

Preparing Aspiring Leaders to Address Special Education Needs in an Embedded Principal Residency Program: A Content Analysis

The pressure to address instructional needs amid heightened school accountability can strain resources and present ongoing challenges for school administrators. Leadership commitment to all students is essential in creating inclusive schools that meet all students' academic, social, and emotional needs, including students with disabilities (DeMatthews et al., 2020). Training aspiring school leaders to be inclusive, instructional, and advocates of all students, especially special education students in public schools, leads to improved learning outcomes and school accountability results.

The number of students with disabilities receiving specialized instruction and services in general education classrooms has progressively increased since the passage of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 2004 (U.S. Department of Education, 2006; Yell, 2012). School leaders play a prominent role in creating and maintaining inclusive schools that meet the academic, social, and emotional needs of all students, including those with disabilities (Boscardin, 2007; DeMatthews, 2015; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; DiPaola et al., 2004; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; Kozleski, 2019; Lynch, 2012; Waldron et al., 2011). However, leadership in special education requires a unique set of skills to ensure positive outcomes. The range of responsibilities in administrating and supporting inclusive classrooms requires that school leaders be knowledgeable and skillful in leadership and policy, program and organizational development, research and inquiry, individual and program evaluation, professional development and ethical practice, and collaboration (Council for Exceptional Children, 2009).

The emersion of school leaders in special education theory and practical outcomes is a critical preparatory step in the achievement and implementation of functionally inclusive classrooms because principals with special education backgrounds and operational understanding are more likely to be vested in improving special education practices, comprehending diverse student needs, supporting school-family partnerships, and eliminating segregated programs (Frost & Kersten, 2011; Lasky & Karge, 2006; Wakeman et al., 2006). Unfortunately, current survey research denotes that few principals are prepared to lead in special education (Powell, 2010; Wakeman et al., 2006; DeMatthews et al., 2020).

DeMatthews and Edwards (2014) noted that leadership programs are often criticized for lacking attention to special education. A 2007 Wallace Foundation study reveals additional deficit areas, including learning from faculty with limited experience as school leaders, misalignment between theory and practice, and ineffective clinical experiences (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). Powell (2010) notes that only eight out of eighty-seven leadership programs provide training in special education policy and procedures. While research in special education and educational leadership stresses the importance of preparing principals to lead inclusive schools with a focus on students with disabilities (Boscardin et al., 2009), principals continue to report receiving limited information on special education policies, discipline requirements, and assessment practices as defined and required in IDEA 2004 (Wakeman et al., 2006). They also continue to express concern that they have little understanding of how disabilities impact student learning and behavior (Wakeman et al., 2006).

To address these criticisms and deficits, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the Collaboration for Effective Educator Development, Accountability, and Reform Center (CEEDAR, 2017) provide a guidance document that aligns the Professional

Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) with research-based leadership practices that support high-quality inclusive schools. The document recommends that principals develop a working knowledge of the impact of disabilities on student learning and the requirements of IDEA, shift from a compliance to an outcome and growth mindset, develop skills to lead and monitor instructional progress and build awareness of personal limitations by reflecting on their own biases (DeMatthews et al., 2020). In addition, Skiba et al. (2011) emphasize the need for principals to understand historic special education equity issues, such as racial disproportionality in special education, exclusionary discipline, and the impact of district policies that support segregated special education programs (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2013, Skrla et al. 2004). Principals cognizant of these equity issues are more likely to implement policies, practices, organizational structures, and cultural norms that promote the success of all students, including those with disabilities.

Theoretical Framework

This study used servant leadership as the theoretical framework in examining the principal interns' role while enrolled in a principal preparatory program advocating and supporting special education students' needs. Servant leadership was coined by Greenleaf (1977) and is defined as those (leaders) who desire to serve first and then begin to lead but acknowledge that there are two types: leader-first and servant-first. Greenleaf (1977) states, "The difference manifests itself in the care taken by the servant first to make sure the other people's highest priority needs are being served" (p. 22). With this ideological concept of changing people (i.e., teachers' mindset), leaders are faced with producing adults to make change happen (Greenleaf, 1977). Spears (2010) analyzed Greenleaf's leadership theory and identified ten servant-leader characteristics. These ten characteristics are listening, empathy, healing, awareness, persuasion, conceptualization, foresight, stewardship, commitment to the growth of people, and building communities (Spears, 2010). In this study, the principal interns share their experiences on being committed to growing people (i.e., teachers) to support special education students. Overall, servant leadership in schools creates a nurturing and empowering environment that fosters academic excellence, personal growth, and the overall well-being of students and staff. It promotes a positive school climate where all school community members feel valued, respected, and motivated to contribute to the shared vision of educational success.

Methods

A qualitative content analysis was used to examine artifacts of six participants' (i.e., principal interns) experiences as they participated in a 15-month job-embedded principal preparation residency program. Berelson (1952) introduced content analysis to objectively examine quantifiable descriptions of the manifest content of communication of written or oral materials. However, Kracauer (1952) argued that content analysis could be used as a qualitative approach. This study used quantitative and qualitative data from the action plans, self-reflections, and data-tracker spreadsheets to describe principal interns' impact on developing teachers to support special education students. Each participant developed action plans for a professional learning community, two teachers, an Emergent Bilingual student, a special education student, and a 504 student. However, this study only focuses on the special education student's action plan.

Data Collection

A total of eighteen items were collected from the six participants. As described above, the action plan was the initial task for the principal intern before the self-reflection and then the completion of the data-tracker. The special education action plan included (1) a description of the problem, (2) a root-cause analysis description of why the problem was occurring, (3) an annual goal, (4) four quarter goals, (5) four interventions for each goal, and (6) progress monitoring strategies for each of the interventions. Below is an example of a participant's (i.e., principal intern's) action plan process explicitly targeting the special education (SPED) student as they lead the process.

Special Education Student

- Problem statement: Data reflects that 5th grade Student 2 met the approach level of 58% on STAAR 2018, but the student is grade equivalent to 3.4 in reading.
- Root Cause: Lack of accommodations being referenced and not being implemented with fidelity
- Annual Goal: By June 2019, the Student will attain meets level on the Reading 2019 STAAR Test.
- Quarter I Goal: By the end of the first quarter, the students will be able to increase reading level from 3.4 to 3.8 or higher based on Quarter 1 reading summative data.
- Intervention 1: The teacher will conduct small group instruction on reading concepts/work on reading fluency and reading comprehension.
- Progress Monitoring for Intervention (1): Implement reading comprehension in small group instructions. Evident in lesson plans and walk-throughs.
- Intervention (2): The teacher will implement guided reading using grade-level reading.
- Progress Monitoring for Intervention (2): guided reading practices evident in lesson plans/walk-throughs
- Intervention (3): The inclusion teacher will provide students with 30 minutes a week of inclusion-pulled MTA (dyslexia) reading.
- Progress Monitoring for Intervention (3): Administrative intern observation with MTA teacher/walk-through/feedback
- Intervention (4): The teacher will implement oral administration on reading all questions and answer selection
- Progress Monitoring for Intervention (4): Oral administration on questions/answer selection evident in walk-through/observations

The interventions and progress monitoring are circular and are not completed sequentially. The student's needs are addressed, and the interventions are tied to the outcomes demonstrated on the progress monitoring implemented following instruction.

The second artifact was self-reflections from each participant. During the last semester of the principal residency program and completion of the action plan, the principal interns reflected on their authentic learning experiences as they applied to their special education case study. Each reflection encompassed their personal experience, including conflicts and success stories, how their experience informs their learning as future administrators, and the next steps for their continuous professional development. Below is an example of one Participant's (1) self-reflection.

(Part 1) - The SPED student is a 5th grade male who has experienced severe behavior concerns. The SPED Student's data for the last two years indicate that the student has not advanced beyond the approaches level on the Math STAAR test. After conducting the root

cause analysis meeting, we determined that the root cause was his lack of motivation in Math. The annual goal for the student was to achieve a minimum score of Meets level on the Math STAAR test. The Quarter I goal for the SPED student’s Math level to improve by 5% or higher on the district summative was met. However, the Quarter II and Quarter III goal for the SPED student’s Math score to improve by 2% or more at the Meets level or higher on the Quarter II district assessment was not met. Through consistent monitoring and implementation of his accommodations, the student exceeded his annual goal of achieving a score of Meets level on the STAAR test and scored at the Masters level, which was the highest score in his history of STAAR assessments.

The principal intern’s reflections are tied to demonstrated progress as assessed in progress monitoring tools following instruction. The data was compared to the goal stated in the action plan and details the resident’s insights into the overall success of the action plan implementation.

The third artifact collected was the data-tracker spreadsheet. The spreadsheet was a quantitative self-reporting tool for the principal intern to track their action plan cases. The data was aligned to the categories of the student report scores on their state assessments. The data points included the district’s Quarter benchmarks and the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) or End-of-Course (EOC) scores, depending on the student's grade level and corresponding test. Categories to report within the spreadsheet were unsatisfactory, approaches, meets, or masters. There was also a reporting category for growth progress aligned with the accountability system for the Texas Academic Performance Report.

Data Analysis

A conceptual content analysis, characterized by its qualitative and inductive approach, unveiled emerging themes within the dataset. Conceptual content analysis involves identifying and analyzing the underlying concepts, ideas, or themes in qualitative data rather than simply counting or categorizing words or phrases. It seeks to understand the deeper meaning and concepts within the analyzed content. This method was initiated with a comprehensive review of special education students' action plans, focusing on teacher-targeted interventions. The first phase involved organizing and coding all interventions (N = 96) into preliminary codes, followed by developing a comprehensive codebook after the interventions had been systematically categorized (refer to Table 1). This nuanced approach allowed for a deeper exploration of the underlying concepts and insights inherent in the data.

Table 1

Codebook for Interventions (N = 96)

Codes	Description	Frequency
<i>Student Responsible</i>	Interventions designed for the student	15
<i>Teacher Responsible</i>	Interventions designed for the teacher	81
Collaboration with Stakeholders*	Teachers of the SPED student work collaboratively with each other to address the needs of the student	9
Exit Tickets	Type of assessment for daily work	3
Guided Instruction	Individualized assistance for students with an emphasis on math and reading instruction	9
Implement IEP w/ Fidelity	Understanding and applying the IEP as agreed upon by the ARD committee	7

Organizational Tools & Resources	Providing resources and tools to assist the student in instruction (e.g., electronic dictionary, Venn diagrams, highlighter)	12
Positive Behavior/Academic Intervention System	Providing an incentive/reward to the student when demonstrating good behavior, participation, and successful work	5
Tutoring	Providing the student with instruction outside the regular operating school day hours (e.g., after-school tutoring)	8
Small Group Learning	Dividing the whole class into small groups where each group is addressed based on needs	3
Monitor & Assess	Observing, Monitoring, and Assessing the student's behavior, academic progress, in-class participation, software program usage, targeted standards the student is weak on, etc.	30

Note: IEP stands for Individualized Education Plan, ARD stand for admission, review, and dismissal.

*Stakeholders definition: The adults that serve the special education student (e.g., content teachers, inclusion teacher, assistant principal, instructional coach, principal, diagnostician, principal intern).

The following process was to analyze the self-reflections of the principal interns as they implemented, observed, and monitored the action plan implementation through leadership to gain more context and clarity on what the interventions were and who they were designed for. For example, one intervention stated that “the SPED teacher will attend content Professional Learning Community (PLC) to align goals with current unit of study.” So, was this for the primary teacher of the special education student, or was this for the designated special education teacher serving on the campus? This participant’s self-reflection clarified that the SPED teacher was not the primary teacher for the student but rather new SPED teachers serving on the campus. The principal intern wrote the response as,

I first met with the stakeholders and analyzed the root cause using the data. The teachers collaboratively worked on the implementation of interventions. I scheduled weekly walkthroughs to monitor and track this student's use of designated supports. We scheduled weekly SPED PLCs to help our new SPED teachers learn the content for each grade level, as well as help them in developing and tracking goals for each of their students.

Through this process, the researcher could sort and organize preliminary codes of *primary teachers, inclusion teachers, other teachers, and special education teachers* into the *collaboration code with stakeholders*.

The third process was to analyze the data tracker spreadsheet and look at all six special education students' progress from Quarter I through Quarter IV. The researcher wanted to determine if each student was progressing and what growth percentage was occurring. At this point, the researcher needed to compare the action plan to review the goals and self-reporting of whether the principal intern believed they met each Quarter’s goal and compare them with the data tracker results from district Quarter assessments and the state assessments.

Validity

Discussing the validity of the findings is imperative since two of the three data points were self-reported. The action plan used a self-reporting method at the end of each Quarter. The

principal intern provided evidence to support their rating. At the end of each quarter, the principal intern rated the implementation by using the following indicators: (1) *no progress made*, (2) *no, but made progress*, (3) *progress made but behind schedule*, (4) *right on target*, or (5) *ahead of schedule*. The principal intern provided conclusive evidence of how the participants self-rated their quarterly goals. Looking back at the action plan for Participant One's special education student, the principal intern rated Quarter II by answering the question – Did you meet this quarterly goal?

- Rating for Quarter II Special Education Student – *Ahead of Schedule*
- Supporting evidence: The student has been pushed by both of his teachers to work in class and stay focused with an IF/THEN plan. The student has tried one-to-one testing with an inclusion teacher. Student takes breaks as part of his IF/THEN plan that helps him stay focused on his work. The student uses a timer as part of his IF/THEN plan to remain focused on his work.

The self-reflections of the principal interns were able to bring more insights into the action plan implementation. Since the action plan required entering information in a specific format, the narrative assisted in elaborating more details of the action plan. Below is the remaining response for Participant (1):

(Part 2) - To help achieve the goals for my SPED student, I met with him regularly to build a rapport and to identify his interests. This helped us offer additional sources of motivation. He loved having a classroom job and feeding the animals in the environmental science classroom. I conducted weekly walk-throughs to observe one-to-one and small-group math instruction, exit ticket implementation, and feedback provided to the SPED student. The teacher and I monitored the student's growth using individual data folders. I closely monitored the attendance and participation of the student during weekly tutoring. As a part of the monthly special education documentation evidence collection, I checked the student's work samples for evidence of the utilization of accommodations and supports. I also conducted weekly check-ins during lunch with the SPED student to discuss weekly progress. Additionally, I participated in weekly PLCs and data analysis meetings after summative assessments.

The self-reflection tool allowed for further detail and context related to the circular nature of the interventions and the monitoring of the student and the teacher's instructional growth.

The data tracker was the sole objective data point to triangulate the previous two. The accountability system in Texas has score reporting for students' results on the state assessments (i.e., STAAR and EOC). Depending on the score, the results will be reported as *unsatisfactory/did not meet*, *approaches*, *meets*, or *masters*. In addition to this reporting, growth measures are also calculated for each student to determine the school accountability report card grade. In reality, students may never *pass* a state assessment; however, they must show growth in their learning. With this noted, only five of the six participants submitted their data trackers. However, these five data trackers showed significant growth measures for special education students. Figure 1 illustrates Participant (1) with his special education student's growth measures.

Figure 1

Participant 1 – Special Education Student's Growth Measures

	Unsatisfactory			Approaches			Meets			Masters			Satisfactory	Growth: .5	Growth: 1
	Scale Score %	# Students	Student %	Scale Score %	# Students	%	Scale Score %	# Students	%	Scale Score %	# Students	%			
QTR 1	<53%	1	100%	53% - 75%	0	0%	76% - 84%	0	0%	>84%	0	0%	0.00%	0	0
QTR 2	<53%	0	0%	53%-73%	1	100%	74%-86%	0	0%	>87%	0	0%	100.00%	1	0
QTR 3	<53%	0	0%	53%-73%	0	0%	74%-86%	1	100%	>87%	0	0%	100.00%	0	1
QTR 4	<53%	0	0%	53%-73%	0	0%	74%-86%	1	100%	>87%	0	0%	100.00%	1	0

The figures illustrate that the special education student significantly grew throughout the school year. The student received *unsatisfactory* performance in Quarter I but then increased his performance in Quarter II by receiving *approaches*. The student received a meets rating in both Quarter III and Quarter IV. Remember, this student had never passed a STAAR or STAAR-like assessment. Weaving reflections into the data, interventions, and progress monitoring created a clearer picture of the teacher's and student's instructional outcomes and growth as monitored by the principal intern.

Findings

Following the synthesis of the reflections, the action plan, and the evaluation of the data tracker, two major themes emerged regarding the connections to student success and the process completed by the principal interns.

Theme #1 – Mindset

The content analysis yielded two major themes. The first theme was the mindset of the principal intern. Each principal intern's mindset was revealed through creating the interventions in the special education student's action plan. There were two mindsets: (1) interventions that were created for the student and (2) interventions that were created for the teacher. So, reflecting on the intent, the intern assessed the intervention's focus, the student or the teacher? In Quarter I, four of the six principal fellows created interventions for the students, implying that the student is solely responsible for their learning outcomes. During Quarter II, some interventions were geared toward the student, but mainly, the interventions were designed for the teacher. All the interventions were developed for the teacher in Quarters III and IV. Figure 2 shows an example of the difference in mindset for creating interventions for the student and the teacher.

Figure 2

The difference in Mindset for Teacher vs. Student Interventions

Teacher Interventions

- The SPED *teacher* will use daily exit tickets to determine if the student masters each lesson.
- *Teachers* will create student work portfolios to track evidence and appropriate use of designated supports
- The *SPED teacher* will use daily exit tickets to determine if the student masters each lesson and provide timely feedback on progress.

Student Interventions

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- The *SPED student* will attend weekly tutoring to reinforce skills not mastered during the week/unit.
 - *This student* will take full advantage of his accommodations to ensure he is on track for success.
 - *The Student* will be given access to an electronic dictionary to find definitions
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The shift that took place during implementation demonstrates that the mindset regarding the success of the student was the responsibility of the teacher rather than the student. The teacher's actions would create the steps needed by the student to have success. The principal interns shifted the focus, as servant leaders, and growth was seen as the mindset changed.

Theme #2 – Monitor and Assess

The second theme focused on monitoring the special education student's learning and progress. Of the 96 interventions, 30 were organized into the code of *monitor and assess*. The bullets below were some examples of the interventions.

- Observations and monitoring feedback will be used to see if the strategy works. Test scores will be compared to when he was in small-group testing.
- Observations of the student when testing will track techniques taught by the counselor.
- The teacher will schedule an observation during a test to see the student explain his work.
- The teacher will schedule 5 observations to monitor how and when the student is being praised for implementing strategies.
- The teacher will ensure that the student receives one-on-one support from the special education teacher for 300 minutes every two weeks in English Language Arts (ELA) class.
- The teacher will ensure students use phonics software twice a week for 30 minutes to increase phonic awareness.
- Teachers will create student work portfolios to track evidence and appropriate use of designated supports.
- The teacher will utilize an organization chart to document and track the use of instruction support and performance on student assignments.

These examples and the 30 interventions for monitoring and assessing special education students are crucial for several reasons. First, it helped teachers understand individual learning needs, strengths, and challenges, allowing them to tailor instruction accordingly. The principal interns shifted the focus from the student actions to teacher actions, creating an environment of growth. Second, it permitted stakeholders to check for behavior or emotional well-being changes, allowing for other timely interventions and support for social and emotional development. Using servant leadership, the principal interns shifted the focus on the interests and motivation of the students, creating an environment grounded in care and relationship building. Overall, monitoring and assessing special education students was vital for their academic, social, and emotional growth, which fostered an inclusive and supportive learning environment.

Recommendations for Best Practice

The findings of this study revealed the leadership practices implemented by future principals can shift teaching practices, improving special education students' success. Below are four recommendations that were gleaned from this study.

1. **Implement the Individualized Education Plan (IEP) with Fidelity.** Implementing an (IEP) with fidelity is crucial because it ensures that students with special needs receive the appropriate support and accommodations to reach their full potential. Following the IEP as designed allows for personalized learning, addressing specific challenges, and providing necessary services. It promotes consistent evaluation and progress monitoring, enabling educators to adapt strategies effectively and support the student's academic, social, and emotional growth. Ultimately, fidelity in IEP implementation enhances the chances of educational success and empowers students to overcome barriers and thrive in their learning environment. The principal is responsible for monitoring the implementations and ensuring it is part of the daily instruction provided by the teacher.
2. **Stakeholder Professional Learning Communities.** The principal can develop a team by creating platforms for discussion and evaluation. The teacher attends SPED PLCs, and the SPED teacher attends content PLCs. This was conducted in Quarters I – IV by one principal intern. During Quarter I, the student did not show progress; however, in the other three quarters, the student made progress and was even reported *ahead of schedule* in Quarter II and Quarter III. PLCs provide a platform for teachers to collaborate and share best practices, strategies, and resources. By working together, special education and general education teachers can learn from each other's experiences and expertise, improving instructional techniques and supporting students with diverse needs.
3. **Monitor and Assess.** In improving the monitoring and assessment of special education students, principals must identify and align the needs of the students to the actions and instruction provided by the teacher. As reported, there were 30 codes identified. One specific intervention was when the teacher created student portfolios to evaluate evidence to provide student feedback and organizational tools. The data showed that the student was reported to be *ahead of schedule* and *on target* using this specific monitoring and assessment procedure. Portfolios allow teachers to tailor instruction to meet individual student needs. By analyzing the portfolio content, educators can identify personalized learning strategies and differentiate instruction accordingly.
4. **Implement Intentional Instructional Strategies. The principal can improve special education student success by creating a teacher reflection and discussion environment improving intentional intervention and instructional design.** Deliberate strategies help teachers focus on specific learning objectives and goals. By designing instruction with clear intentions, teachers can ensure that each lesson aligns with the desired outcomes, leading to more targeted and purposeful learning experiences. Below are specific interventions from the participant's action plans.
 - Teachers were implementing guided reading and math instruction (e.g., guided reading, targeting vocabulary with high-frequency words and phrases to increase fluency levels). Principal interns reported *right on target* when including this intervention and other interventions.
 - Daily exit tickets – This study revealed that exit tickets worked best when combined with other interventions designed for the teacher. However, when grouped with other interventions designed for the student, such as 'the student will attend tutoring,' the principal intern reported *no progress*.

- Intentional instruction provides three release test questions for the SEs of that week, providing common reading strategies on specific knowledge and skills.
- Intentionally create small groups – (e.g., Teachers will create target intervention student groups to monitor growth on low SEs). Student expectations (SE) identify the specific knowledge and skills that students must demonstrate.
- One-on-one intentional teaching (e.g., Teacher will assist student in annotating at least three paragraphs daily.)

Conclusion

The literature reveals that principal preparation programs must provide the appropriate knowledge and skillset to be fully immersed in preparing teachers to provide effective instruction for special education students. The findings from this study indicate that the principal interns showed substantial evidence aligned with (CSSS) and (CEEEDAR) guidelines. The principal interns did show a shift of mindset, as did the teachers, in developing the skills to implement and progress monitor effective interventions (DeMatthews et al., 2020). The principal interns needed to shift their perspective that the interventions must be designed for the teachers, not the students. Furthermore, the principal interns also had to focus on fidelity instead of focusing on the compliance pieces, which were necessary and required. This was done using research-based tools (e.g., equity audit) first to identify the inequities of the campus, specifically special education (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2013; Skrla et al. 2004; Skiba et al., 2011). The interns utilized an action research tool to set annual and four-quarter goals, implemented research-based interventions, and monitored the progress of each intervention. Throughout the process, they were able to be reflective of their authentic experiences.

The principal interns exhibited support and advocacy through their servant leadership lens. They were deeply invested in one SPED student to learn the applicable laws and legal mindset (DeMatthews et al. 2020). The interns attended the Admission, Review, and Dismissal meetings, worked with all the stakeholders (i.e., the teachers) for that particular student, and monitored the fidelity of differentiation for special education students.

Progress monitoring by the principal interns of teachers' instructional practices was paramount in ensuring continuous improvement in special education. By regularly evaluating and analyzing the effectiveness of teaching methods, the stakeholders were able to identify the areas of strength and opportunities for growth. The action plan approach empowered educators to make informed decisions, adapt their strategies, and tailor instruction to meet the diverse needs of their students. Progress monitoring helped create a culture of accountability and professional development, where teachers were encouraged to reflect on their practices. Moreover, this approach fostered a collaborative environment where educators shared best practices and were able to learn from one another. By emphasizing progress monitoring, the principal interns enabled a cycle of improvement, elevating the overall quality of education and benefiting the students' learning experiences and outcomes. As education evolves and new challenges arise, the continuous evaluation of instructional practices will become an indispensable tool in shaping the future of learning and nurturing the potential of every student.

Lastly, it was evident that differentiation played a crucial role in the special education student's learning outcomes. The principal interns created an inclusive and supportive learning environment by recognizing and accommodating the diverse learning needs and abilities of

students with special needs. Differentiation allowed for personalized instruction, fostering individual growth and maximizing the potential of each special education student. Providing differentiation also promoted equal access to education and empowered the students with special needs to actively engage in their learning journey. Emphasizing differentiation in special education led to enhanced academic achievements, improved self-esteem, and better overall student outcomes. As we prioritize differentiation in special education, we take a significant step towards building a more equitable and compassionate educational system for all.

In summary, this paper presents valuable insights that can enhance school leaders' understanding of special needs students. Moreover, the recommendations and implications serve as a practical roadmap for school administrators. With this knowledge, administrators can foster inclusivity and adapt their leadership approach to embrace servant leadership. This paper holds the promise of catalyzing meaningful change within the education community.

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