Spring 5-17-2019

Declassification of Students With Disabilities

Kristin Willis

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/eps_diss

ACCEPTANCE

This dissertation, DECLASSIFICATION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES, by KRISTIN WILLIS, was prepared under the direction of the candidate's Dissertation Advisory Committee. It is accepted by the committee members in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree, Doctor of Education, in the College of Education & Human Development, Georgia State University.

The Dissertation Advisory Committee and the student's Department Chairperson, as representatives of the faculty, certify that this dissertation has met all standards of excellence and scholarship as determined by the faculty.

_____
Nicholas J. Sauers, Ph.D.
Committee Chair

_____
Sheryl Cowart Moss, Ph.D.
Committee Member

_____
Jana Ladner, Ph.D.
Committee Member

_____
Date

_____
William L. Curlette, Ph.D.
Chairperson, Department of Educational Policy Studies

_____
Paul A. Alberto, Ph.D.
Dean
College of Education & Human Development

CURRICULUM VITAE

Kristin Willis

ADDRESS: 30 Pryor Street SW
                        Atlanta, GA. 30303

EDUCATION:

Ed.D.	2019	Georgia State University	Educational Policy Studies
Ed.S.	2018	Georgia State University	Educational Policy Studies
Masters Degree	2008	Georgia State University	Special Education
Bachelors Degree	2003	University of Louisiana at Lafayette	English

PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE:

2015-present   Assistant Principal/Support and
                                    Services Administrator
                                    Cobb County School District

2014-2015   Education Program Specialist
                                    Cobb County School District

2007-2014   Teacher
                                    Cobb County School District
                                    Fulton County School District

PROFESSIONAL SOCIETIES AND ORGANIZATIONS:

2014-present   Georgia Partnership for Excellence in Education

DECLASSIFICATION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

by

KRISTIN WILLIS

Under the Direction of Nicholas J. Sauers, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

Federal law states that any student suspected of having a disability must meet initial eligibility requirements in order to qualify for special education services. Moreover, an individual education program (IEP) team is required by federal law to re-evaluate each student with a disability, tri-annually, in order to assess his or her continued need for such services. The path toward initial eligibility is clearly outlined within federal legislation; however, the law does not explicate a path for *declassification,* or exiting, from special education services. Because of this, many students may remain labeled as a student with a disability when they may no longer require the specialized instruction or related services provided through special education. The purpose of this study, therefore, was to describe the experiences of high school special education leaders regarding declassification of students from receiving special education services. By conducting one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with seven special education leaders, the research questions

helped to reveal their lived experiences as well as the processes and procedures they have utilized when discussing and determining declassification as an appropriate option for students served through special education. Additionally, the researcher's field notes were used as a data source in order to add to the phenomenological value of the study. Respondents consistently noted specific instances of parental agreement or disagreement with the idea of declassification and additionally noted how those parental responses impacted their response to the situation, as a leader. As a result, the leaders' reactions to a situation of declassification were shaped by the actions of the parents. Utilizing a phenomenological approach adds to the current body of literature by providing a unique lens for practitioners and policy makers to consider.

INDEX WORDS: Special Education, Declassification, Re-evaluation, Phenomenology, Social Justice, Special Education Leadership

DECLASSIFICATION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

by

KRISTIN WILLIS

A Dissertation

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements for the

Degree of

Doctor of Education

in

Educational Leadership

in

Educational Policy Studies

in

the College of Education and Human Development

Georgia State University

Atlanta, GA
2019

DEDICATION

For my mom and dad.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Undertaking a doctoral degree was a personal decision, but it was not a solo journey. The last several years of work would not have been possible without the support of my professors, colleagues, friends, and family.

I could not have accomplished this feat without the unwavering support of the professors in the College of Educational Leadership at Georgia State University. When my life took a sudden, tragic turn halfway through this program, they never wavered in their encouragement or personalized care. For their humanity and sincerity, I will be forever grateful. My dissertation chair, specifically, Dr. Nicholas Sauers, has been my coach and support since I began the specialist program at GSU, before the doctoral program was even an option. He always answered my questions, even the dumb ones, and simultaneously made me feel challenged, yet empowered, even in the midst of me freaking out about minutiae. For his specific role in my journey, I am grateful beyond what words on a page could ever express.

My colleagues and friends have also played a critical role toward helping me achieve this goal. Whether calling to check on me, encouraging me to keep going, or hearing a never-ending, "I have homework," response when they were eager for social time, their support was steadfast. Additionally, the specific role Dr. Jana Ladner played in my journey was specifically important to my success. I am so grateful our paths crossed three years ago, and for the friendship that sprung from our work, both inside and outside of this degree.

Finally, my family. What can I say about them that would even come close to the depth of gratitude and love I have for them? Despite the difficult and emotionally draining journey we faced outside of this program, your specific support has been my bedrock. I would have quit in November 2017 if it were not for your encouragement to continue. I know Daddy is proud of all

of us for what we have walked through together, and I am quite sure he is driving all of heaven

crazy with his relentless cheering me on from heaven. All my love to each of you.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

CHAPTER 1

ELIGIBILITY AND DECLASSIFICATION IN SPECIAL EDUCATION

Educating students with disabilities (SWD) requires practitioners to possess a myriad of skills for the numerous legal responsibilities placed upon local schools and school districts, as mandated by federal education law. The primary tenets of special education accountability are the identification, evaluation, placement, and monitoring of students who are identified as having a disability in one or more of the thirteen federally-recognized categories of disability (IDEIA, 2004). Within the evaluation and placement tenets, federal legislation clearly defines guidelines for a student to become eligible to receive special education services; however, the procedures for being re-evaluated regarding the continued need of those services with a path toward declassification, or exiting, from such services are not as clearly defined (Education Rule, 2016). This lack of clarity in federal guidelines could lead to many students becoming eligible for special education services and remaining labeled as a student with a disability for the entirety of his or her educational career when such services may no longer be necessary.

Funk (2011) noted the trend of students becoming eligible for special education services at accelerated rates since special education became part of the educational options available to students who qualify for such services, and he also raised concern with the minimal amount of students who were declassified from such services. In his view, the breadth of services extended to SWD learners has steadily increased with every successive piece of federal legislation; however, the number of students who earn their way out of services has been dismal. As such, this dissertation sought to explore special education leaders' experiences with declassifying students from receiving special education services.

In order to explore the topic of declassifying students from receiving special education services, a review of legislative requirements for initial eligibility into receiving special education services was essential, because initial eligibility concerns would be critical to the conversation if declassification was being explored for a student. As a result, a review of the legislative forerunners to special education, former and current federal legislation detailing the procedural regulations for initial eligibility into receiving special education services, and the legislative regulations for a change in eligibility status, such as declassification. A further review of scholarly literature regarding concerns noted with initial eligibility practices, pervasive opinions, and examples of declassification within different levels of schooling was also addressed.

Special education is a field rife with jargon and acronyms. For the purpose of clarity, and in order to allow for uniformity of definitions while reading this study, special education terms utilized within this study are defined below:

Assessment, similar to *evaluation*, refers to the administration of a battery of psychological measures, as appropriately identified by a school system, for the purposes of gaining data required to determine the presence of a suspected disability (Education Rule, 2016).

Declassification refers to the removal, or stopping, of all special education services and placing the student back into the general education setting (Education Rule, 2016).

Eligibility, or *eligible*, refers to the process by which students qualify to receive special education services through *IDEIA* (2004) and, therefore, have an Individual Education Program (IEP) in place at their current school (Education Rule, 2016; IDEIA, 2004).

Evaluation, similar to *assessment*, refers to the administration of a battery of psychological assessments in order to make an IEP team decision regarding special education eligibility or in-eligibility (Education Rule, 2016).

Individual Education Program (IEP) refers to the written and agreed upon document, discussed at least annually, and determined to be the best course of individualized academic or behavioral actions for each student served through special education (Congressional Research Service, 1985).

Initial eligibility refers to the first time a student is determined to be eligible for special education services (Education Rule, 2016).

Re-assessment refers to the re-administering of a battery of psychological measures, as appropriately identified by a school system, for the purposes of gaining data required to determine the presence of a suspected disability (Education Rule, 2016).

Re-determination refers to the tri-annual examination of all pieces of data, including psychological assessment data, in order to make an IEP team decision regarding continued special education eligibility (Education Rule, 2016).

Students with disabilities (SWD) refers to any student who meets federal and state-based disability criteria set forth in *IDEIA* (2004) and who is served through an IEP (Education Rule, 2016).

Significance of the issue.

In order to become initially eligible for special education services, a student is required to take part in a comprehensive evaluation, including a battery of psychological assessments, meet federal criteria as defined by current legislation, the *Individuals with Disabilities in Education Improvement Act* (IDEIA, 2004), and have a multi-disciplinary individual education program (IEP) team agree that services are required for that student to progress educationally. After initial eligibility for special education services is established, an IEP is developed and reviewed annually, and the student's eligibility is reviewed tri-annually in order to determine the continued

presence of a disability that requires special education services. These steps are clearly outlined within section 300 of the *Code of Federal Regulations* (CFR) (Education Rule, 2016).

The process for the tri-annual re-determination of special education eligibility, also defined within section 300 of the CFR, entails reviewing the same pieces of data as are required for initial eligibility; however, at the tri-annual re-determination, the IEP team has the authority to determine that no additional assessments or information are required to continue special education eligibility for three additional years (Education Rule, 2016). If IEP teams at the tri-annual re-determination period, therefore, are not conducting a thorough review of all elements of available data, as well as conducting additional psychological assessments to determine the continued educational impact of a disability, they risk continuing a disability label which may no longer apply (Carlson & Parshall, 1996; Carlson & Reavey, 2000).

Additionally, federal law defines thirteen potential categories of special education eligibility (Education Rule, 2016). The majority of students who qualify for special education services under any of these exceptionality categories are made eligible during their elementary school years (SRI International, 2005). Given this, students who receive academic assistance and IEP accommodations throughout their elementary and middle school years may be able to overcome their academic weaknesses in order to be exited, or declassified, from special education services in their high school years (Carlson & Parshall, 1996; Carlson & Reavey, 2000; Funk, 2011).

For tri-annual re-determination of special education eligibility, federal law states that a re-evaluation "must occur at least once every 3 years, unless the parent and the public agency agree that a reevaluation is unnecessary" (Education Rule, 2016). The word *unless* (Education Rule, 2016) leads to many students remaining labeled as SWD learners when they may no longer

meet federal or state criteria or require specialized instruction to progress academically. Without an updated psychological evaluation, even if only in the areas of deficit, IEP teams risk over-looking data that could lead to a student earning the ability to be declassified.

Federal legislation that addresses declassification terms this process as a "change in disability status," and simply notes that a student must be re-evaluated in order for such a change in status to occur (IDEIA, 2004). However, the notion within the law that the IEP team can simply agree that additional data from an updated psychological evaluation are not necessary to re-determine eligibility allows for ambiguity in the re-determination process. Put simply, the process for declassification is not clearly outlined with definitive procedures or guidelines, leaving many practitioners to guess what the intent of the law is in regard to this topic. Further, re-determination information as required by the law (Education Rule, 2016), may be assembled, considered, and addressed within the tri-annual IEP and eligibility discussions, but it may not be considered with the degree of fidelity needed in order to move students toward declassification. As Carlson and Parshall (1996) succinctly stated, "We should see special education not as a permanent placement, but as a system of support which some students are able to outgrow" (p. 99). If practitioners consistently focused annual IEP meetings and tri-annual re-determinations toward the potential of declassification, then more students may be able to be declassified and have the label of special education removed.

Guiding Questions

In order to explore the above-noted problem, this study's research questions were as follows:

1. What have been the experiences of high school special education leaders regarding declassifying students from receiving special education services?

2. What specific processes have special education leaders been involved with in regard to declassifying students from receiving special education services?

As noted above, when a student is initially referred and made eligible to receive special education services, the successive IEP teams who tri-annually review that student's eligibility bear the weight of responsibility in determining whether or not that student continues to require special education services (Carlson & Parshall, 1996; Danforth, 2006; Education Rule, 2016; IDEIA, 2004; Sewell, 2016). If IEP teams, particularly at the high school level, are not thoroughly exploring a student's eligibility, in terms of enduring deficits in the initial area, or areas, of deficit, then students who may no longer require special education services may continue to be labeled as *disabled* when removing the label may be an option. Additionally, given that special education leaders are charged with guiding compliance with federal procedures (Harper, 2012; Shealey, Thomas, & Sparks, 2012; Slee, 2001), their perspectives and processes toward these aims were worthy of further study, as was exploring the socially just notion of removing the label of special education from students who may be eligible to have it removed (Anastasiou, Kauffman, & Michail, 2016; Carlson & Parshall, 1996; SRI International, 2005; Ysseldyke & Bielinski, 2002).

Review of the Literature

In order to frame the boundaries within which special education practitioners are required to demonstrate compliance, an important foundational understanding of historical special education underpinnings and intents is necessary. These underpinnings have served as guideposts for successive pieces of special education legislation, as well as framed the margins within which practitioners have served SWD learners since the 1960s. In addition to the fundamental origins of special education, a review of federal legislative requirements for initial eligibility into special

education, as well as the requirements for re-determination and declassification, throughout several major pieces of federal legislation regarding the education of SWD learners is critical to understanding special education practitioners' frame of reference. Currently, literature regarding the topic of declassification from special education services at the high school level has not been widely studied; however, a review of studies currently available surrounding the topics of eligibility and declassification follows a timeline of legislative authorizations. Finally, an overview of the demands placed upon special education leaders is also addressed, as these leaders play a pivotal role in the education of students with disabilities.

Special education forerunner.

The *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) desegregation case is widely considered the landmark court decision which gave rise to desegregation within public schools for not only racial matters but also matters of gender and disability (Esteves & Rao, 2008). As such, *Brown* (1954) could be considered the beginnings of the social justice movement toward educational services for students with disabilities. Following *Brown* (1954), the *Education for All Handicapped Children* (EAHC) (1966) and its successor, *Public Law* 94-142, enacted in 1975, furthered access to FAPE, or free appropriate public education, for SWD learners by mandating access to the least restrictive environment (LRE) for all students who were served through special education (Shyman, 2015). *EAHC* (1966) and *Public Law* 94-142 (1975) could be considered critical victories toward equity in services for students who received assistance through special education. Since the inception of these pivotal legislative attainments, support and services for students with disabilities have primarily been defined and monitored as a function of the amount of time a student was included into mainstreamed, or general education, settings. This, however, should not be seen as a comprehensive definition, because simply placing SWD learners, of any

disability category, into a general education classroom does not equal appropriate instruction for that student, but merely a definition of location (Shyman, 2015).

Special education legislation.

Special education legislation essentially began with the *Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHC)* law in 1966, was amended into *Public Law 94-142* (1975), was reauthorized in 1997 under the name of *Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act* (*IDEA*), and was again reauthorized in 2004 as the *Individuals with Disabilities in Education Improvement Act* (*IDEIA*). A review of the evolution of special education legislation is critical to the declassification conversation, because foundational origins have bounded successive legislative directions. Further, an understanding of the requirements several of these pieces of legislation enacted in regard to procedures for initial eligibility into special education, tri-annual re-determination, and the potential for declassification, is necessary in order to have a basis of understanding of the demands put onto successive IEP teams after initial eligibility, as well as an understanding of the scope of responsibility placed upon special education practitioners and leaders.

Eligibility regulations.

The *Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EAHC)* of 1966, and *Public Law* 94-142 (1975) (Pub. L. 94-142, 1975), were the groundbreaking precursors to modern special education legislation (Congressional Research Service, 1985). For the first time in educational history, SWD learners were given individual attention for their specific needs and schools were mandated to provide a FAPE for SWD learners in the least restrictive environment (LRE) (Christensen & Dorn, 1997; Yell, & Drasgow, 2000). Both of these pieces of legislation held as their primary aims the provision of special education services to those students who were in the most

need of such services (Congressional Research Service, 1985). This primary aim is acutely note-

worthy, because it established a foundational basis from which all future legislation extended. As

such, the legislative intent of these lawmakers indirectly set a social justice and philosophical

precedent for future special education service providers with which to comply. Put simply, *PL*

94-142 could be considered the pervasive origin of thought for special education services. This

idea cannot be overstated, as all subsequent legislation has stemmed from this set of laws, and,

therefore, all subsequent special education services have sprung from its aims.

At the time *Public Law* 94-142 (Pub. L. 94-142, 1975) was enacted, the law noted more

than eight million students within the United States could have been classified under the um-

brella of special education; however, it also noted lawmakers' belief that more than one million

SWD learners were not properly being educated. Therefore, this particular piece of legislation

was primarily focused on the identification and eligibility of students who may have a potential

disability in order to provide them with FAPE. Ten years after the institution of *Pub. L. 94-142*

(1975), concerns were noted with the number of learners made eligible and labeled as a student

with a specific learning disability (SLD). Among the myriad of options attributed as potential

reasons, misclassification, generous eligibility criteria, and the use of special education as an al-

ternative placement where remedial or general education services were not fully funded were

listed as priority causes of over-classification (Congressional Research Service, 1985).

Amendments to *Pub. L.* 94-142 (1975) were initiated and an ensuing, reauthorized piece

of legislation, entitled *Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act* (*IDEA*), took effect in 1997.

Among various logistical requirements for initial eligibility into special education, such as seek-

ing informed consent from the parent(s) before a student could be evaluated, initial eligibility

regulations in *IDEA* 1997 included three critical elements:

- Schools were required to utilize a variety of assessment measures and protocols throughout the course of the evaluation in order to gather appropriate academic and functional data;

- A sole data source could not be used to categorize a child as a child with a disability;

- And a team of professionals, including the parent, was required to meet and consider all evaluation information in order to determine eligibility or in-eligibility for special education services.

Additionally, initial eligibility regulations according to *IDEA* 1997 allowed for definitive parental input, explicitly and repeatedly stating the value of a parent's view in regard to determining the presence of a disability in his or her child (IDEA, 1997).

Current legislation guiding initial eligibility requirements, as provided through *IDEIA* (2004), mirror those within *IDEA* 1997. No major revisions to initial eligibility procedures were enacted with the 2004 piece of legislation, except to add the timeline of a maximum of 60 days allowed to complete all elements of the initial eligibility process (IDEIA, 2004). The initial eligibility guidelines from the 1997 piece of legislation, therefore, remain applicable within current practices.

Tri-annual re-determination.

EAHC (1966) and *Public Law* 94-142 were primarily concerned with the initial identification of students with disabilities since these learners had not been educated alongside their peers without disabilities in the public education setting prior to their enactments. As such, guidelines for the re-determination of eligibility for SWD learners was not their primary focus.

Current federal special education legislation, however, specifically directs IEP teams to tri-annually re-determine if a student who is served through special education continues to require special education services to progress educationally (Education Rule, 2016). *IDEA* (1997) and *IDEIA* (2004) are the two most recent pieces of federal special education legislation, and both contain similar guidelines for the tri-annual redetermination process.

  IDEA 1997 noted within its re-determination of eligibility procedures that a re-evaluation of a child, which entails a battery of psychological assessments to be administered, should take place at least one time every three years, if the child's current conditions merit the need for a re-evaluation, or if one of the child's teachers or parents requests a re-evaluation. However, the re-evaluation would not be required if the IEP team determined no additional data were necessary to determine the student still required special education services to progress educationally. The following data were required to be examined when re-determining a student's eligibility:

- Review of all current and existing data on a student, including previous evaluations, parental information, teacher information, related service provider information,

- Current classroom performance and observation information,

- Any additional parental input (IDEA, 1997).

  IDEA 1997 noted in several places the requirement for parental input to be weighed in the decision-making process for eligibility and re-determination of eligibility. Additionally, *IDEA* (1997) provided parents the ability to request an updated psychological assessment, used to determine the continued presence of a disability. The language of *IDEA* 1997 further noted if the parents or the child's teacher did not request additional assessments be administered, then the tri-

annual IEP team could continue with the re-determination affirmation without requiring a re-evaluation.

IDEIA 2004 is the current set of laws defining requirements for educating SWD learners. Similar to *IDEA* (1997), the re-determination process under this set of laws consists of reviewing the following data:

- Psychological evaluations conducted by the school system or private psychologists during initial eligibility (despite how long ago initial eligibility occurred),

- Current classroom performance and observation information,

- Current state and local assessments,

- Any other information provided by the parent,

- Any other data the IEP team deems necessary, including gaining parental consent so additional (updated) psychological assessments can occur (Education Rule, 2016).

Under *IDEIA* (2004), re-determining a student as a student who continues to qualify for special education services entails an IEP team specifying the continued impact of an identified disability and the need for specialized instruction (Education Rule, 2016).

A distinct concern regarding this law's re-determination process, however, is that IEP teams may not possess the most pertinent information to determine the continued presence of a disability when reviewing eligibility data every three years. Ineffectual re-determinations can lead to students' eligibilities tri-annually continued without updated, accurate data from a psychological re-evaluation to support the student continuing to exhibit difficulties that require special education services (Carlson & Reavey, 2000).

Declassification regulations.

Declassification of students from receiving special education services entails changing the eligibility status of students from *eligible* to *ineligible*, and, as such, requires an IEP team to affirm specific evidence toward this claim. The path toward declassification, as an option for SWD learners, however, is not distinctly specified within current special education legislation, nor has it been historically addressed within previous pieces of legislation.

Though the content of *Public Law* 94-142 (1975) described requirements for evaluating students using assessment instruments which were non-biased to a specific ethnicity, this particular piece of legislation did not specify a path toward declassification. Parents or guardians were required to be notified of the school's intent to change any piece of the student's IEP, which could include declassification intentions; however, declassification was not specifically stated within the law. *Public Law* 94-142's (1975) primary focus was on states' identification of students with disabilities so that they could be educated and provided FAPE (Pub. L. 94-142, 1975).

IDEA (1997) included a brief section regarding a change in eligibility status, which could be inferred to mean a change from *eligible* to *ineligible*; however, specific procedures were not included regarding how to proceed toward this aim. The section noting procedures for change in eligibility status was only one sentence in length, and it simply stated a child was required to be evaluated according to evaluation standards set forth in the law's previous sections before a change in eligibility status could be determined (IDEA, 1997). No further explanation or steps were included.

Since this specific section was only one sentence, and simply referred the reader back to previous sections of the law, this could be a source of confusion for practitioners. Procedures for initial eligibility evaluations were specifically defined, so if those are the procedures an IEP team

must follow prior to changing a student's eligibility status, then the steps were specific. *IDEA* (1997) did not specify if these were the procedures the IEP team must follow to change eligibility status, however. Further ambiguity could ensue if an IEP team focused on the standards for re-determination of eligibility as guidance for determining a change in eligibility status instead of utilizing standards for initial eligibility. According to *IDEA* (1997), tri-annual re-determination IEP teams can choose to not administer psychological evaluation assessments in order to determine eligibility; therefore, if these procedures were utilized, instead of the initial eligibility procedures, then an IEP team could simply determine a child was not eligible for special education services simply by reviewing all pieces of data noted in the re-determination section of the law. Put simply, *IDEA* (1997) did not provide a clear path toward declassification, because it did not specify which evaluation procedures, initial or re-determination, an IEP team should follow when discussing a change in eligibility status.

The current piece of federal special education legislation, *IDEIA* (2004), follows a similar structure as the change in eligibility status notation within *IDEA* (1997). However, the 2004 version is slightly more specific than one sentence in that it also includes an explanation of requirements for a change in eligibility status after a child graduates with a regular diploma or when a child ages out of the education setting according to respective state age regulations. Similar to *IDEA* (2007), *IDEIA* (2004) procedures for a change in eligibility status notes that a student must be evaluated according to the evaluation standards set forth in previous sections of the law in order for an IEP team to determine a change in eligibility status. Unfortunately, as with *IDEA* (1997), *IDEIA* (2004) also directs readers to review both sections of eligibility determination, initial and re-determination, when specifying procedures for a change in eligibility status. Given

this, the same ambiguity of which evaluation procedures to follow that was present in *IDEA* (1997) continues to be present within current federal legislation.

Eligibility concerns.

Given the above information regarding the lack of specificity when discussing a change in eligibility status, which could include declassification, IEP teams that determine initial eligibility bear an enormous weight when determining whether a child meets initial eligibility criteria to be served within special education. This notion dictates that initial eligibility into receiving special education services is an important factor in the declassification conversation. Students who initially qualify for special education services do so under the banner of one or more of thirteen categories of special education eligibility (Education Rule, 2016), and the process to be declassified from those services could be ambiguous for successive IEP teams after initial eligibility. Though some categories of eligibility may necessitate lifelong services through special education or other related service agencies by virtue of their level of need, the categories of deafness, blindness, or severe intellectual disability, for example, such should not be considered the case for all thirteen categories. The initial eligibility category, therefore, should be considered crucially important when considering the ability of a student to eventually progress toward potential declassification from receiving special education services.

Errors in eligibility decisions.

Lee (2014) discussed diagnostic errors in a single case study of a kindergarten Chinese-American student in California who was identified as being a student with autism (AU) and found initially eligible for special education services under this category. The student's school noted language delays and other diagnostic characteristics of autism, but Lee (2014) claimed the school assessed the child for special education eligibility without her father's consent. Federal

law requires parents or guardians must provide consent to the school district before any evaluative assessments can be administered to students when a disability is suspected (IDEIA, 2004). As a result, the child's father challenged the evaluation's results and determination (Lee, 2014).

In addition to discussing the cultural and environmental factors that could have resulted in what he termed as a misdiagnosis, Lee (2014) discussed the potential faulty knowledge of the diagnosticians and school-based personnel who assessed the student, as well as what he determined was a faulty data gathering practice on the part of the school district. Regardless of the reasons for this diagnostic outcome, the student's father was able to challenge the assessment results in front of a judge and prevailed with having the evaluation removed from his daughter's school records (Lee, 2014).

Similarly, Sewell (2016) discussed the potential for oppressive tendencies in educational, school-based psychologists when performing assessments of students for potential special education eligibility. Sewell (2016) cited the potential for educational psychologists to assess students on measures such as norm-referenced tests, for example, which can be biased toward or against certain cultures, and noted that such students could be unfairly labeled as a student with a disability, thus causing them to become unnecessarily marginalized within their educational settings.

Further, given the weight of the psychological assessment's results in determining eligibility, Sewell (2016) noted the need for psychologists to utilize a variety of measures when determining a student's overall cognitive abilities, because the psychological report could result in the recommendation for the student to receive special education services. Sewell (2016) referred to such a practice as "educational consequences" (p. 4), language that intimates the significant impact of labeling a student as a person with a disability, due to the potential for marginalization.

In his concluding discussion, Lee (2014) noted federal laws regarding special education eligibility and the need for schools to comply with them. Sewell (2016) reached similar conclusions for educational psychologists, again, noting the weightiness with which their reports are held by an IEP team determining initial eligibility. Lee (2014) also contended that diagnostic errors were more easily made when assessing students who were culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD). As a result, he called for diagnosticians and school-based personnel to be more aware of their potential limitations and biases when evaluating these children (Lee, 2014).

Adding an important dimension to the initial eligibility conversation, Lee (2014) further highlighted the possibility of assessor bias or subjectivity when providing evaluation data for special education eligibility. Lee (2014) discussed potential issues and errors that could arise with faulty progress monitoring data, which could lead to the misidentification of students for special education. This notion underscores the weight of responsibility IEP teams incur when determining initial eligibility into special education.

Lee (2014), as well as Sewell (2016), both suggested the possibility that not simply the one student discussed in Lee (2014), but any number of students, could potentially be misdiagnosed as students with a disability when they may not meet federal criteria for such a diagnosis or because they have been improperly assessed (Sewell, 2016). If a misdiagnosis has occurred, then declassification protocols should be initiated in order to remove the label of special education that was erroneously placed upon a child.

Given that special education is governed by a specific set of federal rules and regulations, many of which are extremely nuanced (Education Rule, 2016; IDEIA, 2004), Bowen and Rude (2006) provided an overview of the challenges faced by schools in rural settings to appropriately

assess students for individualized needs. By examining and reporting on the overlapping characteristics of special education legislation, as well as the progressive changes that have occurred with each reauthorization, the authors' overall aim was to note that federal legislation changes in the last several decades have been the determining factors for positive changes in outcomes for students with special needs (Bowen & Rude, 2006).

As is related to eligibility for special education, Bowen and Rude (2006) discussed how each successive legislation reauthorization has more tightly focused on academic outcomes for students with special needs, and, more specifically, accountability for students' progress toward mastering of IEP goals and objectives and the success, or lack thereof, of their educational programs. In this respect, their article has a direct bearing on the declassification conversation.

Looking specifically at eligibility decisions for the category of SLD, *IDEIA* (2004) further restricts eligibility consideration for this category by adding several exclusionary criteria, such as students cannot be made eligible for special education under this category if they have not been appropriately instructed in reading, writing, and math (Bowen & Rude, 2006; IDEIA, 2004). This particular addition to the law has a specific impact on declassification decisions, because, depending on results for students' initial psychological assessments, some students could have been misidentified as a student with SLD if these specific exclusionary criteria were not properly regarded. This thought coincides with Lee's (2014) assertion that progress monitoring data, or the lack thereof, could lead an eligibility committee down an erroneous path if it is not accurate.

Further, *IDEIA* (2004) provides specific exclusionary factors that must be considered when IEP teams are making initial eligibility decisions for the category of SLD, specifically the lack of appropriate instruction in reading, writing, or math. Given these exclusionary factors,

when an initial special education eligibility conversation occurs at the high school level, it is extremely difficult for an eligibility committee to determine whether or not a student received appropriate instruction in reading, writing, and math in their earlier years of schooling. As a result, despite this criterion being present in the law, students could be erroneously made eligible and given a label of SLD when he or she may or may not qualify according to federal rules. As Bowen and Rude (2006) noted, the intent of adding these exclusionary criteria was to potentially reduce the number of misdiagnoses for special education; however, the burden of fully exploring all elements of initial eligibility criteria rests on the IEP team charged with making that decision.

Declassification.

Given the nebulous attention given to declassification within federal law (IDEIA, 2004), the availability of literature regarding this topic is equally meager in number. Several studies exist that were dedicated to discussing declassification within different levels of schooling, elementary, middle, and high, but the breadth of currently available literature that places specific emphasis on declassification the high school level is sparse, and studies that focus on the role of the special education leader in declassification are equally meager.

Carlson and Parshall (1996) explored the number of students with disabilities declassified from special education services in Michigan over a four-year period of time. Using extant data representing over 51,000 students from the Michigan Department of Education, as well as survey data from high school general education teachers and counselors representing approximately 43 districts, the authors explored several research questions surrounding the prevalence and demographic characteristics of students who were declassified. Additionally, their quantitative study delved into the post-declassification outcomes for these students (Carlson & Parshall, 1996).

Among their discussion points, Carlson and Parshall (1996) noted, "The number of students with disabilities returning to general education programs through declassification is rarely mentioned in the literature as an appropriate outcome indicator" (p. 90). They aimed to research this subject to inform researchers and policymakers as to the need for future research in this area (Carlson & Parshall, 1996). Carlson and Parshall's (1996) findings indicated most students were declassified between the ages of eight and eleven, with speech/language impairment ranked as the disability category with the highest number of students declassified at the elementary level, followed by the specific learning disability category at the middle school level, and the emotional disorders category at the high school level. Additional findings suggested the need for further research, as a large percentage of students who were declassified from the speech/language category, later returned to special education under the category of specific learning disability. This finding could suggest initial evaluations were not sufficient to diagnose underlying concerns, or that students' needs changed over time, and the presence of one disability dissipated as another one ascended. Such results are appropriate for the declassification conversation, because they iterate the need for a thorough review of all pertinent data when discussing eligibility or declassification for any student, as well as the need for further research into the prevalence of declassification (Carlson & Parshall, 1996).

Additionally, regarding the survey responses from general education teachers and counselors in Carlson and Parshall (1996), results indicated, "Grades appeared to be a major factor influencing whether respondents believed students required additional special education services" (p. 95) after being declassified. Though grades are certainly important indicators of student success, this statement points to a general misconception among general education practitioners of the lawful criteria for special education eligibility. Special education eligibility is

based on a myriad of data points, not simply indicators of performance such as classroom grades

or teacher or counselor perception of social and behavioral adjustment (Education Rule, 2016).

As a final note, Carlson and Parshall (1996) called for administrators who were school-based special education leaders to more carefully monitor declassification of students who no longer need services, a duty often overlooked by special education leaders who are frequently consumed with fulfilling other responsibilities and paperwork requirements. This thought echoes the sentiments of Harper (2012), who also noted the vast array of responsibilities placed onto special education teachers and leaders, including reconciling federal mandates with instructional progress.

Elementary level declassification.

Similar to the aims of Carlson and Parshall (1996), the Special Education Elementary Longitudinal Study (SEELS) studied by SRI International (2005), discussed declassification rates of elementary and middle school students with disabilities, as reported by the students' parents and other school-based personnel. Several of their results corroborated results from Carlson and Parshall (1996).

Authors for this study surveyed a sample of over 11,000 students who were served in special education during the 1999-2000 school year. The students' parents were interviewed, as well as information gathered from school-based personnel, during the subsequent school years, 2000-2001 and 2001-2002, respectively, to determine which students were still being served through special education and which had been declassified. In their interviews, the authors also asked parents to note, if applicable, the reason(s) why their students were declassified (SRI International, 2005).

Findings of SEELS, as noted by SRI International's (2005) report, revealed several notable conclusions. According to the report, echoing results found in Carlson and Parshall (1996), speech/language impairment was the primary disability category from which students were declassified at these grade levels. Additionally, placement in the general education setting for English language arts and mathematics classes was noted as the primary placement indicated for the students who were declassified. Similarities in home-based factors were also discovered among students who were declassified, such as the parental expectation of graduation and a household income of $50,000 or higher (SRI International, 2005). Though this report focused primarily on elementary-level students, it is useful in discussions of declassification, because it added insight into school- and home-based factors that could potentially contribute to declassification conversations at the high school level (SRI International, 2005).

Post-school outcomes.

Carlson and Reavey (2000) conducted a case study in order to investigate young adults who were in their twenties at the time of publication and who had been declassified from special education services while in high school. Data collection entailed semi-structured, in-person interviews with five respondents, reviews of each student's Individual Education Program (IEP), special education eligibility documents, high school transcript, and data from the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS). The authors' guiding research questions centered on the specific circumstances surrounding each student's declassification, as well as the post-school outcomes of the declassified students (Carlson & Reavey, 2000).

After gathering data from their interviews and the NLTS, a conceptual model was primarily utilized as a guide for data analysis. Results for their first research question indicated student-

initiated declassification was the primary reason for removal of special education services, meaning the students believed they were able to succeed without the services or that they believed they never had a disability. Movement from one school level to another was the second highest-noted reason for declassification, and state policies or practices regarding eligibility were the third reason for declassification, meaning students no longer qualified under their specific state's rules (Carlson & Reavey, 2000).

To address their second research question, Carlson and Reavey (2000) noted several factors the respondents stated as affecting their school-based outcomes after declassification. Among their responses were support, or lack thereof, from their families on grades, attendance, tutoring, etc., age and maturity, and, finally, each student's personal beliefs and drive to improve and succeed without the aid of special education (Carlson & Reavey, 2000). Overall, the respondents' opinions toward declassification could be interpreted as having a positive or null effect on their respective futures (Carlson & Reavey, 2000), an interesting footnote in the declassification conversation.

MacMillan et al. (1992) further discussed the post-school outcomes of students with disabilities who dropped out of high school. Their case study involved reviewing statistics widely available on the Internet, and focused on drop-out rates as they are currently by school districts reported to the federal government. MacMillan et al.'s (1992) focus was that these numbers could be skewed, based on the data reported by states, and, therefore, should not be considered a primary factor in determining the success or failure of a student's IEP or any special education services. MacMillan et al. (1992) is important for the declassification conversation, because it lends to the need for psychological assessments to be tri-annually re-administered so that IEP

teams are provided with more concise and specific data that relates to the initial eligibility assessments and noted deficits.

Least restrictive environment.

In addition to concerns with initial eligibility decisions, the location of recommended IEP services plays a critical role in a student's ability to progress within their respective curriculums toward the potential for declassification. The least restrictive environment (LRE) is defined in federal legislation as, "…the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities, including children in public or private institutions or other care facilities, are educated with children who are nondisabled" (Education Rule, 2016). Shyman (2015) noted the application of the LRE mandate varied across practitioners. If special education practitioners more succinctly defined and practiced LRE as the educational setting most appropriate for students to receive meaningful educational benefit toward academic progress (IDEIA, 2004; Waterstone, 2017), then conducting tri-annual re-determinations for SWD learners with a view toward exiting special education could potentially be considered more consistently. Further, practicing legally compliant LRE entails providing SWD learners with the setting that allows them maximum access to being educated alongside their peers without disabilities (IDEIA, 2004), which should be defined by full-time placement within general education without a label of special education (Shyman, 2015). Put simply, the fundamental notions of special education within federal legislation implored practitioners to become conduits of equity and desegregation for all, which should include LRE implications and simplifications (Congressional Research Service, 1985; Shyman, 2015).

***Endrew F*. decision.**

Federal legislation (IDEIA, 2004) guides the boundaries within which special education practitioners operate and offer services to SWD learners. Waterstone (2017) explained how specific court decisions have interpreted *IDEIA* (2004) and defined the standard of offering FAPE to SWD learners. Such interpretations could have specific implications and influence on declassification conversations and decisions.

In 1982, a lower court presented a ruling in the *Rowley* case, which set a precedent for the appropriate standard of FAPE for SWD learners (Waterstone, 2017). The essence of the *Rowley* decision stated that an IEP should be "reasonably calculated to enable the child to receive educational benefits" (*Rowley*, as cited in Waterstone, 2017). This specific ruling stood as the prevailing definition of FAPE for SWD learners until 2017, when the Supreme Court ruled in the *Endrew F.* case. The *Endrew F.* ruling stated an IEP must be "reasonably calculated to enable a child to make progress appropriate in light of the child's circumstances" (*Endrew F.*, as cited in Waterstone, 2017). The *Endrew F.* ruling, therefore, has replaced the *Rowley* ruling as the standard of FAPE which districts must follow for SWD learners (Waterstone, 2017).

The *Endrew F.* standard has direct impact on declassification conversations because of its focus on a student's progress in his or her respective educational curriculum. Under the right set of educational circumstances, and if a student displays continual educational progress, then declassification could potentially be explored for that student. The *Endrew F.* decision is applicable to all categories of special education services and categories of eligibility; however, not all eligibility categories may have the potential for declassification. An important aspect of the *Endrew F.* ruling, however, that aligns more specifically with the topic of declassification, is the standard for showing progress. In order for declassification to be sensibly pursued, a student must show a

pattern of progress that indicates he or she has generalized learning strategies to all pertinent learning environments. The *Endrew F.* standard speaks to a student displaying such progress; therefore, it should be considered as a pertinent element when considering declassification.

Special education leadership.

Leaders who are charged with managing special education departments are tasked with a vast array of responsibilities in addition to ensuring their respective departments are compliant with federal laws and standards, such as the *Endrew F.* standard of FAPE. Given the concerns with initial eligibility decisions and the potential for ambiguity in declassification procedures, the role of the special education leader is critical to student outcomes under that leader's care.

In addition to Slee (2001) and Carlson and Parshall (1996), Harper (2012) provided commentary regarding the landscape of special education leadership in the modern era of educational legislative mandates and systems redesign. Throughout his discussion, Harper (2012) noted the difficulties with which special education leaders were faced as they attempted to manage the juxtaposition of federal legislative mandates, such as *No Child Left Behind* (*NCLB)* and *IDEIA* (2004), with the priorities of social justice leadership. While these legislative mandates provided a level of accountability, he noted, they also served to limit the ability of special education leaders to advocate for full educational options for SWD learners or further the notions of equality for marginalized learners (Harper, 2012). Shealey, Thomas, and Sparks (2012) echoed similar concerns for charter school leaders, in particularly, noting they often lacked understanding of and training regarding federal rules surrounding special education, a trend which served to further marginalize SWD learners.

Comparing special education leadership to the scientific process of smelting, or using intense heat to reduce compounds into pure materials, Harper (2012) explained several challenges

special education leaders face across their wide-ranging spectrum of responsibilities. According to Harper (2012), special education leaders must learn to work within rigid legislative boundaries while attempting to maintain the ability to advocate for conscious change in practices, which often serves to reinforce differences and disabilities instead of helping to reduce them. Harper (2012) also discussed the trend of special education leaders who leave the profession when ideologies shift due to systems reforms, and, with the shifting ideologies, social justice issues may become reduced to a lower priority, allowing for further marginalization of SWD learners. An exodus of special education leaders also threatens to lessen the number of advocates who possess appropriate knowledge and passion to promote equality and challenge marginalization (Harper, 2012). In his final comments, Harper (2012) challenged social justice leaders to defy current systems which serve to preserve and perpetuate stratification and unequal outcomes for marginalized groups. As such, these sentiments mirrored the aims of the foundational legislative underpinnings toward equality for all learners, *Brown vs. Board of Education* (1954).

Social labeling.

When a child is initially made eligible for special education services, a label of special education is placed upon that child. Shyman (2015), as well as Danforth and Rhodes (1987), noted the label of *disabled* could be viewed as a social construct or a designation society has determined to be inclusive of all those who are different. Though Congress' initial intent may have been to provide students who require additional academic assistance an education fitting of their individualized needs (Congressional Research Service, 1985), the label of *special education* has become attached to unintended social consequences (Danforth & Rhodes, 1987; Shyman, 2015). As such, this label could lead to marginalization and segregation by virtue of a designation into a category other than *general* education (Banks, 2017; Danforth & Rhodes, 1987; Shyman, 2015).

As often as they are able, therefore, special education leaders should attempt to help students be declassified from receiving special education services so as to help remove the label of *special education* from a student's educational experience.

Social labeling and special education inextricably intersect with the aims of the modern movement toward social justice, as well as have an impact on federal legislation (Anastasiou et al., 2016; *Brown vs. Board of Education*, 1954; Danforth, 2006; Danforth & Rhodes, 1987; Esteves & Rao, 2008). Utilizing removal of a social label as a function of social justice serves to frame the necessity of this study to further the aims of social justice for students with disabilities, specifically the removal of the label of *disabled* (Anastasiou et al., 2016; Atkins, 2017; Danforth, 2006; Danforth & Rhodes, 1987; Shyman, 2015). Further, social justice theory could be applicable in providing a framework from which leaders could train their IEP teams to base their tri-annual redeterminations of eligibility (Danforth, 2006; Danforth & Rhodes, 1987; Education Rule, 2016; Shyman, 2015).

More specifically, if IEP teams were thoroughly examining whether or not each student continues to qualify for special education services, then the label of special education could potentially be removed more often. This is the primary reason this study's research questions were aimed at special education leaders. The experiences and processes of these leaders are critical, given the weight of responsibility they hold for guiding and informing special education procedures within their respective buildings (Carlson & Parshall, 1996; Harper, 2012; Pazey & Cole, 2012; Shealey et al., 2012; Slee, 2001).

Social justice theory includes a focus on marginalized groups within society (Theoharis, 2007), and, as such, should include those served through special education (Atkins, 2016; Shyman, 2015). Further, social justice theory seeks to expose the oppression of marginalized groups

and the necessity of restoring social dignity to these individuals (Atkins, 2016; Danforth, 2006; Danforth & Rhodes, 1987; Shyman, 2015; Toson, Burrello, & Knollman, 2013). Given these descriptions, discussing declassification through a social justice lens has great merit. When a student is made initially eligible for special education, a label of *disabled* is instantly placed upon that student, and this label has the ability to impact his or her social dignity (Atkins, 2016; Banks, 2017). Declassification from receiving special education services, in essence, entails the removal of such a label, and, therefore, should be considered a socially just outcome for students who are served under the label of *disabled* for any period of time (Anastasiou et al., 2016; Danforth, 2006; Danforth & Rhodes, 1987; Shyman, 2015; Theoharis, 2007).

Dating to the turn of the 20th century, SWD learners have faced marginalization within the school system simply for being unequal, in academics, behavior, or health, with their peers without disabilities (Esteves & Rao, 2008). The core definition of social justice, however, one which includes all learners who are challenged with a disability, has yet to be agreed upon by researchers and practitioners, alike (Shyman, 2015). Shyman (2015) noted the ideas of social justice and inclusion of students with special needs to be indelibly linked, despite nebulous conformity to a standard set of practices. Slee (2001) explained the agonizing divide between social justice as a pervasive thought pattern and special education. He noted the disparity between reform movements and ground-level practice within schools. Among his arguments, Slee (2001) described the need for special educators to lead the movement of social justice inquiry. As he noted, they were the most well placed to lead the discussion in a fundamental direction of change (Slee, 2001).

Social justice theory has profound implications for the realm of special education, as the narrowed focus of special education leaders should be to implement socially just practices for all

SWD learners (Harper, 2012; Shyman, 2015) Though many definitions of social justice theory were available (Christensen & Dorn, 1997), one definition of social justice theory espoused the essence of special education's objectives, which were "issues of equity, social justice, and human rights" (Christensen & Dorn, 1997, p. 181). Theoharis (2007) additionally noted, "Social justice supports a process built on respect, care, recognition, and empathy…" and "…an ultimate concern for situations of marginalization" (p. 223). As such, these notions bear further study.

Shealey, Thomas, and Sparks (2012) called for more research to be conducted regarding the intersection of special education and social justice. The core tenets of social justice lend scope to the declassification conversation, because one could consider SWD learners who were not properly tri-annually re-determined for need of services as receiving socially unjust consideration. A modern, progressive social justice thought in special education should be to provide special education services to students who qualify and require such services, and then remove the label of *disabled* as soon as possible. This line of thinking aligns with the original intent of lawmakers (Congressional Research Service, 1985), as well as with the aims of social justice regarding the desegregation of marginalized and segregated groups and restoration of dignity to the same (Atkins, 2016; Banks, 2017; *Brown*, 1954, Theoharis, 2007).

In summary, *IDEIA* (2004) has essentially pre-defined for educators what their standard of social justice should be toward identifying and helping students with disabilities be as successful as possible in the school setting. This piece of federal legislation has ensured that identified students with disabilities are given proper educational supports (Education Rule, 2016); however, *IDEIA* (2004) does not address what it means for a child to remain in special education for an extended amount of time when he or she has been diligently working toward achieving and

maintaining growth. All students deserve the best education possible, and students with disabilities equally deserve such support. Being identified as a student with a disability can be a life-changing event for families and students. The potential to remove that label should be given equal weight and awe by educational leaders and practitioners when working toward the most productive and socially just outcomes for students with disabilities.

Conclusion.

Shyman (2015), as well as Danforth and Rhodes (1987), noted the label of *disabled* could be viewed as a social construct, or a designation society has determined to be inclusive of all those who were different. Though Congress' initial legislative intent may have been to provide students who required additional academic assistance an education fitting of their individualized needs (Congressional Research Service, 1985), the label of *special education* has become attached to unintended social consequences (Danforth & Rhodes, 1987; Shyman, 2015). As such, this label could lead to marginalization and segregation by virtue of designation into a category other than *general* education (Danforth & Rhodes, 1987; Shyman, 2015).

As often as they are able, therefore, special education leaders and practitioners should attempt to help students become declassified from requiring special education services. Through many rounds of legislative negotiations, the rights of students with disabilities have continued to be an intensely debated topic of litigation and legislation since the mid-1960s, leading into the Civil Rights movement, and persisting within current conversations (Christensen & Dorn, 1997). Today's special education services, as an entity, were closely safeguarded by the aforementioned federal legislation, *IDEIA* (2004), which was written to require schools to acknowledge and make adjustments for students who were in need of additional assistance, in whatever form necessary, or, in other words, to allow equity for marginalized learners (IDEIA, 2004; Christensen &

Dorn, 1997). However, due to nebulously labeled procedures, such legislation has also served to protect marginalization and continue socially unjust practices of allowing students to remain labeled as SWD learners without a clear path toward having the label removed (Harper, 2012; IDEIA, 2004; McPhail, 1995; Shyman, 2015).

With proper acknowledgement to such legislation, and the notion that "(p)eople with disabilities would be in much worse shape without formal recognition of past discrimination and civil rights" (Christensen & Dorn, 1997, p. 193), a student who was made eligible for special education has ultimately been labeled as a student who was different (Anastasiou, Kauffman, & Michail, 2016; McPhail, 1995; Shyman, 2015). In order for social justice to be fully implemented, the right to a "free appropriate public education" (IDEIA, 2004), which was federally written as the equitable disbursement of education for marginalized students with disabilities, should focus as intently on removing such labels as it does for adding them. This was the socially just method of thought which should pervade literature, legislation, and practice; unfortunately, however, due to increased federal oversight, stringent laws, and vague procedures, equity and social justice were often given second-hand importance in favor of legislative compliance (Harper, 2012; Shyman, 2015).

Special education leaders should be considered the gateway to equity for students with disabilities, as they were the primary influencers of procedures, practices, vision, and social justice for their respective schools and departments (Harper, 2012; Danforth, 2006; Danforth & Rhodes, 1987). Dedicated and courageous leadership committed to exploring the socially just practice of examining areas of inequity and marginalization in special education (Danforth, 2006; Danforth & Rhodes, 1987) should lead sustained opposition to promote discontinuing inequitable practices from a ground-level effort within local school districts (Danforth & Rhodes,

1987; Harper, 2012; Shyman, 2015). By focusing this study's aims on special education leaders' perspectives and perceptions, attention can be drawn to the need for development in this area of leadership. In order for this revolutionary thought to take root, however, discussion must take place about the equitable, fair, and socially just practice of removing labels from students as often as possible. Courageous and socially just special education leaders were needed so that existing disparate practices can be spotlighted and conversations regarding needed changes can begin (Danforth & Rhodes, 1987; Harper, 2012; Anastasiou, Kauffman, & Michail, 2016). As Christensen and Dorn (1997) surmised, "…social justice is a key factor in current debates within special education, always implicit but rarely discussed openly" (p. 182). Thus, this study aimed to discuss it openly by means of exploring special education leaders' experiences with declassifying students from receiving special education services.

REFERENCES

Ahearn, E. M., & National Association of State Directors of Special Education, A. V. (1993). Re-examining eligibility under *IDEA*. Retrieved from http://ezproxy.gsu.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=eric&AN=ED389125&site=ehost-live&scope=site

Anastasiou, D., Kauffman, J. M., & Michail, D. (2016). Disability in multicultural theory: Conceptual and social justice issues. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies, 27*(1), 3-12.

Atkins, L. (2016). Dis(en)abled: Legitimating discriminatory practice in the name of inclusion? *British Journal of Special Education, 43*(1), 6-21.

Banks, J. (2017). "These people are never going to stop labeling me": Educational experiences of African American male students labeled with learning disabilities. *Equity and Excellence in Education, 50*(1), 96-107.

Bielinski, J., Ysseldyke, J. E., National Association of State Directors of Special Education, A. V., National Center on Educational Outcomes, M. M., & Council of Chief State School Officers, W. D. (2000). Interpreting trends in the performance of special education students. Technical Report 27.

Bowen, S. K., & Rude, H. A. (2006). Assessment and students with disabilities: Issues and challenges with educational reform. *Rural Special Education Quarterly, 25*(3), 24-30.

Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, 347 U. S. 483 (1954).

Carlson, E. & Parshall, L. (1996). Academic, social, and behavioral adjustment for students declassified from special education. *Exceptional Children, 63*, 89-100.

Carlson, E. & Reavey, A. (2000). Case studies of five secondary-aged youth declassified from special education. *High School Journal, 83*(3), 17-30.

Castro-Villareal, F., Villareal, V., & Sullivan, J. R. (2016). Special education policy and response to intervention: Identifying promises and pitfalls to advance social justice for diverse students. *Contemporary School Psychology, 20*, 10-20.

Christensen, C. A. & Dorn, S. (1997). Competing notions of social justice and contradictions in special education reform. *Journal of Special Education, 31*(2), 181-98.

Coleman, M. (2012). Interviews. In A. R. J. Briggs, M. Coleman, & M. Morrison (Eds.), *Research methods in educational leadership & management* (3rd ed., pp. 250-265). London, UK: SAGE Publications.

Congressional Research Service: The Library of Congress. (1985). *P.L. 94-142, The education for all handicapped children act: Its development, implementation, and current issues* (The Library of Congress Publication No. 85-1031 EPW). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

Danforth, S. (2006). Learning from our historical evasions: Disability studies and schooling in a liberal democracy. In Danforth, S., & Gabel, S. L. (Eds.). *Vital questions facing disability studies in education* (pp. 78-80). New York: Peter Lang Publishing.

Danforth, S. & Rhodes, W. C. (1987). Deconstructing disability. *Remedial and Special Education, 18*, 357-366.

Education Rule, 34 C.F.R. § 300.1-300.11 (2016).

Education for All Handicapped Children's Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1401-1420 (1975).

Funk, L. (2011). Stats show that few special ed students fully re-enter general education. Retrieved from https://www.cabinetreport.com/special-education/stats-show-that-few-special-ed-students-fully-re-enter-general-education.

Harper, J. (2012). Leading special education in an era of systems redesign: A commentary. *Journal of Special Education Leadership*, *25*(1), 48-52.

Hudson, T. M., & Mckenzie, R. G. (2016). The impact of RTI on timely identification of students with specific learning disabilities. *Learning Disabilities: A Multidisciplinary Journal, 21*(2), 46-58.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997, 20 U.S.C. § 1400 et seq.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1400 (2004).

Ishak, N. M., & Bakar, A. Y. A. (2014). Developing sampling frame for case study: Challenges and conditions. *World Journal of Education, 4*(3), 29-35.

Lane, K.L, Wehby, J. H., Little, M. A., & Cooley, C. (2005). Students educated in self-contained classrooms and self-contained schools: Part II--How do they progress over time? *Behavioral Disorders, 30*(4), 363-374.

Lee, B. (2014). Use of a diagnostic errors framework to classify mistakes in an assessment of a bilingual child. *Multiple Voices for Ethnically Diverse Exceptional Learners, 14*(1), 18-29.

Liasidou, A. & Svensson, C. (2014). Educating leaders for social justice: The case of special educational needs co-ordinators. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 18*(8), 783-797.

McPhail, J. C. (1995). Phenomenology as philosophy and method: Applications to ways of doing special education. *Remedial and Special Education, 16*(3), 159-165.

MacMillan, D. L., Widaman, K. F. Balow, I. H., Borthwick-Duffy, S., Hendrick, I. G., & Hemsley, R. E. (1992). Special education students exiting the educational system. *The Journal of Special Education, 26*(1), 20-36.

Maki, K. E., Floyd, R. G., & Roberson, T. (2015). State learning disability eligibility criteria: A comprehensive review. *School Psychology Quarterly, 30*(4), 457-459.

Morrow, S. L. (2005). Quality and trustworthiness in qualitative research in counseling psychology. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 52*(2), 250-260.

Neuman, W. L. (2009). Social research methods: Qualitative and quantitative approaches (7th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson/Allyn & Bacon.

Padilla-Diaz, M. (2015). Phenomenology in educational qualitative research: Philosophy as science or philosophical science? *International Journal of Educational Excellence, 1*(2), 101-110.

Pazey, B. L. & Cole, H. A. (2012). The role of special education training in the development of socially just leaders: Building an equity consciousness in educational leadership programs. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 49*(2), 243-271.

Poggenpoel, M. & Myburgh, C. H. (2005). Obstacles in qualitative research: Possible solutions. *Education, 126*(2), 304-311.

Sewell, A. (2016). A theoretical application of epistemological oppression to the psychological assessment of special educational needs; Concerns and practical implications for anti-oppressive practice. *Educational Psychology in Practice, 32*(1), 1-12.

Shealey, M. W., Thomas, N. M. A., & Sparks, C. W. (2012). Defining leadership in charter schools: Examining the intersection of social justice and special education. *Journal of Special Education Leadership, 25*(1), 15-24.

Shenton, A. K. (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for Information, 22*(2), 63-75.

Shyman, E. (2015). Toward a globally sensitive definition of inclusive education based in social

 justice. *International Journal of Disability, Development, and Education, 62*(4), 351-362.

Slee, R. (2001). Social justice and the changing directions in educational research: The case of

 inclusive education. *Inclusive Education, 5*(2/3), 167-177.

SRI International. (2005). Declassification—students who leave special education: A special

 topic report from the special education elementary longitudinal study (SRI Project

 P10656). Retried June 2017 from https://seels.sri.com/designdocs/SEELS_Declass_FI-

 NAL.pdf

Stake, Robert, E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage

 Publications.

Theoharis, G. (2007). Social justice educational leaders and resistance: Toward a theory of social

 justice leadership. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 43*(2), 221-258.

Toson, A. L.-M, Burrello, L. C., & Knollman, G. (2013). Educational justice for all: The

 capability approach and inclusive education leadership. *International Journal of Inclusive

 Education, 17*(5), 490-506.

Van Manen, Max. (2016). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive

 pedagogy (2nd ed.)*. New York: Routledge.

Waterstone, J. (2017). *Endrew F*.: Symbolism v. reality. *Journal of Law & Education, 46*(4),

 527-538.

Winzer, M. A. (1998). A tale often told: The early progression of special education. *Remedial

 and Special Education, 19*(4), 212-218.

Yell, M. L., Rogers, D., & Rogers, E. L. (1998). The legal history of special education: What a

 long, strange trip it's been! *Remedial and Special Education, 19*(4), 219-228.

Yell, M. L., & Drasgow, E. (2000). Litigating a free appropriate public education: The Lovaas hearings and cases. *Journal of Special Education, 33*(4), 205-214.

Yell, M. L., & Drasgow, E. (2007). Assessment for eligibility under *IDEIA* and the 2006 regulations. *Assessment for Effective Intervention*, 32(4), 202-213.

Ysseldyke, J. E & Bielinski, J. (2002). Effect of different methods of reporting and reclassification on trends in test scores for students with disabilities. *Exceptional Children, 68*(2), 189-200.

CHAPTER 2

DECLASSIFICATION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Federal education legislation clearly defines guidelines for a student to become eligible to receive special education services; however, the procedures for being re-determined for the continued need of those services with a path toward declassification, or exiting, from such services is not as clearly defined (Education Rule, 2016). This lack of clarity in federal guidelines could lead to many students becoming eligible for special education services and remaining labeled as a student with a disability (SWD) for the entirety of his or her educational career when specialized services may no longer be necessary. As such, this dissertation explored special education leaders' experiences with declassifying students from receiving special education services.

When discussing the topic of declassifying students from receiving special education services, a review of legislative requirements for initial eligibility into receiving special education services is essential, because initial eligibility concerns would be critical to the conversation if declassification was being explored as a potential option for a student. Further, the legislative regulations for declassification from receiving special education services is also a pertinent topic to explore so as to frame readers' understanding of federal procedures and guidelines.

Statement of purpose.

The purpose of this study was to examine the lived experiences of special education leaders at the high school level who have interacted with declassifying students from special education. These specific leaders' perspectives were crucial to the conversation of declassification and how it is implemented across different high school buildings. As leaders of special education departments, these practitioners are required to have knowledge of federal special education legis-

lation and to assist each of their respective buildings with maintaining compliance with such legislation. The high school level is specifically pertinent to the declassification conversation, because students who qualify for special education services are most often qualified during their elementary years of schooling (SRI International, 2005); therefore, students who have received services and supports through special education during their elementary and middle school years may be appropriate candidates for declassification from services in their high school years (Carlson & Parshall, 1996; Carlson & Reavey, 2000). Further, a depth of extant literature on the subject of declassification at the high school level is not widely available at this time; therefore, a secondary purpose of this study was to add to the body of available literature regarding this specific area of special education at the high school level.

While making provision for the tri-annual re-determination of students with disabilities and their continued need for special education services, federal legislation governing special education procedures (IDEIA, 2004) does not spotlight a specifically delineated path for students to be declassified, or exited, from receiving special education services (Education Rule, 2016). A phenomenological study, therefore, was undertaken in order to describe the experiences of high school special education leaders with declassifying students from receiving special education services.

Significance of the study.

Special education was initially intended by legislators as a way to ensure SWD learners were given an equal chance at receiving the same educational access and benefit as their peers without disabilities (Congressional Research Service, 1985). With these guiding intentions, legislators enacted laws to ensure school districts complied with policies and procedures for the identification and evaluation of SWD learners (Pub. L. 94-142). However, within these initial laws,

as well as their successors, emphasis was not placed on the length of time an SWD learner may require such services, nor was definitive guidance outlined specifying how a student could work his or her way out of placement within special education and be declassified from such services (Education Rule, 2016; IDEA, 1997; IDEIA, 2004; Pub. L. 94-142).

Further, the process within current legislation for tri-annual re-determination of the continued need for special education services is dependent upon an IEP team's qualitative agreement on a student's sustained need for special education services. This agreement is based on available quantitative data and the qualitative observations of the IEP team members (Education Rule, 2016). The lack of a specifically defined set of criteria for the declassification process could lead to many students remaining labeled as an SWD learner when they may no longer qualify or be in need of such services. Additionally, students potentially being eligible to have the label of special education removed could be further contingent upon whether or not the respective leaders of the special education department of the school in which that student attends are placing critical emphasis on re-determination procedures and pertinent data points (Bowen & Rude, 2006; Carlson & Parshall, 1996; Carlson & Reavey, 2000; Hudson & McKenzie, 2016; Lane, Wehby, Little, & Cooley, 2005; SRI International, 2005).

Given that specific leaders of special education departments, for example the local school administrator and the department chair, are the individuals who are most responsible for guiding the direction of local school compliance with special education regulations, this study is important in order to explore the perspectives and processes of such leaders regarding their views of students being declassified from receiving services. Also, when a student is made eligible for special education, the label of *disabled* is placed upon that child, and having the opportunity to remove that label is a socially just practice which should be furthered explored within literature

(Danforth & Rhodes, 1987; Danforth, 2006, Esteves & Rao, 2008; Anastasiou, Kauffman, & Michail, 2016).

Research questions.

In order to explore local school special education leaders' experiences with declassification, this study's guiding questions were as follows:

1. What have been the experiences of high school special education leaders regarding declassifying students from receiving special education services?

2. What specific processes have special education leaders been involved with in regard to declassifying students from receiving special education services?

When a student is initially referred and made eligible to receive special education services, the successive IEP teams who tri-annually review that student's eligibility bear the weight of responsibility in determining whether or not that student continues to qualify and requires special education services (Carlson & Parshall, 1996; Danforth, 2006; Education Rule, 2016; IDEIA, 2004; Sewell, 2016). If IEP teams are not thoroughly exploring a student's eligibility in terms of enduring deficits in the initial area of academic need, then students who may no longer require special education services may continue to be labeled as *disabled* when removing the label may be an option.

Additionally, given that special education leaders are charged with guiding building-level compliance with federal procedures (Harper, 2012; Shealey, Thomas, & Sparks, 2012; Slee, 2001), their perspectives and processes toward declassification are worthy of further study, as is exploring the socially just notion of removing the label of special education from students who may qualify to have it removed (Anastasiou, Kauffman, & Michail, 2016; Carlson & Parshall,

1996; SRI International, 2005; Ysseldyke & Bielinski, 2002) or, as *IDEIA* (2004) terms this concept, "whether the child continues to have such a disability and such educational needs."

Special education eligibility.

To fully explore the declassification conversation, one must first be acquainted with federal requirements to initially qualify for special education services. In order to become initially eligible for special education services, the following criteria are required:

- The student must take part in a comprehensive educational evaluation, including a battery of psychological assessments.

- The student must meet federal criteria for one or more of the twelve specific eligibility categories, as defined by current legislation, the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act* (IDEIA, 2004).

- A multi-disciplinary individual education program (IEP) team must agree that there is an educational impact of a disability and specialized instructional services are required for that student to progress educationally.

If each of these criteria are met, then a student is made eligible for special education services. After a student initially qualifies for such services, an IEP is developed and reviewed annually, and the student's eligibility for services is reviewed tri-annually. These steps are clearly outlined within section 300 of the *Code of Federal Regulations* (CFR) (Education Rule, 2016).

The process for the tri-annual re-determination of eligibility, entails reviewing the same pieces of academic data as are required for initial eligibility; however, for tri-annual re-determination, the IEP team has the authority to determine that no additional assessments or information are required to continue special education eligibility for three additional years (Education Rule, 2016). If IEP teams, therefore, are not conducting a thorough review of all elements of available

data, as well as conducting additional psychological assessments to determine the continued presence of a disability, then they risk continuing a label which may no longer apply (Carlson & Parshall, 1996; Carlson & Reavey, 2000).

Least restrictive environment.

When the Congress of the United States initially decided to enact federal legislation for students with disabilities, their intent was clear--to level the playing field for SWD learners so they could achieve alongside their peers without disabilities. A review of meeting minutes from the original Congressional education panel provides specific insight into the intent of the law. Because of those initial discussions, students with disabilities were, for the first time in history, afforded opportunities to access general education settings absent from previous options (Congressional Research Service, 1985).

Among the goals of this ground-breaking legislation was to ensure students with disabilities were educated in their least restrictive environment (LRE). A current definition of LRE details that students should be placed within classes that provide the appropriate level of educational support, as guided by the decisions of the IEP team, beginning with the general education setting with no support, and increasingly becoming more restrictive as the options move down this continuum of services (IDEIA, 2004). Put simply, the goal of the LRE conversation is to ensure SWD learners are able to access general education settings as often and in as many settings as appropriate in light that student's particular abilities and needed supports (Christensen & Dorn, 1997; Congressional Research Service, 1985; Yell, & Drasgow, 2000).

The LRE discussion is pertinent to this study's aims in that it provides a logical basis from which to begin conversations regarding a student's progress toward potential declassification. For example, if a student is being served through his or her IEP in the LRE setting of small

group special education classes, and he or she also requires an intense breadth of goals and objectives and instructional accommodations, then that student may not be a candidate to pursue a conversation regarding declassification from receiving special education services. However, if a student is served in the LRE setting of general education classes with minimal to no special education support, and he or she requires few to no goals and objectives and instructional accommodations, then the declassification conversation seems a logical next step. Again, according to the Congressional Research Service (1985), the initial goal of special education was to level the playing field amongst all students. Once that field has been leveled, and an SWD student displays maintenance of success over time, then exploration of declassification seems appropriate.

Special education is guided by federal laws, and special education leaders are charged with ensuring compliance with those laws (Harper, 2012). The extent to which special education leaders are both aware of and guiding their departments toward the aims and intents of those laws will determine the directions their respective buildings pursue. Though declassification falls within the scope of the law, the extent to which it is placed as a focal point within respective schools could differ within each building. As such, a study that describes the lived experiences of special education leaders in regard to their interactions with declassification is both significant and necessary. This study followed the tenets of hermeneutic phenomenology in order to explore the experiences of special education leaders with declassification and reflect upon their understandings.

Methodology

The tenets of hermeneutical phenomenology were utilized as guideposts for the methodological procedures of this study. Phenomenology, as a research method, is a division of human science research which seeks to explore the lived experiences of specific persons in relation to a

particular phenomenon. Equally, hermeneutics seeks to delve into human experiences in order to discover meaning from culturally and socially derived understanding of lived experiences (Crotty, 1998; Van Manen, 2016). Given this study's aims of specifically exploring high school special education leaders' perspectives toward declassification from special education services, understanding these leaders' experiences and how those experiences have framed their views toward declassification were critical to fully exploring their experiences (Crotty, 1998; McPhail, 1995; Van Manen, 2016).

By current definition, a phenomenological study is rooted in basic psychological processes and the human consciousness of learning and adapting to our worlds through social interactions (McPhail, 1995). Phenomenology seeks to understand the fundamental roots of a person's beliefs (Van Manen, 2016) and posits that individuals understand the world around them in relation to their social and peer groups, and their understandings of such things are not deeply ingrained within their respective consciences, but, rather, they develop and evolve over time as social interactions progress (McPhail, 1995). Phenomenology seeks to describe the lived experiences of specific persons who have interactions with a specific phenomenon, as well as to explore and textualize how those persons establish meaning of the phenomenon within their respective and individual worldviews (Creswell & Poth, 2017; McPhail, 1995; Van Manen, 2016).

Fundamental roots from phenomenologists, such as Edmund Husserl, described phenomenology as the way in which individuals construct meaning from an experience. Over time, however, phenomenology has evolved into the study of not only how meaning is constructed, but how meaning is processed within the individual mind (Groenewald, 2004; McPhail, 1995). Further, Van Manen (2016) noted phenomenology does not seek to explain or offer a solution to a

problem, such as with the natural science based positivist approach, but rather seeks to under-

stand the meaning behind a phenomena so that participants in that phenomena "may be able to

act more thoughtfully and more tactfully in certain situations" (Van Manen, 2016, p. 23). The

shift in focus from construction of meaning to processing of meaning is critical to this study's

aims.

Procedures for declassification from receiving special education services are noted within

guiding federal education legislation (IDEIA, 2004); therefore, the meaning of declassification is

already constructed by such legislation as stating a "child is no longer a child with a disability"

(Education Rule, 2016). The processing of the legislation, though, in terms of applying this par-

ticular phenomenon of declassification to remove the label of special education from students, is

not practiced as widely as making a child eligible for special education, or initially labeling the

child (Carlson & Parshall, 1996; Carlson & Reavey, 2000). Thus, by describing special educa-

tion leaders' personal consciousness toward declassification, as detailed by their lived experi-

ences, this study aimed to delve into the personal processings (McPhail, 1995) of special educa-

tion leaders regarding this special education practice.

McPhail (1995) noted the specific ability of one's consciousness to change and adapt

over time as a result of one's lived experiences in the past and expectations of the future. He ad-

ditionally noted the culture in which one exists is constructed in cooperation with one's lived ex-

periences (McPhail, 1995). Given these sentiments, phenomenology posits that all behavior and

actions are temporary, changeable, and adaptable, pending one's circumstances and social group-

ings. Each of these thoughts were critical for the purpose of this study. Further, describing spe-

cial education leaders' experiences and practices, while remaining true to the factual evidence of

their intents (Groenewald, 2004) as described by their experiences, is important research for special education practitioners.

Finally, in regard to the concept of declassifying students from receiving special education services, the culture in which one was trained will have direct influence on how a practitioner implements that particular aspect of the law (McPhail, 1995). Similarly, McPhail (1995) suggested experiencing a phenomenon is the critical element for constructing conscious meaning of that phenomenon, and Husserl believed personal consciousness is derived by personal experience (Groenewald, 2004) and individuals act according to their personal consciousness (McPhail, 1995). As is related to this study, practitioners who have not experienced the process of declassifying a student from receiving special education services cannot attach personal meaning to the necessity of following that part of the legislation, and, as such, would be less likely to interweave that practice into part of their personal culture or way of operating. This study aimed to describe individual special education leaders' experiences and note their experiences' agreement or disagreement with this thought.

These characteristics revealed phenomenology research as the most appropriate methodology for this study, because this study explored the specific internal guidelines and procedures special education leaders employ (Stake, 1995) in order to lead their respective departments for compliance with the legislative concept of special education declassification. Many current researchers have focused their studies of special education related topics utilizing the case study approach (Carlson & Parshall, 1996; Carlson & Reavey, 2000; Lane et al., 2005; Lee, 2014; MacMillan et al., 1992; SRI International, 2005); however, a hermeneutical phenomenological approach not only provides a novel perspective to the field of special education research, but also allows fresh understandings of diverse issues to be explored (McPhail, 1995).

Participants.

The aim of sampling in qualitative research is not to select a specific representative sample of a population, such as in quantitative research. The aim of qualitative sampling is to purposely choose participants who will allow the researcher to fully explore the desired phenomenon, as well as those who are able to speak to the intricacies of the desired phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Groenewald, 2004; Ishak & Bakar, 2014; Padilla-Diaz, 2015; Shenton, 2004; Van Manen, 2016). A large, Southern, metropolitan school district was chosen as the location for this study in order to provide a relevant sample of participants (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Additionally, participants selected for this study were deliberately chosen from two special education leadership positions from the high school level within this district, the special education local school administrator and special education department chair.

At the time of this study, the specifically chosen district fulfilled both of these purposeful sampling aims, employing both a local school administrator who supervised the special education department and a special education department chair who worked in conjunction with the local school administrator to manage the special education department at the high school level.

According to this study's participants, persons employed within these two positions were responsible for maintaining compliance with federal regulations, such as *IDEIA* (2004), as well as guiding the overall academic direction for their respective departments. Additionally, persons serving in the role of local school administrator over special education functioned as the guiding administrator for his or her respective special education department and also served as the designated local education authority (LEA) (IDEIA, 2004) for each, respective building's special education program. In the role of LEA, the special education administrator possessed authority to

speak on behalf of the school district and its available programs and resources. Similar to the responsibilities of a local school assistant principal, the special education administrator was also responsible for working in conjunction with the administrative staff of his or her school to ensure special education procedures aligned with district expectations and federal guidelines. The special education administrator additionally served as a liaison between the local school and the school district for special education related tasks and procedures, including federal legislation and specialized instruction compliance and processes.

Participants within this study explained the special education department chair simultaneously served as a special education teacher and a building-level leader. They additionally noted the department chair was responsible for working in conjunction with the special education administrator to ensure local school special education procedures were in compliance with district expectations and federal guidelines. Primary leadership responsibilities for the department chair were identifying training needs within his or her department, conducting trainings or working with the special education administrator to conduct the trainings, and managing the logistical aspects of leading a high school department. Given the descriptions of these two specific leadership roles, the persons employed within these two positions were most likely to have had experiences with declassification. As such, these persons were essential participants for this study.

In addition to specifically choosing the participants for this study from two specific leadership roles, the high school level was also specifically chosen as the appropriate level of schooling within which to conduct this study. Though several extant studies noted students in the elementary and middle school levels were also declassified, high school was the appropriate setting for this study, because federal data is only reported for declassification of students aged 14 and

older (Carlson & Parshall, 1996; SRI International, 2005); therefore, high school leaders' experiences were critical to the declassification conversation. Further, students who continue to receive special education services into their high school years of schooling were of particular importance to this study's aims, because if students were qualified to receive special education services in elementary school, for example, many of them may have learned and generalized strategies over time and, therefore, may not require special education services to progress educationally through their high school years (Carlson & Parshall, 1996; Carlson & Reavey, 2000; SRI International, 2005).

Finally, phenomenology research seeks to describe the intricacy of an experience, not necessarily an expansive number of how many people have experienced the phenomenon being studied; therefore, a large sample size was not necessary (Englander, 2012). A total of seven participants were selected to take part in this study, four from the role of special education administrator, and three from the role of department chair. Seven participants aligned with research-based examples of an appropriate number of participants from which to obtain information that details an extensive breadth of experiences regarding the phenomenon being studied (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Englander, 2012; Groenewald, 2004; Padilla-Diaz, 2015).

Participants' experience.

This study aimed to represent the perspectives of special education leaders who were serving in a special education leadership role in the high school setting at the time of this study. The information detailed in Table 1 provides information regarding each participant's experiences throughout his or her career, and lends credence to their perspectives as representative of a broad lens across all levels of schooling, elementary, middle, and high school. In addition to serving in a leadership role of either local school administrator or department chair of a special

education department, each of the participants within this study had formerly or was currently serving as a classroom teacher for SWD learners. The experience of special education classroom teacher provided an additional layer of experience from which each participant could draw upon when detailing his or her personal narratives.

At the time of this study, participants numbers three, four, and six were serving in the role of special education department chair, and each noted he or she was concurrently serving as the chair of his or her respective special education department, as well as a teacher within the department; therefore, these participants' numbers of years of teaching on Table 1 also includes their total numbers of special education leadership experience. Additionally, at the time of this study, participants numbers one, two, five, and seven were serving as local school administrators over special education; therefore, these participants were not concurrently serving in a teaching role within their respective special education departments. Further, the columns which indicate each level of schooling experience, elementary, middle, and high, are inclusive of each participants' teaching and leading experiences.

Participants' years of leadership experience within special education represented a diverse array of time, ranging from one year to twenty years. Interestingly, two participants also indicated that they had been involved with educating children with special needs since the mid-1970s, which was the inception of special education legislation and the movement toward identifying and educating students with disabilities alongside their peers without disabilities (Congressional Research Service, 1985; Pub. L. 94-142); therefore, their perspectives added valuable insight as representative of practitioners who had been directly involved with ensuring every authorization of federal legislative mandates for students with disabilities was enacted within their respective classrooms and schools.

Two participants indicated they had participated in different types of experiences other than teaching or leading students with disabilities; however, this information is not represented within Table 1. Participant six had the experience of serving as a paraprofessional for eight years prior to becoming a certified special education teacher and leader, and participant seven had the additional experience of serving as a speech language pathologist for 15 years prior to becoming a certified special education teacher and leader.

Finally, only two of the seven participants indicated their undergraduate degree was in special education. The other five participants stated they pursued their special education teaching certifications through alternate means, rather than undergraduate study. The respective majors of participants three, four, five, six, and seven included majors in textile engineering, English litera-ture, psychology, electrical engineering, and literature and communication. All seven participants indicated, however, their gratitude to be currently working within the field of special education, and considered themselves to be serving in the career to which they were always destined.

Data sources.

Data for this study were collected from two sources in order to aid in data trustworthiness and triangulation: interviews and a researcher journal of field notes (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Groenewald, 2004; Morrow, 2005; Shenton, 2004; Stake, 1995). The first data source was one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with four high school local school administrators, and one-on-one, semi-structured interviews with three high school special education department chairs. The second data source was obtained from the researcher's journal of field notes for additional bracketing of personal experiences throughout the data collection phase of this study and in order to reduce the potential for researcher bias within the study (Van Manen, 2016). All collected data were recorded, transcribed, analyzed, and stored electronically, and pseudonyms were assigned

to all interview participants so that no personally identifying information was recorded. Additionally, all audio recordings, as well as the researcher's journal of field notes, were password-protected and stored on a cloud-based server in order to provide protection for the data (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

Leaders chosen to participate in this study were purposely selected based on their role as building-level special education leaders, since these are the leaders most likely to have had experiences with the phenomena of declassification (Van Manen, 2016). Additionally, several previous studies, such as Carlson and Parshall (1996), Harper (2012), and Slee (2001), noted the vast array of responsibilities placed upon building-level special education leaders, including understanding the landscape of their respective special education departments and charting a visionary direction for instructional progress and legal compliance. Finally, previous studies focused on the perspectives of general education leaders (Carlson & Parshall, 1996; SRI International, 2005); therefore, a study that incorporated the knowledge of special education leaders was necessary to add to the body of available literature regarding declassification.

Though special education leaders' aims should align with the building principal's vision and direction, this study did not incorporate the perspectives of building principals when purposely selecting participants. The special education leaders' specific roles in ensuring compliance with federal special education mandates could be considered more integrally involved in regard to special education compliance within a high school building, more so than the involvement of the building-level principal. For this reason, building principals were not included in the purposeful selection of participants for this study. Chrispeels, et al. (2008) discussed the expansive volume of accountability measures placed upon building-level principals and specifically

noted, "…the principal cannot lead alone" (Chrispeels, et al., 2008, p. 731). This assertion defines the necessity for principals to utilize the knowledge and leadership abilities of other departmental, building-level leaders, which includes the leaders of the special education department within each local school. A reasonable assertion, therefore, is that the principal's ability to ensure a legally compliant school is dependent upon the depth of leadership capability and special education knowledge among his or her staff, including the special education administrator and department chair. Given this notion, the principal's point of view does not necessarily demand the specificity of guiding each directive of the special education department, such as determining when declassification is appropriate for specific students; however, principals are ultimately responsible for the direction and success of the entire building, including the special education department. As such, it is critical for the school-based administrator serving over the special education department and the special education department chair to be aligned with the principal's vision for the entire school and to work in conjunction with the principal to ensure all departments within the local school are aiming in the same direction (Bolman & Deal, 2008; Chrispeels, et al., 2008).

Table 1.

Participant Experiences in Special Education Teaching and Leading

Participant	Years Sp. Ed. Teaching	Years Sp. Ed. Leadership	Elementary Experience	Middle Experience	High Experience	Majored in Sp. Ed.
1	21	20	yes	yes	yes	yes
2	10	4	yes	no	yes	yes
3	15	8	no	no	yes	no
4	22	7	no	yes	yes	no
5	9	11	yes	no	yes	no
6	17	1	no	yes	yes	no
7	16	12	yes	yes	yes	no

Interviews.

Seven interviews were conducted for this study, all of which utilized the same protocols (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Morrow, 2005), though the number of questions and time limits for each respective interview varied, given the phenomenological aim to describe the depth of each participant's lived experiences (Groenewald, 2004; Van Manen, 2016). All interviews, however, were no longer than one hour and began with establishing rapport with each participant and gaining his or her informed consent (Coleman, 2012; Englander, 2012). The one hour time limit was necessary in order to respect the participants' time and to ensure a proper amount of data were able to be collected (Coleman, 2012), as well as to allow access to a greater number of participants. All interviews were conducted either in person or via telephone, based on the participant's choice. Though interviews were limited to a one-hour timeframe, data were collected to the point of redundancy and saturation. Repetition of responses was noted after approximately the fourth interview conducted, and the majority of participant responses after the fourth interview were similar to the previous participants' responses.

Interview questions were adapted from Englander's (2012) and Van Manen's (2016) approaches and were semi-structured in such a manner as to elicit each participant's detailed description of his or her interaction with the phenomenon of declassifying students from receiving special education services. The semi-structured interview framework allowed the researcher to ask the same set of questions to each participant while also allowing the flexibility to probe for additional information or ask for clarification regarding answers that were unclear (Belotto, 2018; Creswell & Poth, 2017). Utilizing semi-structured interviews also allowed for greater freedom for participants to provide rich descriptions of their experiences and feel autonomy to add details to their responses (Belotto, 2018; Van Manen, 2016).

After rapport was established, one of the first questions in all interviews entailed asking participants to thoroughly describe a specific situation in which they interacted with declassification. Though drawn from the same standard set of questions, follow-up questions depended upon how each participant responded to this question about their experiences with declassification. As a result, spontaneous and repeated clarification of responses was necessary (Englander, 2012; Van Manen, 2016) in multiple interviews. The goal of all follow-up questions, despite the point in the interview they occurred, was to indepthly describe the processes and criteria each participant utilized when discussing declassification. Participant responses to these questions aided in a rich description of each participant's lived experiences, as well as noting how each person constructed meaning from the phenomenon of declassification (McPhail, 1995; Van Manen, 2016).

Finally, given the brevity of available research-based studies regarding declassification at the high school level (Carlson & Parshall, 1996; Carlson & Reavey, 2000; SRI International, 2005), interview questions were additionally designed to address topics not currently prevalent in available literature, as well as to provide additional angles for current practitioners from the high school lens.

Researcher journal.

Groenewald (2004) noted that the researcher in phenomenological research will be tempted to superimpose his or her opinions onto the data, or force the data into a specific outcome or meaning. Bracketing was the chosen method of defining the researcher's epoche, and reducing, to the greatest extent possible, the presupposition of meaning, participants' thematic intent, or relevance of comments (Groenewald, 2004). Utilizing researcher field notes as a secondary data source added further significance to the phenomenological value of the study. Jour-

nal notes were collected throughout the interview process in order to retain a log of the researcher's reflections regarding previously held insights, expanded understandings as a result of participant responses, and in order to retain a record of the work as it was in progress (Groenewald, 2004; Van Manen, 2016).

The model set forth in Groenewald (2004) and Hycner (1999) was adapted for collecting and bracketing researcher field notes. Bracketing, or epoche, refers to the researcher suspending his or her own judgements, implications, or opinions during data collection and phenomenological discovery phases so the interviewees' experiences can be holistically reported, reviewed, and textualized. Therefore, in addition to recording field notes, bracketing of personal opinions and preconceptions was conducted when data were collected and throughout the textualizing phase in order to capture the essence of each participant's individually lived experiences without interference from the researcher's perspectives (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Groenewald, 2004; Van Manen, 2016). Further, the researcher was very familiar with the position of special education administrator; therefore, the need for bracketing was of utmost importance to limit potential bias in reporting of findings.

During the data collection phase, field notes were immediately recorded in a separate file at the conclusion of each interview in order to capture the researcher's initial impressions, insights gained, and to make specific note of any immediately identifiable biases assumed during the interview. Content was added to the field notes journal throughout the data collection phase, in order to keep a running record of pertinent thoughts, feelings, reactions, and potential biases (Groenewald, 2004; Hycner, 1999; Van Manen, 2016).

Phenomenological discovery.

Once data were collected, phenomenological methodology was utilized to explore the conclusions of such data, which entailed the researcher reconstructing and textualizing the participants' lived experiences through coding and reducing collected data (Groenewald, 2004; Van Manen, 2016), what Van Manen (2016) termed as "reflective grasping" (p. 32) of the significance of specific data elements. Groenewald (2004), Hycner (1999), and Van Manen (2016) cautioned phenomenology researchers in their use of the word *analyze* to describe phenomenological explication of data. In their views, *analyzing* involves breaking data apart and reducing each piece into separate elements, which is contrary to the aims of phenomenological research. Van Manen (2016) proposed the terms *discovery*, *reduction*, or *reflection* in lieu of *analysis*, because phenomenological data are comprised of a person's memories, truths, and core beliefs. The job of the phenomenological researcher, therefore, is not to analyze a person's experiences for explanation or justification, but simply to discover, reduce, or reflect upon those experiences as the scope of meaning for that individual (Van Manen, 2016).

In order to investigate collected interview data, a process adapted from Groenewald (2004), Hycner (1999), and Van Manen (2016) was employed. To begin, all interviews were transcribed from their audio formats, utilizing both hand-transcription and a technology-based transcription service. After transcribing, the researcher verified each transcript by listening to each audio recording and comparing it to the correlated transcript in order to gain maximum depth of understanding of each participant's individual experiences (Englander, 2012; Groenewald, 2004). The process of repetitive reviews of the transcripts was necessary in order to provide an accurate description of interview data collected and to represent the data in its whole, unbroken state (Van Manen, 2016). Through repetition, the researcher became intimately familiar

with each participant's responses, which assisted in creating a narrative that closely resembled the participant's experiences (Groenewald, 2004; Hycner, 1999). Throughout this phase of the data reduction process, researcher journal notes were continuously bracketed and reduced in order to decrease the potential for researcher bias and to correct erroneous assumptions of participant intent.

Once the transcription process was completed, each interview participant received an electronic copy of his or her transcript via email and was offered the chance to validate and member-check his or her responses. The member-checking process stressed to each participant the desire by the researcher to represent each respondent's individual story with accuracy and sensitivity to his or her experiences. Further, the member-checking process allowed participants the opportunity to ensure their responses had been accurately portrayed, as well as allowed participants to suggest revisions to their recorded answers or to clarify the intent of specific comments (Bowen, 2005; Shenton, 2004; Stake, 1995). Member-checking further provided participants with the ability to extend their responses past the one-hour timeframe in which interviews were conducted. Participants were provided with a specific time period within which to provide any necessary revisions to their collected and transcribed responses. Four participants responded to the member-checking invitation, and each of the four stated the electronic transcript was correct as presented and no modifications or additions were necessary. The three remaining participants did not respond to the request to verify or member-check his or her transcript. After the noted time period elapsed, since no corrections or responses were received from the remaining three participants, their recorded answers were utilized as were initially transcribed.

Following the member-checking phase of data reduction, all transcripts were uploaded into the data analyzation software, NVivo, in order to assist with coding, categorical grouping of

the data, and to assist with drawing connections between participants' responses. Once all transcripts were uploaded into NVivo, another open reading of each transcript occurred, from which the researcher selected a list of pertinent, novel, or relevant quotations within each transcript. Such quotations were then grouped into thematic categories, as defined by their content, and thematic category headings were labeled within NVivo as codes, or nodes, as NVivo labels them. Two additional close readings of each transcript ensued, in order to code additional responses underneath the categorical node heading with which it most closely aligned. Throughout this phase of the data discovery process, additional nodes headings were added, as dictated from repetitive and pertinent responses within the data. Additionally, researcher journal notes were continuously reviewed and bracketed in order to reduce researcher bias to the greatest degree possible. Where researcher bias was noted, corresponding data were re-coded underneath the more appropriate node category.

Throughout the data reduction process, NVivo was primarily used as a data repository and organizational tool, and it did not provide the only source of coding and data-based revelations. A list of 18 different nodes headers resulted from the initial phase of data discovery and thematic categorical grouping. The 18 distinct nodes headings were then grouped together into clusters of holistic meaning, based on the similarity and significance of their content. From the clusters of holistic meaning, repeated thematic ideas were reduced and noted from the culmination of each participant's lived experiences (Groenewald, 2004; Hycner, 1999; Van Manen, 2016). In doing so, the list of nodes headers was consolidated and re-coded from 18 separate nodes into six emergent themes (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Groenewald, 2004; Hycner, 1999; Van Manen, 2016). Once six emergent themes were established, an additional close reading of each thematic section was necessary in order to further synchronize and investigate patterns found

within the data. The six emergent themes and all nodes data within each respective thematic category were printed out and hand coding of data commenced. Researcher journal notes were additionally reviewed and compared to thematic categories in order to further bracket the researcher's epoche (Van Manen, 2016) and to ensure coding of data was commensurate with participant intent to the greatest degree possible. Following this phase of data reduction, the six emergent themes were further consolidated into two commonly noted essential themes that were prevalent throughout each participant's responses. Within the discovery of two essential themes, four incidental themes were also reduced from the data. The incidental thematic elements served to reinforce the participants' experiences with the essential themes (Van Manen, 2016).

Concurrent to the data reduction process, a special education practitioner who did not contribute to the study as a participant also reviewed and verified the data. Data review by a non-participant special education practitioner served to affirm the researcher's conclusions, as well as to allow for further bracketing, or minimization of personal assumptions or biases, when analyzing this study's results (Bowen, 2005; Creswell & Poth, 2017; Groenewald, 2004; Poggenpoel & Myburgh, 2005; Shenton, 2004; Stake, 1995). In order to ensure the data reviewer's credibility in the field of special education, she was chosen based upon her service in various special education positions for over twenty years, and because she possesses an earned doctoral degree in the field of special education.

Following each of the above noted phases of data discovery and reduction, the researcher narrated a cohesive response that assimilated information underneath each of the two essential thematic experiences. The chronicling of such narratives was specified within the findings sec-

tion of this research study and specifically attended to convergent opinions and responses in order to deduce critical agreements and the experiences common to the participants (Groenewald, 2004; Hycner, 1999).

Field notes reflection.

In order to delineate the researcher's epoche, a model set forth in Groenewald (2004) and Hycner (1999) was adapted and utilized within this study for chronicling and bracketing the researcher's thoughts and potential biases throughout the data collection cycle. Collection of field notes occurred immediately upon conclusion of each interview, and such notes were bracketed and further reduced after each review of interview transcripts.

Continual revisiting of bracketed responses was necessary in order to define the potential for additional biases or presupposition in data interpretation. Researcher field notes were assimilated into the study's findings in order to discuss the participants' responses with the researcher's impressions and bracketed reflections that were most closely interconnected with derived thematic categories of meaning (Groenewald, 2004; Hycner, 1999; Van Manen, 2016).

Findings

Findings discovered throughout the process of data reduction were coded into two categories of thematic significance, essential and incidental themes. Van Manen (2016) discussed the difference between essential and incidental themes within a hermeneutic phenomenology study. Essential themes are compromised from multiple incidental themes in order to provide a holistic interpretation of data. Essential themes are considered critical to the phenomenon being studied, so much so that without such themes the experience would cease to be relevant in that person's paradigm or within the context of the lived experience. Incidental themes can be considered as subsidiaries of the essential experiences a participant relays throughout the interview process;

however, such elements are merely supplementary to the essential experiences related to the phenomenon being studied (Van Manen, 2016). Data discovery for this study yielded two essential themes regarding declassification as a phenomenon: common understandings of the meaning of declassification and various concerns regarding the process and meaning of declassification. Incidental themes discovered throughout the data reduction phase served to compliment these essential themes.

Before discussing this study's findings, it is important to provide a frame of reference for the reader to understand the federally-guided regulations to which special education practitioners must adhere in regard to declassification from receiving special education services. Federal legislation governing special education states a well-defined process for initially determining a child to be a student with a disability, as well as a specific process for the tri-annual re-determination of the continued presence of a disability and the subsequent need for special education services (IDEIA, 2004). The tri-annual re-determination process provides a guiding framework from which special education practitioners can base their practices; however, a detailed focus on declassifying students from receiving special education services is not specifically defined within the law. The primary requirement for declassification noted within *IDEIA* (2004) is that a student must be evaluated prior to an IEP team recommending a change in that student's eligibility status (Education Rule, 2016). Though the intent of this study was to share current special education practitioners' experiences regarding declassifying students from receiving special education services, language of the legislative rule for a change in eligibility status provides a backdrop against which participants' responses should be considered.

Additionally, as noted in Table 1, interview participants were special education leaders with a vast array of experiences and several layers of responsibility; therefore, recording their

learned experiences was a sensitive and delicate activity due to the legal nature of their jobs and the personal portrayal of their experiences (Van Manen, 2016). According to current literature, special education leaders are consistently charged with a wide array of tasks and responsibilities, the primary of which being a depth of understanding of federal procedures for special education compliance (Harper, 2012; Shealey, Thomas, & Sparks, 2012; Slee, 2001). When considering the findings of this study, therefore, it is incumbent upon both the researcher and the reader to respect the participants' positions and multi-faceted roles of responsibility within their respective buildings, all of which contributed to their derived world views and the phenomenological value of this study (Groenewald, 2004; Hycner, 1999; Van Manen, 2016).

Common understandings.

Understanding the federal laws that guide special education is essential to successfully leading a special education department. Throughout the data discovery phase, several commonly held beliefs and understandings amongst the participants became pervasively prominent. As a result, an essential theme was noted regarding leaders' understandings of processes they believed should guide declassification. In addition, several incidental themes of common building-level procedures and consistencies in the profile characteristics of a potential declassification candidate were noted. These two incidental themes served to underscore the common threads of understanding in regard to the beliefs they held toward declassification within their respective buildings.

The first essential theme discovered within this study was a lack of clear understanding among the participants in regard to proper procedures when considering declassification as an option for students. Participants indicated a common understanding that two options exist within federal law for declassification: re-evaluation or revocation; however, confusion surrounding the

option of re-evaluation was prevalent among responses. According to participants, re-evaluation

for declassification entails an IEP team specifying the need for the student to participate in a psy-

chological re-evaluation in order to potentially be declassified from receiving special education

services. In regard to her understanding of re-evaluation for potential declassification, one partic-

ipant summed the totality of the guiding thoughts of several other participants when she stated

these procedures were "fuzzy" and "not clear cut." Though several of their responses indicated

an understanding of the declassification process as defined by *IDEIA* (2004), such as the need for

"academic testing," participants' comments additionally indicated their broad confusion as to

what specific processes should be followed when an IEP committee may be considering declassi-

fication. As such, responses that indicated misunderstandings in regard to proper procedures

seemed to be a commonly experienced phenomenon among participants.

The majority of participants in this study stated they understood some form of educa-

tional assessment through a psychological re-evaluation was necessary in order for a student to

be considered for declassification through an IEP team decision; however, they were unsure as to

what were the parameters of the re-evaluation. The leaders who had the most years of experience

seemed to be more definitive in their responses, with one participant almost verbatim quoting the

federal re-determination process (Education Rule, 2016) by stating an IEP team must "go

through the eligibility process;" however, she additionally noted "but the eligibility process can

be a records review of current functioning, work samples, observations." Despite their consist-

ently noted confusion with the declassification process, several participants cited their concern

with the procedure of a psychological re-evaluation being required before declassification could

be commenced, noting the framework provided within the law was not definitive enough for a

consistent practice from one building to another. One participant succinctly explained her confusion by stating she believed there was a great need for "…consistencies of what (the procedures) look like," because "there's no plan (for declassification), because there's no process."

As an incidental theme regarding lack of clear understanding with declassification procedures, respondents also noted that declassification procedures for specific categories, such as emotional behavior disorder (EBD) or other health impairment (OHI), were additionally confusing for practitioners. Several leaders noted that students being considered for declassification under these specific categories of special education eligibility should not follow the same procedures as a student served under the category of specific learning disability (SLD), because the regulations to become initially eligible for special education services for each of these categories are different, which serves to add more confusion to the declassification process. Participants noted it would be helpful if specific quantitative measures that an IEP team could consider for each exceptionality category were detailed within federal procedures, such as a specific math or reading score, or a standardized set of guidelines to help IEP teams navigate through the process of declassification.

Respondents noted a second procedural option for declassification exists, which is to revoke placement in special education. According to federal legislation, parents can revoke their consent for placement in special education at any time. Additionally, as students turn 18 years old, their educational rights transfer to them from their parents, giving them the authority, at that time or thereafter, to revoke consent for special education placement without parental consent (Education Rule, 2016). Several leaders explained their varied experiences with parents and older students choosing to revoke consent for special education placement as a declassification option. When the option of revocation for declassification was utilized, participants noted some

parents chose to revoke placement instead of forcing their child to participate in an updated psychological evaluation. This sentiment echoed several respondents' suggestions that allowing an IEP team to make a unilateral decision toward declassification without the need for an updated psychological evaluation would help many parents feel that their child had accomplished something, rather than the negative connotation of the word *revoke* seeming as if it was their only other option. Participating leaders explained their belief that many parents felt that revoking conveyed a sense of failure, as if their student had not accomplished anything while being served through special education for any length of time. Participants expressly noted the frustration many parents have felt when they believed their child was ready to be exited from special education, but they did not want their student to be required to participate in a new evaluation. Due to the constraints of ambiguous procedures within federal legislation (IDEIA, 2004), respondents believed parents may have felt stuck in special education with no viable way out.

Despite ambiguity in regard to federal procedures for declassification, multiple participants noted agreement with what they believed was the aim of special education services, "…we work to remove them from support, because that's what we're charged to do;" removal of support is "our big picture goal, it's supposed to be." Given this, several incidental themes were also noted among participants' common experiences with procedures in regard to declassification. Incidental themes included commonly utilized declassification procedures and consistent descriptions of scholastic profiles which indicated to participants that a student may be a potential candidate for declassification.

Common procedures.

Though special education leaders who took part in this study indicated experiencing confusion regarding procedures for declassifying a student from special education services, an incidental theme regarding common procedures they have implemented in their respective buildings in order to help IEP teams determine if a student would be a potential candidate for declassification was also noted. One participant explained, "…from an educational standpoint, we should only be looking at those kids who are really ready." In this respect, participants agreed that the overarching criteria for students who could be potential candidates for declassification was students who had "mastered what (their) deficit areas were." Among their common procedures were consulting with their school's psychologist, discussing all pertinent data points with a student's parents, reducing the level of direct services provided to the student, and consistently removing services before pursuing declassification.

Before discussing the potential for declassification within an IEP meeting, participants indicated a common procedure was to consult with the school psychologist prior to convening the IEP team. In their experiences, participating leaders indicated consulting with the school psychologist provided IEP case managers an opportunity to have the school psychologist explain the results of the student's previous evaluations in light of their current functioning so the case manager was more prepared to discuss these elements during an IEP meeting. Having the school psychologist attend the IEP meetings where declassification would potentially be discussed was also noted as an effective procedure to help parents and other IEP committee members equally understand the results of the previous evaluation as compared to the student's current functioning so the IEP team could make the most informed decision.

Additionally, leaders who participated in this study considered it critically important to have a conversation with a student's parents regarding all data points that indicated support for declassification before convening a full IEP team meeting. Participants stated they had encountered many parents throughout their careers who were unaware of declassification as an option or "the ultimate goal" of an IEP; therefore, they deemed it helpful to have a data-based conversation before convening a full IEP meeting so the parents were not caught off guard or surprised by the declassification discussion. Further, respondents noted they believed it was important for an IEP team, including the parents, to hear the psychologist's explanation of what assessments would be utilized if an IEP team deemed a re-evaluation was necessary at that time. Respondents felt that parents and students may not understand the evaluation process and that having the school psychologist present in the meeting was important to assuage concerns and to narrow the IEP team's focus of the re-evaluation process so they could make an informed decision when considering options and making recommendations.

For students being considered as potential candidates for declassification, a common experience participants noted was IEP teams recommending a reduction in the level of direct services provided to students by placing the student on the consultative level of LRE placement and tracking progress data for a least two semesters prior to an IEP team considering declassification any further. According to participants, the consultative model of LRE service provided a student with direct support from a special educator on a routine basis, but those services were provided outside of the classroom setting, and no direct services were offered in the classroom. Participants felt that the data collected from this type of reduction in services was critical to helping IEP teams make informed, data-driven decisions for students.

Additionally, several participants specifically noted they also recommended to their teachers to ensure the student was brought into the conversation of reduction in services, in addition to the parents, within the IEP meeting. Common practices specified were allowing the student to self-advocate as to which services he or she believed were required and then reducing services in that student's IEP to only those specific services, while monitoring progress over a period of no less than two semesters. Participants in this study stated their belief that if students were in high school and being considered for declassification, then it was paramount to have that student's voice represented within the declassification discussion. IDEIA (2004) requires students who are aged 14 and older to participate in their IEPs through development of a Transition Plan, but it does not prohibit IEP teams from including the student on all other portions of the IEP process. Respondents noted their belief that high school students could provide the IEP team with specific information regarding how much assistance they felt they required and whether or not they felt that they had sufficient strategies already in place to be successful. Leaders noted they believed the student voice in the process was oftentimes lost in the conversation, especially when the student was below the age of 18 and not legally able to make educational decisions on his or her own and without permission from his or her parents.

Given this study was focused on the high school level, participating leaders felt that working to reduce and remove support from students as they proved successful with lesser services was "what we're charged to do." Concentrating on what they termed as the "big picture" of special education, leaders commonly expressed their belief in the strategy to allow students the opportunity to be successful with reduced special education services before they graduated high school. Further consensus of participants' experiences indicated these leaders felt that if students were demonstrating their ability to maintain progress in middle school, then an IEP team should

consider giving students the benefit of services while they were moving from middle to high school, while closely monitoring potential declassification candidates and reducing accommodations by year two or three of high school if the student was capable and the teachers and IEP team felt the IEP process was moving in that direction. The majority of participants indicated that the high school level was the most appropriate level of schooling in which declassification should be explored, because, "…they might have been doing this 16 years or more, (and) learned some of the strategies on their own."

Consistencies in profiles.

An additional incidental theme of consistency in the scholastic profile of a student being considered as a candidate for declassification was noted among participants in this study. When reviewing a student's readiness level for potential declassification, participants provided a variety of identifiers that have been common in their experiences. In their experiences, these markers were considered as the primary identifiers that IEP teams have specified as pertinent and necessary characteristics of a student who may be considered a prospective candidate for declassification. A specifically germane quote that encapsulated the similar sentiments among all participants in regard such criteria was, "They've mastered everything. They're receiving no accommodations in the classroom. We have no justification or criteria for which to have them remain eligible." As such, common identifiers noted from participants were good grades, reduced level of accommodations and specialized instruction required for success, and specific time periods of academic success with reduced IEP services.

Among the most common identifiers noted by participants were good grades, a student who required very little support or classroom accommodations, and a student who did not require specialized instruction in order to progress in his or her respective classes. Mastery of IEP goals

and objectives was also noted as an identifier; however, respondents explained that the above-noted characteristics were symbiotic with mastering IEP goals and objectives so they did not consider mastery as a separate necessity. Put simply, respondents noted if an IEP team had determined appropriate the goals and objectives, as well as implemented appropriate accommodations and specialized instruction techniques, then mastery of the goals and objectives should be a by-product of success with these services.

Further, respondents indicated a common time frame to monitor a student's progress when a student was placed on the consultative model of LRE placement and had his or her IEP supports and services reduced. In their experiences, participants noted IEP teams have monitored a student on a reduced level of service for no less than one-to-two semesters, while documenting the student's progress both behaviorally and academically. Organization and maturity were also noted as primary data points IEP teams considered when tracking the progress of a student once he or she was placed on the consultative model of LRE placement and had his or her IEP services reduced. Leaders who took part in this study cautioned for the necessity to "look at the totality of reasons," or the "whole child" to determine when a reduction in services, as well as declassification, may be appropriate. One participant specifically stated, "…you (need to) have a full (IEP) team to (have)... a thorough discussion, about their accommodations and the goals and objectives, because when you're looking at placement, they might not need as much support." Another participant additionally noted this could be the case especially "…if they are using their coping skills that they have learned with many years of specialized instruction."

In summary, participating leaders noted their overall confusion with procedures detailing the necessity of a psychological re-evaluation prior to pursuing declassification; however, they noted their desire to see declassification promoted as the "big picture" for SWD learners who

were able to be removed from special education. Leaders additionally explained their experiences with parents and students choosing to circumvent the psychological re-evaluation process by revoking consent for placement within special education so the student could be declassified from receiving special education services without participating in the re-evaluation. Though common misunderstandings were experienced and noted among the leaders who participated in this study, participants also indicated they implemented common procedures and identified a generic scholastic profile within their respective buildings so IEP teams would have a framework to follow when data indicated declassification could be an option for an SWD learner. These commonly instituted procedures served as de facto guidelines in lieu of federal legislation providing a specific set of criteria for students to be considered as candidates for declassification. Leaders indicated they believed implementing these guiding recommendations for procedures and student profiles ensured their respective buildings had a process to follow so that students could be removed from special education when they earned that opportunity (see Figure 1).

Common concerns.

The second essential theme discovered through participants' experiences was multiple points of concern regarding declassification as an option for SWD learners. Additionally, respondents indicated incidental themes of concern from two perspectives: theirs, as building-level leaders, and from parents. Concerns from their perspectives as leaders primarily entailed frustration with their inability to spend sufficient time training their respective staffs on fundamental special education procedures so declassification could be pursued more often. Additionally, participants provided numerous examples of concern and apprehension from parents when declassification was discussed as an option for their respective children.

Leaders' concerns.

Throughout the interview process, pervasive commentary from several participants revealed a self-reflective desire to do more, as leaders, to ensure students who may potentially qualify to be declassified from special education were being identified and properly evaluated. Among these concerns were the time constraints they experienced, as leaders, to train their staffs on a variety of building-level procedures, including those surrounding declassification. To underscore this concern, several respondents noted their experiences with IEP teams choosing to keep similar services in a student's IEP year after year, without proper focus placed on a reduction of services in response to students' data-based successes. Responses indicating their desires to better train their staffs included, "(When) new teachers come in…there's so much to learn…" and, "You're so embedded into dealing with the actual document of the IEP and all it contains and mandates that it can be overwhelming to think about process." As leaders, they believed it was their role to train their staffs on proper procedures of not repeating the same IEP services from year to year; however, they iterated a strategic concern with their time being divided among so many tasks that it was difficult for them to provide necessary training in special education procedures.

Additionally, disconcerting experiences were noted regarding participating leaders' perceptions that some IEP teams did not seem to be working as if the "big picture" for SWD learners was to help them progress each year so they could potentially be declassified from requiring special education services. Several participating leaders termed this idea as "case manager apathy," more specifically defined as teachers who seemed to continually recommend similar services for successive annual IEP meetings for students, even when progress had been noted within

that student's IEP. Interestingly, multiple participating leaders used the same phrase, "big pic-

ture," to represent what they viewed as the goal of special education. Participants further noted

that training staff members in building-level declassification procedures would be easier if fed-

eral special education laws allowed for declassification simply through an IEP team decision in

lieu of a psychological re-evaluation; however, since the process requires a re-evaluation, leaders

continuously felt they were not providing proper training to their staffs to help them align with

the "big picture" as their guiding frame of thought.

Further, training IEP teams to ensure proper focus was placed on the specific needs of

each disability category, such as SLD, EBD, or OHI, was a perplexing task for participating

leaders. More specifically, several respondents described a concern with ensuring students were

initially made eligible under the correct eligibility category and served with appropriately aligned

special education services so that they had the best chance of success. For example, respondents

indicated students who were made eligible under the category of EBD may not require the same

interventions as students who were served under the category of SLD. Pervasive thoughts among

participating leaders indicated their belief that students who were initially made eligible under

the appropriate eligibility category and were able to receive specifically designed accommoda-

tions and instructional supports aligned to that category, would potentially be able to be declassi-

fied; however, leaders reiterated this idea required continual training and focus in order to be

achieved.

In conjunction with their concern of ensuring appropriate eligibility categories were ap-

plied, almost all respondents noted their belief in recommending additional evaluations at an ap-

propriate time in a student's educational career. Participants indicated they did not want their

staffs to simply wait until students were potential candidates for declassification before IEP

teams recommended an updated evaluation. Though they cautioned against re-evaluating students at the change of schooling levels, they did note that students who entered high school with an evaluation that was conducted in their elementary years of schooling were at risk of being improperly served. Instead, several leaders advocated for students to be re-evaluated at each level, elementary, middle, and high, so that IEP teams could utilized updated data to make recommendations for students.

Furthering this line of thought, the majority of respondents concluded their belief that students should be re-evaluated by the school psychologist before they reached high school so that proper high school services and placement could be provided prior to students exiting the K-12 education system. Citing the potential for students to be re-evaluated in high school and then no longer qualify for any special education supports, many respondents stated they do not regularly recommend students for an evaluation in the high school setting; although, the vast majority of respondents additionally concluded their belief that high school was the most appropriate level for a student to be declassified if a psychological evaluation indicated special education supports were no longer required for that student to progress educationally.

Parents' concerns.

In addition to the incidental theme of their concerns as leaders of special education departments, an additional incidental theme was noted by participants indicating prevalent concerns in regard to their interactions with parents when declassification was discussed as part of the IEP process. Respondents described the common experiences of parents responding in one of two distinct manners: nervous support for the declassification process or vehement opposition to the potential of removal of special education services.

Overall, parents who were supportive, albeit many apprehensively so, were noted to be receptive to the declassification conversation, but concerned with what their student's education would look like without special education support or not wanting their child to have to participate in a new evaluation in order to be declassified. One participant summed up the extent to which she believed parents were apprehensive about their student potentially being declassified:

"…it tends to be more of a nerve issue. I would liken it to a kid going to kindergarten for the first time or transition from elementary to middle school. It's just uncomfortable for them. Particularly for those who've had those services for some time. It's just uncomfortable to think about it."

In these instances, leaders noted they trained their staffs to explain to parents and students that students who had progressed to the level of potential declassification were already being successful with minimal support, and, therefore, had consistently displayed maturity and the ability to succeed without special education services. Participation in a new evaluation was also noted to be a concern among some parents; however, leaders indicated in these instances they explained to parents that a new evaluation should be viewed as a culminating solidification of that student's success throughout his or her years of being served in special education. In either case, leaders explained they worked with parents and students to ease the stress of removing special education services by relying on established relationships with those parents and students to ensure them that the student no longer required special education services. Several leaders additionally noted they encouraged parents and students to view declassification as a type of graduation that was worthy of being praised and celebrated.

Though some parents were noted by participants to apprehensively support declassification, one leader summarized parents who opposed declassification at the high school level as being "afraid to let the services go," or that these parents had a "fear of the unknown." Multiple leaders additionally noted they had experienced this type of parental opposition primarily at the high school level. In their experiences, parental aversion to declassification seemed to be primarily due to trepidation surrounding whether or not the child would be able to continue to demonstrate progress if special education support was removed. To assuage parental fears, leaders again noted they relied on previously established relationships to work with parents and students to explain that declassification should not be viewed as losing the community support of special education, but as gaining independence as evidenced by the student's consistent achievements leading up to declassification.

An additionally pervasive experience for participants was parents asking "What if…" questions when the declassification conversation was initially introduced. Examples of such questions were parents asking, "What if there were changes in medication?," or "What if we didn't do extra tutoring after school?" or "What if they need support in college?" Several respondents noted these particular concerns most often in regard to students served under the category of OHI for conditions such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). Participants' conclusions were that parents were looking at a scenario based on fear of losing services, instead of focusing on what the students had accomplished or could potentially accomplish if he or she was given more independence, as well as celebrating declassification as a milestone that indicated tremendous growth and success for the student.

In addition to the above concerns, respondents noted parents who were more adamantly opposed to the declassification conversation also had several common viewpoints:

- Their child still required special education services;

- Those services were necessary so their child could receive accommodations on tests, such as the Scholastic Achievement Test (SAT);

- They did not want to provide consent for a new evaluation;

- Specific concern over the child moving from one level to another without the benefit of special education support.

Leaders stated they, as well as their teachers, have reported experiencing stress in relation to parents who proclaimed one or more of these reasons for opposition to the declassification conversation. In these situations, declassification became more of a point of contention than a source of pride in a student's achievements, even when IEP data supported the student's capability for decreased amount of special education services required to progress educationally.

As reported by participants, some parents were not receptive to the declassification conversation because they did not "want to give up the label," because of the extra supports special education provided, as well as the possibility for those supports continuing into future settings, such as college or post-secondary environments. In these instances, leaders reported the need for a difficult conversation with parents about IEP services through *IDEIA* (2004) terminating when a student officially graduates from high school with a diploma or ages out of the secondary education system, as well as their experiences that colleges do not always accept students' IEP accommodations and transfer them into the post-secondary setting. For these reasons, participants believed it was their duty to help prepare students to become as independent as possible by appropriately reducing special education services before they exited the secondary education system.

Overall, respondents reported the need for IEP teams to educate parents on the potential of declassification and to explain that the goal, or "big picture," of special education should be to improve a student's level of independence and self-advocacy so that the supports could be integrated and generalized into a student's educational strategies toolbox. Additionally, participants reported a desire to help parents see what the future could look like for their students without special education services, and whether or not the student's life would be greatly impacted if they were already receiving minimal services in high school.

In summary, leaders proposed a solution to their consistent feeling of not having enough time to properly train their staffs to view declassification as the goal of an IEP, as well as a potential solution to alleviate parental anxiety and disagreement with declassification. In their views, adding declassification as a topic of discussion at every annual IEP meeting, for every student, whether or not it was factually being considered, would serve to alert their respective staffs to consistently view an IEP as a tool for marking progress and declassification being the ultimate goal. Additionally, leaders indicated implementing this additional talking point within annual IEP meetings would potentially also serve to alleviate parental apprehension, because the declassification discussion would become a procedural norm, instead of an outlier. Though participants indicated their belief that not all students who were served through special education may be candidates for declassification, such as learners served through the intellectual disabilities (ID) categories, for example. However, participants noted they believed declassification would be pursued more often for SWD learners who *were* potential candidates for declassification if IEP teams discussed this notion from the initial inception of eligibility (see Figure 2).
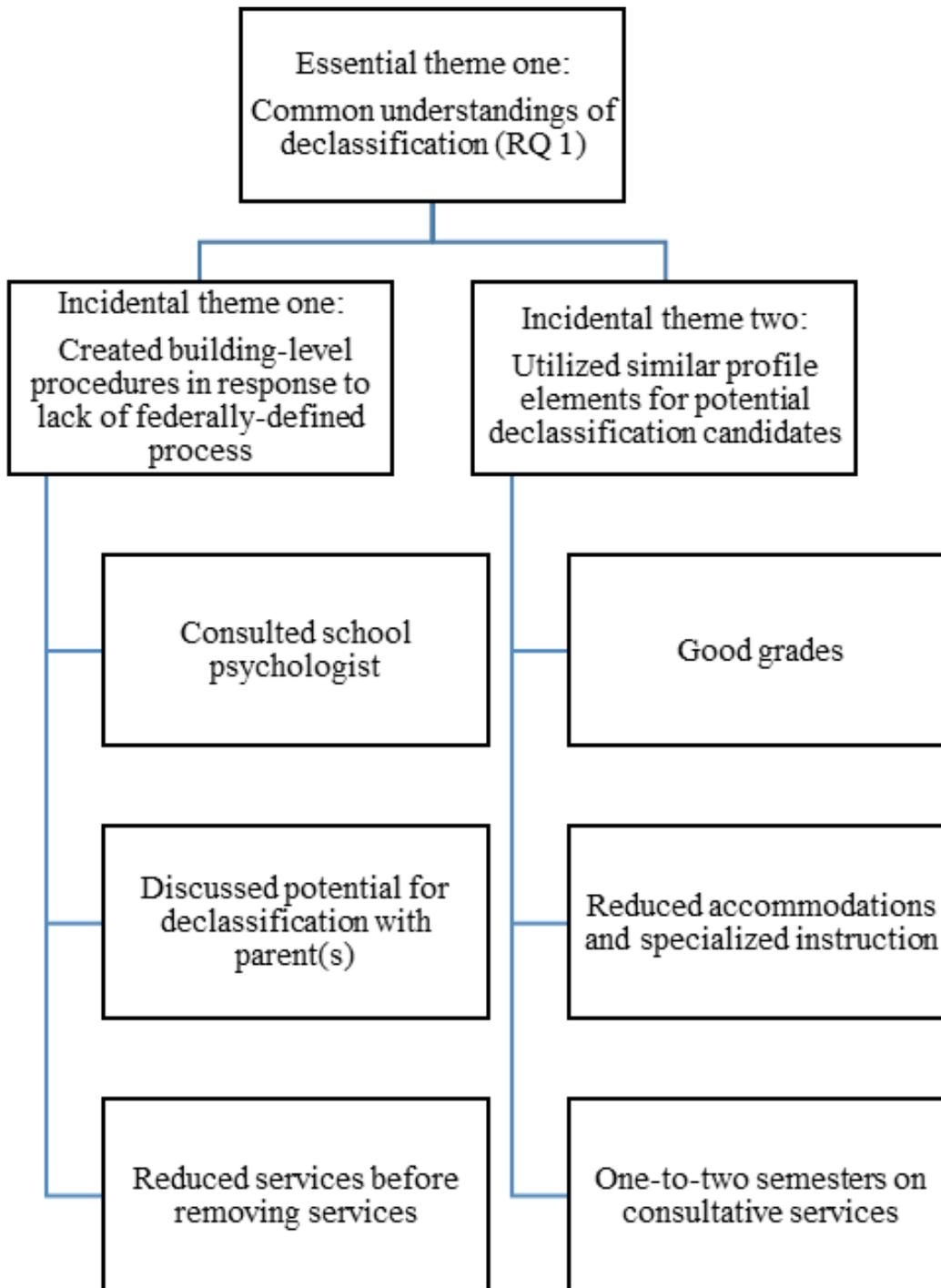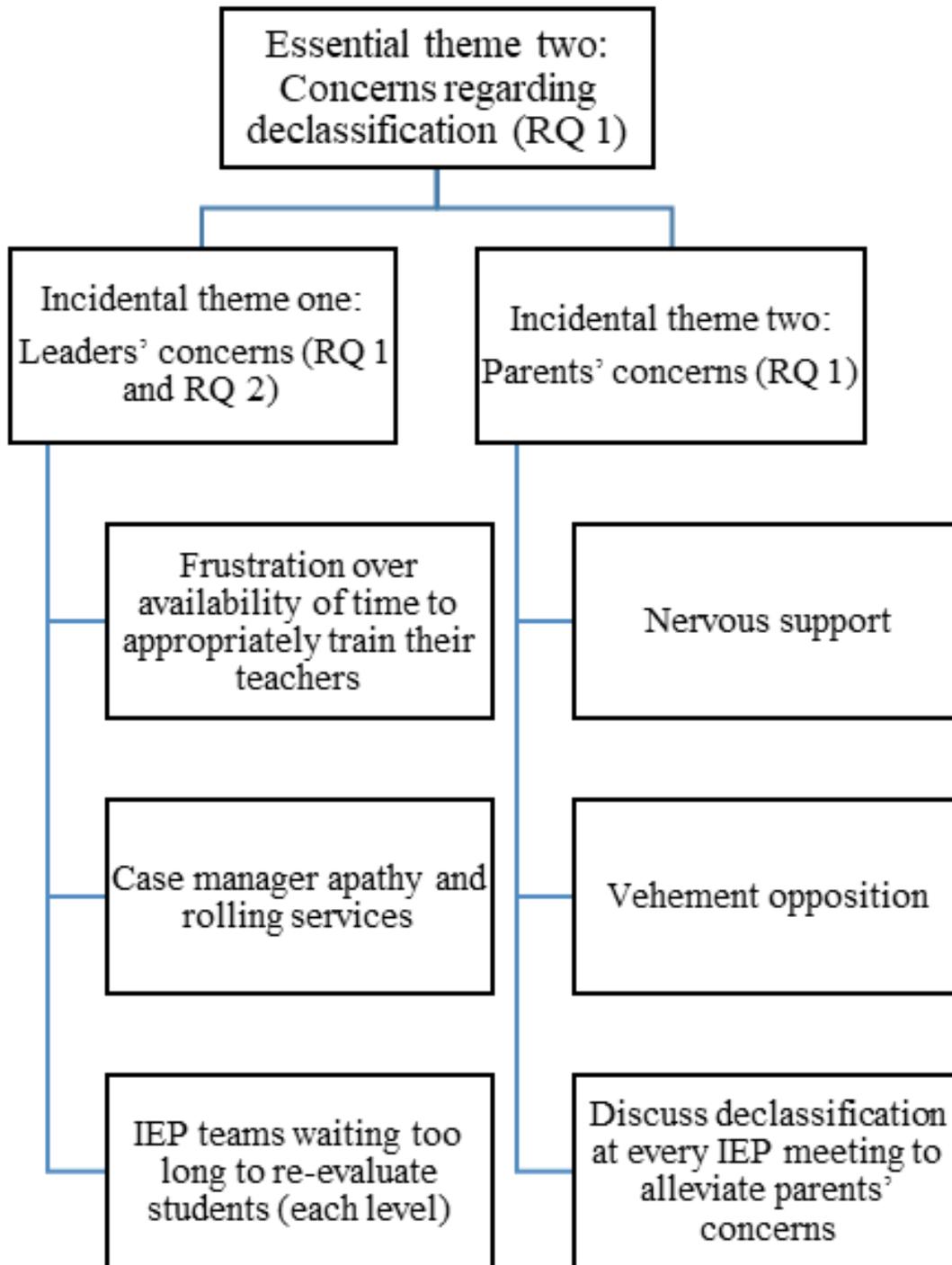
Figure 1. Summary of essential theme one.

Figure 2. Summary of essential theme two.

Discussion.

Participants within this study provided strikingly similar responses to most interview questions, which indicated common experiences and application of special education procedures. Though each participant's individual stories and narrative of experiences were noteworthy and provided inspiring examples of care and dedication, synchronicity was revealed through participants' responses. This harmonization, in itself, weaves a phenomenological response of common experiences despite the participants' different backgrounds and years of experience in special education (Groenewald, 2004). The understated idea of how much benefit a student was receiving from his or her IEP (Waterstone, 2017) was a commonly expressed sentiment throughout many participant responses, which further indicated leaders were each constantly striving to improve the educational experience for students with disabilities within their buildings.

In essence, one leader stated a succinct description of belief among the participants that "…declassification would be not necessarily saying that their disability has gone away. Just that they no longer require the specialized instructional support in order for them to access education, because they have learned how to manage it themselves." The following section describes a synchronization of currently available literature with this study's participants' responses in regard to their understandings of federal procedures and their building-level responses to the ambiguity within the law in regard to declassification. Though specific studies are not widely available that focus on the ambiguity within federal law in regard to declassification, a description of noted practitioners' concerns with respect to declassification procedures is also discussed in light of similarly available literature.

Carlson and Parshall (1996) explained that special education leaders are often faced with a daunting set of responsibilities, but specifically noted that special education leaders should focus on declassification practices within their buildings. Among the special education leadership participants in the current study, a common response in regard to declassification was the desire to place emphasis on this concept but confusion with the specific steps of the process to ensure compliance with federal laws. One participant noted her frustration with ambiguity within current special education legislation by saying, "I think when it comes to the legislation, a law or a bill can have a good intent. And then…it becomes almost so overprotective or it loses its intent to where it prevents you from doing other things." This insightful response can be traced to previous legislators' intentions to create regulations for SWD learners to have equal access to public education (Congressional Research Service, 1985); however, leaders in current practice have become frustrated by the lack of clarity within federal regulations. For example, respondents within this study indicated their understanding that students were required to be re-evaluated before declassification could be pursued; however, several participants indicated confusion as to the depth that evaluation was required to entail.

Bowen and Rude (2006) discussed the historical reauthorizations of federal legislation for SWD learners and noted that each successive set of federal guidelines has served to improve educational conditions for students with disabilities; however, practitioners within this study indicated their continued frustration with the lack of explicit federal guidelines for declassification. More specifically, participants in this study repeatedly expressed frustration with their understanding of federal procedures requiring a new psychological evaluation before declassification could be considered by an IEP team, and several respondents discussed their experiences with some parents being equally frustrated with these federal procedures. Participants' suggestion to

clarify confusion found within the law was to allow IEP teams to recommend declassification based on available data, but without the requirement for a psychological re-evaluation. From the viewpoint of the practitioners who participated in this study, this adaptation would greatly increase their ability to pursue declassification more often for students who demonstrate such readiness.

Despite ambiguously stated federal procedures, leaders who participated in this study explained they trained their respective staffs on general guidelines and scholastic profiles that would indicate a student may be a candidate for declassification. Though their building-level procedures were not specifically stated within codes of federal regulations for SWD learners, the guidelines they utilized were anchored in the standard of helping students to progress educationally and receive maximum benefit from their IEPs (Waterstone, 2017). In essence, each of these leaders framed their own tenets for declassification and bordered their aims in helping students become independent learners who could be successful without the support of special education. One of their noted indicators of success was a student's classroom grades. The results of Carlson and Parshall (1996) found similar sentiments among high school practitioners in regard to indicators of whether or not a student was in need of special education services. In this study, high school general education teachers and counselors stated they believed classroom grades were an important gauge of how well a student would perform if special education services were removed (Carlson & Parshall, 1996).

Further, despite having generic procedures in place, participants within this study expressed their continued concern with their abilities, as leaders, to properly train their respective staffs on these procedures, as well as other fundamental processes for special education practitioners. In their views, which aligned with the sentiments of Carlson and Parshall (1996) and

Harper (2012), special education leaders are tasked with so many diverse responsibilities that training on fundamental elements of special education practices are often difficult to establish and maintain, much less training on a concept such as declassification. Additionally, respondents indicated their belief that lack of training contributed to case managers who seemed apathetic to declassification being the "big picture" for students served through special education, because teachers' time was focused on ensuring only basic compliance with IEP procedures instead of stepping back to view the more broad notion that a student's progress should lead them toward eventual declassification.

Additionally, given the aims of hermeneutical phenomenology to search for meaning within a phenomena (Van Manen, 2016), multiple participants underscored their personal and guiding definition of declassification as the ultimate goal, or "big picture," of special education. This meaningful sentiment provides further evidence of the need for clarity of federal special education procedures regarding declassification, as well as the need for special education leaders to have the time to train their respective staffs on all elements of federal law. Put simply, if special education leaders are attempting to guide their staffs toward understanding maximum IEP benefit (Waterstone, 2017), specifically to the degree of declassification, then it behooves federal legislation to follow that same path of meaning and underscored importance.

Additional concerns noted by respondents in this study were in regard to experiences with parents when declassification was discussed as an option for their respective students. Though some parents seemed supportive of the declassification conversation and the ensuing process, other parents were noted to have been afraid of how their students would perform if the special education services their student had for an extended amount of time were suddenly removed. A pattern of experiences among participants indicated their perception was that parents,

at times, thought their student needed more support than the school actually had academic and progress data to support. Even after multiple data points were discussed with parents, common responses from participants indicated an overall sense of fear, trepidation, or refusal from some parents to consider declassification as a viable option for their student. Multiple respondents, however, noted the need to involve high-school aged students in the declassification conversation so that their opinions were considered in addition to their parents' opinions. Carlson and Reavey (2000) indicated similar conclusions, and noted the student's voice should be considered with equal weight when considering declassification. In their findings, Carlson and Reavey (2000) noted that high school students were often the ones who initiated declassification, not the school or the parents, because they believed they could be successful without special education services. Despite the parental concerns or fears noted by participants within the current study, several leaders indicated they believed the student's voice in the declassification conversation should be explicitly considered. These sentiments, therefore, should be considered along with the results of Carlson and Reavey (2000).

Additionally, an important phenomenological assertion can be derived from the participants' perspectives of parental concerns, as noted within their experiences. Respondents consistently noted specific instances of parental agreement or disagreement with the idea of declassification, and also noted how those parental responses shaped their response to the situation, as a leader. As a result, the leaders' reactions to a situation of declassification were shaped by the actions of the parents. These interactions provided the leaders with a new avenue from which to base all future interactions (McPhail, 1995) with that parent and toward which paths they guided that child, whether toward declassification or away from it. This notion is a powerfully critical

example of how leaders' actions can be shaped, not by federal legislation, but by their experiences (Van Manen, 2016).

As a means of addressing their insecurities regarding lack of time to train their staffs, as well as a means of potentially lessening parental fear and opposition to declassification, participants noted their desire to make declassification a consistent talking point within all IEP meetings, beginning at initial eligibility. This idea has not been widely reported within other currently available studies; however, it bears consideration in light of the experiences of this study's participants. In their estimation, having the declassification conversation far in advance of it being an actual reality for students would frame the role of special education as a means to a successful end for all students, instead of a final academic resting place. The proposed inclusion of declassification as a talking point within IEP meetings further underscored participants' frustration with the lack of depth in federal guidelines regarding declassification.

In summary, using the tenets of the hermeneutic phenomenological methodology, the primary aims of this study were to add to the body of available literature regarding declassification from special education services through exploration of the lived experiences of high school special education leaders, specifically high school special education administrators and department chairs. The perspectives of these specific leaders are critical to the declassification conversations, because they represent those who were charged with ensuring local school compliance with federal legislative requirements for SWD learners, as well as the level of schooling which is the last stage for students to receive special education services under *IDEIA* (2004). Further, hermeneutical phenomenology research seeks to understand a phenomena "from the inside" (Van Manen, 2016, p. 8), rather than from merely an intellectual standpoint of depth (Van Manen, 2016). As such, a guidepost of this study was to explore and represent through text the lived experiences of

special education practitioners who were most likely to have had experiences regarding the phenomena of declassification, and, therefore, were best suited to construct and extrapolate meaning (Van Manen, 2016) of declassification from their experiences. Further, understanding that our experiences shape our frame of reference and actions, this study brings value to current special education practitioners by providing a sample of special education leaders and their experiences in a field that is bordered by an extensive set of federal rules (Groenewald, 2004; Hycner, 1999; IDEIA, 2004). Given the repeated sentiments of respondents who participated in this study, a common beliefs regarding the meaning of declassification can be textualized (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Van Manen, 2016), as well as the need for additional clarification of federal procedures.

Implications.

The federal guidelines for initial eligibility into special education are specifically detailed within *IDEIA* (2004). General guidelines for initial eligibility are provided, as well as more specific procedural requirements based on the exceptionality category being explored by the IEP team. However, the guidelines for a change in eligibility status, such as from eligible to not eligible, are significantly less specific, and do not detail specific procedural guidelines for different disability categories (Education Rule, 2016). This lack of procedural specificity for declassification has proven to be a stumbling block for practitioners and leaders, alike, as noted by participants within this study. As such, several policy and practical implications should be considered from this study's results.

Policy implications.

Based on their broad experiences in special education, leaders who participated in this study indicated the need for specific changes that would assist IEP teams and special education practitioners when working with students and families toward declassification. Suggestions can

be categorized by proposed changes that would require federal law adjustments, including implications based on the recent Supreme Court decision in the *Endrew F.* case, and proposed changes that could be implemented on the local district level.

One of the frustrations respondents noted regarding the currently ambiguous legislative process for declassification was that IEP teams should be allowed to make the decision to declassify a student from receiving special education services without the requirement for an additional psychological evaluation. Their suggestion was to allow an IEP team this unilateral authority when sufficient raw data, which included a pattern of success with reduced services and maintenance of progress over time, was present. Participants also noted their belief that the re-evaluation process was cumbersome and lengthy. They further noted their belief that requiring a psychological re-evaluation before declassification could be fully pursued would reduce the number of students who could potentially be declassified.

Further recommendation for policy changes in the declassification process were noted by respondents stating they would like to have definitive steps for pursuing declassification by each specific category of special education eligibility. Multiple participants noted that without definitive steps for declassification by each exceptionality category, the procedures for declassification could become confusingly subjective within different buildings. Both of the above suggestions, however, would require federal law (IDEIA, 2004) to be updated to include more specificity in the process for determining a change in eligibility status, such as declassification. Additionally, policy implications exist in light of the Supreme Court's 2017 ruling in the *Endrew F.* decision. Given the new standard of FAPE detailed in the *Endrew F.* decision (Waterstone, 2017), declassification has the potential to become a more consistent practice as school districts place greater emphasis on student growth and evidence of progress.

Practical implications.

In their work regarding organizational structures, Bolman and Deal (2008) discussed the structural frame of an organization as being the critical skeleton from which all elements of the organization spring. Proper structure ensures not only seamless alignment between the organization and the organisms which comprise the organization, but it also allows for procedural efficiency and consistency. The overarching goal of structure within an organization is to align people and systems into their most natural roles so both can perform at maximum capacity (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Consistent with the idea of the necessity for structural alignment for maximum effectiveness, multiple respondents within this study stated they would like to see several new IEP procedures put into place within their respective buildings and school districts. In essence, their views entail adding new procedures into previously established IEP meeting structures, which would allow them to help remind staff and parents to focus on declassification as the "big picture" goal for students served within special education.

Similar to their conversation surrounding an organization's structural needs, Bolman and Deal (2008) also discussed symbols within an organization as allegorical examples of motivation from which workers could draw. This same idea of the power of symbols can be applied to an IEP team and the declassification discussion. Symbols within an organization are meant to stir emotions and provide a reference point in which all parties can agree and rally around. Multiple participants within this study noted the need to add a new element of structure to IEP meetings by discussing the idea of declassification with parents and students at every annual IEP meeting. In their view, framing IEP meetings through the symbolic focal point of declassification being the "big picture" could become a powerful point of unification and alignment of purpose be-

tween the parents, the student, and the school. This aim could be accomplished by school districts adding declassification as a talking point in the transition section of each IEP meeting. One avenue students at the high school level participate in their IEP meetings is by creating and revising a transition plan that details specifics about their goals for after they leave the secondary school setting (Education Rule, 2016). Adding a talking point within the transition planning section that discusses declassification and each student's current progress toward achieving that aim would be an informal means by which IEP teams could address declassification at each IEP meeting.

Additionally, participating leaders noted a concern regarding the need for specific profile characteristics for declassification within each eligibility category. A practical suggestion to address this concern would be for a school district to assemble a checklist of suggested assessment measures and applicable scores as a guide for IEP teams to utilize when discussing declassification at IEP meetings. Participants suggested compiling a scale of quantitative measures, such as reading inventory scores, math inventory scores, standardized test scores, grade ranges, and cognitive measure scores that could be utilized by IEP teams as a basis from which to begin conversations regarding progress toward potential declassification. This checklist, however, would simply be based in practical suggestions and not guided by federal policy. Respondents noted the combination of discussing declassification at each IEP meeting, along with a district-provided set of quantitative guidelines for applicability of declassification, would accomplish the purpose of ensuring declassification could become a focal point as the end goal for SWD leaners who are able to achieve that aim. If these suggestions were implemented within a district, then building-level special education leaders could incorporate these practices into their departmental expectations, as well.

Finally, several participants in this study indicated their belief that students should participate in an educational re-evaluation before beginning high school. A practical suggestion to address this concern would be for school districts to require a re-evaluation for all SWD learners after they complete the level in which they were initially made eligible for special education services. For example, if a student was initially made eligible for special education services in elementary school, then that student would be psychologically re-evaluated before he or she attended middle school, or before he or she attended high school if initial eligibility was established in middle school. Though this suggestion may place additional burdens on school psychologists to complete more evaluations within a given school year, the procedure of initiating a new psychological evaluation at every level of schooling could be implemented as a district procedure and would not require a change in *IDEIA* (2004) regulations.

Limitations.

Inherent within the phenomenological methodology are specific limitations surrounding generalizability of results for differing contexts other than the context represented within the study (Creswell & Poth, 2017; Hycner, 1999). In addition to generalizability, limitations relative to this study were the amount of time each participant was interviewed in order to describe their lived experiences (Van Manen, 2016), as well as the potential for researcher bias (Van Manen, 2016). Findings should be interpreted as representative of the experiences of these seven leaders, and not necessarily as representative of and applicable to the experience of all special education leaders as a result of these potential limitations.

Given this study represented the experiences of seven special education leaders from one school district within the Southern part of the United States, applicability of results to other leaders in different locations and school districts may be limited. Additionally, though the leaders

who participated in this study had previously held other positions within the field of special education, such as paraprofessional, teacher, or speech and language pathologist, leaders described their experiences relative to their individual careers and communicated these stories in light of their personalized world views (Van Manen, 2016).

An additional limitation to this study was the amount of time each participant was able to participate in the interview process. In order to have access to a variety of participants across multiple buildings, interviews were limited to one hour each. Given this time constraint, each participant was unable to provide a lengthier response regarding his or her lived experiences of declassifying students from receiving special education services. Though the participants were able to provide a breadth of examples regarding their respective experiences with declassification, the standard of depth in phenomenological research was not explored to its maximized potential, and, therefore, could be considered a limitation to providing richer and deeper explications of each participant's respective experiences (Van Manen, 2016).

Though data were collected to the point of redundancy and saturation, the researcher attempted to establish maximum rapport with participants to cultivate an environment where the respondent felt comfortable sharing his or her experiences to whatever depth was possible. This aided in reducing the effect of the timeframe limitation. Reflections from researcher field notes regarding the time constraint of the interview process indicated overall smooth interview sessions. Giving participants the option to choose a face-to-face or over the phone interviews seemed to be a helpful accommodation, because the majority of participants chose the phone option. As a result, the researcher and interviewee were essentially strangers via an innocuous phone call; however, researcher field notes indicated this element greatly added to the level of

trust established and rapport for honest and thoughtful responses. Further, as indicated in transcripts, participants who participated via phone conversation often provided additional depth of explanation to their responses without prompting from the researcher. This indicated a level of openness, comfortability, and trust given to the researcher, which minimized the limitation of time constraint.

The potential for researcher bias also added to the limitations of this study. This limitation was noted and bracketed throughout the data collection and phenomenological discovery phases of research. Given the researcher was familiar with the position of special education administrator, a temptation to provide personal anecdotes or assume intent was prevalent. Although, some anecdotal references offered by the researcher within interviews served a purpose of providing context for a question or supporting rapport, multiple examples of bracketed researcher field notes indicated misinterpretation of responses from several participants because of biases due to assumptions relative to personal experiences. In multiple instances, the researcher's initial interpretation of a participant's response was opposite of what the participant intended, and had to be clarified by the participant after the researcher reiterated initial understanding of the response.

Further, as indicated by the researcher's bracketing of field notes, the most difficult task throughout the entire data collection phase was trying to not to superimpose comments or meanings onto the responses of the participants or cut the participants off mid-sentence with an overlay of the researcher's assumptions. The researcher bracketed multiple instances regarding difficulty attempting to withhold judgement of participants' responses and simply reporting statements as the participants offered them. Multiple instances were cited in the researcher's field

notes with presumptive rebuttals to participants' comments or the researcher's opinion of what would prove her point as correct in comparison to participant's noted opinion as he or she stated.

Additionally, several interview questions elicited more bracketed personal responses than others from the researcher. More specifically, questions surrounding participants' understandings of declassification rules and procedures were difficult to not respond to than questions regarding what procedures were in place in the participants' respective buildings. Further, multiple participants stated they were confused by what they understood the declassification procedures to be, which was an important piece noted in the problem background of this study; therefore, the researcher found it difficult to not state vehement agreement with this notion while documenting the participant's comments and experiences.

Multiple participants noted their concern with administering an evaluation which could potentially lead to declassification if it would cause a student to lose special education services or if it caused a disagreement between the parents and the local school. The researcher's epoche was particularly prevalent in regard to these comments, given her perceived understanding of federal legislation and parameters of eligibility qualifications. More specifically, if students no longer qualified for special education as determined by federal categorical regulations, then an IEP team should not subvert the declassification process or continue to hold that child as a student with a disability longer than necessary.

Finally, researcher field notes indicated repeated verbal over-agreement during the interview process with participants who noted that some students who were initially identified for special education services in elementary school had not been re-evaluated since being served in that level. Bracketed responses indicated the researcher's questions surrounding how those stu-

dents were still being served as if they not had not shown any growth to warrant a new evaluation since their elementary years. Researcher field notes indicated vehement desire to assert the researcher's own experiences with this phenomena instead of simply documenting the participants' experiences as they were detailed and dictated.

Given these potential limitations, inability for generalization of results, time constraints during the interview process, and potential for researcher bias, this study's results should be considered in light of these limitations. Additionally, future research in the area of special education declassification should strive to reduce the impact of similar limitations.

Suggestions for future research.

Based on this study's limitations, a primary suggestion for future research would be to replicate this study in different parts of the United States in order to determine the level of similarity and continuity of experiences between special education practitioners in other locations. Further, due to the gap in available literature regarding declassification at the high school level, and the notion that this study could only address a small portion of that gap, future studies that describe the experiences of other practitioners, such as teachers or school psychologists, as well as parents' perspectives, would also be beneficial to the field of special education research.

Additionally, future research that explores special education leaders' experiences with declassification to a greater degree of depth would also be beneficial to the field of special education research. Removing the one-hour time constraint and conducting interviews over a longer period of time and multiple sessions would allow participants to detail a more rich description of their lived experiences (Van Manen, 2016).

In regard to a different angle not addressed within this study, potential future research regarding the impact on funding for schools when students are declassified would also be beneficial for school districts. Since 1966, school districts who provided special education services received additional federal monies in order to provide FAPE for SWD learners (Aron & Lopest, 2012; Congressional Research Service, 1985; Esteves & Rao, 2008). Due to the additional monies provided to school districts who serve students labeled as SWD, an important piece of the eligibility and declassification conversation surrounds funding, because a district who receives funding for such students would receive fewer federal dollars if many students were declassified from receiving special education services. Though not the focus of this study, the funding element could be considered a counter-argument to the declassification conversation by some practitioners; however, the value of restoration of dignity from removal of the label of *disabled* (Atkins, 2016; Banks, 2017) should be considered a priceless endeavor and worthy of further research.

Social justice.

Though not the focus of this study, the historical fundamental ideals of providing SWD learners equality in the educational setting (Congressional Research Service, 1985) intersects cohesively with the modern movement toward social justice; therefore, future research that intertwines the ideals of social justice with special education practices would be beneficial to the field of special education research.

Social justice theory includes a focus on marginalized groups within society (Liasidou & Svensson, 2014; Theoharis, 2007), and, as such, includes those served through special education (Atkins, 2016; Shyman, 2015). Further, social justice tenets seek to uncover the oppression of marginalized groups and the necessity of restoring social dignity to these groups (Atkins, 2016;

Danforth, 2006; Danforth & Rhodes, 1987; Shyman, 2015; Toson, Burrello, & Knollman, 2013).

When a student is made eligible for special education, a label of *disabled* is instantly placed upon

that student, and this label has the ability to impact his or her social dignity (Atkins, 2016;

Banks, 2017). Declassification from receiving special education services, in essence, entails the

removal of such a label, and, therefore, should be considered a socially just outcome for students

who are served under the label of *disabled* for any period of time (Anastasiou et al., 2016;

Danforth, 2006; Danforth & Rhodes, 1987; Shyman, 2015; Theoharis, 2007), as well as a valua-

ble topic for future special education research.

Conclusion

Students with disabilities are required to have their annual progress examined, as well as

a tri-annual re-determination by an IEP team of the continued need for special education services

(Education, 2016). Ensuring an in-depth examination of progress by means of a tri-annual re-

evaluation is needed so that adjustments to IEP services can be made (Ysseldyke & Bielinski,

2002) and the idea of declassification consistently remain at the forefront of practitioners' and

special education leaders' guiding thoughts.

As Bielinski and Ysseldyke (2000) noted, "…disability status is dynamic…," (p. 2); how-

ever, currently available literature does not seem to support this as the prevailing belief or prac-

tice among special education practitioners and leaders. This phenomenological study, therefore,

was needed in order to explore this area of thought and to discover special education leaders'

perspectives on the subject of declassification. Leaders who participated in this study repeatedly

expressed their surety that special education teachers were trying their best to work on behalf of

students with special needs, but they were in need of guidance about how to pursue declassifica-

tion with fidelity to both federal legislation and the most appropriate outcomes for students. As a

result, more clear and concise policies at both the federal and local levels, participants believed, would assist families and IEP teams in guiding more productive conversations toward receiving maximum benefit from placement within special education.

REFERENCES

Anastasiou, D., Kauffman, J. M., & Michail, D. (2016). Disability in multicultural theory: Conceptual and social justice issues. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies, 27*(1), 3-12.

Atkins, L. (2016). Dis(en)abled: Legitimating discriminatory practice in the name of inclusion? *British Journal of Special Education, 43*(1), 6-21.

Banks, J. (2017). "These people are never going to stop labeling me": Educational experiences of african american male students labeled with learning disabilities. *Equity and Excellence in Education, 50*(1), 96-107.

Bielinski, J., Ysseldyke, J. E., National Association of State Directors of Special Education, A. V., National Center on Educational Outcomes, M. M., & Council of Chief State School Officers, W. D. (2000). Interpreting trends in the performance of special education students. Technical Report 27.

Bolman, L. G. & Deal, T. E. (2008). Reframing organizations: Artistry, choice and leadership (5th ed.). San Francisco: Josey-Bass.

Bowen, S. K., & Rude, H. A. (2006). Assessment and students with disabilities: Issues and challenges with educational reform. *Rural Special Education Quarterly, 25*(3), 24-30.

Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, 347 U. S. 483 (1954).

Carlson, E. & Parshall, L. (1996). Academic, social, and behavioral adjustment for students declassified from special education. *Exceptional Children, 63*, 89-100.

Carlson, E. & Reavey, A. (2000). Case studies of five secondary-aged youth declassified from special education. *High School Journal, 83*(3), 17-30.

Castro-Villareal, F., Villareal, V., & Sullivan, J. R. (2016). Special education policy and response to intervention: Identifying promises and pitfalls to advance social justice for

diverse students. *Contemporary School Psychology, 20*, 10-20.

Chrispeels, J. H, Burke, P. H., Johnson, P., & Daly, A. (2008). Aligning mental models of

district and school leadership teams for reform coherence. *Education and Urban Society,*

40(6), 730-750.

Christensen, C. A. & Dorn, S. (1997). Competing notions of social justice and contradictions in

special education reform. *Journal of Special Education, 31*(2), 181-98.

Coleman, M. (2012). Interviews. In A. R. J. Briggs, M. Coleman, & M. Morrison (Eds.),

Research methods in educational leadership & management (3rd ed., pp. 250-265). Lon-

don, UK: SAGE Publications.

Congressional Research Service: The Library of Congress. (1985). *P.L. 94-142, The education*

for all handicapped children act: Its development, implementation, and current issues

(The Library of Congress Publication No. 85-1031 EPW). Washington, DC: U.S. Gov-

ernment Printing Office.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. W. (2017). *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing*

Among Five Approaches, 4th Edition. Sage Publications.

Crotty, M. (1998). *The foundations of social research*: *Meaning and perspective in the research*

process. [Kindle Reader version].

Danforth, S. (2006). Learning from our historical evasions: Disability studies and schooling in a

liberal democracy. In Danforth, S., & Gabel, S. L. (Eds.). *Vital questions facing disability*

studies in education (pp. 78-80). New York: Peter Lang Publishing.

Danforth, S. & Rhodes, W. C. (1987). Deconstructing disability. *Remedial and Special*

Education, 18, 357-366.

Education Rule, 34 C.F.R. § 300.1-300.11 (2016).

Education for All Handicapped Children's Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1401-1420 (1975).

Ellingson, L. L. (2014). "The truth must dazzle gradually": Enriching relationship research using a crystallization framework. Journal of Social & Personal Relationships, 31(4), 442-450.

Harper, J. (2012). Leading special education in an era of systems redesign: A commentary. *Journal of Special Education Leadership*, *25*(1), 48-52.

Hudson, T. M., & Mckenzie, R. G. (2016). The impact of RTI on timely identification of students with specific learning disabilities. *Learning Disabilities: A Multidisciplinary Journal, 21*(2), 46-58.

Hycner, R. H. (1985). Some guidelines for the phenomenological analysis of interview data. *Human Studies, 8*(3), 279-303.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997, 20 U.S.C. § 1400 et seq.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, 20 U.S.C. § 1400 (2004).

Ishak, N. M., & Bakar, A. Y. A. (2014). Developing sampling frame for case study: Challenges and conditions. *World Journal of Education, 4*(3), 29-35.

Lane, K.L, Wehby, J. H., Little, M. A., & Cooley, C. (2005). Students educated in self-contained classrooms and self-contained schools: Part II--How do they progress over time? *Behavioral Disorders, 30*(4), 363-374.

Lee, B. (2014). Use of a diagnostic errors framework to classify mistakes in an assessment of a bilingual child. *Multiple Voices for Ethnically Diverse Exceptional Learners, 14*(1), 18-29.

Liasidou, A. & Svensson, C. (2014). Educating leaders for social justice: The case of special educational needs co-ordinators. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 18*(8), 783-797.

Maki, K. E., Floyd, R. G., & Roberson, T. (2015). State learning disability eligibility criteria: A comprehensive review. *School Psychology Quarterly, 30*(4), 457-459.

Morrow, S. L. (2005). Quality and trustworthiness in qualitative research in counseling psychology. *Journal of Counseling Psychology, 52*(2), 250-260.

Neuman, W. L. (2009). Social research methods: Qualitative and quantitative approaches (7th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson/Allyn & Bacon.

Padilla-Diaz, M. (2015). Phenomenology in educational qualitative research: Philosophy as science or philosophical science? *International Journal of Educational Excellence, 1*(2), 101-110.

Pazey, B. L. & Cole, H. A. (2012). The role of special education training in the development of socially just leaders: Building an equity consciousness in educational leadership pro-grams. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 49*(2), 243-271.

Poggenpoel, M. & Myburgh, C. H. (2005). Obstacles in qualitative research: Possible solutions. *Education, 126*(2), 304-311.

Sewell, A. (2016). A theoretical application of epistemological oppression to the psychological assessment of special educational needs; Concerns and practical implications for anti-op-pressive practice. *Educational Psychology in Practice, 32*(1), 1-12.

Shealey, M. W., Thomas, N. M. A., & Sparks, C. W. (2012). Defining leadership in charter schools: Examining the intersection of social justice and special education. *Journal of Special Education Leadership, 25*(1), 15-24.

Shenton, A. K. (2004). Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects. *Education for Information, 22*(2), 63-75.

Shyman, E. (2015). Toward a globally sensitive definition of inclusive education based in social

justice. *International Journal of Disability, Development, and Education, 62*(4), 351-362.

Slee, R. (2001). Social justice and the changing directions in educational research: The case of
inclusive education. *Inclusive Education, 5*(2/3), 167-177.

SRI International. (2005). Declassification—students who leave special education: A special
topic report from the special education elementary longitudinal study (SRI Project
P10656). Retried June 2017 from https://seels.sri.com/designdocs/SEELS_Declass_FI-
NAL.pdf

Stake, Robert, E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage
Publications.

Syed, S. (2014). Beyond buses, boilers, and books: Instructional support takes center stage for
principal supervisors. *Journal of Staff Development, 35*(5), 46-49.

Theoharis, G. (2007). Social justice educational leaders and resistance: Toward a theory of social
justice leadership. *Educational Administration Quarterly, 43*(2), 221-258.

Toson, A. L.-M, Burrello, L. C., & Knollman, G. (2013). Educational justice for all: The
capability approach and inclusive education leadership. *International Journal of Inclusive
Education, 17*(5), 490-506.

Van Manen, Max. (2016). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive
pedagogy (2nd ed.)*. New York: Routledge.

Waterstone, J. (2017). *Endrew F*.: Symbolism v. reality. *Journal of Law & Education, 46*(4),
527-538.

Winzer, M. A. (1998). A tale often told: The early progression of special education. *Remedial
and Special Education, 19*(4), 212-218.

Ysseldyke, J. E & Bielinski, J. (2002). Effect of different methods of reporting and

reclassification on trends in test scores for students with disabilities. *Exceptional Chil-*

dren, 68(2), 189-200.

Zirkel, P. A. (2017). A major new court decision: Are blurred boundaries worth the price on the

eligibility side? *Exceptionality, 25*(1), 1-8.