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# Establishing Special Education Programs: Experiences of Christian School Principals

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## Establishing Special Education Programs: Experiences of Christian School Principals

### Abstract

This phenomenological study investigated the experiences of principals who initiated special education programs in Christian schools. Principals described efforts involved to effect changes in the school and noted difficulties in dealing with reluctant staff members. Principals described academic and social rewards of providing services and the satisfaction of parents who found it possible to send their children with special needs to a Christian school. A prominent theme evidenced in this study was the spiritual change in the school as all students interacted and cared for each other.

*Keywords: special education, private Christian schools*

### Establishing SPED Programs: Experiences of Christian School Principals

Since the United States Congress passed laws to ensure the education of students with disabilities, public schools have been mandated to implement special education (SPED) programs. The 1975 Public Law 94-142, its supplemental amendments, and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) have resulted in public schools providing speech and hearing therapy, resource programs, and a variety of other services. Because private institutions do not fall under the purview of these laws, parents often find it difficult to enroll their children with disabilities in Christian schools (Bello, 2006). They are typically told that the absence of services is due to the lack of funds, space, qualified faculty, and the perceived need for SPED by the school's constituency (Eigenbrood, 2005). Establishing such services in Christian schools can be a difficult task for principals. Leaders are, nevertheless, a key component in leveraging a school's SPED needs (Bays & Crockett, 2007), and those who have already taken initiative to do so may provide valuable insights to others who are considering doing likewise.

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences of Christian school principals as they established SPED programs. This phenomenological investigation focused on understanding the considerations, thoughts, and opinions principals examined in determining whether to provide SPED in their schools. Research questions for this study were as follows:

1. What were the experiences of Christian school principals, as they were involved in considering and implementing SPED programs?
2. What factors or events were influential in the principals' experiences?

3. Were there any biblical considerations that were influential when considering the implementation of a SPED program?
4. Were there any legal considerations that were influential when considering the implementation of a SPED program?

### **Background of the Problem**

Because public school principals are required to be adept at SPED law and procedures, Eigenbrood (2004) encouraged Christian school principals to be conversant with the intricacies of these laws as well, understanding the necessary services required to begin a SPED program. Eigenbrood (2004) analyzed the effects of IDEA on private schools and called for cooperation between public and private entities to ensure adequate services for all students with special needs despite the type of school in which they are enrolled. Eigenbrood's speculation was that this approach would eventually result in full-fledged SPED programs within cooperating Christian schools. Wright, Wright, & Heath (2007) noted that, though many Christian school administrators may not be motivated to comply voluntarily with SPED laws applicable only to public schools, there are indeed biblical considerations for dealing with persons with disabilities. Though replete with stories of people with disabilities, the Bible does not address the topic specifically in the context of education. It does, however, provide implications for the treatment of individuals with disabilities. Taylor (2005) applied these implications to the role of the Christian school principal—one role being to ensure that students with disabilities are valued as human beings created by God and another role being to meet the physical, social, emotional, and intellectual needs of students with disabilities. As these

roles are successfully implemented, the result will be what Pudlas (2004) described as students with disabilities becoming valued participants and welcomed in Christian schools.

Christian schools often rely on public schools to meet the special needs of their students (Eigenbrood, 2004 & 2005; Weber, 2007). They typically release students during a period of the day to a local public school for speech therapy or other similar services. However, initiating their own SPED program has been reported to be a transforming process for both the school community and the individuals within it (Paxton-Buursma, 2007; Pudlas, 2004). It typically involved developing or revising the school mission, educating parents, hiring qualified teachers, and developing curriculum. Because many stakeholders shared in the responsibility and vision for the newly-formed SPED programs, high levels of collaboration were reported as a vital element of the process (Cooper, 2005; Paxton-Buursma, 2007).

In both the implementation and maintenance of SPED programs, the principal plays a comprehensive role (Taylor, 2005). The tasks of principals include the humanitarian aspect—that of considering the concerns of parents, students, and teachers. Other aspects of SPED leadership include the educational elements of curriculum, instruction, legal constraints, and related SPED services (Lasky & Karge, 2006). Weighing these concerns creates new tasks and obstacles for principals to administer (Bonds & Lindsey, 2001; Hehir, 2007).

### **Method**

Participants included a purposive sample of seven principals serving in Michigan Christian schools that had already implemented SPED programs. The principals, all of whom happened to be male, were chosen based on names supplied by the Christian Learning Center in that state. Their schools ranged in enrollment from 175 to 920 students. Four schools were made up of grades P-8; one was P-6; and two were 9-12. All of the schools were located in suburban communities and were members of Christian Schools International.

The researcher collected data via in-depth interviews in the principals' offices. Each interview, approximately two hours in length, was recorded and transcribed. Participants reviewed transcripts to verify and clarify data before it was analyzed for recurring themes. Field notes allowed the researcher to record nonverbal information (e.g., tone of voice, body language, distractions) inherent to the interview but not recordable. Questions were open-ended and formulated from the four research questions. The researcher concluded each interview when it reached a saturation point.

Coding began with a thorough understanding and familiarity of the information that had been collected. This process involved transcribing, reading, re-reading, and coding the transcripts. The initial coding procedures—referred to as provisional coding—involved finding those words and phrases that appeared often throughout the interviews (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorensen, 2006). To begin the coding process, important words, phrases, and sentences were highlighted. Additionally, the researcher re-read the data and important words and phrases from principals' responses were typed on separate documents. Using the same color-coding format as the interviews, the typed

lists of words and phrases were highlighted. This dual process allowed the researcher to more readily code and compare similarities in responses.

## **Results**

### **Categorical Analysis**

**Shared vision.** Participants perceived their own role in the implementation process as key to program success. An initial responsibility was for them to develop a philosophy statement. “Without an underlying philosophy of special education,” one principal stated, “the program would have floundered.” *Passion* and *ownership* were commonly used words. A principal’s “passion must be deep and personal in order to provide the missionary zeal required for such an undertaking.” In the context of passion, participants also spoke of vision. One participant advocated the “direct enunciation of the vision without apologies.” He emphasized that “once the vision has been formulated, it’s important to share it.” Another mentioned the need to grapple with the concept of what it meant to be a Christian school. This foundational belief drove him to consider the purpose of the school and to think deeply about his God-given task to lead it.

Another initiating task included investigating and visiting other SPED programs. Observations and interactions with those involved in already established programs provided insight into planning. Additionally, each principal expressed the value of the Christian Learning Center—a private Christian organization that provided valuable advice and use of their SPED-certified teachers. Because these teachers were so beneficial to the programs, every school in this study later hired personnel from the Christian Learning Center.



As the implementation process proceeded, faculty were informed of the planning schedule and asked for input. Teachers might “sabotage the program,” one cautioned, if their ideas were not heard. This principal believed that teachers needed to provide input to illustrate that school authorities were involving everyone in the change process. Likewise, the parents and school community needed to be informed. One noted that his role included “leading the community through the issues” by giving them the necessary information. Common references were made to the significance of collaborating with all constituents to enable everyone to “buy into the philosophy and the program.”

Time was a factor bemoaned by three participants who required extra faculty meetings during fact-finding and informational stages. Though one participant spoke of the increased workload, he believed it was worthwhile. Implementation “doesn’t always work out like you want it to work,” he commented. Yet, he expressed the joy of the outcome of his labors. An unexpected result was the personal growth and gratification experienced by the principals themselves. They spoke of the joys received from interacting with students with special needs, and one in particular conveyed how the program broadened his horizons as a teacher, a person, and a Christian.

**Funding.** Since all participants were under governing school boards, they were required to obtain approval before adding any new programs. To begin the approval process, they informed the boards of the initial groundwork and kept them informed through each stage of implementation. An important step in board approval involved presenting the board with the program’s estimated initial costs and ongoing budget.

One school board initially required parents of students with special needs to pay extra tuition. The board's goal was for the program to be self-sustainable—for it to survive on its own tuition income. In its early years, the program functioned well under this policy. Eventually, however, SPED funding was no longer separated from the school's regular budget, and parents ceased to be charged extra tuition for services. All other schools in the study began with SPED as part of their general budgets. These boards set out with the perspective that students with special needs were wholly part of the school culture and that funding to service them should derive from the general budget. To minimize a rapidly increasing budget, one principal advocated starting the program on a small scale. In this way he hoped for only small increases and thus easing tuition burdens. Promotional literature of three participating schools employed the term “covenantal responsibility” to articulate the idea that SPED costs should be borne by all school families. A covenantal tuition policy reflects the belief that all enrolled families share the burden of all aspects of tuition (Stronks & Blomberg, 1993).

**Parental concerns.** Parent societies founded all seven participating schools and hold final authority. Any fundamental change in operations was required to be placed on the agenda of the annual society meeting. Since the societies consisted of parents as predominant voting members, the principals' next task was to convince parents of the need. Some members of the parent societies had already been pursuing the possibility of enrolling their children with special needs. These parents did not require convincing about the value or need of implementing such a program. They were the ones providing initial impetus to investigate the program's feasibility. One of them had pointedly asked

the principal, “Who made you the one to determine whether my child attends this Christian school?” The question ignited some soul searching, leaving the principal without an immediate response.

Representing the overall tone of the parent society responses, principals stated, “The parents at the school had the heart’s desire to serve the special needs student,” and “The community was ripe for the program.” These comments indicate the level of commitment from the parents even before the programs began. Therefore, when they had the opportunity to vote, they did so by a great majority in all seven schools.

Parents of general education students posed a few concerns at the outset. A mother with misgivings about students with special needs in the general education classroom was afraid her child would not receive an adequate education. After assurance from the principal and after the program’s implementation, this particular principal heard no further parental concerns. At another school, a parent expressed apprehension regarding her child’s safety after the misconduct of a student with special needs. The school worked with the student, but behavioral problems continued, and ultimately the student was removed from the school. Overall, however, principals reported that parents expressed satisfaction with the school’s academic program after the addition of students with special needs.

**Teacher input.** Participating principals were unanimous in conveying the need to keep faculty informed throughout the process. One principal explained how he had spoken to the teachers before the implementation process to ascertain their reactions. He found no opposition. Others, however, found it a laborious process to convince

especially veteran teachers of the need for SPED. Teachers relatively new to the field were more accepting of the program and were more willing to instruct SPED students than were their veteran colleagues. Two of the schools experienced what the principals described as a “division” among their teachers over SPED students. They indicated instances in which teachers were unreceptive to changing teaching styles or making accommodations. In order to set the groundwork for the program, these principals advocated promoting the vision, working with the teachers, and continuing with the program.

Three principals indicated that general faculty approval occurred when a core group of influential teachers accepted the program. One found that the change produced a transformation in the faculty. He recalled that some of the most ardent antagonists later became top supporters after they were able to accept the program changes. In fact, he related that an initial program detractor later traveled to other schools to proclaim the positive aspects of SPED. Though this principal reveled in the change of attitude, he noted that time was needed to change both the attitudes and school culture for acceptance. Faculty members who continued to oppose SPED eventually resigned, and principals hired new teachers supportive of the program.

**Student considerations.** When describing SPED students, each principal related stories that illustrated both the joys and trials of enrolling them. Most of the stories showed the satisfaction they experienced with the process. Though stories of limited success were few in number, the principals did indicate that hardships, such as behavior and staffing challenges, occurred during early years of SPED implementation.

Principals mostly related success stories since the enrollment of students with special needs. The over-arching theme of each principal's story was the reaction of general education students to the new students. Principals spoke of the positive social aspects of having students with special needs in the building. With the enrollment of these students, many general education students could now interact with them for the first time. The principals gave only positive feedback about this student interaction.

Two principals noted the reluctance of middle school students to relate to students with special needs. These principals believed that the changing world coupled with early teenage years prohibited many middle school students from active involvement with students with special needs. Even though most middle school students were not reluctant to intermingle, the principals noted that this age group was more likely to avoid these students. In no way did this cause the principals to rethink their SPED programs. One of these principals observed that, when students were involved with students with special needs from kindergarten and first grade, they were more likely to associate with them throughout middle school and beyond.

Another positive aspect of enrolling students with special needs was the change in the school culture. Four principals sensed the change in the general education students, noticing that they became more caring and sensitive to the needs of others. The change was noticed between the general and SPED students, as well as in relationships among general education students. The principals expressed the joys and rewards received from implementing a SPED program—ones that had not been expected.

Three principals advocated the necessity of preparing general education students for SPED students. They noted that simply adding these students to the school population, without preparing general education students, would be a mistake. Sensitivity training for students was needed for programs to work smoothly. One principal mentioned a certain student in the SPED program who had not been a complete program success. This principal reflected that insufficient pre-enrollment preparation, for both the new student and the general student body, caused all students to suffer. General education students were not prepared well for an extreme special needs case, which, unfortunately, had negative repercussions for the school. Based on this student's enrollment, the principal became a strong advocate for preparing general education students for students with special needs.

One method principals used to enable students to interact with students in the SPED program was an activity called "circle of friends." The activity elicited the assistance of general education students in tandem with the students in SPED. Using student volunteers, the activity placed three to five general education students as helpers for one student with special needs. If a student with special needs required help in the lunch line, carrying items, or assistance in the restroom, this student's "circle of friends" was called upon to provide the necessary assistance. If the circle of friends noticed that their friend was having a difficult time in chapel or class, they were instructed to remove their friend from the situation and help calm the friend as much as possible. Once the student regained composure, the circle of friends would return the student to the class or assembly.

One principal remembered when classmates of a student with special needs—disappointed with her behavior—told the girl that fifth grade students did not act the way she was acting. The girl immediately changed her behavior and joined her friends. The principal said that neither he nor his teachers were able to change this girl's attitude and behavior, even after an hour of coaxing. Her circle of friends accomplished the task in a few minutes.

Because the circle of friends activity was voluntary, no general education student was required to participate. Students who chose to volunteer received training from SPED teachers on needs and behaviors as well as requirements and expectations of a volunteer. Students who participated were rewarded each month with a pizza party.

The circle of friends concept extended past the school day to include after school events. Students were encouraged to take students with special needs to school sporting activities and even to gatherings at their homes. Principals indicated that the students with special needs were invited to social events outside of the school. They reported that this camaraderie not only improved the school culture but also aided the alacrity of acceptance of both the SPED program and the students enrolled in it.

**Spiritual considerations.** As the principals spoke of their experiences, their deeply-seated commitment to follow biblical teachings was evident. They wanted all parents who wished to enroll their children in a Christian school to be able to do so—regardless of any disabilities the students may have. The principals believed that each child was God's child and the role of the Christian school was to teach them. Three

principals used the phrase “created in God’s image” as they referred to students enrolled in their SPED programs.

All seven principals described their schools as Bible-based schools with the goal of educating all God’s children. One referenced 1 Corinthians 15 which describes the various parts of the spiritual body. He likened students enrolled in general education and those in SPED as different parts of the same body and felt called to honor all parts of this body. One principal mentioned his school’s motto—God’s Mosaic. He described the motto as “understanding the body of Christ, our uniqueness, and our requirement to become more attuned to the kingdom of God and how the kingdom of God works through each of us.” He spoke of how SPED helps students understand the body of Christ and the care required for the weaker ones among us. Establishing a SPED program was his way of helping the weaker members of the body of Christ.

Another principal spoke of cultural diversity and its association with color and religion. He noted that in God’s kingdom diversity included more than color or religion—it also included ability. He said Christians were required to appreciate the diversity of the body of Christ. Since students with special needs are included in God’s diversity, he did not believe they should be excluded from the Christian school.

### **Thematic Analysis**

Moustakas (1994) described the themes of phenomenological research as those that change personal perception, affect core feelings, integrate new identity, refocus personal values, and incorporate new learning. The following themes were those that indicated a change in the life of principals as they considered SPED programs.



**Biblical influences.** A prevalent factor influencing these seven principals was the necessity of providing a Christian education for all students. Six of the principals expressed a biblical conviction that led to implementing a SPED program. They described careers that initially did not include SPED. When challenged by parents regarding the lack of SPED services at their respective schools, the principals could not articulate from a biblical perspective why the school did not provide services. As time progressed and more parents challenged the widely-held belief that Christian schools could not afford SPED, they were unable to explain the lack of services.

These challenges forced interviewees to consider why and how economic factors had come to replace biblical grounds for establishing a Christian school. As principals weighed the biblical considerations, they were convicted that a policy excluding students with special needs was unacceptable and that implementing SPED services was needed. They explained a newly-formulated realization that all children are created in the image of God and that the Christian school is responsible for training these children. When considering the fundamental philosophy of a Christian school, the principals were challenged to consider the primary purpose of a Christian school. The principals reconsidered the basic purpose of Christian education and analyzed the needs of the Christian community they served. In conclusion, they decided that implementing a SPED program was a God-honoring decision.

One principal added a very personal element to his consideration of SPED when he explained his siblings' experiences in a Christian school. His first sibling, receiving very little assistance from his teachers, had a very difficult time. His second was unable

to enroll in the Christian school because of severe learning disabilities. This principal witnessed the mistreatment of his siblings in school. Now, as a principal of a Christian school, he did not want to deny a Christian education to any student. Personal experiences ignited his passions for a Christian school that would educate all of God's children.

**Spiritual growth.** Another emergent theme involved unexpected school-wide benefits. At first, principals perceived the sole beneficiaries to be students enrolled in the SPED program. Instead, school-wide benefits emerged, including a more caring and sensitive student body. The inclusion process enabled students to learn about others, and the caring that developed caused a systemic change in the entire school.

Secondly, the principals received personal benefits. Not only general education students but also the principals grew spiritually as they were blessed by the newly enrolled students. Working with them, seeing their joy of being enrolled in their school of choice, and noting the elation of the parents enhanced the personal experiences of the principals. They received the reward of helping others and in turn were rewarded by each new life enrolled in school.

**Understanding among faculty.** Faculty opposition to SPED surprised these seven interviewees, but they all conveyed a growing awareness of staff members and their philosophical beliefs that developed throughout the implementation process. In retrospect, they acknowledged that they should have expected the opposition and been more proactive about it. Nevertheless, grappling with these issues along the way has strengthened the faculty and more sharply honed their purpose and approach to SPED.

**Vision to establish Christian community.** Participants in this study realized the importance of ensuring that their school was truly a Christian community. Establishing this community involved working with parents, students, and teachers to understand a biblical worldview, the academic purpose of the school, and the caring community that should be fostered at the school. The principals, whether during the consideration stage of the program or the implementation, did not always experience cooperation with the school community. They grappled with the dissatisfaction expressed by teachers and students. These impediments to the implementation of the program demanded dedicated principals who were willing to stand firm in providing for the education of students with disabilities.

### **Summary Conclusions, and Implications**

Principals play an important role in ensuring the appropriate education of each student (Conderman & Pedersen, 2003; Idol, 2006). A review of the literature and data from principal interviews support this conclusion. As they establish SPED programs, Christian school principals ensure that an appropriate education is provided and maintained for every student. This study indicated that—though initial preparations may be arduous—the benefits to parents, students, faculty, and principals outweigh any obstacles.

According to the principals interviewed, interactions with board members, parents, and teachers were the primary motivating factors behind implementation of their SPED programs. Without advocacy from the principals, however, and their dedication to the task, the programs would not have begun. A committed principal was needed to

propel the program from philosophy to fruition. Their vision for the program provided further impetus for the program's implementation and success.

The reported contributions to campus culture were an unforeseen byproduct. Though principals firmly believed in the goal of educating students with special needs, they were not prepared to receive what they perceived as "blessings" that occurred both in them personally and among other stakeholders. As they explained, the benefits to the general education students from assisting students with special needs enabled the entire campus to experience the joys of helping others.

Identifying service to God as their first responsibility, the principals recognized that current admission policies did not comply with their newly-articulated educational philosophy. Restricting admissions to general education students did not comply with a perceived biblical mandate to educate all children. With a restructuring of personal philosophy, each principal concluded that his Christian school needed fundamental changes. Implementing a SPED program provided the school with an educational philosophy more aligned with the interviewees' perceptions of the teachings of Christ. This resulted in principals who believed that they were more closely following biblical principles in their admissions policies and services to students.

In capturing the voices of Christian school principals who have already ventured to initiate SPED programs, this study serves to encourage those who have yet to begin such a journey. Those without special education programs should earnestly rethink their policies and philosophy. Instead of dwelling on budgetary concerns inherent in implementing a new program, principals should focus on Christian service and biblical

mandates. Furthermore, principals should consider the school's witness to its parents and community. By limiting enrollment only to those of prescribed academic abilities, the school's role in the community is limited.

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