rate for those suspended once and a 38 percent rate for those suspended twice in their first high school year. (Shah, 2013, para. 1)

Shah (2013) then explained when students were suspended out-of-school, those self-identified as Black received special education services, came from low-income families, and received this level of discipline more than other students (para. 7). In the researcher’s opinion, bias appeared to play a pivotal role in the disciplinary measures used on students with disabilities. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Rhode Island (2015) conducted a study on how students with disabilities tended to be suspended more than non-disabled peers. The researchers analyzed nine years of suspension data and revealed 32.9% of students who were suspended, had a disability (p. 1); over twice the number expected. Student participants made up only 16.11% of the total student population (p. 1). From this data, the researcher concluded special education students were suspended/expelled at higher rates than non-disabled peers.

This information was critical because as a country, there was a definite disparity between the numbers of special education students who graduated from high school within four years of enrollment. This was influenced by suspension/expulsion disciplinary actions. As a result, the focus of this research was to determine a potential relationship between the suspension/expulsion rates and graduation rates of students with and without a disability, in the state of Missouri.

Rationale

The rationale to conduct this research study was twofold. First, students' graduation with a high school diploma meant they were on the path towards a successful life after graduation. According to The American Academy (2012), "Statistics show that more than 60% of job opportunities in the skilled labor force require a high school diploma" (para. 2). Furthermore, it was stated how some employers would not consider candidates for hire if they did not graduate from high school (para. 2). For students with disabilities, this was especially important, because the student's skill sets and abilities may be more limited than typically-developing peers, so receiving a high school diploma may assist them with job obtainment. The American Academy also explained a high school diploma opens 'doorways' to attend an institute of higher education, which may include vocational training, a work program, or even college. Ultimately, this may lead to a long-term career (para. 4), and the researcher believed this was exactly the goal for all students, including those with disabilities.

The number of students with disabilities who are suspended/expelled continued to increase, even more so than that of typically-developing students. Borg (2015) explained that the ACLU of Rhode Island (2015), conducted a study about the suspension of special

education students. The report, titled, “Suspended Education: The Over-Suspension of Students with Disabilities in Rhode Island,” revealed, “Students with disabilities comprised 32.9 percent of all suspensions between 2005 and 2014” (Borg, 2015, para. 3). This represented over one-fourth of the total student population in Rhode Island. In Oklahoma, there were also higher numbers of students with disabilities suspended/expelled, compared to their non-disabled classmates. According to Robson (2015), “2.1 percent of special education students in Oklahoma were expelled in 2011-2012, compared with 0.8 percent of other students. The 2.1 percent represents 2,099 children” (para. 10). All of this information depicted that the suspension/expulsion rates of students with disabilities across numerous states were continuing to increase. Through this research study, interventions were sought that would increase the graduation rates of students receiving special education services, while at the same time decrease the suspension/expulsion rates of students with disabilities in grades nine through twelve.

When students demonstrate inappropriate behaviors, there should be consequences for their actions. However, some consequences, such as suspension/expulsion, may not be as effective as other methods. For example, according to Robinett (2012), requiring students to complete community service hours may be a more meaningful deterrent for misconduct than removing them from the classroom.

Community service offers a much more productive and appropriate punishment in some cases than does suspension or expulsion. Campus community service would keep students in the school environment and teach them respect for school property, while providing a valuable service to the campus. (p. 34)

This demonstrated that there were other approaches to improving student behavior; so, that a suspension/expulsion may not be necessary, which would allow the student to stay in school and continue to learn.

The goal of high school was for students to earn the necessary credits within a four-year time span that allowed them to graduate with a diploma. This was especially important for those with disabilities. “According to the Education Commission of the States, high school graduates earn higher salaries, so are less likely to depend on public assistance, to have health problems, or to engage in criminal activity” (as cited in American Library Association, n.d., para. 1). If graduation did not occur, it may be due to the fact that, when students were suspended from school, they had a more significant chance of landing in the ‘school-to-prison pipeline.’ This meant they left the education system and ended up in the criminal justice one (Klein, 2015, para. 7). That was one reason why this research study was crucial to student success. It focused on the state of Missouri and provided interventions to be deployed; so, the graduation rates of students with disabilities would increase, while at the same time decrease the number of suspensions/expulsions that they faced. As a result, students receiving special education services during high school could possibly experience additional opportunities for success.

Hypotheses and Research Questions

Hypothesis 1: There will be a difference in the graduation rates of special education students graduating from high school between the school years of 2012-2013, 2013-2014, and 2014-2015.

Hypothesis 2: There will be a difference between the suspension/expulsion rates of special education students between the between the school years of 2012-2013, 2013-2014, and 2014-2015.

Hypothesis 3: There will be a difference between the graduation rates of non-suspended/expelled special education students to suspended/expelled special education students.

Hypothesis 4: There will be a difference between the suspension/expulsion rates of special education students and the suspension/expulsion rates of general education students.

In addition, as a mixed-study, the research questions investigated included:

Research Question 1: How do school personnel that work with special education students view suspension/expulsion rates for students with disabilities and without disabilities?

Research Question 2: What is the viewpoint that school personnel have that work with special education students about their suspension/expulsion rates?

Research Question 3: What is the viewpoint that school personnel who work with students with disabilities have about their graduation rates?

Research Question 4: According to experts in the field of education what interventions would be more successful than suspension/expulsion for students with disabilities? Why?

Research Question 5: According to experts in the field of education, what are the necessary supports required to be successful with special education students? Why?

Limitations

There were several limitations associated with this study. Of the 170 survey links emailed, there was no guarantee on the number of public school district personnel who would complete the voluntary survey. According to Fryrear (2015), the average response rate for external surveys was 10% to 15% (para. 5). This meant there was not a very high chance that voluntary participants would complete the survey.

Public school staff could have chosen to skip particular questions, limit answers on the constructed response questions, interpret questions differently than the researcher's intent resulting in answers not previously considered, or participants could stop responding to the survey at any time. Each item contributed to a more difficult analysis of each survey question. The researcher limited the window of time available for public school district staff to complete the survey. The survey was available beginning on April 26th and closed on May 27th. This date was chosen to close the survey link, because it was the last Friday in May, and the majority of public schools would be closed for summer recess. In addition, the survey was only distributed to public school employees in the state of Missouri and not to public school personnel in other states. The researcher's population consisted of 170 participants; a representative sample of the larger population within the state of Missouri. Furthermore, the researcher investigated only public schools in the researched state; no private school data were included in this study, which further limited the population and sample size.

Definition of Terms

Credits: "One of the primary methods used to determine and document that students have met academic requirements, generally at the high school level. Credits are

awarded upon completing and passing a course or required school program” (Credit, 2013, para. 1).

Disability:

The Americans with Disabilities Act (n.d.) stated:

The ADA defines a person with a disability as a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activity. This includes people who have a record of such an impairment, even if they do not currently have a disability. It also includes individuals who do not have a disability but are regarded as having a disability. The ADA also makes it unlawful to discriminate against a person based on that person’s association with a person with a disability. (para. 2)

Free Appropriate Public Education: Special education services and related services were provided at the expense of, and under the supervision of, the public at no additional cost. Furthermore, these services met the state standards and were available at all levels; from pre-kindergarten through high school. They also aligned with each student’s individualized education program (IEP) (SPEDWatch, 2008, para. 2).

General Education: According to the USDOE (as cited in the Illinois State Board of Education, 2009b), the term referred to classrooms and other school locations where students without special education services interacted. This may include the lunchroom. “Placement is not an either/or decision, where children are either placed in a general education classroom or they’re not. The intent is for services to follow, or go with, the child, not for the child to follow services” (Illinois State Board of Education, 2009b, pp. 59-60).

Graduation: “The award or acceptance of an academic degree or diploma”

(Graduation, 2015, para. 2a).

Individualized Education Program: A legal document required for a student to receive services considered to fall within special education. Students were found eligible when they were considered to have a disability and required specialized services due to their disability. The document was created by the IEP team and followed the requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), specifically Part B and the amendments. The IEP included information about the child’s then-current performance levels and specific special education services. “It includes provisions for defining annual goals, evaluating progress, and formalizing what is to be a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) for the student with the disability” (Thurlow, 2009, para. 2).

Individualized Education Program goals: These were annual goals that began from the time an IEP was implemented until the next review. It outlined what a student was expected to learn and demonstrate. Goals may include behaviors, knowledge, and/or skills and should also be identified in a student’s then-present level and described, “What a child is reasonably expected to accomplish from the specialized educational program during the school year” (National Association of Special Education Teachers, 2006-2007, para. 2).

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act: A law that ensured students with disabilities received the necessary special education services. It, “Governs how states and public agencies provide early intervention, special education and related services to more than 6.5 million eligible infants, toddlers, children and youth with disabilities” (U.S.

Department of Education [USDOE], n.d.a, paras. 1-2). Part C included infants and toddlers with disabilities through age two and Part B targeted children and youth.

Manifestation determination: A meeting scheduled when a student with a disability was suspended 10 school days in a row, or longer. The IEP team met to determine if the inappropriate student conduct was a result of the student's disability or if it occurred as a result of the district not implementing the student IEP correctly. If the IEP team determined the behavior was not a result of the disability, the student was possibly suspended, but still required to receive special education services, including curricular work from the general education setting. If the behavior was found to not be related to the disability, the student was possibly not suspended, unless there was involvement with drugs, weapons, or bodily harm (Special School District of St. Louis County, n.d., para. 24).

Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education: For the purpose of this study, the researcher defined MODESE as the state department in Missouri that governed elementary and secondary education.

Non-disabled peers: For this study, the researcher defined non-disabled peers as students without disabilities who were appropriately developing for their age in the areas of academics, social skills, and emotional well-being.

Special Education: Instruction specially designed for students with disabilities and came at no cost to the parents of the student receiving services. This instruction was provided in the classroom, home, hospital, institutions, or other settings, and in physical education (USDOE, n.d.c., Section 300.39).

Special Education Administrator/Coordinator: For the purpose of this study, the individual who oversaw the special education within a school district or department. Responsibilities included: program analyses, hiring and supervision of special education staff (i.e. special education teachers), assisted with IEP development and implementation, and ensured compliance with special education legal regulations.

Student Services Director: The Student Services Director oversaw pupil service programs that aligned with the objectives of the district and state. In addition, this role maintained and hired staff, ensured program and service objectives were met within budget guidelines, worked with grants, special education, vocational services, and possessed knowledge in instruction, curriculum, strategic planning, and program evaluation (Nogales Unified School District #1, 2007, p. 1).

Suspension/expulsion: Suspensions were traditionally for a specific amount of time and the student was allowed to return to class after they completed the mandated time away from school. An expulsion meant the student could no longer attend the school for an indefinite amount of time, until the local school board approved the student's return (MODESE, n.d., para. 2).

Typically-developing peers: For the purpose of this study, typically-developing peers were referred to as non-disabled peers.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to determine a relationship between the suspension/expulsion rates and graduation rates of special education students enrolled in public high schools in the state of Missouri in grades 9-12. As a result of this study, new interventions may be implemented for the reduction of suspension/expulsion rates which

would increase graduation rates of high school special education students. Across the nation, low special education graduation rates became an epidemic. According to Dreilinger (2015), “Louisiana's 37 percent special education graduation rate was also low in absolute terms: Across the country, 62 percent of students with disabilities graduated on time” (para. 4). Further research to support this topic, as well as interventions, are addressed in the next chapter.

Chapter Two: The Literature Review

When a student entered high school as a freshman, there were many changes and challenges they must overcome to pass their classes and earn the required credits necessary to graduate from a public school in the state of Missouri. According to Cauley and Jovanovich (2006), “Typically the move to a new school includes changes in school climate and size, peer relationships, academic expectations, and degree of departmentalization among peers” (p. 15). Numerous obstacles awaited all students in secondary education, including those who received special education services. As a result, a person with a disability may have had a lower high school graduation rate than one without a disability (Lanford & Cary, 2000). This may be due to students labeled with a disability having had a higher probability of suspension or expulsion (Sullivan, Klingbeil, & Norman, 2013). Higher suspension rates for students with disabilities was a concept that was also supported by Owen, Wettach, and Hoffman (2015). They explained that as a result of suspension, negative and unintended outcomes occurred. This included, “A less healthy school environment, lower academic achievement, higher levels of disruptive or antisocial behavior, and higher school dropout rates” (p. 6). Basically, negative consequences presented themselves that were not beneficial to the student.

This information was further supported by the fact that, “Nationwide, nearly 1 in 5 students with disabilities were given out-of-school suspensions during the 2011-2012 school year. That’s a rate about twice that of their typically-developing peers, according to data collected by the U.S. Department of Education” (Diament, 2015b, para. 2). This data was also supported by Berwick (2015). It was explained that since 2009, the annual suspension rate for the nation was 10%, which was higher than any other time (para 4).

The suspension of students had also been found to be an ineffective means of disciplining students for their behavior. Instead, it contributed to a deficiency in appropriate interactions with others, “Poor classroom social behaviors (e.g., getting along with other students), and involvement with bullying or with the police” (Wagner, Newman, & Cameto, 2004, paras. 4-6). This was supported by data obtained from the USDOE Office for Civil Rights (2014). Based on this information, “Students with disabilities (served by IDEA) represent a quarter of students arrested and referred to law enforcement, even though they are only 12% of the overall student population” (p. 1). Based on this information, “As districts continue to work on graduation rates, they have to look at suspension rates,” Ms. Johnson, a law center lawyer, added, “as well as why students are being suspended and how they are being suspended” (Shah, 2013, para. 15). By focusing on these areas, information may be obtained and recommendations created to decrease the suspension/expulsion rates of students with disabilities and increase their graduation rates.

Background on Disabilities

In the state of Missouri, if a student was found eligible to receive special education services, there were disability categories they could qualify under. According to MODESE (2015a), the classifications included: “Intellectual Disability, Hearing Impairments and Deafness, Speech or Language Impairments, [or] Visual Impairments including Blindness” (para 21). Additional diagnoses included Emotional Disturbance, Autism, Orthopedic Impairments, Other Health Impaired, Traumatic Brain Injury, Specific Learning Disability, Multiple Disabilities, and Deaf Blindness (para. 21). After a student received their diagnosis, and the parents or legal guardians provided consent, an

Individual Education Program (IEP) meeting was held between the parents or guardians, the special education teacher, related service providers, general education staff, administration, and any other school personnel who may work directly with the child.

When the IEP team met, they discussed each section of the document. According to the USDOE (n.d.a), there were several components that made up an IEP. The first one was known as current performance, or a child's present level. This explained how the student's disability affected their performance and involvement in curriculum in the general education setting. Annual goals were next. The IEP contained goals a student was supposed to meet or exceed within one year's time. Goals were broken down into benchmarks or shorter objectives. These goals were either academic, behavioral, social, addressed physical needs, or addressed any other essential educational skills. Goals must be written as measurable and observable so that data may be collected on the progress the student made (paras. 24-25). There was also a section about the types of services the child received. The USDOE (n.d.) stated the IEP must include the, "Special education and related services to be provided to the child or on behalf of the child" (para. 26). In addition, the supplementary aids or services the student received needed to be listed in the IEP as well (para. 26). Also included in this section was information about modifications, accommodations, and training and supports for school personnel that worked with the student. Afterwards, there were statements about the amount of time the child participated with typically-developing children (para. 27), as well as what their participation level would be in state and school district assessments. If the student did participate in state or school district assessments, it should be explained what modifications or accommodations the student required to complete them. If they did not

take the exams due to the tests being inappropriate for him or her, a statement needed to be included in the IEP about why it was deemed not appropriate and what alternative tests were taken instead (para. 28). There was also an area in the IEP that outlined the services the child received. It explained when, how often, and where services were provided (paras. 28). These were the sections required for students prior to entering high school. When they reached a particular age though, there were additional areas that needed to be completed.

After a student turned 14 years old, the USDOE (n.d.a) explained transition services needed to be described and incorporated in an IEP as well. It outlined the courses required to meet goals –post high school and should be included in all IEPs until graduation (para 29). At the age of 16, more specific transition services were described that assisted a student with preparations to leave high school (para. 30). This was also labelled the Age of Majority. The USDOE (n.d.a) stated that when a student reached a specific age, they needed to understand that their rights will be transferred and they will have control of their own educational decision-making (para. 31). This was important as a student entered adulthood. Regardless of the age of the student, progress should be noted throughout the IEP including the form of progress measurement and forms of communication with the parents or guardians (para. 33).

After the meeting concluded and all stakeholders were in agreement with the contents of the document, the United Federation of Teachers (n.d.), explained, “Schools must ensure that a copy of the IEP is provided to the student’s parents” (para. 12). This was one of the many legal requirements and safeguards provided for parents or guardians. This allowed for communication and collaboration to continue between the IEP team and

ensured everyone was on the same page and was working towards the betterment of the student. There were occasionally students who required additional interventions and supports in order to remain safe in school. These supports ultimately helped contribute to their level of success.

Legal Interventions

When students were found eligible and received special education services, they may also have required additional behavioral supports due to their inability to function appropriately in the school setting. Consequently, staff had the responsibility to spend, “Hours and hours of filling out forms and writing reports documenting each student's progress” (Hale, 2015, para 13). This included legal compliance and paperwork (Hale, 2016, para. 35). Based on this work, functional behavioral assessments (FBA) were sometimes conducted. This, “Is a process that identifies specific target behavior, the purpose of the behavior, and what factors, maintain the behavior that is interfering with the student’s educational progress” (Lincoln County Public Schools Department of Special Education, 2006, para. 1). From this information, behavior intervention plans (BIP) and crisis plans were developed as components of the IEP.

In order to first develop an FBA, the child’s significant behavior that impacted the child personally or interfered with the learning of other students had to be identified. This meant different influencers needed to be reviewed including interactions between the student and peers, socialization, emotional well-being, cognitive functioning, and environmental factors that contributed to the occurrence of the targeted behavior. Each of these areas was reviewed because, “This broader perspective offers a better understanding of the function or purpose behind student behavior. Behavioral

intervention plans based on an understanding of ‘why’ a student misbehaves are extremely useful in addressing a wide range of problem behaviors” (Center for Effective Collaboration and Practice, 2001, para. 2). This was also supported by O’Connor (2015) who described how important it was to understand the root cause of the inappropriate behavior. Through this approach, the student who demonstrated the misbehavior was able to be addressed as a person, instead of as someone condemned who received consequences (para. 3). Based on this information, there were two different methods that data may be collected on the targeted area.

The first method of collecting behavioral data was known as indirect FBA. According to the Lincoln County Public Schools Department of Special Education (2006), this was utilized when only the student and school personnel were involved. It included written or verbal interviews with the student, his or her teachers, and other school personnel involved with the student. The questions focused on the identified behavior, the circumstances that may have caused it to occur, and the function of the behavior. The Lincoln County Public Schools Department of Special Education (2006) explained, “Based on this information, a hypothesis can be developed and a written plan can be formulated by the team” (para. 4). Following this, there may be follow up questions, a review of additional school data, or the progression to a more in depth FBA known as Direct.

When a the second method of data collection called the Direct FBA was required, it meant that more intensive services were needed to determine the function of a student’s behavior and how to teach a replacement behavior or correct the unwanted behavior. The University of Kansas (n.d.) explained, “Direct observations include gathering information

about when problem behavior occurs, what happens right before problem behavior (e.g., antecedent triggers), what problem behavior looks like, and how people respond to the occurrence of problem behavior (e.g., consequences)” (para. 36). The Child Study Center (2002), said there were additional influencers to review as well. For example, “These factors may include problems at home, problems on the bus, and so on” (para. 1). This demonstrated that students and their behaviors could be impacted by circumstances that occurred outside of the classroom or school environment. As a result of the FBA, a hypothesis was developed and interventions created as part of the BIP.

The BIP was developed by the IEP team as a direct result of the FBA that was conducted. According to Public Schools of North Carolina (n.d.), it included multiple interventions and strategies, but should not be considered punishment. Instead, “Positive behavioral intervention plans increase the acquisition and use of new alternative skills, decrease the problem behavior and facilitate general improvements in the quality of life” (para 2). This meant that life was then improved for the individual student, their family, and their support team members (para 2). Through the use of a non-punitive, team approach, inappropriate behaviors may be changed into positive ones. In order for this to occur, there were several components to the plan that must be included. The first part should provide a FBA summary, as well as the behavioral function. Next are the child’s strengths, the replacement behavior taught, the way it was taught, and who taught it. There should also be indication about how long it took to teach the desired behavior and how staff reinforced it. Furthermore, additional supports that should be outlined included, “Schedule changes, additional services, tutoring for missing skills, etc.” (Illinois State Board of Education, 2009a, p. 75). This then led into the section about data analysis, how

it would be determined if the plan was successful, and the way the plan would be communicated to the student's family (p. 76). As a result, a crisis plan was then able to be developed.

A crisis plan was the next step in behavior modification for students with disabilities. The Pacer Center (2014) explained the crisis plan was an action plan created and implemented when a student was at risk of harming themselves or others. The crisis plan should be written and approved by the IEP team and implemented by those trained in crisis response. It should also be reviewed during IEP meetings and follow all school or district guidelines when supporting a student in crisis. If the student's behavior violated a discipline policy though, it could result in disciplinary action (p. 1). The article stated that the plan should outline what the student's crisis entails, what the school will do to help the child while he or she was in crisis, who the staff were that would be contacted for assistance, the ways the child was supported during the situation, what it looked like when the crisis concluded, and knowing when to contact families about the incident (p. 1). If followed, a student's level of safety increased because staff will know how to address a child's behaviors when potentially attempting to harm themselves or others.

These three components, FBA, BIP, and crisis plan were all crucial elements of an IEP because of the ways they supported a child in the school setting and provided guidance to staff when faced with a student's challenging behaviors. There were times though, when students may be unaware of the actions they demonstrated due to their disabilities.

Why are Students with Disabilities Being Suspended/Expelled?

When a student with a disability was suspended/expelled from school, it was usually due to exhibited behaviors that were perceived as inappropriate. Lewis (2015) explained that out of the total number of students with disabilities in secondary education, 18% of them were suspended during the 2011-2012 school year (para. 1). Furthermore, one-third of all students from kindergarten through 12th grade with an emotional disability were suspended at least once (para. 2). Lewis stated that these were the students that were unable to sit still, challenged their teachers, and presented difficulties with social interactions and other behavioral obstacles. Often times, these looked like purposeful misbehaviors or defiance, which resulted in disciplinary action (para. 3). These types of referrals may want to be reconsidered though, as some students' disabilities were more than just behaviorally based. According to Hamilton (2015), "People with ADHD have a true brain disorder, not just a behavioral problem" (para. 4). This demonstrated that there was more to a student than simply the way they were behaving. It could be due to how their brain operated. This included mental health concerns. Adams (2013) explained this was a problem that school employees ran into often. It included, "depression, eating disorders, and other mental health issues – and yet they are not trained to handle situations like these" (para. 3). This led to the question about the high rate of suspensions/expulsions for special education students and why it often resulted in a manifestation determination meeting.

After a student with a disability was suspended for 10 or more consecutive school days, a manifestation determination meeting was required. According to Special School District of St. Louis County (n.d.), this was a meeting held after a student had been

suspended for over 10 consecutive days at school or the student received an even longer suspension. During this meeting, families, district employees, and other important IEP team member met to determine if the inappropriate behavior resulted from, “A direct and substantial relationship to the child's disability or if the conduct in question was a direct result of the district's failure to implement the IEP” (para. 24). Special School District of St. Louis County stated if it was determined that the student’s disability was not related to the behavior, then the student may be suspended, but was still required to receive the same services that were outlined in the IEP. This included access to the general education curriculum. Alternatively, if it was determined that the behavior the student demonstrated was related to their disability, then they cannot be suspended, unless there was involvement with drugs, weapons, or bodily injury (Special School District of St. Louis County, n.d., para. 25). This depicted how IDEA '97 provided Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) to these students. Hartwig and Ruesch (2000) explained there were requirements as a component of IDEA which guaranteed that students with special needs followed school rules and regulations. This included the provisions that focused on the removal from their “current placement when [their] behavior significantly violates school discipline codes, and requirements for the continuation of services for students with disabilities who are disciplined” (p. 241). While these guidelines did provide some parameters for disciplining students with disabilities, prejudice may still play a key role in an administrator’s decision about whether or not to utilize suspension/expulsion.

The Bias

There were several factors that contributed to the rationale about why students receiving special education services were suspended more often than their typically-

developing peers. Blad and Samuels (2015) explained, “It’s often the attitude of educational leaders, not the behavior of students that predicts high suspension rates” (p. 10). Due to this factor, there was evident bias towards this particular student demographic because not all administrators provided the same consequences for inappropriate student behaviors.

Furthermore, Blad and Samuels (2015) said:

Among secondary students with disabilities, black males were suspended at the highest rate, at 33.8 percent. Black female students with disabilities were also suspended at a high rate, 22.5 percent. Among white secondary students with disabilities, the suspension rate was 16.2 percent for males and 7.3 percent for females. The 5,700-student Riverview Gardens, Mo., district was cited in the report for suspending 85 percent of its secondary students with disabilities in 2011-12, compared with 49 percent of its secondary students overall. (p. 10)

This information depicted possible prejudice towards one student population over another when it came to disciplinary action. For example, according to the USDOE Office for Civil Rights (2014), “Students with disabilities are more than twice as likely to receive an out-of-school suspension (13%) than students without disabilities (6%)” (p. 1). McMillan and Wildaman (1992) supported this idea when they stated while schools and districts closely followed the regulations that FAPE provided, students with mild disabilities had higher “delinquency and dropout rates” than their non-disabled peers (p. 20). From this information, the researcher inferred that students receiving special education services were more likely to be suspended for inappropriate behavior than their general education peers.

In the state of Kansas, Cooley (1995) conducted a study to determine if students with disabilities were suspended for different reasons than those of their non-disabled peers. The results of the data revealed that students with learning disabilities and behavior disorders were, “Suspended at more than twice the rate of other students, but the acts they are suspended for are, for all practical purposes, no different from those of other students” (p. 4). This demonstrated that while the infractions may be comparable to that of general education students, those receiving special education services were 50% more likely to receive corrective action. Furthermore, Skiba (2002) explained once a student was suspended, they were 40% more likely to receive similar consequences for their behavior. This suggested that students misunderstood that a removal from school was meant to teach a lesson (para. 53).

Another research study using data from the 2000-2001 school year, by Dickinson and Miller (2006), also supported the idea that students receiving special education services were more likely to be suspended or expelled than their non-disabled peers. “More than 91,000 special education students in the U.S. were removed from their normal school settings for disciplinary reasons” (p. 76). Dickinson and Miller (2006) explained this number represented about 1.4% of the total number of students that received special education services in public schools during the course of that school year (p. 77). These findings were important because, “In the long term, school suspension has been found to be a moderate-to-strong predictor of school dropout” (Losen & Skiba, 2010, p. 10). Blad and Samuels (2015) reinforced the idea that students with disabilities “frequently become disengaged” after being suspended more than one time (p. 12). From this notion, the researcher concluded that as students continued to demonstrate the same

inappropriate behaviors repeatedly, they tended to receive similar disciplinary action each time. Thus, school personnel began to “expect” conduct problems from them because of the repetitive cycle resulting in a bias stance towards this student population. This led to students with disabilities dropping out of high school and a school district’s special education graduation rate decreasing, even though school officials were simply following their district’s Zero Tolerance policies.

Zero Tolerance

Schools districts addressed student disciplinary issues in a variety of ways. One of which was through a practice called Zero Tolerance. Bazelon (n.d.) explained that Zero Tolerance guidelines were immediate penalties which included automatic suspension and expulsion. Initially they were developed as a means to address serious problems such as illegal drugs and school weapons; however, “In practice they have often been used for infractions of all school rules, leading to severe punishment for misbehavior” (p. 1). This meant that regardless of the severity of the student infraction, if it conflicted with the Zero Tolerance policies in a district, they were suspended or expelled. According to Deeny (2014), this type of administrative action sent a message to at-risk students who required the most support and attention that they were unwanted by the school (para. 1). Furthermore, “25 percent of the students recommended for expulsion in accordance with the policy had disabilities that would have qualified them for special education services” (Holloway, 2001/2002, pp. 84-85). Holloway (2002), explained this was double the number of special needs students that were expected to be in the total school-aged population (pp. 84-85).

This information revealed that there were a high number of students with disabilities that were forced to vacate school due to disciplinary decisions. Consequently, many of these students ended up moving from the education system to the juvenile justice system.

School-to-Prison Pipeline

There were many students that attended public schools who did not begin their educational careers with an opportunity for success. Quinn, Rutherford, Leon, Osher, and Poirier (2005) stated there were several theories that explained this rationale. The first one was called *school failure*. It implied that students with learning disabilities, emotional/behavioral disabilities, and intellectual disabilities, either automatically had difficulties in school or would fail. Based on this information, these students had a lower self-image, which led to dropout, suspension, or other disciplinary issues.

The second theory, called *susceptibility*, meant that children with disabilities were predisposed to criminal activities or delinquent behavior. Several characteristics were used to describe these traits. This included low impulse control, becoming easily irritable, giving into the suggestions of others, and not understanding social cues. The third one, *differential treatment*, explained that even when both students with and without disabilities demonstrated the same behaviors, law enforcement, court houses, and juvenile corrections, reacted differently to those with disabilities. *Metacognitive deficits* was the fourth theory. It stated that youngsters with disabilities were not able to problem-solve as well as their typically-developing peers. Due to these factors, students with disabilities had an increased risk of delinquent and felonious behavior (Quinn, Rutherford, Leon, Osher, 2005, p. 340).

The Pacer Center (2013) agreed with the idea that students with disabilities were more at-risk when it came to inappropriate conduct. During a national survey in 2005, it was discovered that, “Almost 20 percent of the youth with emotional and behavioral disorders were arrested while in secondary school” (p. 3). This study described how approximately 13% of these adolescents had developmental disabilities and approximately 36% of them had a type of learning disability. As a result, when these types of students presented conduct concerns, many of them were referred by their school to a corrections facility (p. 1). This type of action has occurred in other states as well. Capps (2015) explained that, “Schools in Virginia, the state with the highest rate of student referrals to police or courts, referred students with disabilities to law enforcement for discipline at jarring rates” (para. 6). Consequently, more students with disabilities have ended up in the school-to-prison pipeline.

The school-to-prison pipeline, “Refers to the policies and practices that push our nation's schoolchildren, especially our most at-risk children, out of classrooms and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems” (American Civil Liberties Union, n.d., para. 1). This disciplinary practice had specifically affected students with disabilities. According to Mader and Butrymowicz (2014), one in three students arrested had an emotional or learning disability. Furthermore, throughout the nation, a student with an emotional disability was three times more at risk of being arrested prior to high school graduation than their typically-developing peers (para. 3). These results were viewed in different states across the country as well. For example, in Texas, “A study of one million Texas students found that those who were suspended or expelled were nearly three times as

likely to enter the juvenile justice system” (The Koffel Law Firm, 2014, para. 2). After a student was removed from school though, additional negative consequences occurred.

When school personnel expel students, the youth often lost access to the resources or supports they were provided in their educational setting. Brooks (2015) explained one component of this was staff support. For example, at Baltimore County Public Schools, some students had a teacher, paraeducator, and a support staff member that was solely focused on behavior intervention. Furthermore, Amurao (2013) explained that being unable to attend classes often forced students to go back to places that lacked positive influence. This could be their own homes or neighborhoods. Then as the students were exposed to more negative behavior, they often, “Become hardened, confused, embittered. Those who are unnecessarily forced out of school become stigmatized and fall behind in their studies” (para. 2). As a result, many dropped out of high school, while others committed felonies in their communities (para. 2). This cycle was a root cause of the suspension/expulsion rate of special education students, which in turn affected graduation rates. This was why there were several organizations that attempted to counter these actions and supported both students and staff to overcome these challenges.

The National Education Association (NEA) was one group that assisted with addressing the school-to-prison pipeline epidemic. “NEA leaders and members have helped raise awareness of the issue, shape district and state policies, and provide resources on restorative practices” (Flannery, 2015, para. 21). Flannery (2015) stated the superintendent of Montgomery County and the Montgomery County Education Association collaborated to create their own code of conduct. It minimized suspension and instead, allowed students the opportunity to learn from the mistakes they made. Also

several school districts created memorandums of understanding as agreements between the school district and law enforcement so that minor offenses students committed could remain out of criminal courts (para. 23). Furthermore, there were additional groups that joined this cause. One in particular, Dignity in Schools (2011) supported this notion. They united, “Parents, youth, advocates and educators to support alternatives to a culture of zero-tolerance, punishment and removal in our schools” (para. 1). This initiative, of finding alternative consequences to suspension/expulsion, had spread throughout the country as well and some states have changed their practices to reflect newer methodology.

In the state of Texas, a research study was conducted by Fabelo et al. (2011). They analyzed millions of juvenile justice and school records to determine the types of students that were most frequently suspended or expelled from secondary, public schools and how it affected academic performance and student involvement in the juvenile justice system (p. 6, para. 1). Several examples of significant findings included if a student was suspended or expelled between the grades of seventh and 10th, about 10% of them had dropped out. Also if a student was disciplined 11 times or more, 59% did not graduate during the period of this study (p. xi). Lastly, when it came to special education students, nearly three-quarters of them were suspended or expelled at least one time during this study. Another interesting fact was that the disciplinary action utilized was very much based on a student’s disability. If a student had a diagnosis of emotional disturbance, they had greater chances of being suspended or expelled. “In contrast, students with autism or mental retardation—where a host of other factors was controlled for—were considerably less likely than otherwise identical students without disabilities to experience a

discretionary or mandatory school disciplinary action” (p. xi). Thurlow, Sinclair, and Johnson (2002), supported this research study as well. They stated that, “Arrest rates are alarming for youth with disabilities who drop out of school—73% for students with emotional/behavioral disabilities and 62% for students with learning disabilities” (para. 7). These research studies reinforced the idea that this was a crisis that has continued to spread throughout the country.

The Paths that May be Chosen

There were a variety of tracks a high school student with a disability may end up on as they concluded their career in secondary education. Schifter (2011) explained that during the school year 2006-2007, there were 394,442 special education students that exited school. There were approximately 56% that graduated with diplomas, 16 percent that received certificates, 25% decided to drop out, and the rest either passed away or aged-out of the school system (p. 411). This data represented that secondary students with special needs do not have statistically high chances of graduating from a public school district. Furthermore, during the 2012-2013 school year, *Education Week* Research Center (2015) released information that compared the state of Missouri’s rates with that of the nation on these specific topics. It revealed that in Missouri, 82.8% of students graduated high school with a regular diploma, 0.1% received a certificate, 15.5% dropped out, 1.2% reached maximum age, and 0.4% died (p. 6). On the other hand, the results from the nation were that 65.2% of students graduated with a regular high school diploma, 14.4% received a certificate, 18.6% dropped out, 1.5% reached maximum age, and 0.4% of the students died (p. 6). This information demonstrated that across each of

these areas, Missouri had either rates that were higher than or equal to, that of the country as a whole.

According to a study by Amos (2011), 56% of students who dropped out of high school within a two-year time span were arrested and 34% were placed on probation or parole (para. 5). The National High School Center (2007) also supported this information. It stated that, "Overall, at least one-third of students with disabilities who drop out of high school have spent a night in jail" (p. 1). This was three times more than the number of students with disabilities, who completed high school (p. 1). Due to the fact that students receiving special education services represent 13% of all students, the only way the nation would achieve a 90% graduation rate, was to increase these numbers (Grad Nation, 2014, para. 4). There were systematic processes put into place though, that supported special education students and their goals of earning a high school diploma.

Graduating with an Educational Disability

Students in the state of Missouri that received special education services may graduate with the same diploma as their general education peers, as long as they completed the graduation requirements that the state had authorized. The way graduation rates were calculated though, had significantly changed. In 2005, the nation's Governors created a specific graduation cohort rate. This later aligned to the 2008 federal regulations, and then during the 2010-2011 school year, the USDOE made the use of the rate calculation mandatory because of how it utilized the four-year, cohort method (Press Office, 2011, para. 1).

Samuels (2008) explained that, "The regulations, published in the Federal Register Oct. 29, will be one of the last changes the Bush administration makes to the

federal No Child Left Behind Act” (para. 2). The *ASHA Leader* (“Graduation Rates,” 2015) reported that these modifications reflected the number of students that began school together in the ninth grade and then graduated four years later. The cohort number was then adjusted for students who transferred in and out of the district; omitting students who graduated based on IEP goals and any students that had to repeat a grade (p. 12). This represented the intended focus on groups of students who began and ended their four years together based on earning a traditional diploma in the state of Missouri, rather than graduating based on other factors.

Even though this formula may have increased graduation rates, there was still a discrepancy between the number of students completing high school with and without disabilities. According to Yettick and Lloyd (2015), students receiving special education services, “Have a 62 percent on-time graduation rate, which is 19 percentage points lower than the overall national rate” (p. 18). As a result, there was a gap between these two student populations of graduates. This was also evident in the statistics from the state of Missouri.

In 2013, Missouri had a graduation rate of 86% (State Graduation Brief, 2015, para. 7). This represented the number of students that graduated with a high school diploma. However during this same year students with disabilities only had a graduation rate of 73%; this was a difference of 13 points (State Graduation Brief, 2015, para. 7). The percentages alone should not be the only alarming piece. Diament (2015a) reported that there are more students with disabilities able to complete the [high school course] work, 85 to 90%. Instead though, only every six out of 10 students graduated in 2013 (para. 2). Knowing this information, there were a variety of avenues for students with

disabilities to travel. Through specific supports, hopefully their chosen routes led them to high school graduation.

Supporting Secondary Students with Disabilities

In order for students with disabilities to achieve success in high school, they must first be identified as struggling learners, before interventions may be implemented. Losen, Hodson, Keith, Morrison, and Belway (2015) explained that the starting point to do this was to provide information and training to staff about the implementation of utilizing alternative strategies (p. 32). Once this occurred, the Center for Public Education (2007) stated that there were key student characteristics to focus on. One example was demographic background, which included students with learning or emotional disabilities. Another focused on educational experiences. This centered on those who struggled academically, demonstrated poor classroom behavior, and had poor teacher and peer relationships (para. 9). From this information, it may be surmised that the sooner students with disabilities were recognized as having difficulties, the quicker supports may be put into place. As a result, graduation rates of special education students in grades nine through twelve may increase.

One type of intervention that may be provided to students in high school was known as targeted interventions. The George Washington University Center for Equity and Excellence in Education (2012), described this as supports provided to small groups of students. It included checking in every day with students to determine if they were attending classes, or contacting their families if they were not in school over two days a month. In addition, there were, “The use of behavior checklists to monitor student behavior, and the provision of extra help for students, such as small group tutoring, when

course failure is a possibility” (p. 7). These types of supports allowed the interventions to be individualized based on the needs of each student. Another method to help high school students with disabilities was to allow them to tutor younger children. The Intercultural Development Research Association (2013) stated that students in high school who were considered “at risk,” may tutor elementary students. This allowed the secondary students to gain increased responsibility and pride. As a result, they tended to perform better in school and gain positive recognition for their work (para. 4). The researcher concluded from this information that tutoring opportunities provided both the tutor and tutee the chance to make a difference in one another’s lives by remaining in school and working towards graduation.

New approaches involving trauma education were also developed so that instead of receiving a suspension/expulsion, students and staff learned how to overcome challenges that occurred. In Connecticut, several schools transitioned towards using a trauma-sensitive approach when it came to student discipline. According to Kolodner (2015), these schools have moved towards helping students cope with the trauma they have had. “The idea is to catch problems before they become disciplinary issues resulting in suspensions or expulsions, and thus remove key barriers to academic success” (para. 7). From this information, the researcher inferred that a student’s past and present history did impact their graduation and suspension/expulsion rates.

Other organizations have also transitioned towards becoming trauma-sensitive. For example, in Missouri, a behavioral health organization called Great Circle (2015) was, “Instituting trauma-informed care. Trauma-informed care demonstrates a thorough understanding of the profound neurological, biological, psychological and social effects

of trauma and violence on individuals and incorporates awareness of the impact of trauma in assessments and treatment programs” (para. 4). The Post Traumatic Stress Center, LLC. (n.d.) also provided a variety of programs to support schools and students in grades kindergarten through twelve, focused on trauma-informed care. They offered the following: screenings about stressful experiences, sessions for students that focused on stress reduction, education on child safety, a program to allowed students to express concerns and receive support and recognition, sessions for parents about engagement, specialized summer programs, and professional development for school personnel (para. 1). The researcher concluded from this information that in order for students, including those with disabilities, who had a history of trauma to be successful in high school, they needed additional interventions to avoid suspension/expulsion. Instead, the supports put into place allowed them to remain in school and receive the necessary credits towards high school graduation.

Many schools had also adopted a framework called restorative justice or practices. According to Porter (2007), this methodology focused on inclusion, building relationships, and problem-solving. It also included conflict resolution which brought victims, their offenders, and the people who supported them together to address their issues. “Instead of punishment, students are encouraged to reflect on and take responsibility for their actions and come up with plans to repair harm” (para. 3). These types of practices were important because they could be used in place of suspensions and expulsions. Wettach and Owen (2014) also mentioned how staff may be trained to become “restorative justice practitioners” (para. 10). There was data that supported its implementation as well. Dalporto (2016) said, “In the three years since embracing the

practice, suspensions dropped by 87%, violence decreased dramatically and expulsions became non-existent” (para. 3). Through this initiative, public school employees were better able to support their student population.

As a result of restorative justice or practices, the climate in a school may improve, which could foster healthy relationships for students and school personnel, decrease disciplinary disparities, increase engagement with students and families, support social-emotional well-being, and endorse accountability, as well as two-way communication. “When the culture and climate of the school is improved, students become more engaged, which results in improved attendance, fewer classroom disruptions, higher academic performance, and increased graduation rates” (“Restorative Practices,” 2014, p. 5). If concerns about students, including those who received special education services, were not addressed, then high school graduation may not even be a consideration for some students. This was why the personnel included in this study were considered experts in the field of education.

The Experts Chosen

There were several reasons why the public school personnel chosen for the study were contacted to complete the survey. First of all, the positions of Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent were picked because they were considered to be executive leaders within school districts. This meant that they impacted special education students from a higher level. The Kern County Superintendent of Schools (n.d.) released a statement on behalf of their Division of Special Education. Their website explained how they advocated for children and collaborated with districts and families. It stated that they, “deliver services to students with special needs by providing innovative approaches

to education, individualized programs, and preparation for successful citizenship” (para. 1). This was important because it demonstrated that the top administrators in school districts wanted their special education population to become contributing members of society.

Building level administrators also provided support to staff who worked with students that had disabilities. Principals and Assistant Principals were communicated with about the survey due to their leadership roles in school buildings that service special education students. According to DiPaola and Walther-Thomas (2003), when building administrators focused on improving instruction, they also tended to, “Demonstrate administrative support for special education, and provide high-quality professional development for teachers produce enhanced outcomes for students with disabilities and for others at risk for school failure” (p. 9). Based on this information, Principals and Assistant Principals were some of the staff that drove instructional decision-making in order to produce more positive outcomes.

It was imperative that Special Education Administrators/Coordinators were included as well. This was due to their expertise in the field of special education and because of the supports they provided to both students and staff. The role that a Special Education Administrator/Coordinator played was important to the research study because of their background and direct involvement with special education students. According to the Council of Exceptional Children (2001), their roles and responsibilities were expansive. They set standards and goals for programs that worked with students with disabilities, ensured compliance at the local, state, and federal level, outlined policies and procedures for special education staff, and supported them in their work. They also

communicated with families, conducted program evaluations, worked with budgets, responded to concerns from legislators, provided mediation between families and schools, and attended community meetings when discussions were focused on special education (p. 2). All of these items aligned well with both the initiatives that Superintendents and Assistant Superintendents wanted because the Special Education Administrator/Coordinator provided support to building level administrators with the tasks they were expected to complete.

The Student Services Director operated in a similar fashion as the Special Education Administrator/Coordinator. That is why this position was included in the survey. Overall, the public school personnel in this position were responsible for several areas that positively impacted students with disabilities. According to the Mehlville School District (2016) website, the Student Services Office provided a variety of services. This included instructional support for students with unique learning styles, programs that assisted students with achieving high learning standards which allowed for increased societal contributions, and specialty supports for students that received special education services. Furthermore, this office helped English Language Learners, students that were gifted, and those that were affected by poverty or homelessness. It even provided ongoing training and supports through Positive Behavior Support Teams, assistance with health services, and oversaw the transfer program that allowed students in St. Louis City to transfer to attend school in St. Louis County (para.1). Due to the wide depth of involvement that this office represented, and specifically employees in Student Services Director positions, it was essential that the researcher asked staff in these roles to complete the survey.

The last four positions, High School Counselor, Paraprofessional, Special Education Teacher, and School Psychologist were essential positions that were provided surveys because of their direct contact with students with disabilities. School Counselors were chosen because of their involvement with, “Serving on teams that assist with disability identification and implementation of services” (Hall, n.d., para. 3). The Paraprofessional position was selected because it provided a vast range of support to students that received special education services. According to McVay (1998), responsibilities included: small group instruction, the collection of materials, personal care and physical support, task completion, the facilitation of positive social interactions, the adaptation of lessons with teacher support, and the provision of support to the classroom community (p. 3). With all of this in mind though, the most influential members to influence a classroom community were the Special Education Teachers.

Special Education Teachers were the personnel who had the most significant impact on students with disabilities. This was because they were responsible for the day-to-day implementation of student programming. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015), they worked with students with a wide range of disabilities which included learning, social/emotional, and physical. As a result, they were expected to adapt lessons from the general education setting and provide instruction in reading, writing, math, literacy, or communication techniques (para. 1). Based on this information, they had greater insight into the functioning of their students and were able to share their perceptions about the suspension/expulsion and graduation rates of these adolescents.

The last position, the School Psychologists, were identified as survey candidates because of how their roles and responsibilities changed. *Education World* (n.d.) reported

that, “The job of school psychologists has evolved from "test and place" to the provision of mental health services that deal with the spectrum of behavioral and academic needs” (para. 16). This meant that while they used to be solely focused on the assessment of students to determine special education eligibility, as of this writing they were used to provide greater support. Based on this, the researcher inferred that public school personnel in these positions had an understanding of what may have caused students with disabilities to be suspended/expelled or what supports they truly needed in order to graduate from high school.

The Importance of Earning a High School Diploma for Students with Disabilities

Earning a high school diploma was found to be an essential component towards achieving success when transitioning into adulthood. According to Cortiella (2013), this was because, “Today’s focus is on all students leaving high school “college-and- career ready” (p. 5). This meant that regardless of the path chosen, they should have gained the necessary knowledge and skills to be successful with either option. Unfortunately, graduating from high school was something that may not have occurred for all students with disabilities, and as a result, they may not have had the same amount of success -post high school as others who did graduate.

During the school year 2011-2012, Diament (2014) explained that data was released from the USDOE’s National Center for Education Statistics about the graduation rates of special education students. It revealed that, “While the number of students with disabilities obtaining diplomas also ticked up that year, just 61 percent of those with special needs graduated, the findings indicate” (para. 3). This information was important because without a high school diploma, achievement in a post-secondary school or job

obtainment was more difficult. This was supported by Ipatenco (2015); because, “Most colleges and technical schools will not admit you without a high school diploma” (para. 2). Furthermore, Cortiella (2013) explained that “Nearly 90 percent of the fastest-growing, highest-paying jobs require some sort of education beyond high school” (p. 5). This information connected to employment rates as well. Ipatenco (2015) reported that according to the National Dropout Prevention Center, statistics showed that people who completed a minimum of four years in college, were four times more likely to be employed than those who did not earn a high school diploma (para. 2). Furthermore, Palm Beach Schools (n.d.) provided some insights about the application and interview process. “With the multitude of applicants applying for available jobs, it's very unlikely that a person without a high school diploma will even be considered for an available position” (para. 2). This demonstrated that employers had moved towards hiring educated individuals because they wanted the most qualified candidate for the job. This then led to pay and salary. Ipatenco (2015) said “High school graduates earn an average of \$143 more a week than those who don't finish. Go on to college, and you'll earn an average of \$479 more a week than high school dropouts” (para 2). Regardless of whether a student’s goal was to attend a –post secondary school or acquire a job, each of these components were associated with one another because neither goal may be accomplished without a high school diploma.

Summary

High school graduation was a milestone for many students. The state of Missouri set precise requirements for them to graduate and the courses taken during their tenure were supposed to prepare them for college or career readiness. Unfortunately, not many

students with disabilities were able to achieve this and earn their diploma. This may be due to several factors. One of them was bias towards them from school personnel simply because they received special education services. Another was that they were suspended/expelled at a higher rate than their typically-developing peers. A third reason was that behaviors inhibited their ability to learn and because staff were unable to manage them, they received disciplinary consequences that removed them from the classroom. Often, this aligned with the Zero Tolerance policies set by a school or district, which tended to restrict students from attending school. Then as a result, when they were unable to attend school, they committed crimes that landed them in what was known as the school-to-prison pipeline. If a student with a disability overcame these obstacles, as well as the social challenges of being in high school, and earned a diploma, then they may have a promising future. Consequently, they could attend a post-secondary school or earn a job, and contribute to society instead of being a hindrance upon it.

Chapter Three: Methodology

The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to investigate the suspension/expulsion and graduation rates of Missouri public high school special education students. This was important because, according to Evenson, Justinger, Pelischek, and Schulz (2015), “Students with disabilities make up only about 11% of the school population in the U.S., while they account for almost 20% of school suspensions” (para. 4). Consequently, “Across the United States, 63 percent of students with disabilities graduated from high school in 2014 — a rate of graduation roughly 20 percent lower than the national average” (Grindal & Schifter, 2016, para. 3). Based on this data, the researcher wanted to determine if there was a relationship present between the two areas of focus, suspension/expulsion rates and graduation rates. In order to conduct this study, data was obtained from MODESE and from surveys distributed via SurveyMonkey. Chapter Three outlines the following: hypotheses, research questions, purpose, methodology, limitations, the research site, and participants.

Null Hypotheses

Null Hypothesis 1: There will be no difference in the graduation rates of special education students graduating from high school between the school years of 2012-2013, 2013-2014, and 2014-2015.

Null Hypothesis 2: There will be no difference between the suspension/expulsion rates of special education students between the between the school years of 2012-2013, 2013-2014, and 2014-2015.

Null Hypothesis 3: There will be no difference between the graduation rates of non-suspended/expelled special education students to suspended/expelled special education students.

Null Hypothesis 4: There will be no difference between the suspension/expulsion rates of special education students and the suspension/expulsion rates of general education students.

Research Questions

Research Question 1: How do school personnel that work with special education students view suspension/expulsion rates for students with disabilities and without disabilities?

Research Question 2: What is the viewpoint that school personnel have that work with special education students about their suspension/expulsion rates?

Research Question 3: What is the viewpoint that school personnel who work with students with disabilities have about their graduation rates?

Research Question 4: According to experts in the field of education what interventions would be more successful than suspension/expulsion for students with disabilities? Why?

Research Question 5: According to experts in the field of education, what are the necessary supports required to be successful with special education students? Why?

Purpose

The purpose of the project was to determine if there was a potential relationship between the suspension/expulsion rates and graduation rates of secondary, special education students who attended public school in the state of Missouri in grades nine

through twelve. Investigation revealed that research was conducted on one topic or the other, but not both together in the state of Missouri. The secondary data obtained from MODESE represented the school years 2012-2013, 2013-2014, and 2014-2015.

Methodology

The first step in this research study was to obtain International Review Board (IRB) approval for the study. After this occurred, the researcher contacted MODESE. This department provided the graduation rates of special education students graduating from public high schools for the school years of 2012-2013, 2013-2014, and 2014-2015 (Table 1).

Table 1

MODESE Special Education Graduation Rates

| School Year | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 |
|-----------------|-------|-------|-------|
| Total Graduates | 5,883 | 5,832 | 5,775 |
| Total Cohort | 7,982 | 7,757 | 7,532 |

Note. Source (MODESE, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c)

The next set of rates MODESE supplied was the suspension/expulsion rates of public school special education students for the school years of 2012-2013, 2013-2014, and 2014-2015 (Table 2).

Table 2

Suspension/Expulsion Rates of Special Education Students

| School Year | 2012-2013 | 2013-2014 | 2014-2015 |
|-------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Total OSS and ISS | 7,225 | 6,511 | 8,701 |

Note. Source (MODESE, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c; MODESE Data Request, personal communication, July 20, 2015)

The third type of information MODESE gave was the graduation rates of public school non-suspended/expelled special education students to suspended/expelled special education students (Table 3).

Table 3

Special Education Graduation Rates with and without Suspension/Expulsion

| School Year | 2012-2013 | 2013-2014 | 2014-2015 |
|------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Suspended/Expelled | 1,673 | 1,605 | 1,484 |
| Non-Suspended/Expelled | 4,210 | 4,227 | 4,291 |

Note. Source (MODESE Data Request, personal communication, July 20, 2015).

The last set of rates from MODESE contained the suspension/expulsion rates of public school special education students and the suspension/expulsion rates of public school general education students (Table 4).

Table 4

Suspension/Expulsion Rates (Per 100 Students) of Special Education Students and General Education Students

| School Year | Special Education Students | General Education Students |
|-------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| 2012-2013 | 0.224 | 0.138 |
| 2013-2014 | 0.204 | 0.123 |
| 2014-2015 | 0.273 | 0.161 |

Note. Source (MODESE Data Request, personal communication, July 20, 2015).

Following this, the researcher analyzed the secondary data from MODESE to determine if there was a relationship, in order to answer each null hypothesis. The tests conducted included the test of Homogeneity of Proportions and the z -test for difference in proportions. After utilizing these tests, analyses were performed. Next, the one multiple choice and five open-ended survey questions were put on SurveyMonkey to prepare for email distribution. The consent for approval included in the email invitation was also developed and included with the SurveyMonkey link, as well as the deadline to take the survey. The survey was sent out three times between the months of April 2016 and May 2016. The last step was to analyze the results from the surveys and look for patterns

within answers. The researcher purchased a computer program called NVivo, in order to more easily export and analyze the data.

Limitations

There were several limitations associated with this study. This first component was, out of the 170 survey links emailed, there was no guarantee that public school district personnel would complete and return the responses. This was because participation in the survey was completely voluntary. As a result, the researcher only received 36 responses, or 21.17%.

Another limitation was that public school staff could have chosen to skip particular questions, limit their answers on the constructed response questions, interpret questions differently than their intended meaning resulting in answers that were not previously considered, or they could stop taking the survey at any time. Each of these items could have contributed to a hindered analysis of each survey question. There was also a limit on the amount of time school district staff had to complete the survey. This was because the survey was available beginning on April 26th through May 27th. The end date was chosen because it was the last Friday in May, and the majority of public schools would be closed after this date for summer recess.

In addition, the survey was only distributed to public school employees in the state of Missouri and not to public school personnel in other states. The 170 people who received the invitation represented a sample size of the larger population within the state of Missouri. This meant only a small number of staff from around the state were provided with the opportunity to complete the survey. Furthermore, the researcher did not send the survey to educational employees in private schools. This was because the study itself

focused on special education students who attended public schools in grades nine through twelve.

The Research Site and Participants

The research site was not a component of this research study. The researcher did not utilize data contributed from one particular site, because the secondary data was obtained from the MODESE website with the assistance of the MODESE Data Specialist. In addition, the surveys were distributed online, which allowed participants the opportunity to complete the questions in any location they chose.

The researcher's work email address was utilized to distribute the surveys, since the researcher had numerous email addresses of public school personnel from the daily work conducted with these staff. In addition, if participants recognized the email address the survey was sent from, they may be more inclined to complete the survey. In order for the researcher to use his work email address for research purposes, permission was obtained from the researcher's supervisor, the Vice President of Education.

In order to send the survey out to public school personnel from the Midwestern district, a more formalized process was required. This suburban school district had a specific process and protocol followed in order for the survey to be emailed out. This meant that an Application to Conduct Research was one of four items submitted to the district's Evaluation and Research Administrator. In addition, the Research Prospectus, completed Expedited IRB, IRB Approval Letter, and Adult Consent and Survey Questions were all required submissions. After the administrator reviewed these items, there were a few emails back and forth with the researcher, in order to clarify some questions. Following this, one of the Assistant Superintendents from the district provided

final approval. Once obtained, the researcher worked with the Evaluation and Research Administrator to determine how many staff would receive the survey invitation. The Evaluation and Research Administrator then emailed out the survey to the school personnel on behalf of the researcher. After an initial email, the researcher asked the Evaluation and Research Administrator to send it out again, as a reminder, towards the end of the survey window.

Table 5

The Total Number of School Personnel That Were Emailed the Survey

| Position | Number of staff that were sent surveys |
|--|--|
| Assistant Principal | 16 |
| Assistant Superintendent | 9 |
| High School Counselor | 14 |
| Paraprofessional | 18 |
| Principals | 18 |
| Special Education Administrators/Coordinator | 45 |
| Special Education Teacher | 29 |
| Student Services Director | 2 |
| School Psychologist | 3 |
| Superintendent | 7 |
| “Other” | 9 |
| Total | 170 |

There were 170 surveys distributed to public school employees in the state of Missouri. This included sending it to staff in urban, suburban, and rural settings. The building level or district level positions it was emailed to include: Assistant Principals,

Assistant Superintendents, High School Counselors, Paraprofessionals, Principals, Special Education Administrators/Coordinators, Special Education Teachers, Student Services Directors, School Psychologists, Superintendents, and Other staff. The total number of school personnel within each category who received the email and the survey link is represented in Table 5.

The number of people in each position that completed and submitted the survey included: six Assistant Principals, zero Assistant Superintendents, two High School Counselors, zero Paraprofessionals, two Principals, 12 Special Education Administrators/Coordinators, four Special Education Teachers, one Student Services Director, one School Psychologists, two Superintendents, and six Other staff. The personnel who fell into the Other category included positions such as Curriculum Director, Director, and Curriculum. The survey was opened on April 26, 2016 and was sent out two additional times, as a reminder of its completion it. The deadline for completion was on May 27, 2016.

Summary

The research that occurred for this study was conducted through a mixed-methods approach. It included secondary data from MODESE focused on the suspension/expulsion rates and graduation rates of both students with and without disabilities for the school years 2012-2013, 2013-2014, and 2014-2015. The data was analyzed through the use of the test of Homogeneity of Proportions and the z -test for difference in proportions. The qualitative data were acquired from a survey distributed via SurveyMonkey to public school district personnel. There were 36 responses out of 170 possible. The researcher then purchased a program called NVivo to assist with

exporting the SurveyMonkey data, as well as analysis. Chapter Four outlines and explains the results obtained from this study.

Chapter Four: Results

Overview

The purpose of the project was to determine if there was a relationship between the suspension/expulsion rates and graduation rates of secondary, special education students who attended public schools in the state of Missouri in grades nine through twelve. Investigation revealed that research was conducted on one topic or the other, but not both together, utilizing data representing the state of Missouri. The researcher conducted this study through the use of secondary data obtained from MODESE for the school years 2012-2013, 2013-2014, and 2014-2015 and through an anonymous survey distributed to public school personnel via email and utilizing the survey tool SurveyMonkey.

In order to analyze the SurveyMonkey results after the responses were obtained, the researcher purchased a computer program called NVivo. This program allowed for the SurveyMonkey responses to be exported into Microsoft Excel for analysis. After it was exported, the researcher sorted the survey responses according to the positions of the respondents who filled out the survey. This allowed for analysis to occur between public school personnel of similar and different positions, to find out the respondents answers to the research questions.

Null Hypotheses

Null Hypothesis 1: There will be no difference in the graduation rates of special education students graduating from high school between the school years of 2012-2013, 2013-2014, and 2014-2015.

Null Hypothesis 2: There will be no difference between the suspension/expulsion rates of special education students between the between the school years of 2012-2013, 2013-2014, and 2014-2015.

Null Hypothesis 3: There will be no difference between the graduation rates of non-suspended/expelled special education students to suspended/expelled special education students.

Null Hypothesis 4: There will be no difference between the suspension/expulsion rates of special education students and the suspension/expulsion rates of general education students.

Research Questions

Research Question 1: How do school personnel that work with special education students view suspension/expulsion rates for students with disabilities and without disabilities?

Research Question 2: What is the viewpoint that school personnel have that work with special education students about their suspension/expulsion rates?

Research Question 3: What is the viewpoint that school personnel who work with students with disabilities have about their graduation rates?

Research Question 4: According to experts in the field of education what interventions would be more successful than suspension/expulsion for students with disabilities? Why?

Null Hypotheses

The researcher's first hypothesis analyzed the number of public school, special education high school students who graduated during three different years.

Null Hypothesis 1: There will be no difference in the graduation rates of special education students graduating from high school between the school years of 2012-2013, 2013-2014, and 2014-2015.

A contingency table was used to analyze the public school special education graduation data between the school years 2012-2013, 2013-2014, and 2014-2015. Table 6 was specifically utilized for the Test of Homogeneity of Proportions. According to Tanbakuchi (2009), the Test of Homogeneity Proportions, “tests the null hypothesis that different populations have the same proportions of some characteristics” (p. 4). From this information ($\chi^2(2, N = 23946) = 3.714, p = 0.156$), with 6 degrees of freedom, $\alpha = 0.05$, and a critical value of 12.592, the null hypothesis was not rejected and it was determined that the graduation rates of special education students were not different between the years of 2012-2013, 2013-2014, and 2014-2015.

Table 6

MODESE Special Education Graduation Rates

| School Year | 2013 | 2014 | 2015 |
|---------------------|-------|-------|-------|
| Total Graduates | 5,883 | 5,832 | 5,775 |
| Total Non-Graduates | 2,099 | 2,150 | 2,207 |
| Total Cohort | 7,982 | 7,757 | 7,532 |
| Rates | 0.737 | 0.752 | 0.767 |

Note. $\chi^2(2, N = 23946) = 3.714, p = 0.156$. Source (MODESE, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c)

Null Hypothesis 2: There will be no difference between the suspension/expulsion rates of special education students between the between the school years of 2012-2013, 2013-2014, and 2014-2015.

The researcher also used the Test of Homogeneity Proportions to evaluate if there was a difference between the suspension/expulsion rates of special education students over the course of the years 2012-2013, 2013-2014, and 2014-2015. From this information ($\chi^2(2, N = 96044) = 449.16, p < 0.0001$), with 6 degrees of freedom, $\alpha = 0.05$, and a critical value of 12.592, the null hypothesis was rejected and it was revealed that the suspension/expulsion rates of special education students were different between these school years.

Table 7

| <i>Suspension/Expulsion Rates of Special Education Students</i> | | | |
|---|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| School Year | 2012-2013 | 2013-2014 | 2014-2015 |
| Total OSS and ISS | 7,225 | 6,511 | 8,701 |
| Total Non-Suspended/Expelled | 25,030 | 25,406 | 23,171 |
| Total Rates | 0.289 | 0.256 | 0.376 |

Note. $\chi^2(2, N = 96044) = 449.16, p < .0001$. Source (MODESE, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c; MODESE Data Request, personal communication, July 20, 2015)

Null Hypothesis 3: There will be no difference between the graduation rates of non-suspended/expelled special education students to suspended/expelled special education students.

In order to determine the outcome for hypothesis number three, the researcher used the z -test for difference in two proportions. Social Science Statistics (2016) stated that the z -test for difference in two proportions was, “used when you want to know whether two populations or groups (e.g., males and females; theists and atheists) differ significantly on some single (categorical) characteristic” (para. 1). This assessment was used three times by the researcher to account for all three years’ worth of data.

For the 2012-2013 school year, the graduation rate of special education students who were suspended (0.596) was significantly different from the graduation rates of special education students who were not suspended (0.814), as indicated by a z -critical value of ± 1.96 , z -test value = -21.128, $\alpha = 0.05$, and $p < .0001$ (See Table 8).

During the 2013-2014 school year, the graduation rate of special education students who were suspended (0.631) was significantly different from the graduation rates of special education students who were not suspended (0.811), as indicated by a z -critical value of ± 1.96 , z -test value = -17.229, $\alpha = 0.05$, and $p < .0001$ (See Table 8).

In the 2014-2015 school year, the graduation rate of special education students who were suspended (0.635) was significantly different from the graduation rates of special education students who were not suspended (0.826), as indicated by a z -critical value of ± 1.96 , z -test value = -18.13, $\alpha = 0.05$, and $p < .0001$ (See Table 8).

Table 8

| <i>Special Education Graduation Rates With and Without Suspension/Expulsion</i> | | | |
|---|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| School Year | 2012-2013 | 2013-2014 | 2014-2015 |
| Suspended/Expelled | 0.596 | 0.631 | 0.635 |
| Non-Suspended/Expelled | 0.814 | 0.811 | 0.826 |

Note. Source (MODESE Data Request, personal communication, July 20, 2015).

Null Hypothesis 4: There will be no difference between the suspension/expulsion rates of special education students and the suspension/expulsion rates of general education students.

The researcher used the z -test for difference in two proportions on this set of data, as well. This test was conducted three times to account for all three school years, 2012-2013, 2013-2014, and 2014-2015.

For the 2012-2013 school year, the suspension rates of special education students (0.224) were significantly different from the suspension rates of general education students (0.138), as indicated by a z -critical value of ± 1.96 , z -test value = 40.779, $\alpha = 0.05$, and $p < .0001$. The outcome of this was a difference of 0.086 in the suspension/expulsion rates of special education students to the suspension/expulsion rates of general education students (See Table 9).

During the 2013-2014 school year, the suspension rates of special education students (0.204) were significantly different from the suspension rates of general education students (0.123), as indicated by a z -critical value of ± 1.96 , z -test value = 40.06, $\alpha = 0.05$, and $p < .0001$. This resulted in a difference of 0.081 in the suspension/expulsion rates of special education students to the suspension/expulsion rates of general education students (See Table 9).

Table 9

Suspension/Expulsion Rates (Per 100 Students) of Special Education Students and General Education Students

| School Year | 2012-2013 | 2013-2014 | 2014-2015 |
|----------------------------|-----------|-----------|-----------|
| Special Education Students | 0.224 | 0.204 | 0.273 |
| General Education Students | 0.138 | 0.123 | 0.161 |
| Difference | 0.086 | 0.081 | 0.112 |

Note. Source (MODESE Data Request, personal communication, July 20, 2015).

Then, during the 2014-2015 school year, the suspension rates of special education students (0.273) were significantly different from the suspension rates of general education students (0.161), as indicated by a z -critical value of ± 1.96 , z -test value = 49.483, $\alpha = 0.05$, and $p < .0001$. This analysis revealed a difference of 0.112 in the

suspension/expulsion rates of special education students to the suspension/expulsion rates of general education students (See Table 9).

Research Questions

Research Question 1: How do school personnel that work with special education students view suspension/expulsion rates for students with disabilities and without disabilities?

Of the 36 survey respondents from a variety of urban, suburban, and rural settings, there were a total of 11 that agreed the suspension/expulsion rates for students with disabilities were higher than those without. For example, one Special Education Administrator/Coordinator stated, 'The rate of suspension for students with disabilities is higher (3.67:1 ratio) than for those without. The differential has declined over the last 3-5 years.' Another Special Education Administrator/Coordinator explained, 'The district's total for students with disabilities receiving OSS per incident is three times higher than their non-disabled peers. Students with disabilities received ISS two and one-half times as often as their non-disabled peers.' An Assistant Principal said the rates of students with disabilities were 'slightly higher' and another Special Education Administrator/Coordinator also agreed.

I have found in the course of my career that it appears that tougher discipline is handed out [to] students with disabilities. In fact in one of my work experiences the data supported this. We were found through a DESE review to be disproportional in suspension rates for students who were identified as having a disability.

The information provided from these survey participants demonstrated that there were valid concerns about the suspension/expulsion rates of students with disabilities. However, others had counter viewpoints.

There were nine respondents that stated the suspension/expulsion rates were about equal for both special education students and general education students. A principal who completed the survey explained, 'Our school has no expulsions. We have suspensions for both disabled and nondisabled students. Our rate for nondisabled is higher than the other.' Additionally, there were 11 replies that did not directly answer the question, but instead wrote about items, such as behavior plans, homebound, or manifestation determination. One Special Education Teacher mentioned that the goal of the school was to try and keep students in school. Homebound services were available though, on an as-needed basis, through the district's alternative school. Next, this educator described how, by day 11 of a suspension/expulsion, 'There is a meeting to determine if the behavior is manifested by the disability. If so, how and where the student receives his/her services is addressed at the IEP meeting that follows the Manifestation Determination.' While these answers may not support the idea that more special education students were suspended/expelled than general education students, it did show that this form of disciplinary action continued to occur without evidence-based results, meaning student behavior may not be positively impacted, or changed. Overall, this information demonstrated that more respondents viewed the suspension/expulsion rates of students with disabilities as a problem, than those who did not.

Research Question 2: What is the viewpoint that school personnel have that work with special education students about their suspension/expulsion rates?

The researcher discovered there were a total of nine responses that thought there was bias, when it came to the suspension/expulsion rates of students with disabilities. According to a participant in the Other category, who identified themselves in a Curriculum position, it was stated, 'I see bias due to lack of training of general education teachers/staff-sometimes the disability is misunderstood and therefore suspension may occur even though the behavior may be in part due to their disability.' A High School Counselor also agreed with this idea, 'Even in some of the extreme disciplinary cases...students with IEPs are held to a different standard.' These two ideas alone, inferred that, when it came to providing consequences to students for inappropriate behavior, if they had an educational disability, then the penalties provided were harsher to those with special needs than those without.

Similarly, one Special Education Administrator/Coordinator felt similarly about the topic of suspension/expulsion, 'I see that repeat offenders are ones that staff are tired of dealing with or that really do not know how to deal appropriately with the behavior displayed by students.' Consequently, harsher consequences were provided to students that required special education services.

There were 25 responders who disagreed with the nine other points of view and had their own opinions about this question. One Special Education Administrator/Coordinator noted that administrators within their own district attempted to be, 'Attentive to the students with disabilities in regard to disproportionality monitoring at the state level. We were identified in the past and continual reminders to those making discipline decisions has brought attention to alternate strategies for students with disabilities.' This

showed that, at the time, this district struggled with this area of focus; however, since the state became involved, it since rectified the situation through alternative consequences.

A Special Education Teacher also supported this notion that bias was not observed when the suspension/expulsion rates of special education students were viewed. This teacher explained that IEP and 504 plans needed to be followed, including the Behavior Improvement Plans and Alternate Discipline Plans. Furthermore, in high school these students were held accountable for their actions, and the majority of behavioral concerns occurred from general education students, not those with disabilities.

There were also two survey participants who chose not to respond to this question. As a result, their answers were not analyzed during this process.

Based on the survey information provided for this research question, it appeared that the majority of staff believed that bias was not present, when it came to the suspension/expulsion rates of special education students in public schools in the state of Missouri.

Research Question 3: What is the viewpoint that school personnel who work with students with disabilities have about their graduation rates?

For this research question, there were a total of eight people who thought the graduation rates for special education students were a problem. One School Psychologist believed that this was an issue and there were root causes that led to this occurrence. ‘When we label students, it affects their self-esteem, which in turn leads to higher dropout rates. Once students are placed in special education, the expectations placed on them are lowered. When children are not challenged and engaged, why come!’ Therefore, it sounded like, while students with disabilities required special education services in

order to be successful in school, it may in fact hinder them because of what the staff think and feel about them.

Another Special Education Administrator/Coordinator agreed with this idea, 'Graduation rates for students with disabilities are currently about 18% lower for students with disabilities than the total population for their 4 year cohort. The differential declines by about 10% at the 5 year point.' Based on this information, it was evident that general education students graduated at a higher rate than special education students. A classroom teacher of special education students came to the same conclusion, especially when the goal was to turn students with disabilities into productive citizens, 'Letting them fail leads them into a dependent culture where others are responsible for taking care of them. They are not self-sufficient productive citizens, but could be with the right program to lead them to success instead of failure.' This led the researcher to believe that it was not just about the end goal of students with disabilities graduating. It was also about providing the best possible educational program for special education students.

Those whom had different points of view stated in varying ways that the graduation rates for students with disabilities was not a problem. There were a total of 20 individuals, however, who felt this way. One Assistant Principal explained, 'The graduation rate for students is not a problem per if their services and plans are being followed they should progress through their grades at the appropriate time.' This demonstrated that the services provided to students with disabilities may be enough to assist them with graduating from high school. A High School Counselor agreed, as well. It was stated that through the work of the IEP team and a student's case manager, students should make enough progress that they are on track to graduate. This staff

member then said, ‘We have so many credit recovery programs, summer school opportunities, and even co-op programs (credit for working) that our special education students succeed.’ This demonstrated that if a school or district had the resources to provide additional programming in order for students to make up lost credits, their high school special education population may be more successful.

Two additional Special Education Administrators/Coordinators also said the graduation rates were not a problem within their own districts. One discussed how, ‘Our graduation rate has continued to increase. Part of the reason could be due to the fact that more students have involvement with outside agencies that provide some support to the students as well as the family members.’ From this information, it sounded like students required more than simply schooling to make it through school. There was also a component of outside supports for both the child and family. As a result of the extra support, the students may be more likely to graduate.

The other Special Education Administrator/Coordinator believed that in their own school district, the graduation rates were comparable. ‘Thankfully in MO [Missouri] students can graduate through an IEP if necessary. This is helpful, but our first preference is to help students graduate on the same track expected for regular education, but provide necessary supports.’ When the state of Missouri allowed students to graduate traditionally based on credits or through an IEP, this helped districts move students with disabilities through school, so the graduation rates of special education and general education became commensurate with one another. The remaining eight survey respondents chose to either skip the question or stated they did not know the answer.

Research Question 4: According to experts in the field of education what interventions would be more successful than suspension/expulsion for students with disabilities? Why?

Of the 36 respondents, there were 33 people who answered question # 4. The three remaining participants did not respond to the question or noted that they could not think of anything more successful than suspension/expulsion to use as a descriptor for success. One common theme that occurred was for alternate settings or programming to be created for students who would otherwise be suspended. This was recommended by a Curriculum Director and three Special Education Administrator/Coordinators. The Curriculum Director explained that the alternative campus would be separate from the main one. Instead of punishment, it would be used for any student who may be facing suspension or expulsion. 'This separate school would afford the opportunity not to get behind on studies and be able to make a smooth transition back into the normal setting once completed.' All three of the Special Education Administrator/Coordinators' answers were very similar, as well. One said, 'The alternative schools/programs within the district [would be] specifically for students with disabilities or designed [in a way] that IEP teams can [make] recommend[at]ions. These programs should have a counseling component to work toward the prevention of re-offending.' With this information, it sounded like counseling was a focus that needed to be taken into consideration when it came to alternatives to suspension/expulsion. The other two Special Education Administrators/Coordinators either stated they would like a suspension alternative program in their own district or mentioned alternate programming, as well.

Another common theme that coincided with an alternative program was ISS, known as in-school suspension. One Assistant Principal claimed:

I believe that ISS (in school suspension) is a better alternative to suspension. ISS allows the student to be present at school and get work done with assistance if needed. Suspending a student makes for opportunities for them to get into trouble outside of school.

This aligned with a Special Education Teacher's goal of keeping students in school. There were two Principals and another Special Education Teacher who also mentioned ISS as an alternative to suspension/expulsion.

An additional topic that several public school staff members mentioned was community service or retribution. One Special Education Administrator/Coordinator said, 'Depending on the offense the disciplinary action could be determined that the student complete some community service to fulfill his punishment.' A Special Education Teacher mentioned this idea, as well, when it was stated that the student who made the infraction could provide community service at or around the school.

Similarly, another Special Education Administrator/Coordinator said they preferred consequences that allowed for retribution. This would be in place of removing a student from curriculum, where he or she already tended to be behind. As a supervisor, this individual provided examples, including if a student destroyed property, then the student had to restore it or earn the money to have it replaced. Furthermore, it was also indicated that if the infraction was disrespect, then a counseling session about how to show respect should be provided. Their preference was to avoid removing students from academic instruction, 'There are times when a short break is needed to regroup to

develop strategies to aid the student in success, but not being in school is a punishment that doesn't change behavior. We need to teach replacement behaviors.' Through interactive or hands-on experiences, this Special Education Administrator/Coordinator believed that the student would learn more rather than if they were simply suspended/expelled.

One High School Counselor also believed in a similar plan of action that attempted to keep a student in school, rather than utilizing suspension/expulsion. This specific individual discussed restorative discipline. It was stated, 'I think this makes sense for all students.' This notion included both the special education and general education population.

The final suggestion common amongst public school personnel centered on preventative strategies before suspension/expulsion occurred, rather than alternatives to that type of consequence. Getting to know individual students and changing their behaviors was mentioned amongst 12 individuals. One example came from a Special Education Administrator/Coordinator. The answer provided included monitoring the IEP and services, direct instruction that focused on expectations and consequences, and conducting Functional Behavioral Assessments in order to create Behavior Improvement Plans and Alternative Discipline Plans. One Special Education Administrator/Coordinator explained, 'I believe it would be helpful to identify students' individual needs and create a plan for those students if their behavior impedes their academic success.' The School Psychologist had similar thoughts when it was stated that students often have behavior issues, due to lacking certain skills, 'Instead of suspending/expelling students, we need to provide them with appropriate instruction so that they are successful.'

This may look like direct skill instruction in social skills, anger management, as well as academic skills.’ This individual also stated coping strategies may need to be taught, in order for students to learn to deal with emotions. The last example shared came from an Assistant Principal. It was a summary of what each of these other individuals had said about interventions, ‘Make sure their plans and services are being followed [in order] to make sure they have the best chance to be successful and when they are, continue to use appropriate interventions as with any other student.’ Based on the feedback from these staff, if instruction occurred both inside the classroom and outside, through tasks, such as community service, students were more viable to learn from their mistakes without being removed from the educational setting.

Each of these experts in the field of education had different viewpoints about what interventions would be more successful than suspension/expulsion for students with disabilities. This may be due to the resources available within their schools or districts, their identified positions within their organizations, and the experiences they had leading up to the completion of this survey. Overall, the trends that appeared were alternative settings or programming, in-school suspension, community service, and relationship building. The latter was essential, because it allowed staff to get to know their students and their needs in order to be successful and avoid suspension/expulsion.

Research Question 5: According to experts in the field of education, what are the necessary supports required to be successful with special education students? Why?

There were a total of 23 responses to question # 5 that explained how the respondents felt they had the necessary supports in order to be successful with special education students. One person, who marked themselves in the Other category as

Curriculum, claimed, 'Yes, we are in a total sped environment so therefore we have more training and supports than general education staff.' This demonstrated that training was essential in order for staff to successfully work with students that have disabilities. A Principal also claimed that the necessary supports were present for school personnel, 'We have teachers who are dually certified in a content area and special education. We train on engagement strategies. We gather data on those strategies and make adjustments.' Again, the idea of professional development was a focus for working with special education students. One Special Education Administrator/Coordinator expressed, 'Yes, I believe I have the necessary supports because many of the supports created are enforced in accordance to state and federal guidelines. Staff must adhere to those parameters to optimize and sustain success to achieve effective outcomes.' Based on the information from this participant, the regulations put into place at the state and federal level supported the needs of the workforce, which allowed for success.

One respondent to this question focused on staffing as a necessary support. According to a Student Services Director, 'We hire staff to support the needs of the students, not based off student numbers.' This was important; because, it demonstrated that this district was financially able to hire staff to work with students with disabilities based on the need, instead of on how many special education students there were. A Superintendent also offered input, as far as supports go, for students with disabilities. This district leader stated, 'Our sped staff is well versed in making appropriate recommendations and accommodations for students. Resources are available to support the interventions.' As a result, it appeared that for this organization, funding was

allocated to the special education department in order to provide appropriate programming to meet each student's needs.

Each of these responses demonstrated it was possible to provide the appropriate supports to the special education population that would allow them to be successful. This may not be the case in all schools or districts. Nine survey respondents did not feel they had the necessary supports that allowed their special education population to be successful. The response from one Assistant Principal was, 'No. There are not enough teacher assistants to allow opportunities for teachers to work effectively and successfully with the students. We need to hire more qualified and ready TA's to support teachers in the SPED classes.' This was an opposite viewpoint from what the Student Services Director stated. The issue of school staff was also brought up by a Special Education Administrator/Coordinator, as well as a few other points, 'No we do not have the supports to make special education students successful, we are understaffed, under supplied, and regulated too much by the federal government without the government money.' This individual then discussed that student expectations needed to be raised just like staff expectations, families needed to be involved, and responsibility should be taken by all stakeholders, in order for progress to be made.

A shared idea amongst several public school personnel that was written about focused on mental health and trauma. Both were mentioned by two different Special Education Administrators/Coordinators. One said, 'It seems that post-secondary, teacher prep programs do not adequately equip new teachers with awareness of current student issues including trauma and mental health conditions.' This supervisor then provided follow up information when it was stated that their organization provided in-servicing for

this topic, but it only had limited success. The other Special Education Administrator/Coordinator shared similar concerns. For example, this educator explained if, ‘our PD cycle included mandatory Mandt [safety] training, trauma-informed care, and understanding poverty,’ then they would have more of the supports they felt were necessary in order to be successful with students with disabilities. Again, this may be reflective of the school, district, or funding available to the organization.

The last group of people for this question either left the answer blank or discussed how they wished there were more opportunities available for students who received special education services. One of which, a Special Education Teacher, remarked, ‘Somewhat. There needs to be more opportunities for community based instruction and on the job training.’ This instructor then explained how academics were not the future for 90% of students with disabilities; however there were not many opportunities for these students to access technical education compared to the total population of students that received special education services.

Each of these educational experts expressed topics that either showed the supports were present for special education students or explained what supports would help them be more successful when working with this student population. Training was a focus that was mentioned several times, including during post-secondary education for staff and after they were already hired in an organization. State and federal regulations were seen both in a positive and negative manner and staffing varied from individual-to-individual, based on where the educator worked. Resources, community based instruction, and on-the-job training were also elements that school personnel thought could have been improved upon. The end result of all of this information demonstrated how points of view

varied greatly between individuals in different schools or districts and how some organizations believed they met or exceeded the supports required to be successful with special education students, while others felt they were lacking in various areas.

Summary

This mixed-methods study analyzed the suspension/expulsion and graduation rates of special education students in grades nine through twelve, who attended public schools in the state of Missouri. The data for the quantitative portion was obtained from MODESE and analyzed. It revealed several items. The first one was that there was not a difference between the high school graduation rates of special education students between the school years of 2012-2013, 2013-2014, and 2014-2015. It did, however, confirm that there was a difference between the suspension/expulsion rates of special education students between the school years for 2012-2013, 2013-2014, and 2014-2015. The third hypothesis verified was that there was a difference between the graduation rates of non-suspended/expelled special education students and suspended/expelled special education students. The last item validated was that the suspension/expulsion rates of special education students and the suspension/expulsion rates of general education students were different. Based on this information, it was inferred that there were overall differences, when looking at the suspension/expulsion rates of students with disabilities.

The second component to this research study was completed via SurveyMonkey by public school personnel. The survey was distributed to school staff who worked in urban, suburban, and rural settings. The responses were completed anonymously and the only identifying factor was each participant's position within their school settings. The options were: Assistant Principal, Assistant Superintendent, High School Counselor,

Paraprofessional, Principal, Special Education Administrator/Coordinator, Special Education Teacher, Student Services Director, Superintendent, School Psychologist, or Other. The other five questions were constructed response, and respondents had the option of leaving any of them unanswered. Of the 170 surveys distributed, there were only 36 people who responded. As a result, analysis was limited, based on the data obtained. For the first three research questions focused on special education suspension/expulsion rates and graduation rates, there were viewpoints from both sides that opposed one another. For example, there were 11 staff members who responded to research question number one that believed there was a problem with the suspension/expulsion rates of special education students, while nine additional respondents did not. Due to this type of feedback on all three questions, it was difficult to determine whether the problem lay in specific settings, urban, suburban, or rural, or within specific schools or districts. The fourth research question, however, which targeted interventions, gained 33 responses. Common answers included the creation of alternative settings or programming, in-school suspension, community service, and relationship building. The final research question, which looked at the necessary supports required for special education students to be successful, presented several common themes. They included: training, regulations from the state and federal government, resources, community based instruction, and on the job training. Each of these ideas indicated there may be commonality amongst the needs of students with disabilities in urban, suburban, and rural settings which may contribute to their suspension/expulsion and graduation rates. Chapter Five outlines recommendations for staff who work with special education students, in

order to contribute to a decrease in suspension/expulsion rates and increase in graduation rates. It also includes recommendations for future studies.

Chapter Five: Discussion and Reflection

Overview

In order to evaluate the relationship between the suspension/expulsion rates and graduation rates of secondary, special education students who attended public schools in the state of Missouri in grades nine through twelve, the researcher conducted a mixed-methods study. The first step involved in this process was to obtain secondary data from MODESE for the schools years 2012-2013, 2013-2014, and 2014-2015. These statistics specifically provided information about the suspension/expulsion and graduation rates of special education students and general education students, in Missouri. The researcher then analyzed this information using two different tests. The first was the test of Homogeneity of Proportions and the second was the z -test for difference in proportions. These tests were used to determine if hypotheses were accurate. If they were proven as supported by the data, the researcher then determined action steps that could be put into place in order to decrease the suspension/expulsion rates of special education students, while at the same time increase the graduation rates.

The second component of this study consisted of a qualitative portion. The researcher created a survey designed to gain insight from public school personnel about special education high school students and their suspension/expulsion rates, graduation rates, interventions, and necessary supports. The survey was created via SurveyMonkey, and the researcher submitted it to potential participants through email. Through the researcher's organization, the email addresses were already available and for those that were not, the researcher contacted a Midwestern school district in order to have the survey submitted to additional respondents.

The survey consisted of six questions. Question number one was created as a multiple choice option, because it allowed respondents to choose their specific position within their school or district. The options provided were: Assistant Principal, Assistant Superintendent, High School Counselor, Paraprofessional, Principal, Special Education Administrator/Coordinator, Special Education Teacher, Student Services Director, Superintendent, School Psychologist, or Other. If the option of Other was chosen, the opportunity was provided to the staff member to type in the correct position. The next five questions were constructed response.

The open-ended questions targeted five different items. They included: ‘How do school personnel that work with special education students view suspension/expulsion rates for students with disabilities and without disabilities?’ ‘What is the viewpoint that school personnel have that work with special education students about their suspension/expulsion rates?’ ‘What is the viewpoint that school personnel who work with students with disabilities have about their graduation rates?’ ‘According to experts in the field of education what interventions would be more successful than suspension/expulsion for students with disabilities? Why?’ and ‘According to experts in the field of education, what are the necessary supports required to be successful with special education students. Why?’ There were a total of 170 surveys distributed to public school personnel and a total of 36 people who responded.

Through these investigative methods, the researcher hoped to determine if the hypotheses were supported and if what public school personnel said about these topics was consistent with the data obtained from MODESE. As a result, recommendations and suggestions were created that allowed for future action plans to be researched.

Hypotheses and Research Questions

Hypothesis 1: There will be a difference in the graduation rates of special education students graduating from high school between the school years of 2012-2013, 2013-2014, and 2014-2015.

Hypothesis 2: There will be a difference between the suspension/expulsion rates of special education students between the between the school years of 2012-2013, 2013-2014, and 2014-2015.

Hypothesis 3: There will be a difference between the graduation rates of non-suspended/expelled special education students to suspended/expelled special education students.

Hypothesis 4: There will be a difference between the suspension/expulsion rates of special education students and the suspension/expulsion rates of general education students.

In addition, as a mixed-study, the research questions investigated included:

Research Question 1: How do school personnel that work with special education students view suspension/expulsion rates for students with disabilities and without disabilities?

Research Question 2: What is the viewpoint that school personnel have that work with special education students about their suspension/expulsion rates?

Research Question 3: What is the viewpoint that school personnel who work with students with disabilities have about their graduation rates?

Research Question 4: According to experts in the field of education what interventions would be more successful than suspension/expulsion for students with disabilities? Why?

Research Question 5: According to experts in the field of education, what are the necessary supports required to be successful with special education students? Why?

Discussion

Hypothesis 1. Hypothesis 1 focused on the number of special education students that graduated from high school between the school years of 2012-2013, 2013-2014, and 2014-2015. The researcher utilized the data obtained from MODESE and examined a contingency table, specific to the test of Homogeneity of Proportions, to conduct this analysis. This allowed for all three years' worth of rates to be compared at one time. The results revealed that graduation rates were not different between the three years. This demonstrated that action plans implemented by schools or districts to increase this rate were not effective, due to the rate remaining stagnant over the course of the three years.

This outcome was important, because it demonstrated that, as a state, Missouri may need new interventions in order for this rate to be increased. According to Bidwell (2015b), as a country, students needed to be moving towards, "Readiness for success in college and careers" (para. 3). When the state of Missouri demonstrated a stagnant, three-year graduation rate, this showed that improvement was not being made towards student preparation for college and career readiness. Furthermore, Samuels (2015) explained that during the school year in 2010-2011, there were several states that said they allowed students receiving special education services "to take easier substitute courses to count for credit, allowing them to skip end-of-course tests, or, alternatively, permitting them to

earn a lower score on those end-of-course tests than their typically-developing peers, but still receive a passing grade” (para. 10). Based on this information, the researcher believed that this type of programming did not support students with disabilities to prepare for college or career readiness. All students, including those receiving special education services, should still be held accountable to meet state requirements, if they were on the track to earn a traditional high school diploma.

In 2013, the organization Achieve said that regardless if states adopted the national standards (CCSS) or created their own, which aligned to the career and college readiness standards, consideration should have been provided as to how special education students would be supported to meet the standards (Achieve, 2013). This was vital, because it was required in order for all students, including those with disabilities, to be successful post-graduation. If states did not take this into consideration, then it may be more difficult to achieve the intended student outcomes. Ujifusa (2015) agreed with this thought. It was explained that there were 26 states that offered multiple avenues to earning a diploma; however, not all of those options aligned with the college and career readiness standards “in English/language arts and math. And 20 states don't offer any diploma that requires students to meet college- and career-ready expectations in E/LA and math” (para 14).

Again, to the researcher, this represented that students with disabilities that graduated were not prepared for college or careers, nor did the notion of providing these students with easier high school coursework increase their rates of graduation.

Hypothesis 2. Hypothesis 2 stated that there would be a difference between the suspension/ expulsion rates of special education students between the school years of

2012-2013, 2013-2014, 2014-2015. This proved to be supported by data, as there were differences between the suspension/expulsion between all three years. Due to this factor, a trend was unable to be established that demonstrated the rates were decreasing over time. The researcher calculated these rates using the Test of Homogeneity of Proportions. It revealed that while there was a decrease in rates from 2012-2013 to 2013-2014, there was an increase during the 2014-2015 school year. This growth in suspension/expulsion was larger, at 8,701 students than during the 2012-2013 school year, which was 7,225 students. These statistics were troubling, because during each of the three school years there was approximately the same total number of students. During the 2012-2013, there were a total of 32,255 students with disabilities, in 2013-2014 there were 31,917, and in 2014-2015 there were 31,872 special education students. Unfortunately, that last school year had the greatest amount of suspension/expulsion rates. From this information, the researcher depicted that the trend in the rates of the number of students with disabilities that received a suspension/expulsion increased over time. This was supported by Song (2015) when it was stated that there were “high rates of out-of-school suspensions among students with disabilities, as data suggests they are twice as likely to be removed from schools in comparison to their non-disabled peers” (para. 3). This was concerning to the researcher, because the more students that were removed from high school meant the less likely they were to graduate.

Hypothesis 3. Hypothesis three targeted the belief that there would be a difference between the graduation rates of non-suspended/expelled special education students to suspended/ expelled special education students. The researcher utilized a z-test for the difference in two proportions to determine if this was accurate. The test was

conducted three times and revealed that during each of the years, there were significant differences between the graduation rates between the two groups. Unfortunately, the rates calculated increased over time, which resulted in a larger gap between the two populations, non-suspended/ expelled special education students to suspended/expelled special education students.

This notion of tying lower graduation rates to suspension/expulsion rates did have merit, according to one Florida study. Wachtel (2013) explained that this analysis revealed that approximately three-fourths of ninth graders in Florida “who were never suspended out of school as freshmen graduated from high school, compared with a 52 percent graduation rate for those suspended once and a 38 percent rates for those suspended twice in their first high school year” (para. 2). Based on this data the researcher determined that the earlier in high school a student was suspended/expelled, the less likely they were to graduate. Furthermore, if this type of consequence was put into effect more than once for the same student, there would be a further reduction in the possibility of graduation.

Hypothesis 4. The fourth Hypothesis stated that there would be a difference between the suspension/expulsion rates of special education students and the suspension/expulsion rates of general education students. Through the use of a z -test for difference in two proportions, the researcher revealed that there was a difference between the two populations during all three years.

The disproportionality of suspension/expulsion rates was seen in other states as well, including Texas. Ergenbright (2010) explained that in Texas Public schools, students with disabilities were nearly two times as likely to be suspended, compared with

their general education peers. This was documented in a report given to the Senate Committee on Education. Furthermore, the expulsion rate was also unbalanced, “Though special education students make up just 10 percent of the enrollment in Texas public schools, they account for 21 percent of expulsions” (para. 2). Ergenbright then said, “According to the TEA report, for every 100 special education students in Texas, there were 55.8 in-school suspensions and 25.1 out-of-school suspensions in the 2007-2008 school year, compared to 33.2 in-school suspensions and 12.1 out-of-school suspensions for non-special-ed students” (para. 4). Based on this information, the researcher concluded that additional interventions needed to be developed and implemented to reduce this rate. Furthermore, there may have been a level of bias present when disciplinary measures were provided to students receiving special education services.

According to *U.S. News and World Report*, Bidwell (2015a) examined the 2011-2012 suspension rates in Florida, because they were higher than any other state. Results included the fact that “students with disabilities were also more than three times as likely to be suspended at the secondary level” (para. 6). This proved to the researcher that if the needs of students with disabilities were met, then this rate would decrease. This was not the case in the state of Florida.

This information represented the thought that when suspension/expulsion was considered as a consequence to a student’s actions, if the student in question had a disability, it was more likely suspension/expulsion was the course of action taken. As a result, the researcher determined that suspension/expulsion rates for students receiving special education services continued to increase over time.

Research Question 1. The first research question focused on how school personnel that worked with special education students viewed the suspension/expulsion rates for students with and without disabilities. The feedback obtained provided the researcher with a variety of viewpoints; some saw the rates as a problem, while others did not. According to Losen et al. (2015), The Center for Civil Rights Remedies conducted a research study that reviewed the suspension rates across the country. Both elementary and secondary data were analyzed, including for those students with disabilities. The state of Missouri was mentioned more than once in the findings. “The top ten highest suspending districts at the secondary level include two of the same Missouri districts identified at the elementary school level, Riverview Gardens and Normandy, Missouri” (p. 27). This report represented that, as a state, there were definite concerns with the number of special education students that were suspended/expelled in Missouri.

Due to this information, the researcher felt that more awareness was needed to allow public school personnel to understand and realize that the suspension/expulsion rates for students with disabilities was a problem in the state of Missouri. While it may not have been prevalent at all districts, it was found to be a large enough issue that there were districts within the state of Missouri that made it to the top of the list for being some of the highest suspending districts in the country.

Research Question 2. Research question two centered on the viewpoint that school personnel had about the suspension/expulsion rates of special education students. The results revealed that only nine participants felt there was bias in the way discipline was handled for students with disabilities, while the majority of respondents believed there was not.

According to Capps (2015), The Center for Civil Rights Remedies at the UCLA Civil Rights Project, conducted a research study that revealed the nationwide rates of suspension for students with disabilities during the 2011-2012 school year. Statistics were analyzed at both the elementary and secondary levels. The data revealed that 5.4% of all elementary students with a disability across the nation were suspended, and 18.1% of all high school special education students were suspended, as well (Capps, 2015, Table 1). The article then had another figure (Capps, 2015, Figure 7) that compared a secondary student's risk for suspension, based on disability status and race/ethnicity during the 2011-2012 school year. The overall percentages disclosed that the secondary school students without disabilities had a risk rate of 9%, while the students in high school with disabilities had a risk percentage of 18.1%. This was more than double the non-disabled rate.

Based on this data, the researcher believed that, while the majority of survey participants felt that there was not bias placed in the determination of suspension/expulsion rates of students with disabilities, there may not have been an awareness of what occurred outside of each participant's own experiences or school building. If this small sample of professionals possessed this opinion, then there may have been numerous more educators who did as well. As a result, the researcher thought that more public school personnel needed to learn about what transpired in the rest of the state of Missouri, based on these suspension rates, as well what occurred in the rest of the country.

Research Question 3. The third research question examined the viewpoint from public school personnel about whether the graduation rates for students with disabilities were a concern. There were 20 public school staff members that felt the rates were not a

concern, while eight of them did. As it turned out overall, MODESE (2013) explained that in 2010, Missouri was ranked eighth in the country for having a graduation rate of 80.7% of high school students. “This is the second year the state has been in the top 10 and the fourth consecutive year the state has seen growth in its graduation rate” (para. 1). This number included the special education population, as well; so, gains had also been made with students with disabilities.

The researcher was surprised at this rate until it became clear how the state of Missouri scored so high. One key factor was that there were several graduation options available to students with disabilities. According to MODESE (2015b), “Students with disabilities who meet state and local graduation credit requirements by taking and passing regular courses, taking and passing regular courses with modification, taking and passing modified classes, or successfully achieving IEP goals and objectives shall be graduated” (page. 17). This meant that any special education student who was able to fulfill one of these options would be awarded a traditional high school diploma. The researcher felt that this gave more possibilities for graduation than other states offered.

While the graduation rates of students with disabilities in the state of Missouri may not have been the majority of survey participants’ biggest concern, the researcher believed that it would continue to be one for the rest of the country. It appeared though, that in Missouri, due to the variety of graduation avenues available to students receiving special education services, the success rate increased. This was something that definitely varied from one district to another. The researcher imagined that it may be due to demographic area, school or district finances and resources, and the support that both a

family and potentially outside agencies were able to provide to a student with disabilities in order to meet their needs.

Research Question 4. The purpose of the fourth research question was to find out from experts in the field of education what types of interventions would be more successful for students with disabilities than suspension/expulsion. Of all the public school personnel that replied, the majority, 33 out of 36, or 91.6%, suggested ideas that did not remove a student from school, which meant a continuation of educational instruction.

The researcher agreed with the bulk of the respondents, because keeping students in school, including those with disabilities, should always be the focus; so, that success may occur. This included if a student was sent to an alternative school or program. There were key factors though, that Owen et al. (2015) stated were essential in order for the student to be successful. These included “a full day of school, small student bodies, small classes, a student-centered atmosphere, alignment of curriculum and assessment, availability of special education services, training and support for teachers, and connections with multiple external agencies” (p. 36). The researcher concurred with these ideas, because this meant that even students with disabilities that were facing additional challenges, could still work towards school success and gain additional supports along the way.

The concept of in-school suspension, as opposed to out-of-school suspension, was also supported by the researcher, as well as several survey participants. This meant that students should be provided with more than paper/pencil work during suspension time. According to O’Connor (2015), Miami-Dade County Public Schools were “setting up

‘success centers’ so suspended students don’t disrupt classrooms. The centers are staffed by teachers, social workers and other service providers to work with the students – and keep them on their classwork” (para. 5). Again, this tied into the idea of additional supports, which allowed students to remain in a school setting, including those with disabilities, so they would not fall behind in their education.

Community service was also brought up as a viable alternative to suspension/expulsion by several survey participants. The researcher concurred with this thought, because of the possible benefits to the students that would participate. Wettach and Owen (2014) felt, “Suspension lengths are often shortened when the students participate in community service. Programs often offer students a chance to develop skills through the community service venues” (para 11). This belief was important to the researcher because of the hands-on learning component that allowed special education students to learn from their mistakes. This notion flowed directly into the concept of restorative practice.

One survey contributor, a High School Counselor, wrote about restorative practice and how it would be effective with all types of students. The researcher felt the counselor provided an accurate perception because of previous success rates reported in schools. Dalporto (2016) explained that after restorative practice was implemented at Bunche High School, which was a continuation high school dealing with high-crime and poverty in Oakland, California, suspension rates “dropped by 51% last year. Disrespect for teachers has declined; the school is safer. Students are more focused on their studies and many have stopped cutting class” (para. 1). Thus, the researcher acknowledged the fact

that that when negative student consequences were reduced, such as suspension/expulsion, students were able to continue working towards the completion of high school.

The Los Angeles Unified School District also embraced the idea of restorative practice. According to Berwick (2015), when restorative practice was implemented, “Suspension rates for its roughly 700,000 students plummeted by 52 percent in the two years since it banned suspensions for subjective offenses such as ‘willful defiance’” (para. 16). Furthermore, as an outcome of this adoption, the graduation rates in Los Angeles increased by 12% between the school years 2012-2013 and 2013-2014. This article then went on to state how additional districts around the country decided to move towards this methodology and saw positive results. For example, when Denver Public Schools went this direction, their suspension rates were reduced by half and their graduation rates improved (paras. 18-19). Based on this information, it was clear to the researcher that restorative practices were an effective intervention in place of suspension/expulsion.

The remaining answers provided by respondents to the survey aligned with the researcher’s belief system, as well. Each mentioned targeted interventions in lieu of suspension/expulsion. The Koffel Law Firm (2014) summarized and supported these same recommendations. The Koffel Law Firm stated, “Many schools have focused on providing students with drug counseling and conflict-resolution training, and use in-school or after-school detention rather than out-of-school suspensions” (para. 3). These suggestions focused on getting to know the students and their needs, in order to best support them to overcome the challenges they faced. The researcher felt that each of

these actions allowed students with disabilities to remain in school in order to work towards earning their diplomas.

Research Question 5. The final research question asked staff in the public school setting if they felt they had the necessary supports, in order to be successful with special education students. Of the 36 total participants, 23, or 63.8%, believed they had the supports, while nine did not. The remaining participants either did not answer the question or focused on individual needs, such as community-based instruction. Based on this information, the researcher believed that the responses to this question varied greatly between participants, when it came to the recurring themes, such as training, staffing, and following state and federal regulations.

The researcher agreed that each of these items were key elements needed to support students with disabilities. The professional development mentioned was primarily focused on students with mental health or trauma needs. This area of focus was either not mentioned by those who felt they had the necessary resources or was discussed as an opportunity for improvement by those who felt the support was lacking within their school or district. One author, Adams (2013) stated, “Research indicates that teachers feel they lack the training needed for supporting children’s mental health needs” (para. 2). Then, Adams (2013) explained how, in 2011, a study conducted revealed that only 34% of the teachers that completed the survey believed they could identify and support students that dealt with mental health issues (para. 2). The researcher felt this was important; because, if a district did not have the financial resources to properly train the staff, then there would be definite deficits in meeting the needs of special education students.

The concept of financial stability was also taken into consideration by Adams (2013), and the researcher agreed with the point of view presented. “Resources for student mental health prevention and treatment vary tremendously from school to school. The majority are unable to provide enough services to meet demand” (para. 10). The article then explained that, due to budget cuts, a school often had to make a decision about what staffing position was truly needed. Options included an assistant principal, teacher’s assistant, librarian, or social worker. To the researcher, this meant there could have been bias taken into consideration when the decision was made about which position was chosen, because the needs may have varied dependent upon who was asked.

When survey participants discussed the number of staff needed to appropriately support students receiving special education services, there was discrepancy in the answers provided. This was because some felt special education personnel were hired based on need, while others believed there were not enough personnel. Brooks (2015), of Baltimore County Public Schools, created a proposal that addressed appropriate staffing of the special education department. Several items were reviewed during this process. This included the Maryland State Department of Education Requirements, the district’s mission, the special education department’s goal, the continuum of services, the then-current model they were using to staff, and the changes they wanted to implement. In the researcher’s opinion, this was an evaluation that public school districts in Missouri should conduct on a regular basis to ensure that regulations were followed and to guarantee the needs of the students were met through appropriate staff numbers.

State and federal regulations that pertained to special education were both a blessing and hindrance, according to survey participants. The rationale for this was, while

the guidelines ensured that students with disabilities received the appropriate accommodations and modifications in order to be successful, the documentation that went with this process was a time-consuming component of the job. According to Hale (2015), “The IDEA and the IEP require hours and hours of filling out forms and writing reports documenting each student's progress” (para. 13). In another article, Hale (2016) explained that a study was conducted in 2011 that reviewed and analyzed how much of a special educator’s time was taken to complete the legal paperwork. Special educators were observed, and the information learned was broken down into categories with percentages next to each one. “Management, IEP paperwork and administrative responsibilities: 33 percent; Collaboration, co-teaching, assisting other teachers and meetings: 27 percent; Instruction, teaching students in their classroom: 27 percent; Diagnostic, testing and data tracking: 13 percent” (para. 42). While the researcher was able to understand the mixed viewpoints of staff about the regulations and why they were imperative, this data showed that providing instruction was unable to be the number one focus of special educators, due to the paper work requirements at the state and federal level.

One respondent to the survey, a special education teacher, summarized thoughts about this matter. It was explained that the supports for the students were present, but having the time to address all of the other job components was not. This was due to the long list of duties, which included ‘teaching and the planning, grading, parent contacts, etc. like other teachers. They are also second teachers in regular education classes, so collaboration is necessary, as well as, modifying and helping the 504 and at-risk students.’ This educator then explained the paperwork aspect and how it was required

throughout the school year. This comprised of items such as IEPs, Re-Evaluation of Existing Data (RED) meetings, transition, documentation of the quarterly goals, and the performance summaries for seniors who were graduating.

Based on this information, it was evident to the researcher that while the supports may vary between special educators based on training, staffing, and state and federal regulations, one common characteristic amongst all of them may be the desired state of having enough time in their school day to complete all tasks. The documentation piece appeared to be just as important as the instructional component though, due to the way that IEPs drove accommodations, modifications, and programming. If a special educator was able to find a balance in each of these areas, time may still be the key element that was missing from their school day.

Reflection

Throughout this study, the researcher maintained the focus on whether suspension/expulsion rates of public high school special education students had an effect on their graduation rates. The information obtained from the literature review brought to light the fact that students with disabilities were suspended/expelled more often than the general education population. This was surprising and important to the researcher, because it was initially unknown how these rates compared to that of non-disabled peers. This information also confirmed an important point to the researcher that there was an issue with the number of special education students suspended/expelled both in the state of Missouri and the rest of the country.

One of the ways that the researcher established the idea that there was a concern with the number of public high school special education students that were suspended/

expelled was through the use of secondary data obtained from MODESE. While the information about how it was analyzed was discussed in the Chapter Four, the realization for the researcher occurred when the results of the third hypothesis were revealed. It showed that over the course of the three years analyzed, 2012-2013, 2013-2014, and 2014-2015, there was a significant difference between the graduation rates of special education students who were and were not suspended. The researcher felt this strengthened the case about the importance to find interventions that would decrease one rate, while increasing the other.

During the qualitative portion of the study that involved an online survey, the researcher was surprised how much answers varied between participants, even those with similar job positions. While in some cases, the majority may have leaned one way or another, per question it was evident that there were discrepancies in the way public school personnel felt about the survey questions. As a result, the researcher was able to deduce that there were several factors that went into the responses staff provided. This may have included the setting of the school or district (rural, urban, or suburban), the amount of funding and resources available to them, and how the survey participants' personal experiences in education affected their answers. While some staff confirmed there was a correlation between the suspension/expulsion and graduation rates, others did not feel this was an issue. This was due to the fact that some participants stated how the suspension/expulsion rates were lower for their special education population than the general education population, but their graduation rates were higher. This was attributed to the numerous tracks that some districts provided students with disabilities, in order to complete high school and earn a diploma. As a result, the survey made it a bit more

difficult for the researcher to confirm whether the suspension/expulsion rates of public high school special education students influenced their graduation rates.

The other influential factor to this portion of the study was how few participants actually completed the survey. Only 36 staff out of 170 responded to the questions. It would have been interesting to the researcher to see what the results looked like had there been more participation from public school personnel from around the state of Missouri.

Overall, the researcher believed that more collaboration should occur between schools or districts in order to better educate all stakeholders involved in the education of students with disabilities and whether their suspension/expulsion rates were in fact influenced by their graduation rates. The researcher did believe there were always opportunities for improvement. If specific schools were struggling with decreasing their suspension/expulsion rates in order to increase their graduation rates, then there should be collaboration occurring amongst educational entities so that success stories and action plans may be shared and created. This meant that new interventions could be developed and implemented, which would result in the possibility of significant changes occurring for the betterment of students with disabilities.

Recommendations for Future Research

There were several recommendations for future research that the researcher would suggest to expand on this current study. First of all, for the quantitative analysis, it may be meaningful to find out what the negative actions taken by high school special education students were that resulted in them being provided with a consequence, such as suspension/expulsion. If MODESE was able to break down each inappropriate act into categories, such as drugs, weapons, and fighting, which resulted in a suspension/

expulsion, trends would be able to be analyzed. Then the data would confirm what the highest-rated infraction was and if public school administrators within different schools and districts provided the same consequences for similar violations.

Another piece to the quantitative portion that would be interesting to learn about would be the high school level in which most students with disabilities were suspended/expelled in the state of Missouri. This would produce results that would allow for targeted grade-level interventions to be developed. Furthermore, if the information could be obtained from rural, urban, and suburban settings, then action plans could be created that would focus on specific locations of special education students. As a result, the interventions implemented would have a greater influence on the students, resulting in a positive change.

The third idea to increase the quantitative information would be to request from MODESE the suspension/expulsion and graduation rates of public high school special education students by disability. In the state of Missouri, a student may qualify for special education services through the umbrella of 14 different diagnoses. It would be interesting to find out which disability was suspended/expelled most often, least often, and why. Then for the graduation rates component, it would be informative to learn about which disability graduated most and least and what impacted those rates. These factors then may lead further into the idea about the relationship between the suspension/expulsion rates and graduation rates of public high school students with disabilities.

When looking at the qualitative section, it would be beneficial to ask survey participants what type of school setting they worked in. This could be rural, urban, or suburban. Their answers would help tailor specific participant responses, to understand

who felt they had the necessary supports in place for their special education population to be successful and who did not. Then this data could be compared to MODESE information that looked at rural, urban, and suburban school districts.

Another insight from the researcher was that it may be helpful to send out the survey during a different time period of the school year. By doing so, more responses may be obtained, if participants are provided the survey before the last month of the school year. The window that the survey is open could also be extended, to allow for more time to complete it, as well.

An additional recommendation may be to send out the survey to more school districts and staff, outside of the ones used for this study. There are numerous ones to choose from, because during the 2015-2016 school year, there were 567 districts in the state of Missouri. By expanding the sample size to include staff from more districts, the number of responses may increase, which would allow for more patterns to be established, analyzed, and understood. Then, based on the responses received, additional interventions may be considered that would assist with decreasing the suspension/expulsion rates and increasing the graduation rates of students with disabilities.

The researcher also suggested conducting interviews with staff, students, and parents or guardians in rural, urban, and suburban settings. This may include school personnel at any level, such as paraprofessionals, teachers, related service personnel, and administrators. Each interview held has the chance to provide more information than was shared during the online survey. Plus, this would allow for follow up conversations, since the interviewer would know who to go to after the initial discussions occurred.

During the student interviews, it may be beneficial for a researcher to speak with both special education and general education high school students. This would include those that had and had not been suspended/expelled, in order to understand and compare their answers. This would also provide an insight as to why a student was suspended or expelled and what their thoughts were about the situation that occurred. Often times, a student may even suggest what he or she could have done differently or what the staff could try instead next time, in order to avoid this type of consequence.

Through these interviews, the special education student responses may be compared with MODESE data of suspension/expulsion rates, based on the disability category. This would help substantiate the data that MODESE provided, as well as determine if there was in fact bias from administrators when they chose to implement negative consequences, such as suspension/expulsion.

If possible, it would also be intriguing to interview graduates with and without disabilities, from different schools or districts and what their thoughts are about this topic. Through a graduate's point of view, it would be interesting to learn what practices a school or district previously used and what interventions they were implementing in follow-up, when it comes to suspension/expulsion. The discussions with graduates would also provide information with regards to whether they felt their needs were met in preparation for high school graduation and their post-secondary goals.

During the interview process with parents or guardians of a student with special needs, it could be thought-provoking to learn about their child's background and what type of environment they grew up in. A child's upbringing can truly impact their actions and beliefs as they get older. The interviewer may learn about a student's family and

socioeconomic status, and the impact this had on them. Also, if a specific special education student suffered consequences for behaviors he or she demonstrated before, the parents or guardians may have insights about what the school and staff were attempting to do in order to break the student's inappropriate pattern of behavior. This is important; because, if an intervention was found to be effective, it would mean that a student may no longer be suspended/expelled, because the unacceptable behavior was overcome. Consequently, this could result in lower suspension/expulsion rates and potentially an increase in graduation rates.

Another recommendation to expand on this research study would be to contact private schools in the state of Missouri. This may include schools located in rural, urban, and suburban settings. It would be interesting to find out about their suspension/expulsion and graduation rates of their special education population. Then based on these findings, the data would allow for a comparison to occur between the public and private education sectors. With that in mind, schools and districts could then collaborate with one another in order to create action plans that would fit their own needs, in order to produce a change in the rates of suspension/expulsion and graduation.

The last suggestion the researcher has to expand this study is to do a state-by-state comparison of the suspension/expulsion rates and graduation rates of high school students with disabilities that attend public schools. Knowing the Missouri rates, it could be noteworthy to see how that state compares to its surrounding neighbors. This may include reviewing the data for Illinois, Kentucky, Tennessee, Arkansas, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, and Iowa. The suspension/expulsion rates of the different states may provide information about how the Midwestern part of the country is doing as a whole

and what interventions are currently taking place to attempt to reduce this rate.

Furthermore, the graduation rates may then be looked at as well, and if one state is producing more high school graduates than another, it may be worth finding out how they are accomplishing this goal.

Conclusion

At the time of this writing, throughout the country, more and more students were being identified as having a disability and then qualifying for special education services. Therefore, the number of special education students has continued to rise. Based on this information, it is imperative that schools and districts change with the times and find ways to meet the needs of the ever-changing, diverse student population they serve. This has become challenging across the nation though, especially because many of the students identified as having an educational disability demonstrated inappropriate behaviors. As a result of the conduct demonstrated, school and district officials often turned to the one intervention they were familiar with, suspension/expulsion.

Suspension/expulsion is definitely one way administrators handle difficult student behaviors. Unfortunately, it is an ineffective method to changing a student's actions. According to Ferguson (2012), when students were removed from school for a short time, it really did not feel like a punishment to them. Unfortunately, when this occurred, students tended to miss school work, resulting in a decline in grades and "detachment from the academic environment. Out-of-school suspensions leave kids at home unsupervised and able to cause more problems. And they also do nothing to teach appropriate alternative behavior nor address underlying issues that may be causing the bad behavior" (para 3). When this happens, while it may seem like a break for school

staff, families often do not know what to do to overcome the behavioral obstacles. As a result, they waited on the educational experts, who were the ones that provided the out-of-school suspension in the first place, to provide them with guidance. Then after a student returns to school, the same thing may occur because new interventions were not created or implemented to support the student who had the disabilities.

Unfortunately, as this pattern continued, a student may give up on school and end up on the school-to-prison-pipeline track. This refers to the idea that a student may not complete high school before ending up in the justice system or would be arrested for breaking the law, closely after the time they graduate. In either case, the young adult loses the educational supports and resources available to them, due to incarceration. Then the cycle continues where they learn additional inappropriate behaviors and potentially pass this learning on to others.

For those students suspended/expelled from high school, the likelihood of graduating and receiving a diploma is greatly reduced. On top of this, the more often this negative consequence was provided to a student, the further they moved from ever completing high school. Unfortunately, this also negatively affected the graduation rates of the school or district the student came from. As a result, schools and districts began looking at newer interventions that would allow a student to remain in school in order to continue their education and learn appropriate replacement behaviors, instead of the negative ones demonstrated.

There are a wide variety of ever-changing interventions that may be created and implemented, that would help keep special education students in school. These interventions would allow students to learn from their mistakes and continue to work

towards graduation. For example, several surveyed public school staff members mentioned how alternative schools or programs would be beneficial in place of suspension/expulsion for a student with disabilities who violated a policy. This is because these types of interventions would allow him or her to remain in an educational setting and continue to receive the same, or additional, supports that would help teach appropriate replacement behaviors. According to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (2012), alternative education may provide a “smaller and more personalized environment in which to learn and form strong connections with school staff and peers. Alternative Education may present a different pathway in which to achieve educational success and to earn a high school diploma” (para. 1). This is an important option for students with disabilities and their families, because this type of programming may help a student to find success in school for the first time.

In-school suspension was also brought up as an intervention by survey participants, and so were community service, retribution, and restorative discipline. Each one of these items would support a student to learn from mistakes. Furthermore, restorative discipline was highlighted both by literature and by several public school personnel who answered the online questions. This is because it is viewed as a way to build relationships, problem-solve, and learn about appropriate conflict resolution techniques.

Regardless which support path was chosen, it was evident, based on the survey, that most staff believed the best course of action for a student with disabilities to learn from mistakes was to provide them with learning opportunities that did not isolate them

from others. Suspension/expulsion was viewed as a method which resulted in students being removed from school and not learning from their mistakes. Instead, they needed to be around others in order to gain a hands-on understanding, so they did not continue to make the same mistakes, and their pattern of inappropriate behavior may be broken.

While these are only a few examples of interventions, one critical piece to reducing suspension/expulsion rates is to provide staff with ongoing training that will help them overcome student obstacles. Due to both the number of students being identified as special education students, at the time of this writing, and the inappropriate behaviors that accompany them, public school personnel need to learn more positive interventions, instead of relying on suspension/expulsion. This may include workshops that help staff identify and overcome trauma or mental health challenges within the school setting. Adams (2014) explained how in California this was done, so that “all teachers and staff will be trained to consider that students’ angry outbursts or sullen withdrawal in the classroom could be the result of trauma, such as physical or sexual abuse, abandonment, and domestic and neighborhood violence” (para. 13). This is important so that public school employees are better able to understand where students are coming from and what is causing their inappropriate behaviors. Knowing this, they will better be able to program for students receiving special education services, which will allow them to remain in school and continue to work towards graduation.

In order to provide this specialty type of training, schools and districts need to ensure that they are fiscally responsible. This means that, not only are they able to provide workshop opportunities, but they also have the means to support their staff with materials and resources. One concern a staff member provided in the survey was how it

appeared that the special education department was lacking in all of these areas, including staffing. In order for students with disabilities to be successful, it is crucial that the student-to-staff ratio is followed, based on MODESE guidelines. If each of these items, training, materials, and staffing, are met, then the suspension/expulsion rates of high school special education students may decrease, which would result in an increase in their graduation rates.

When the researcher analyzed the graduation rates of students with disabilities over the course of three consecutive years, 2012-2013, 2013-2014, and 2014-2015, it was evident there was a difference between the data for high school special education students that were and were not suspended. In addition to these findings, there was literature that supported the foundational idea that the earlier in high school and more often a student with disabilities was suspended/expelled, the less likely he or she would be to graduate and earn the diploma. Research was conducted in other states as well, such as Florida, to support these findings.

Fortunately, in the state of Missouri, there were several options available to students with disabilities that would allow them to pass high school. This included completing and passing general education courses, completing and passing general education courses with modifications, taking and passing classes that were modified, or successfully completing all goals and objectives within a student's IEP. This may have been why the perception from the majority of survey participants about the graduation rates of special education students within their districts were not of concern. Unfortunately, within the rest of the country, students with disabilities not graduating from high school is still an issue that needs to be addressed.

Overall, according to MODESE (n.d., 2013, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c), the state of Missouri is doing fairly well with their overall graduation rates. In 2010, they ranked eighth in the country. Unfortunately, the number of special education students who graduate was still significantly less than the general education population. With that being the case, there are always opportunities for improvement, especially when it comes to decreasing the suspension/expulsion rates of special education students and increasing their graduation rates.

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Appendix A: Survey Questions

Demographic Identification:

Please identify the current position you hold within your public school district in the state of Missouri.

- A. Assistant Principal
- B. Assistant Superintendent
- C. High School Counselor
- D. Paraprofessional
- E. Principal
- F. Special Education Administrator/Coordinator
- G. Special Education Teacher
- H. Student Services Director
- I. Superintendent
- J. School Psychologist
- K. Other _____

Constructed Response Questions:

1. Discuss the difference between suspension/expulsion rates for students with disabilities and without disabilities.
2. Discuss any bias you see towards the special education population when it comes to their suspension/expulsion rates? Why?
3. Discuss if the graduation rates for students with disabilities are problem. Why?
4. What interventions do you believe would be more successful than suspension/expulsion for students with disabilities? Why?
5. Do you feel you have the necessary supports to be successful with special education students? Why or why not?

Thank you for participating in this research study.

Appendix B: NIH Certificate



Vitae

Matthew Glazer is currently the Curriculum Director for a behavioral health organization. He oversees all aspects of curriculum, instruction, assessment, and professional development on four school campuses around the state of Missouri. He also assists with accreditation procedures and processes and supervises the Transition Services department, as well as several other staff members. At one time, he also acted as Interim Associate Director of Special Education, where he oversaw the day-to-day operations of a school program, while still maintaining his Curriculum Director roles and responsibilities.

Prior to administration, Matthew taught all levels of special education. He was a secondary, special education teacher and before that, taught elementary, special education students in a cross-categorical classroom. For several summers, he was an Extended School Year (ESY) special education teacher as well.

Matthew is currently pursuing his Doctorate of Education degree in Advanced School Administration. He currently holds Specialist and Master's Degrees in school administration and has a bachelor's degree in Exceptional Child Education. Furthermore, he is certified as a Superintendent, K-12 Principal, K-12 Special Education Administrator, K-12 Special Education Teacher, and Elementary Teacher.

There are two professional organizations that Matthew is a member of as well. This includes the Association of Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD) and Show-Me Curriculum Administrator's Association (SMCAA). He also attends the Legislative Advocacy Committee meetings where LEAs, community stakeholders, and city leaders discuss current educational policies and practices.