Mentoring New Special Education Directors Through a Supplemental Preparation Program in Massachusetts

A Doctoral Thesis

presented by Kristin M. Campione
to the College of Professional Studies

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

Dr. Chris Unger
Advisor

Northeastern University
Boston, Massachusetts
June 2016
Abstract

The purpose of this study was collect and analyze the perceptions of special education directors who attended a state funded Leadership Academy for new Special Education Directors in Massachusetts. The participants were member of the Accept Collaborative Leadership Academy (ACLA) cohorts 9 (2012) & 10 (2013). The two research questions for this study were: (1) what benefits were perceived by director’s who participated in ACLA? (2) What is the perceived benefit to members of a Community of Practice (CoP) that developed as a result of ACLA?

The problem of practice focused on the challenges new special education directors face in their first years in the position and the need for a network of peer support. This qualitative study consisted of three focus groups made up of current Massachusetts special education directors who had attended ACLA. The theoretical framework chosen was Community of Practice (CoP) theory. The literature review contained summaries of the literature on the following topics: the role of the special education director, certification, standards for special education directors, preparation programs, supplemental training, mentoring and cohorts. Data was gleaned from focus group transcripts, demographic data and a topic/speaker ranking activity completed by the special education directors.

The study had six findings: (1) Directors who participated in focus group interviews and by submitting documents were extremely grateful for their experience in ACLA and the continued benefit of participating in reunions and CoP meetings over the years; (2) While individual mentoring was not the focus of the research questions, mentorship was discussed frequently in all focus groups. Directors spoke candidly about the lack of support from their districts such as not being assigned a mentor, or being assigned a mentor who did not have the
credentials to assist them. (3) Directors were open to examining their own weaknesses in learning a new job and spoke candidly about their struggles in their first few years of their directorships and their continued challenges in the position. (4) New Special Education Directors in Massachusetts benefit from learning and networking with cohort peers and seasoned directors at the state-funded leadership academy and form a bond as members of a cohort of new directors statewide. (5) Most directors attending ACLA formed networks that continued to remain in contact on an informal basis. (6) After attending ACLA, some directors formed self-governing networks that continued to meet formally for professional development and networking purposes.

*Keywords*: special education director, administrator preparation programs, communities of practice, mentoring, cohorts
Acknowledgements

This journey began eight years ago when a colleague, Tara, and I were accepted into the doctoral program at the University of Massachusetts. After an invitation by our colleagues in a neighboring school district seven years ago, we transferred to the Northeastern program and the Groton cohort. The support from the cohort was unexpected, but developed into a network of talented, creative school administrators that I greatly admire. I would never have finished without the support of Sheila Muir & Tara Hanley—thank you for your friendship.

I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Chris Unger, for his tireless support and perfect balance of constructive feedback and supportive guidance. He was always available for a pep talk or feedback on a section or chapter as I was ready. I would also like to thank my second reader, Dr. Kristal Clemons, for her feedback and efforts on my behalf. Thank you to my third reader, Dr. Deb Brady, who told me I could do this every chance she got. I will never forget your encouragement and kindness that turned me around every time I wanted to give up. Thank you to my school district, Quabbin Regional, my coordinator, Laura Holbrook, and my editor, Margaret Jones, for all of your support.

My two mentors, Linda Rakiey & Pam Kaufmann, taught me that as a special education director I must prioritize relationships with people first and legal compliance second. I have appreciated their incredible patience with that lesson I desperately needed to learn. I must also thank the participants in this study as without their donation of time and the honesty of their wonderful words, this study would not be possible. I would like to thank my ACLA CoP: Eva, Brenda, Walter, Susan, and Andrea. Our group was the inspiration for this study.

Friends make life so much more fun, so I want to acknowledge the girlfriends who supported me over the life of this project. Whether it was the 3K weekends in NY that were a
welcome break from the library, or those that showed up with a bottle a wine or margarita to help me cope! Thank you Cheryl, Donna, Kathie, Kim, & Tracey.

Thank you to my parents, Glenn & Glenna Boden, who taught me the value of a good education and demonstrated such passion and dedication to teaching that all three of us followed in your footsteps. I know I wasn’t the easiest child to raise, so I hope you derive some pride from this milestone! I’m sure it doesn’t make up for all of the head shaking my antics caused over the years, but at least it’s something. Thank you to my two siblings, Sondra & Buffy, for always being there and pushing me to succeed. This degree should guarantee the favorite child spot is all mine now, but you shouldn’t feel too badly—I’m sure mom and dad still love you. I would like to thank my husband, Steve, who tirelessly picked up all of the slack at home so that I could pursue my dream. Thanks for forcing me to work when I lacked the motivation. I know I didn’t make it easy sometimes, but you were always supportive and deserve this doctorate as much as I. I love you.

To my children, Alexandra & Anthony—I would like to apologize for anything I missed as a result of this research study. Alex, I will never forget watching your first collegiate homerun online while I was in a Saturday research methods class. I’m sorry I wasn’t there in person to celebrate with you. Tony, I recall missing your junior year high school baseball trip to Florida and have always regretted not being there to cheer you on. While I hope you both understand why I wasn’t always present, I know we will never have those times back. For both of you: through this process I have learned humility and tested my perseverance and inner strength. I also learned that with the right person beside you, anything is possible. Choose wisely. You’ve already accomplished so much more than I did at your age, so I can’t imagine what lies ahead for
you both. I am so lucky to be your mother! I love you unconditionally and I wish you enough. I dedicate this work to you.
# Table of Contents

Abstract .......................................................................................................................... 2  
Acknowledgements ...................................................................................................... 4  
List of Tables ................................................................................................................ 11  
List of Figures ................................................................................................................ 12  
Chapter I: Introduction ............................................................................................... 13  
  Statement of the Problem ....................................................................................... 13  
  Research Problem .................................................................................................. 14  
  Justification for the Research ............................................................................... 16  
  Deficiencies in the Evidence ............................................................................... 17  
  Relating the Discussion to Audiences .................................................................. 18  
  Purpose Statement ............................................................................................... 19  
  Research Questions ............................................................................................. 19  
  Significance of the Research .............................................................................. 19  
  Positionality Statement ....................................................................................... 20  
  Theoretical Framework ....................................................................................... 22  
  Summary ............................................................................................................... 27  
Chapter II: Literature Review ...................................................................................... 27  
  Overview ............................................................................................................... 27  
  Role of the Special Education Director ............................................................... 27  
  Certification ........................................................................................................... 33  
  Standards for Special Education Directors ......................................................... 38  
  Preparation Programs ......................................................................................... 39
Cohort Model.................................................................................................................47
Mentoring.......................................................................................................................51

Chapter III: Methodology ...............................................................................................56
Introduction.....................................................................................................................56
Purpose of the Study ......................................................................................................56
Research Questions ........................................................................................................57
Research Design ............................................................................................................57
Research Tradition ........................................................................................................58
Participants ....................................................................................................................59
Recruitment and access .................................................................................................65
Data Collection ..............................................................................................................66
Data Storage ..................................................................................................................66
Data Analysis ................................................................................................................67
Trustworthiness .............................................................................................................69
Protection of Human Subjects .........................................................................................70
Summary .......................................................................................................................70

Chapter IV: Research Findings .......................................................................................71
Study Sites, Participants, and Data Collected ................................................................71
Research Question 1 .....................................................................................................74
Research Question 2 .....................................................................................................92
Differences across Focus Groups ...............................................................................102
Document Analysis .....................................................................................................103
Summary of Findings .................................................................................................107
Chapter V: Discussion of the Findings ................................................................. 109

Revisiting the Problem of Practice ................................................................. 109

Discussion of Major Findings ........................................................................... 110

Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Theoretical Framework ............... 120

Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Literature Review ...................... 124

Conclusion ......................................................................................................... 131

Significance of the Study ................................................................................ 132

Limitations ......................................................................................................... 134

Validity ............................................................................................................. 134

Future Research ............................................................................................... 135

Recommendations ......................................................................................... 136

Personal Commentary ..................................................................................... 138

References ....................................................................................................... 141

Appendix A: Focus Group Protocol ................................................................. 149

Appendix B: Activity at Culmination of Focus Group Cohort 9 .................... 152

Appendix C: Activity at Culmination of Focus Group Cohort 10 ................. 153

Appendix D: Demographic Worksheet ............................................................. 154
List of Tables

Table 1: Comparison of Special Education Director Expectations across five New England States
Table 2: Present Conceptualizations of Mentoring
Table 3: Special education directors who completed the 2013 Leadership Academy Program
Table 4: Special education directors who completed the 2012 Leadership Academy Program
Table 5: Geographical divisions for ACLA 2013
Table 6: Geographical divisions for ACLA 2012
Table 7: Job titles of study participants ACLA 2013
Table 8: Job titles of study participants ACLA 2012
Table 9: Demographic Data of Focus Group Participants
Table 10: Themes emerging from Research Question 1.
Table 11: Themes Emerging from Research Question 2
Table 12: Ratio of male to female directors in ACLA Cohorts 9 & 10
Table 13: Ranking by Cohort 10 Focus Group 1 & 2 Members of ACLA Activities/Topics (in order of most beneficial to least beneficial)
Table 14: Comparison of Speaker/Topic Rankings between Cohorts
List of Figures

Figure 1: Components of a social theory of learning: an initial inventory

Figure 2: Two main axes of relevant traditions

Figure 3: Stages of development of Communities of Practice

Figure 4: Certification process for special education administrators in Massachusetts

Figure 5: Hahn’s Coding Levels
Chapter I: Introduction

Statement of the Problem

The role of a public school special education director in Massachusetts requires an extensive knowledge base, strong problem solving and negotiation skills, and the ability to formulate quick decisions. The coursework and internship that comprise the current guidelines for certification are insufficient to prepare directors for the demands of their first year. New directors who step into the role without the proper support often do not complete the first year; the isolation of the position and the decision-making demands can cause stress and burnout. In the article, “Burnout Among Special Education Administrators: A Preliminary Study,” Susan J. Carter (2011) writes that directors “found that frequent interruptions, participating in activities outside school hours, too heavy a workload, meetings, writing reports and memos, and the constant stress of having to resolve differences among students, parents, teachers, and superiors to be contributing factors. [Directors] were also exhausted from trying to finish things up, taking work more seriously than others, and having a hard-driving work ethic” (p. 109). Although these findings are discouraging, there is light at the end of the tunnel. Leadership Academies for new special education directors in Massachusetts have provided a forum to decrease isolation. They also support directors by giving them access to peers with the knowledge base required to make the challenging decisions they face daily.

An effective special education director provides all students in the district with services, programs, and placements that meet their needs in the least restrictive environment. They must have an extensive knowledge base that includes an understanding of special education law, and they must possess the ability to balance ethics with good management of district funds. They must hold the necessary certification, but that alone is not enough to ensure success. In
Massachusetts, directors need additional preparation and support to be successful and remain in the position. In my experience, with increased and appropriate preparation programs, special education directors are better prepared to meet the demands of their profession.

**Research Problem**

Once directors are in their district role, they are expected to take the reins as the primary decision maker in all areas of special education. Many new directors have been successful teachers and bring knowledge of the district to the job, but they are often unprepared to meet the demands of the director position without additional training, mentoring, or access to a peer group. One place for Massachusetts directors to turn for additional knowledge, mentoring, and a community of practice (CoP) is the Accept Collaborative Leadership Academy for New Special Education Directors (ACLA). This type of program is invaluable for directors in their first year in the role when they are most likely to struggle with feelings of inadequacy, self-doubt, and isolation as compared to their success in the teaching ranks. Access to peers (both novice and experienced) assists directors with managing the demands of the position.

Because learning is a social process, access to a network of peers through a CoP may help new directors begin to address these negative feelings of self-doubt and isolation. Etienne Wenger studies and writes about learning as a social process in business and industry, but he also acknowledges its early role in assisting educators with isolation in educational leadership:

“Schools and districts are organizations in their own right, and they too face increasing knowledge challenges. The first applications of communities of practice have been in teacher training and in providing isolated administrators with access to colleagues” (Wenger, 1998, p. 5). ACLA is one vehicle that might provide a community of practice and prevent directors from experiencing extensive isolation and self-doubt.
When I think back to my first years as a special education director, I recall that my lack of knowledge and skill contributed to a sense of isolation and low self-efficacy when compared to my feelings of success as a teacher. Supplemental training programs may reduce this sense of isolation and increase confidence in new directors by building a community of practice throughout their region.

The majority of public school district administrators belong to a cohort of peers by nature of their professional positions. A school principal has other principals within the district from whom he or she may seek advice; superintendents have their cabinets or statewide groups that unite at regular meetings; teachers and paraprofessionals have peers within each district building. Conversely, a special education director is a “lone wolf” within the district. Many issues that arise within the area of special education are unique, and access to a peer or a larger network of peers with experience in a similar situation is helpful. This network could also provide the opportunity to brainstorm solutions, an option not available within individual districts. Directors without local peers might ask superintendents or assistant superintendents for advice on special education issues. Although some superintendents are former special education directors, many lack this experience and the issues that directors face are often outside the realm of superintendents’ expertise. At the same time, it can be intimidating for directors to admit to their primary evaluators that they need assistance, so they make difficult decisions in isolation instead.

Special education directors need support to be successful and remain in the position. Supplemental training programs in the form of a community of practice may support special education directors’ confidence and sustain them as they undertake their specific role.
Justification for the Research

In response to the need for additional training, the Massachusetts Department of Education has supplied grant-funded training through special education collaboratives\(^1\) to supplement the preparation of special education administrators. These leadership academy trainings are extremely helpful for new directors (Rees, 2013), but directors must be accepted into the program and able to complete the yearlong training program. The leadership academies that are provided for special education directors are welcomed, but not all directors within the state have access to the programs or are required to attend them. Some may choose not to participate because they are concerned that becoming involved in a series of workshops will only add tasks to their seemingly endless list of responsibilities. Instead, as in my experience in my initial years, many directors attend various unrelated professional development seminars designed to meet the needs of other administrators, such as principals or superintendents.

A management training program specifically for special education directors with the support of a community of practice presents an opportunity to maximize the effectiveness of these professionals while minimizing their sense of isolation. As an added value, such a program can provide a naturally occurring community of practice for participating directors. One example of this type of state-funded training program is ACLA run by the Accept Collaborative. Executive Director Dr. Susan Rees describes the Accept Education Collaborative as a

---

\(^1\) Special education collaboratives provide member towns with tuition-based public special education placement options such as behavioral classrooms, vocational programs, and programs for students with developmental disabilities, Autism and other impairments. The collaboratives provide a cost-effective alternative to placing students in private program to receive the services they need. In addition, they provide professional development for teachers and preparation programs for administrators. Most school districts in Massachusetts belong to at least one special education collaborative. Massachusetts has 26 collaboratives statewide that service students from the over 400 public school districts.
regional education service agency governed by fourteen school districts in the Metrowest area of Massachusetts. Our mission is to provide exemplary programs grounded in the belief that what matters most in student achievement is excellent teaching and educational leadership. Accept Collaborative is a leader in design and implementation of professional development programs that meet the instructional, management and leadership challenges that educators face on a daily basis. These programs drive systemic change resulting in enhanced teaching, learning, and leading. (Rees, 2012, p. 2)

Accept Collaborative has received the Massachusetts Leadership Institute grant for 11 years, and ACLA has graduated 11 classes of special education directors. As with all grant-funded programs, ACLA is subject to potential budget cuts by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE). Funding decisions are made annually, and the number of applicants to ACLA always exceeds the number of available slots. Consequently, many directors are unable to participate during the first year of service in the directorship and many do not attempt to enroll in future years. As a graduate of the program, the benefits of ACLA are apparent to me, but I will investigate if an examination of the experience of individual graduates might recommend mandatory attendance for new directors statewide.

**Deficiencies in the Evidence**

Current studies exist on various types of preparation programs implemented within other states, but research specific to special education administrators or related programs instituted within the Commonwealth of Massachusetts is sparse. Early research that examined special education director preparation recommended further study on this topic. This has not been conducted to date (Gooden, 1993) and is long overdue. Massachusetts has joined the research ranks by contributing a national study by faculty of the University of Massachusetts. The
findings indicated the need for additional research in the area of credentialing special education administrators, which points to the need for more study in supplemental preparation programs as well (Boscardin, Weir, & Kusek, 2010). Improved college preparation programs are valued, but the benefits of a supplemental training program for novice directors – as well as the continued benefit of access to a community of practice following the initial training – is the focus of this dissertation.

Funding for support programs for new special educators is not assured due to state budgeting priorities. As a result of the lack of current research on these training programs, the need for continued funding is unclear, and the programs may not survive annual state budget reductions. If funding was assured and all directors were required to participate as part of the certification process, the importance of the perceived benefit would be magnified. In the dissertation, I will examine the perceptions of directors who have graduated from ACLA to find out what they see as the benefits of the Academy and the developed community of practice.

Relating the Discussion to Audiences

To comply with state regulations, every public school district in Massachusetts must hire an administrator of special education. The research results will be of interest for all administrators. If the research demonstrates that ACLA is perceived to be beneficial to a special education director, each district’s superintendent may be interested in having his or her director attend. A savvy special education director can save the district hundreds of thousands of dollars, but more importantly he or she might be better prepared and able to build and supervise an excellent program to enable all students in the district to reach their individual potential. Special education director interest in this research is evident, given the need for free, supplemental training, but this research should also be of interest to state legislators and the state director of
special education; these individuals hold the purse strings to the grant money that allows these programs to be available free of charge.

**Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to collect and analyze the perceptions of special education directors of two ACLA cohorts (2012 and 2013) to examine differences in their perceptions of its usefulness, and to determine if a CoP develops and remains active after graduation.

**Research Questions**

The following two research questions will guide the study:

1. What benefits are perceived by directors who participated in ACLA?
2. What is the perceived benefit to members of a CoP that developed as a result of ACLA?

**Significance of the Research**

Massachusetts needs well-trained and knowledgeable special education directors to provide appropriate education for special needs students and to help stem the increasing special education costs in districts. A knowledgeable and well-connected special education director can make a tremendous difference in the progress special needs students make by providing adequate programs, services, and well-trained teachers. A less knowledgeable director may cause district funds to be spent on restitution for missteps in planning and poor programs instead of on the educational needs of the entire district population. Given this need, exploring how current special education directors’ experience in ACLA assists with better decisions and improved use of district funds and resources in a way that better supports its students is imperative.
If attendance at ACLA was required of all Massachusetts directors during their first year in the position, would each graduating class have the support of a community of practice to assist with decisions and program plans in each successive year? Participation in ACLA could help directors acquire necessary skills and support to become better leaders. As a result of both the knowledge gained and exposure to colleagues, directors could experience an increase in self-efficacy and decrease in the sense of isolation.

In this research study, special education directors’ perceptions of developing a community of practice through ACLA will be examined. The benefits of the community of practice remaining intact after graduation and its perceived benefits to directors in their successive years will also be examined.

**Positionality Statement**

My formal title is Director of Student Services, but I am the Special Education Director of record for a regional school district in central Massachusetts. My previous experience as an elementary and high school special education teacher, special education department chairperson, administrative chairperson, and assistant special education director did not prepare me for the isolation and self-doubt I experienced in my first year as director. Before I was a special education director, I had access to a peer group that provided varying levels of support. As a teacher, I worked daily with the other special education teachers in the building. As a high school department chair, I met weekly with all of the department chairpersons. As an administrative chairperson and assistant special education director, I could turn to the assistant principals for advice. In my current position as Director, I am a singleton within my district. The demands of the special education director job are unlike that of my central office cohort (superintendent, assistant superintendent, technology director, and business director.) At central
office meetings, my role is to share current issues in an advisory capacity. The other directors do not share an expertise in special education, and that is stated openly.

Müller (2009) conducted a study of retention and attrition among special education directors and concluded that because “the position of special education director is often solitary, the importance of opportunities for collaboration with general education colleagues and special education administration staff, as well as new directors’ academies was noted” (p. 7). I strongly agree with Miller and feel that directors require access to a network of job-alike peers, or community of practice, for this type of collaboration to offset the solitude of the position.

The purpose of this research study is to evaluate the perceptions of special education directors with regard to their experiences in attending ACLA and establishing a community of practice. As a 2013 graduate of ACLA, I have firsthand knowledge of the program benefits. My participation provided invaluable, relevant training as a new special education administrator. Six of the graduates and I have developed a community of practice that has continued beyond the scope of ACLA. We have corresponded via telephone and e-mail, and we have met face-to-face six times each year since graduation. We schedule visits at each other’s districts to observe programs and gain insight into program development, organizational strategies, and of course to share experiences and brainstorm solutions to current cases. In addition, ACLA has offered an annual spring two-day reunion seminar on “Hot Topics in Special Education” for all classes of ACLA to attend as a continued support. This provides an additional opportunity for the community of practice to continue to come together and renew ties. Given the bias inherent to my professional role and as a graduate of the academy, I will take care to remain impartial and to present the findings of the research study without prejudice.
Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for the research study is a social theory of learning: communities of practice. CoP was first introduced as a social learning theory by Etienne Wenger. His definition follows:

Communities of practice are formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor: a tribe learning to survive, a band of artists seeking new forms of expression, a group of engineers working on similar progress, a clique of pupils defining their identity in the school, a network of surgeons exploring novel techniques, a gathering of first-time managers helping each other cope. In a nutshell communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly.

(Wenger, 1998, p. 1)

Interacting regularly with the graduates of ACLA improves a director’s effectiveness on many levels, including knowledge acquisition, experience, and creativity. It can also create healthy competitions as directors share evidence of a problem solved, and inspire others to emulate their success.

CoP theory contains four assumptions and four components. The assumptions and components are quoted below and the components are illustrated in Figure 1:

1. We are social beings. Far from being trivially true, this fact is a central aspect of learning.

2. Knowledge is a matter of competence with respect to valued enterprises – such as singing in tune, discovering scientific facts, fixing machines, writing poetry, growing up as a boy or a girl, and so forth.
3. Knowing is a matter of participating in the pursuit of such enterprises, that is, of active engagement in the world.

4. Meaning – our ability to experience the world and our engagement with it as meaningful – is ultimately what learning is to produce.

If we accept them, the four assumptions outline learning as a social experience as the primary focus of the theory. Our participation in the community of practice is both in action and in a sense of belonging (Wenger, 1988, p. 4)

Figure 1. Components of a social theory of learning: an initial inventory (Wenger, 1998, p. 5)

The four components are defined as:

1. Meaning: a way of talking about our (changing) ability – individually and collectively – to experience our life and the world as meaningful.

2. Practice: a way of talking about the shared historical and social resources, frameworks, and perspectives that can sustain mutual engagement in action.
3. Community: a way of talking about the social configurations in which our enterprises are defined as worth pursuing and our participation is recognizable as competence.

4. Identity: a way of talking about how learning changes who are and creates personal histories of becoming in the context of our communities.

The relevant basis for CoP theory is in social learning theory. The theory originated in Plato’s *Republic* and has found an audience in the more modern work of work of Anthony Giddens. This theory of social learning developed from the works of Karl Marx, Emile Durkenheim, and Max Weber (Giddens, 1971). Wenger’s representation of a vertical and horizontal axis in Figure 2 demonstrates the intersections of four theories of learning. CoP resides on the vertical axis with social structure and situated experience, and practice and identity are important components that lie on the horizontal axis. All four components together best describe learning as a social process.

![Diagram](attachment:image.png)

*Figure 2. Two main axes of relevant traditions (Wenger, 1988, p. 12)*

ACLA creates social experiences for directors. It provides mentoring among peers and facilitates relationships between experienced and novice directors. Both these types of
interactions assist new leaders in collaborating and sharing techniques of special education management. A community of practice forms when directors meet monthly at ACLA meetings. Topics are decided upon by the ACLA professional development team, speakers are hired for presentations, and directors are allowed an opportunity for questions following the presentations. When the 30 novice directors meet on a monthly basis, a CoP develops organically. The additional opportunity for novice directors to meet in small groups of eight participants facilitated by an experienced director forms another layer of the CoP.

Speaking with graduates will reveal the perceived benefits of the large and small group meetings. The cohort model of ACLA equates to a multilayered CoP. New directors receive mentoring on organizational and individual levels through social interactions and relationships with peers. Cohort members may form few or many ties to peers, and while encouraged it is totally voluntary on their part. These relationships can be weak, or they can develop into strong connections that drive career development through the mentoring process. During each ACLA program, directors are divided into eight-person groups called cracker-barrel groups. They are formed by geographical location. One hour is allotted to discuss current problematic situations. The dialogue is facilitated by an experienced director who is also a graduate of the program. Following the cracker barrel session, each group elects a speaker from their cohort to address the reassembled combined group. The topics generated by each group are shared, and solutions to the proposed problematic situations are suggested by members of the larger combined assembly. Examining these communities will be helpful in determining which aspects ACLA graduates apply to their CoPs in the years following graduation from the academy.

---

2 The term “cracker barrel” comes from frontier days when people shopped at their local general store and gathered around the cracker barrel to sit and visit with others in the community, much like the modern day water cooler.
CoP theory provides the optimal lens to examine the perceived benefits of ACLA for novice special education directors. This community is the framework that mirrors the model of each ACLA cohort. As the program components valued most by special education directors are examined, CoP provides the organizational frame to outline or categorize the benefits of a social learning model.

**Figure 3.** Stages of development of Communities of Practice (Wenger, 1998b)

Wenger’s diagram of the stages of development (Figure 3) corresponds with the stages of the ACLA participation process. The potential stage is the directors coming together for the first time as a result of an invitation to attend ACLA summer academy. The coalescing stage is during the yearlong workshops and meetings that occur monthly. By mid-year, participants move into the active stage and continue there until year’s end. The dispersed stage begins after graduation and continues with reunions and planned CoP meetings. The memorable stage is reserved for ACLA graduates who no longer meet as part of a continued CoP. They still have the materials and memories of the experience which they can access whenever they wish.
Utilizing CoP theory as a lens to examine the problem of practice will allow me to delve into the experiences of each participant through each stage of the CoP. The ACLA process closely mirrors the stages and allows for careful consideration of the participants perceptions at each stage.

Summary

Special Education Directors’ perceptions of the benefit of attending ACLA is the purpose of this research project. This research study examine these perceptions and the development of a CoP to assist new and seasoned directors in the years following graduation from ACLA. This research could assist state organizations with securing funding for continuation of the program.

This chapter included an introduction to the research problem, the significance of the research problem, the research questions, and the theoretical framework for the study. In the following chapter a review of the current literature on the study’s topics is shared.
Chapter II: Literature Review

Overview

The following review of the literature will cover seven streams of empirical literature concerning the problem of practice presented in Chapter One. To begin however, I will present literature that helps to explain the role of the special education director, the isolation of the position, and the existing preparation programs. These will briefly be compared to those of general education administrators or building principals as is important to understand the difference between the two roles, as they can be treated identically in preparation programs. The roles are vastly different and warrant separate paths of levels of preparation. The literature review that follows will include the breath of literature on the subject of special education director preparation, training programs, and models for these programs.

Specifically, this literature review will cover the following themes: literature related to the role of special education director, isolation of directors, certification and standards, preparation programs, supplemental training, mentoring, the cohort model, and communities of practice. The sequence of topics was designed to move from the regulatory to the humanistic aspects of director preparation and from required elements to supplemental elements. The first component of the literature review will focus on the role of special education directors.

Role of Special Education Director

The director of special education is a position required by statute in Massachusetts and each public school district must have an administrator licensed as a director of special education to be in compliance with state law. Directors are responsible for the needs of students with disabilities, and for providing services, programs, and placements for these students so they make effective progress in the curriculum. Services include instruction and academic support,
usually delivered by special education teachers and paraprofessionals. Related services such as speech/language therapy, physical therapy, occupational therapy, vision/mobility training, adaptive physical education, behavioral supports and counseling are also the director’s responsibility. In addition, directors are responsible for developing and maintaining programs within the district schools. These programs allow students with more intensive needs to remain in their neighborhood schools. Examples of such programs are integrated preschools, and classrooms for students with cognitive impairments, Autism, and behavioral or emotional disabilities. These programs exist in the majority of Massachusetts school districts. The director must also supervise placements in schools outside district borders. These range from collaborative public day programs in nearby towns to full residential facilities that could be located out of state. The demands placed on a new director to monitor and manage students attending these programs immediately upon entering the role can be overwhelming.

Once directors have obtained the necessary certification, the continued on-the-job training needs are usually provided through participation in general education administrator training, mentoring, supplemental programs, and communities of practice. Understanding the role of the special education director and how they are certified (primarily in Massachusetts and New England, but with a brief look at national certification standards) is critical to this study.

An initial description of the special education director position written in 1965 serves as a starting point to understand the complexities of the job:

The Director of Special Education is an educational leader with many and varied responsibilities. The basis for his professional behavior is a body of specialized knowledge which he uses to create a general education program for specialized clientele. To do this, he interacts with the entire spectrum of the school system. This responsibility
is not confined to academic areas, to curriculum, to instruction, or even to administration. He must coordinate a variety of services—psychological, vocational, transportation, etc. Expenditure of funds to be properly coordinated requires his specialized knowledge. Organizing this job into meaningful description is no small task. (Marshman, 1965, p. 3)

This description makes the breadth of the position clear, and although 50 years have passed since it was written, it still applies to directors today.

Despite frequently experiencing emotional exhaustion and dealing with the other drawbacks of the position, some special education directors experience immense personal accomplishment and satisfactions with their career choice (Carter, 2011). Special education directors must have a wide range of skills:

Because it serves children at all levels and degrees of handicaps, special education is a humanistic profession. Administrators must be able to empathize with their staff, assess when they lose their objectivity, know when to intervene on behalf of children and parents, and be a warm yet forthright decision maker. They must take risks in developing programs for children. They must be able to respond to staff needs and be accessible to staff; this is especially critical in large districts and regional units, where staff is spread thin. They must be prepared to deal with conflict, and ever-present reality, and they will have to develop counseling skills and interactive techniques. Stressful situations are unavoidable in an administrative position, and the would-be administrator might do well to analyze in advance of training his/her ability to deal with conflict and stress. (Finkenbinder, 1981, p. 494)

Even as reliance on technology grows, the ability to personally connect to the needs of disabled children and their families cannot be replaced; it is uniquely personal. There is no room
for the “one-size-fits-all” tack that is often taken with the general education curriculum. Management skills, coupled with the humanistic qualities Finkenbinder outlines must be balanced. The ability to manage conflict and stress is also a skill directors must have. Directors are responsible for a challenging subgroup of students who are expected to achieve alongside non-disabled students, and they must find a way to balance fiscal responsibility and student need. Students with disabilities must work much harder to gain the same ground as their non-disabled peers, so what some may perceive to be small successes can be monumental for special education students.

Certification for administrators of special education within the Commonwealth of Massachusetts requires a master’s degree and completion of an internship program, and the latter can be obtained during service in the administrator role. Based on my initial anecdotal experiences in the position of director of special education, attainment of certification for the role is not adequate preparation for this complex and demanding responsibility. Although I obtained the necessary certification the year prior to my first appointment, I was unprepared for the myriad novel decisions required daily. An examination of supplemental preparation programs is warranted to support directors and allow them to experience increased levels of success in the position.

In 2007, Thompson and O’Brian conducted a study that surveyed special education directors in Illinois on the demands of the position. The study found that directors are often overwhelmed by “wearing so many hats.” Additionally, they have “difficulty juggling multiple roles inherent in special education administrative work.” Respondents to the survey said they feel “like there is nothing [they] are not expected to do,” and that they have trouble “satisfying the political forces of different stakeholders, i.e., [sic] boards of education, superintendents, etc.,
while advocating for needs of the children” (Thompson & O’Brian, 2007, p. 41). These survey responses underline the multifaceted challenges faced by directors of special education and points to the need for examination of additional preparation programs.

Although directors focus on providing their perception of the best placement and program for each student, the interpretation of what is “best” can vary among specialists, advocates, parents, team members, and lawyers. Directors can sometimes feel they have nowhere to turn for assistance in these cases and their decision is sometimes for the cheaper of two expensive choices. For example, there are frequently situations where parents of special education students are not satisfied. As a consequence, they engage attorneys to demand expensive special education placements. In this situation, a director is called upon to review the case and choose a side. If the parent’s attorney successfully argues that the services and placement proposed by the director and outlined in the student’s individual education program (IEP) are not appropriate, a costly placement could be warranted. Another example is when a director is called to defend the district at a hearing of the Bureau of Special Education Appeals (BSEA). These hearings can be requested by parents who want the DESE to file a decision that will decide the educational program and location for their child. The BSEA can also assign damages, legal costs or educational services to either party. Even with a successful hearing outcome for the district, it is not without extensive unavoidable legal costs. Special education directors could benefit from additional training and access to a network to aid with decision making.

The position of special education director is multi-faceted. An effective director walks the line between managing the financial bottom line and providing a student a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment (IDEA, 2004). Directors often face
ethical struggles with their decisions, such as with the settlement situation previously described. Another example of a stressful demand is when a parent argues that their child did not receive the special education services mandated on his or her IEP and files a complaint with the Department of Education Program Quality Assurance (PQA). If PQA finds in favor of the parent, the district can be ordered to retrain staff, hire additional staff, and/or provide compensatory services to the student. These services could be minimally expensive, e.g. after school tutoring costs, or they could rise to the level of a year of college tuition. Directors must understand their obligations under special education law, ensure their special education programs and services are sound, and present the necessary evidence to avoid a finding against their district. In these stressful situations that can affect entire school districts, directors can benefit from having undergone additional training. Additionally, access to a network of peers can enable directors to make better-informed decisions.

Directors of special education ponder these crucial decisions daily. If they do not supervise the special education programs and match students with the appropriate programs, student progress can be adversely affected. If a student has not demonstrated effective progress, a case can be made for compensatory services or a private placement to “fix” the lack of progress. This results in the special education budget of a school district dedicating millions of dollars to a small number of students in private placements, which also includes expensive daily transportation. The public may view this as “siphoning” funds from the bulk of students served by the district to support a few, and it can be nerve-racking for the director who must plead a case to the superintendent or business manager to reallocate funds.
Certification

In Massachusetts, two state certifications are available for those serving in the role of special education administrator -- pupil personnel director and special education administrator (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2004). Certification as a pupil personnel director allows expansion of the director role to include other responsibilities (e.g., Section 504, homeschooling, homeless student education, guidance department, nursing department, and English language learners). Many special education administrators are assigned the title of director of student services or director of pupil personnel. For the purposes of this study and literature review, only the licensure of the special education administrator will be addressed. The path to certification in Massachusetts is outlined by the Massachusetts Department of Education (2004) as reflected in Figure 4. Credit is given to candidates with some experience in higher education or other fields, as evidenced by the track to the right. This acknowledges those who arrive in the position without a current teaching certification. A written exam in communication and literacy is also required.
There are no studies that address content specific to Massachusetts certification of special education directors, but research has been conducted to examine special education administrator licensure on a national level (Whitworth & Hatley, 1979; Stile & Pettibone, 1980; Finkenbinder, 1981; Stile, Abernathy, & Pettibone, 1986; Lashley & Boscardin, 2003; Crockett, Becker, & Quinn, 2009; Boscardin et al., 2010). In these studies, the standards for certification were found to vary widely from state to state. Starting in the 1970s, Whitworth and Hatley examined the effect of certifications and practices on university preparation programs, leaders, and district administrators.

---

3 This figure illustrates the certification process for special education administrators in Massachusetts. Candidates with one or a combination of the following prerequisite backgrounds may pursue licensure as indicated. The panel review is only available for candidates who completed a post-baccalaureate program in management/administration at an accredited college/university or who have three full years of work experience in executive management/leadership or a supervisory or administrative role (Massachusetts Department of Education, 2004).
programs (Whitworth & Hatley, 1979). At that time, 30 of 50 states had some requirement for certification of special education leadership personnel. The requirements for New England states varied: Connecticut, New Hampshire and Vermont had no certification requirement, Massachusetts required special education administrative approval, and Maine and Rhode Island had special education supervisory endorsements (Whitworth & Hatley, 1979).

Stile and Pettibone examined all state requirements a year later. Their data showed 26 states require special education administrator certification and existing training programs for special education administrators. The fact that only 51% of states require certification might seem alarming, however in some states that did not require special education administrator certification, the general administrator certification included special education authorization (Stile & Pettibone, 1980). This also accounts for the apparent lower numbers of states with certification from the earlier Whitworth and Hatley data. Stile and Pettibone argue against a separate certification for special education administrators. Instead they support one certification for all administrators on the grounds that one certification eliminates the duality that exists with general education and special education in schools. If administrators had the same license, the assumption would be that special education directors would be well versed in general education practices and general education administrators (such as principals) would be knowledgeable about special education. I do not agree that one certification would be enough to blur the deeply etched lines between the two camps. Principals and special education directors have very different roles. An understanding of each other’s roles is helpful, but given the contrasting tasks of each role, preparation programs should have different tracks.

The original Stile and Pettibone 1980 data were reviewed in a follow-up study five years after the original research was performed, and not much had changed. Surprisingly, the number
of states requiring certification of special education directors decreased from 26 to 23, but this was due to a transfer of special education certification to the general administrator license, which is in line with the move to consolidate the preparation of principals and special education directors (Stile, Abernathy & Pettibone, 1986). Of the New England states, ME, MA, RI, and VT had separate special education administrator certification, but CT and NH did not.

In a 2010 study, data collected indicated 27 states require licensure, certification, or endorsement as a special education administrator and it was found that position titles varied widely (Boscardin, Weir & Kusek, 2010). Of the New England states, all but CT require certification, licensure or endorsement. NH joined the ranks of requiring credentialing for its special education administrators. Although four of the five New England states have this requirement, their other requirements vary widely as evidenced in Table 1 below.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>CEC Standards</th>
<th>Degree Requirements</th>
<th>Prior Teaching Experience</th>
<th>Practicum/Internship</th>
<th>General Education Exam</th>
<th>Special Education Exam</th>
<th>Continuing Education Courses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ME</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MA</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NH</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RI</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VT</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 1 compares the five New England states that require special education director certification, licensure, or endorsement on Acceptance of the Council for Exceptional Children Standards, minimum degree requirements, necessary teaching experience, requirement of practicum or internship, required examinations, and continued coursework for re-certification. (Boscardin, Weir & Kusek, 2010)*

The varied titles for administrators of special education were further discussed in great depth. Titles for the New England states were: none (CT) Special Education Administrator/Director (ME) Administrator of Special Education (MA, RI) Special Education
Administrator (NH) and Director of Special Education (VT). It may seem a trivial point, but if states cannot agree on the position name, that calls into question whether there is hope for a national set of standards and certification (Boscardin, Weir & Kusek, 2010).

Given the considerable shortage of qualified special education directors for available positions (Lashley & Boscardin, 2003) national certification standards could make it easier for school districts in neighboring states to assume reciprocal certification. In addition to examining the certification requirements for each state, this national study summarized that professional development programs are needed to train special education administrators (Boscardin et al., 2010). The need for these professional development programs are met by programs like ACLA. The supplemental training, coupled with a reciprocal certification among neighboring states could ensure we have adequately trained and certified directors to keep positions filled and provide continuity of services for students.

Lashley and Boscardin (2003) reported on the licensure requirements and availability of preparation for special education directors in public school districts. The results summarized the variability of licensure requirements from state to state and evidenced that training program availability was decreasing as principal preparation programs were increasing. Their conclusion was that special education administrators need to collaborate with their general education counterparts to maximize effective administrative practices in this new age of accountability.

Particularly, the ascendance of outcome accountability measures for all students has highlighted the necessity to apply all curricular, instructional, and assessment tools from both general and special education to the education of all students. As a result, special education administration has come to a crossroads as a practice. Special education and general education leaders will be challenged to join together to solve the problems of
practice inherent in a diverse, complex, high-stakes educational environment. (Lashley & Boscardin, 2003, p. 18)

The literature available on the certification of special education administrators highlights the need for national certification and consistency among the states. Given that many states will not relinquish local control and may add elements to their state process that are not addressed in national certification, it appears this need will never be realized. The cross pollination of certification for general education and special education administrators in some states, while well-intentioned, has created a critical problem of generalizing two very different roles.

**Standards for Special Education Directors**

The original national standards for special education administrators were developed in 2003 by the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), a national organization. In 2004, Massachusetts revised state guidelines for administrative licensure. New standards for special education administrators were developed and adopted in 2009 by the CEC after review of the 2003 version. Several articles have discussed missing elements within the new CEC standards. The first was Voltz and Collins (2011) who conducted a study to consider the preparation of special education administrators for inclusion in diverse, standards-based contexts using the new CEC standards as a baseline. The researchers stated the standards excluded the important aspect of working with students and families from diverse backgrounds. Boscardin, Mainzer, and Kealy (2011) agreed with Voltz and Collins in the view that special education administrators must support children from diverse backgrounds, however Boscardin et al. 2010 commented that this area is addressed in the new standards. In response, Voltz and Collins maintained their assertion that the diverse needs of families with disabled students continue to be inadequately addressed in the standards.
National standards or competencies for special education administrators have been developed, reviewed, and revised by national organizations. Wigle and Wilcox (2002) conducted a study of the national competencies developed by the CEC from self-reports by special education directors who determined that additional training was needed. The participating directors acknowledged that they lacked important skills when comparing their own competencies with the CEC standards. They also required collaborative support from principals to run effective programs for students with disabilities. Wigle and Wilcox’s study raised significant concerns because if directors do not acquire training in the skills needed to collaborate with principals, the progress of students with disabilities could be dramatically reduced (Wigle & Wilcox, 2002). Inherent to this study is the fact that current directors did not feel that their skills matched up with the competencies. The collaboration between directors and principals is also a key point that many directors may not have anticipated as novices. This supports the need for additional training.

The standards or competencies for special education directors vary from state to state, and no national standard has been developed by the Office of the Secretary of Education. Although the CEC developed the standards for special education administrators, these have not been adopted or referenced within many state documents. Now that more states are beginning to institute the Common Core Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010), perhaps the time is ripe to initiate dialogue on the national standards or nationally sponsored training programs for school administrators.

**Preparation Programs**

A review of literature related to preparation programs for special education directors requires an examination of studies addressing leadership programs targeting school principals,
special education directors, and inclusive programs for both directors and principals. Such programs are developed with components that will be important to consider as principals and special education directors currently share the responsibility of educating students with disabilities, a change from the lines of responsibility that existed previously when principals were responsible for general education students and special education directors were responsible for special education students. Given the blurring of lines that currently exist in the responsibilities for special education students, improvement and updates to preparation programs in universities is warranted (Murphy, Moorman, & McCarthy, 2008) to address these changes.

There has been an effort dedicated to rebuilding preparation programs in educational institutions. Multistate collaboration is moving toward the improvement of university education leadership programs by developing programs to conform to specific standards and instituting them across state universities to ensure uniform implementation. A 2008 study cites a rebuilding effort aimed at 54 universities within six states (Murphy, Moorman, & McCarthy, 2008). It points to the need for reform and updates to preparation programs, but cites the many stumbling blocks in the way: state law and legislation, culture, structure and professional norms inside universities, faculty assignments, admissions criteria, and resource allocation. The largest struggle was the ingrained notion of teaching theory at the expense of integrating knowledge (Murphy, Moorman, & McCarthy, 2008). The improvement of college preparation programs is needed, but there are some programs that currently exist for principals and their preparation.

**Principals.** Exemplary principal preparation programs exist that produce highly effective leaders (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen, 2007). A school leadership study conducted in 2007 examined what exemplary programs do well and outlined some implications for future planning of principal preparation programs. The case studies took place
in CA, CT, KY, MI, and NY. The study findings were that “the principals who participated in the preparation and professional development programs selected as exemplary reported being significantly better prepared, holding more positive attitudes, and engaging in more effective practices on average than did the principals in their relevant comparison groups” (Darling-Hammond, Lapointe, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen, 2007, p. 143). While these results are hardly surprising, most of the exemplary programs were available in states where reform was needed and funds were allocated to develop these programs; Massachusetts is considered one of the top states for providing public education.

Militello, Gajda, and Bowers (2009) conducted a study on principals’ perceptions of the quality of their preparation programs. Findings suggested that when and where principals were certified influenced their perceptions of their preparation programs. Principals certified after passage of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 said they felt less prepared by their programs. The researchers felt this was due to the increased accountability mandated by the legislation (Militello, Gajda & Bowers, 2009). Not surprisingly, principals within private education settings where accountability standards remained the same felt better prepared by their preparation programs. They called for a revision of the principal preparation standards to include twenty-first century skills in the new age of accountability.

Research related to the preparation of principals demonstrates these professionals do not feel prepared to supervise special education programs offered by their schools. With legislation such as the NCLB Act and the state requirement for all children to demonstrate growth on the exams of the Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) and Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers (PARCC), principals have been made

---

4 MCAS statewide assessments for grades 3-10 began in Massachusetts with the class of 2009. Passage of three assessments: one of 4 high school science/technology tests, grade 10 mathematics, and grade 10
increasingly responsible for the effectiveness of instruction delivered to students with disabilities. They are required to work closely with special education directors, but neither have much understanding of each other’s role and responsibilities. ACLA programs can assist a new special education director in understanding the role of the principal as compared to learning better ways to manage their own position.

**Multipurpose leadership programs.** A review of preparation programs for principals and other professional population groups in higher education indicate the need for supplemental programs to fill the knowledge gap or the development of on the job learning or supplemental program development. Margaret Terry Orr (2011) examined 17 leadership preparation programs and surveyed graduates about their experiences. Graduates were current principals, assistant principals, department heads, and central office administrators. Her findings indicated that the manner in which aspiring education leaders are prepared influences what they learn and how far they progress in administrative positions. Those that arrive in the position with significant teaching experience progress more quickly through the ranks and fare more favorably in the role of administrator. Survey responses that pertained to the quality of the program’s internship experience indicated the most variance. These responses were the most interesting for this study. It pertained to the quality of the program’s internship experience. Orr characterized the internships as “the most challenging feature to deliver” (p. 155) when discussing the quality of preparation programs. Many special education directors complete an internship, but its quality appears to depend on the school district where the internship takes place as well as the quality of the supervisor in that setting.

---

English/Language Arts became a requirement to earn a Massachusetts high school diploma in 2010. Current discussion has been on discontinuing the MCAS or replacing it with the newly developed and piloted PAARC test.
Special education administrators. Many directors arrive in the role from different career paths (Thompson & O’Brian, 2007). To compound the differences in experience, they also obtain their certification from varied preparation programs. In 2009 Jean Crockett and colleagues reviewed 474 articles published between 1970 and 2009 on the conceptualization of special education leadership and suggested that little had changed over four decades. The authors asserted “more needs to be known about the needs of new special education administrators and their initial preparation, recruitment, induction, and retention in today’s schools” (Crockett, Becker & Quinn, 2009, p. 66). Today, programs are not any closer to examining needs, and the programs do not address those needs adequately. Special education directors obtain a master’s degree in Special Education to prepare for the role, but this program’s focus is on curriculum, pedagogy, and disabilities; it is hardly preparation for the leadership skills needed. A master’s degree in Special Education Administration does not exist in Massachusetts. A would-be director must choose between the previously mentioned Master of Special Education or Master of Educational Leadership which is designed especially for the principal and superintendent roles. A study on special education director preparation programs completed by Mackie and Engle indicated that training was inadequate in the following identified areas: “personal competencies, administration and leadership, evaluation and leadership, teacher recruitment and selection, motivating professional development of staff, supervision, budget and finance, research, coordination with community agencies, legislative procedures and public relations” (Mackie & Engle, 1999, p. 16).

In the 1960s Leo E. Connor suggested that the minimum preparation for a special education administrator should be three years of successful teaching experience and 30 graduate credits beyond a master’s degree, with a doctorate in special education administration as the
pinnacle of preparation (Connor, 1966). This contrasts with current Massachusetts standards which calls for a master’s degree and three years teaching experience. Perhaps this assists in explaining why directors can feel so unprepared for the demands of their position during the first few years. This review of the literature on preparation programs for special education directors will begin in the 1960s and progress forward to 2015. This chronology will demonstrate how little has changed in 55 years despite the obvious need for a well-trained and experienced special education director in every school district.

Supplemental training. Directors of special education must complete course work for a required degree, take the necessary tests or attend a state/district preparation program, but supplemental programs can provide access to a cohort of peers and some of the missing content knowledge.

Minnesota introduced a competency-based pilot program known as the Special Education Administration Training Program in 1974 (Weatherman & Dobbert). This was a supplemental continuing education program that was a joint enterprise of two university departments: Special Education and Educational Administration. It was described as a competency-based education program developed from a systems orientation model that was used as a continuing education program to meet specific needs for current administrators. Although well intentioned, a recent search (September, 2015) of the University of Minnesota website indicates the pilot training program did not develop into a program that is still available to directors.

Berkeley and Harriman (1994) examine a master’s degree program that was developed primarily to meet the needs of special education administrators in rural areas of NH, ME and VT. The program was dependent upon the collaboration of three universities: Gallaudet University (DC), Plymouth State College (NH), and Keene State College (NH). This program later
developed a Certificate of Advanced Graduate Study (CAGS) at the request of this population of directors. They describe the needs of directors in these northern New England states as very different due to a lack of nearby resources. The program began as a Summer Leadership Academy in Special Education held at Plymouth State College and then advanced from a certificate to the master’s level and then CAGS degree. This is an example of a supplemental program that grew as a result of unique needs.

Another supplemental program in NH invited special education directors to collaborate on developing a vision statement for their districts and supporting its implementation. This training was unique in that it prepared the directors to work together with building-based administrators on a district-wide venture when they returned to their districts. They were also introduced to leadership styles and models of leadership (Berkeley, Harriman, & Gray-Chassie, 1995). As we see more and more overlap of the principal and director of special education, these types of programs may be the answer to increasing the collaborative task of educating all students in the same classroom.

In Massachusetts, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has provided supplemental training programs for special education administrators through various vendors such as educational collaboratives and independent educational research or professional development organizations. In an interview I conducted with Carla Jenz, Executive Director of the non-profit organization Massachusetts Administrators for Special Education (ASE), Jenz shared that the leadership academy model was originally the brainchild of ASE. At some point in the development process, the Massachusetts DESE determined that the proposed leadership academy would be granted to the special education collaboratives. At that point, ASE and
Accept Collaborative worked closely to align the curriculum and staff development completed by ASE and transfer resources to the collaborative program (Jenz, 2015).

In an interview I conducted with the Dr. Susan Rees, Executive Director of ACLA, she shared director’s evaluations of the program:

The academy evaluations have been glowing from the participants, and most say that it has increased their confidence, skills, and provided necessary support so they don’t feel so isolated. On the other side, directors have left their position because they realized that they didn’t have what it takes and they didn’t want to have what it takes. The position wasn’t a match. At least four have gone on to superintendent and many have moved to different districts and have gotten better paying jobs. Many have said that even though the academy was only eight days, they got more out of it than their master’s program or CAGS. Having said that, we failed with those that had no background or were working as chairs or coordinators in districts with poor practices. (Rees, 2013)

Dr. Rees remains committed to the continuation of ACLA despite her retirement in June, 2014; she has stayed in contact with each graduating cohort through annual reunion meetings and still facilitates each class through the academy.

The Accept Collaborative’s Leadership Academy I is a state-sponsored training program for directors with one to three years of experience in the role of director. It is designed to provide training and a peer network for new directors. It is funded by a grant from the Massachusetts DESE and is in its tenth year. The West-Ed Leadership Academy II is funded through the same grant and is designed for administrators with five or more years of experience as special education administrators within Massachusetts. The Leadership Academy I is the focus of this study. According to Susan Rees (2012),
topics of critical interest to special education administrators will be addressed including leadership and systems change, data collection and analysis, program evaluations, access to the general education curriculum, dispute resolution and conflict management, laws and regulations, and additional special topics depending on the interests of participants. (p. 1)

Both academies follow a similar model. They begin with a summer academy over three to four days, followed by bimonthly, full-day meetings, and finally an annual two-day reunion to which all graduating classes are invited to form or continue a community of practice. Because there is not yet any research in this area, this study will examine the perceived benefits of supplemental programs from the perspectives of current special education directors.

**Cohort Model**

The ACLA program utilizes a cohort or class model. Cohorts are used in college programs and can also be used in supplemental training programs. They are defined as “intact student groups in lock-step course patterns” (Hebert & Reynolds, 1998, p. 253). They are also well understood in education professional development programs as creating a network similar to a college graduation class. Individuals will always identify with and compare their life paths of success and failure with their college cohort. The Hebert and Reynolds (1998) research examined three graduate programs and use of the cohort model. Although the participating students reported benefits to the cohort, the study results indicated minimal measurable benefit.

Interesting research has been conducted on cohorts within the realm of education, specifically their use in teacher education programs (Basom, Yerkes, Norris, & Barnett, 1996; Barnett, Basom, Yerkes, & Norris, 2000; Ross et al., 2005; Teitel, 1997; Tooms, 2007; Unzueta, Moores-Abdool, & Donet, 2010; Salazar, Pazey, & Zembik, 2013). Basom et al. (1996) views
the cohort as a way to develop transformational leaders, however these researchers caution that
the concept must be developed and cultivated. They state, “utilizing a cohort structure does not
ensure that a true cohort will develop . . . [an] educational leadership preparation program may
well have embraced the cohort concepts without fully appreciating its potential for developing
transformational leaders” (p. 110). There are also criticisms of the model in their article. They
identify some challenges: vulnerability, elitism, and pressure when one cannot keep up with the
pace of the cohort or tension between cohort members and non-cohort members within the same
program or position (Basom et. al, 1996).

Barnett et al. (2000) conducted a study with a sample of cohort users who reported
organizational efficiency and learning as benefits of the cohort. Participants also described
benefits of a cohort as ascending from the academic sphere to the professional one.

Most investigation of cohorts examine what occurs during the course of the academic
preparation program; however, there is some evidence that the cohort experience can
influence students’ professional relationships and practices. Based on the strength of the
interpersonal relationships that develop in cohorts, students often maintain professional
contacts after completing their university coursework. (Hill, 1995 as quoted in Barnett et
al., 2000).

This is similar to what happens in the ACLA cohort and continues in the community of practice
that develops after graduation.

According to Ross et al. (2005), “the cohort model has a tremendous and largely
untapped potential for developing the kind of collaborative transformational leaders needed by
schools today” (p. 279). Although more research is needed in this area, Ross et al. are in
agreement with the findings of Barnett et al. that there are perceived benefits in the collaborative skills developed in working in a cohort.

Tooms (2007) conducted a unique study in the Bahamas. She interviewed all members of an educational leadership program. There is no requirement or corresponding salary increase for a master’s degree in the Bahamas, yet Kent State University offers a program in educational leadership at The College of the Bahamas. Given that the participants were enrolled at their own expense and for no incentive from their positions, it is not surprising that their perceptions of the cohort’s effectiveness were positive and they reported a supportive peer group (Tooms, 2007).

Unzueta et al. (2010) found that special education professors and doctoral students perceive many benefits of the cohort. The positives were reported as inter-student support, a flexible learning model, support for cultural and linguistic needs, opportunities to build relationships, ease in scheduling, and opportunities for maturation. The negative implications of the model were reported as the negative feelings and sense of isolation from other students who were not members of the cohort. (Unzueta et. al, 2010). The participants for this study were picked specifically because they were culturally and or ethnically diverse, so perhaps the participants’ responses were affected by possibly feeling like a part of a marginalized group and this should be considered when applying the results.

A preparation program targeting school principals was found that utilizes a cohort model and surveyed graduates to determine the program benefits (Salazar et al., 2013). The cohort model was reported as a strength of the program by one participant:

The cohort model allows the group to build relationships and trust. When discussing issues such as social justice, leadership participants need to be open and honest. Topics such as race can become very personal and heated. Without an established commitment
to “stay at the table” no matter the outcome is very difficult without trust. If I was in a classroom full of strangers I would not have pushed by own boundaries to grapple with hard realizations. The other reason cohort models are effective is the rigor of the program. Cohort members need an outlet and support group to get through the process. Like educational administration, individuals cannot be successful on their own. You need the group to help support and push your learning. (Salazar, Pazey & Zembik, 2013, p. 316)

This example of the cohort member voice is powerful because the cohort model is increasingly used in contemporary education. Many colleges and preparation programs implement the construct as a way to control the curriculum paths of students and the number of course sections offered as well as to build cohesive, supportive learning groups. This is similar to the ACLA cohort which enables each group to progress together through the training. The directors begin to build trust and be able to engage in a learning process in a setting where participants feel safe.

A 1997 study at the University of Massachusetts at Boston is important, not only because it is based in Massachusetts, but because it is an example of what happened to one university that changed all of its school leadership programs to the cohort model (Teitel, 1997). I anticipated the finding that students felt increased support and connection, but did not anticipate the increase in depth of discussion in class or the changes in interpersonal relationships among students, power relationships between students and faculty, and in program planning and decision making dynamics (Tietel, 1997). Students were able to engage in deep classroom discussions even about sensitive topics, given the comfort of the cohort. The challenges for interpersonal relationships was not predicted. Students felt badly about their experiences in the cohort when they had a naysayer in the group or had an unreliable peer. Instead of a short-lived, semester-long
relationship, they felt “stuck” with the peer for four years (Tietel, 1997, p. 71). Cohort members also felt closer to professors given the longer exposure to the same faculty. They felt safer making suggestions to the syllabus and assignments as a result of this relationship. Lastly, the students and faculty felt that the cohort allowed them to advocate for better educational experiences for both parties. The power of the cohort model was perceived to be beneficial to both faculty and students in Tietel’s study on the model.

A study comparing cohort and non-cohort models in university programs found that cohort classes appeared to have more participation and deeper discussions than traditional classes (Reynolds & Hebert, 1995). The study was complex and examined intensive schedule and non-intensive schedules in the same data. “Intensive” referred to a course of study with curriculum compacting, but the distinction clouded the results. There were four groups under investigation: non-cohort non-intensive, non-cohort intensive, cohort non-intensive, and cohort intensive. This appears to support the use of the cohort model as a preferred style in university preparation programs. While this finding is encouraging, it cannot stand alone given the added layer of intensive and non-intensive schedules that cloud the study.

Cohort members in all studies report positive results in belonging to a cohort as compared to proceeding through a course of study or training as an individual. Despite these positive results and much qualitative data, the research does not clearly demonstrate a statistically relevant benefit of learning via this model. More qualitative research is needed to begin to examine trends and to determine the shared experience more deeply.

Mentoring

Mentoring by an experienced special education director is as important as the cohort model in the ACLA program. At ACLA meetings, new directors are grouped with an
experienced director from their geographical area of the state. Discussions are focused on current events in special education and the experienced directors share needed resources and advice. The literature on mentoring is expansive.

Mentoring theory has been criticized for its inability to stand alone without the concepts of training or socialization (Bozeman & Feeney, 2007; Higgins & Kram, 2001). It appears that the best-intentioned mentor can only impart the wisdom of his or her own experiences. In the educational administration field, mentors assigned to novice administrators are ideally very experienced and possess a wealth of knowledge and pedagogy. On the other hand, they may be rooted in outdated curriculum methods and lacking an understanding of current research on leadership. In addition, the experienced administrator sometimes feels lost in a world of increasing technology and technological advancements in teaching and learning. It is important to define mentoring as it pertains to this study: Mentoring is

a process for the informal transmission of knowledge, social capital, and psychosocial support perceived by the recipient as relevant to work, career, or professional development; mentoring entails informal communication, usually face-to-face and during a sustained period of time, between a person who is perceived to have greater relevant knowledge, wisdom, or experience (the mentor) and a person who is perceived to have less (the protégé). (Bozeman & Feeney, 2007, p. 731)

This definition describes a relationship between two people where one possesses the knowledge and the other is the recipient of the knowledge. In their article, Bozeman and Feeney compare three processes for transmitting work-related knowledge: formal training, socialization and mentoring. Their findings indicate that mentoring is challenging as a stand-alone theory given its close ties to training, coaching, socialization and even friendship (Bozeman & Feeney, 2007).
As such, they dismiss this as a fully developed theory to explain how knowledge is transferred from experienced worker to novice.

The literature describes many mentoring programs for educators or school administrators that have demonstrated success. Higgins and Kram (2001) in their article, “Reconceptualizing Mentoring at Work,” view mentoring as a multiple-relationship phenomenon that has progressed from the two-person mentor-protégé model. They introduce the developmental network perspective as superior to traditional mentoring. The comparison is reproduced here as Table 2.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phenomenological Boundaries</th>
<th>Traditional Mentoring Perspective</th>
<th>Developmental Network Perspective</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mentoring relationship(s)</td>
<td>Organizational</td>
<td>Intra- and extraorganizational (e.g., profession, community, family)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hierarchical</td>
<td>Multilevel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Single dyadic relationship</td>
<td>Multiple dyadic/networked relationships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Focus on protégé learning</td>
<td>Mutuality and reciprocity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provided in sequence of relationships throughout career</td>
<td>Provided simultaneously by multiple relationships at any given time in career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functions Served</td>
<td>Organization/job related</td>
<td>Career/person related</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Levels of analysis</td>
<td>Dyad level</td>
<td>Network level and dyad level</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Table 2 explains past and present conceptualizations of mentoring (Higgins & Kram, 2001, p. 268).

The traditional mentoring model does not exist without supports in today’s educational workplace. An example of raising support from the traditional model is evident within the other workplace environments, specifically in the related field of childcare. Mentoring is implemented within the childcare industry as a way of helping childcare directors focus on effectuating organizational change while developing leadership skills (Fleming & Love, 2003). A new model is used in that industry: the Systematic Change Model for Leadership, Inclusion,
and Mentoring (SLIM). This model was proposed as a result of more working mothers looking for high-quality educational components in daycare settings for their children. Directors were empowered through this model to establish relationships with other childcare organizations and these broad connections helped to improve their training of directors and subsequently improve training for daycare providers in their programs (Fleming & Love, 2003).

Kim and Kim (2007) combined mentoring theory with social network theory to examine the creation of mentoring networks. Because the participants were military officers, the findings may not be generalizable to education administrators, however the study does validate that protégés receive mentoring from multiple mentors throughout their careers. This support from multiple avenues is viewed as superior to the traditional mentoring dyad. Kim and Kim discuss mentoring networks as superior to traditional mentoring dyads. These networks are defined as offering “both career functions which are characterized by providing challenging assignments, coaching, exposure, protection, and sponsorship as well as psychosocial functions which are characterized by providing counseling, friendship, and serving as role models” (Kim & Kim, 2007, p. 45). This is exactly the type of networking experience that is offered to ACLA participants during their first years in the role of special education director.

To understand the perceived benefits of ACLA by graduates, themes were sought within existing relevant research: licensure, standards, preparation programs, supplemental programs, the cohort model, and mentoring. Through a review of each theme and the subthemes, it is clear that studies specific to special education directors and the effects of supplemental programs are needed. The communities of practice formed in a preparation program cohort, as well as the predicted effectiveness and sustainability, are also areas in need of future research.
In summary, this literature review covered the following themes: literature related to the role of special education director, isolation of directors, certification and standards, preparation programs, supplemental training, mentoring, the cohort model, and communities of practice. The challenges of the role of special education director were discussed along with the isolation of the position in a public school district. Director certification was examined in detail followed by existing competency standards. Preparation programs for directors as well as other administrators were described as insufficient. The development of a peer cohort and an active community of practice was seen as a necessary supplement to the current preparation offered for directors.
Chapter III: Methodology

Introduction

This intent of this study is to examine how the ACLA program and potential ongoing relationships benefited Special Education Directors as perceived by them. There are three sections to this chapter: purpose, research questions, and research design. The design section includes participants, recruitment and access, data collection, storage, and analysis, trustworthiness and protection of human subjects. The first section follows with the purpose of the study.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine the perceived benefit of Massachusetts special education directors’ participation in the ACLA program. Each special education director arrives in the role initially with varying levels of experience and education, and individual directors’ perceptions of the benefit of ACLA will be the focus of this research. Participation in the ACLA program ends after one year, but examination of continued benefit during successive years is also an area of interest. Because individual’s experiences within group instruction are unique, a sample of special education director’s perceptions of ACLA and its benefits will be examined in depth.

The study will utilize qualitative inquiry to begin to examine the perceptions of directors both during initial participation and post-graduation. First I will share the research questions and then I will highlight why the qualitative method is closely matched with the research questions. Next, I will introduce the participants, recruiting methods and the process of data collection. Lastly, I will discuss data analysis, credibility, and reliability of the results ending with protection of human subjects.
Research Questions

This study examines the perceptions and experiences of ACLA graduates. The following research questions are investigated:

1. What benefits are perceived by directors who participated in ACLA?

2. What is the perceived benefit to members of a CoP that developed as a result of ACLA?

Research Design

A qualitative methodology was chosen for this study. Creswell’s 2009 explanation of the qualitative method is as “a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 4). This will allow for individual perceptions of the graduate’s shared experience. Qualitative analysis will enable the collection of richer, more in-depth data than would a quantitative approach, such as a survey instrument. The use of individual interviews was considered, but utilizing open-ended questioning via focus groups will allow the researcher to draw on data beyond the scope of individual interviews. Perceptions of the effect of ACLA and developed community of practice on graduates might be highly individualized, but the use of focus groups will allow for discussion and interaction to broaden the scope of their perceptions. Participants will benefit from the responses of others in their focus group, which will provide richer data for analysis.

The focus groups will allow participants to share their experiences in response to questions posed. Discussion will provide me with a broad base of data on the participant’s perceptions on the shared experience. Because I am examining the range of ideas and perceptions on the shared experience, the focus group is the preferred modality. (Kruger & Casey, 2009)
Research Tradition

This study will examine the perceived benefit for Massachusetts special education directors who participate in the Accept Collaborative Leadership Academy for New Directors through the use of a qualitative study utilizing focus group interviews. The definition of a focus group interview is best summarized by Valerie Wilson in her critique of utilizing the focus group interview in qualitative research.

Common elements of the focus group interview:

- It is a small group of four to 12 people.
- They meet with a trained researcher/facilitator/moderator.
- Meetings last for one to two hours.
- They discuss selected topic(s).
- Meetings take place in a non-threatening environment.
- They explore participants’ perceptions, attitudes, feelings, ideas.
- They encourage and utilize group interactions. (Wilson, 1997, p. 211)

Wilson specifically points to the last bullet point as difficult to prove because most quotes in qualitative studies are attributed to an individual voice. I will demonstrate that the interaction of participants increases the validity of the data as Wilson proposes. (Wilson, 1997) The three focus group interviews in this study will consist of the following groups:

1. Four to six graduates of ACLA 2013 (directors whose roles and responsibilities are only within special education)
2. Four to six graduates of ACLA 2013 (directors whose roles and responsibilities encompass other areas in addition to special education)
3. Four to six graduates of ACLA 2012 (with varying roles and responsibilities)
This study will employ the CoP theoretical framework to examine participant perceptions using a transcendental phenomenological approach. This approach is “focused less on the interpretations of the researcher and more on a description of the experiences of the participants.” (Creswell, 2007, p.59) Because the research problem is understanding common experiences of a shared phenomenon, it is well-suited to this approach. The research questions are focused on special education directors’ perceptions of the benefits of participation in ACLA, and this is well-suited to a phenomenological study. I must be conscious of my own voice as a participant. Bracketing is described by Nelewiadomy as, “bracket [ing] or set [ting] aside [your] own experiences in order to understand those of the participants in the study” (as cited in Creswell, 2009, p. 13). In sharing my personal experiences about ACLA, I will attempt to “bracket” them and begin to examine the experiences of others in a new light (Creswell, 2007).

Participants

From a list of ACLA 2013 participants provided by ACLA, it was determined that 27 of the 29 graduates would be eligible to participate in this study. A list of ACLA 2012 participants was requested and refused by ACLA for confidentiality purposes, but ACLA sent participants an e-mail to inquire about their potential interest in participating. After IRB acceptance, ACLA, complied with sharing the demographic data on the 2012 and 2013 participants. E-mails were sent to all 2013 participants and the 2012 participants that replied in the affirmative to ACLA’s question of possible interest in participating. Criteria for selection will include the following:

1. Must be a 2012 or 2013 graduate of ACLA
2. Must be currently filling a special education administrator role within a Massachusetts school district
These criteria will exclude those who have left Massachusetts public education or the position of special education director since participating in ACLA.

The 27 directors who were enrolled in ACLA for the 2012-13 school year represent 17 public school districts, three charter school districts, two regional technical high schools (grades nine through 12 only), and six regional school districts. Table 3 provides the breakdown of school districts and potential program participants, and demonstrates that all existing types of Massachusetts districts are proportionally represented. Table 4 provides the same for ACLA 2011-2012.

Table 3

*Special education directors who completed the 2013 Leadership Academy Program*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District type</th>
<th>Districts represented</th>
<th>Number of directors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Town public</td>
<td>Clinton, Cohasset, Middleborough, Reading, Palmer, Rockport, Lee, Walpole, Tewksbury, Ludlow</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City public</td>
<td>Revere, Natick, Fall River, Fitchburg, Beverly, Marlborough, Gloucester</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional public</td>
<td>Quabbin, Tantasqua, Dighton-Rehoboth, Dover-Sherborn, Mendon-Upton</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charter</td>
<td>Community Day, Holyoke Community, Alma del Mar</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional vocational/technical high school</td>
<td>Old Colony, Greater New Bedford</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4

*Special education directors who completed the 2012 Leadership Academy Program*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District type</th>
<th>Districts represented</th>
<th>Number of directors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Town public</td>
<td>Mansfield, Lincoln, Lynnfield, Ashland, Milford, Norwell, Swampscott, Wilmington, Stoughton</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>City public</td>
<td>Brookline, Boston, West Springfield</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional public</td>
<td>Southern Berkshire</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charter</td>
<td>Paulo Friere, Holyoke, Four Rivers, Greenfield</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Regional vocational/technical high school</td>
<td>Minuteman-Lexington, Cape Cod-Harwich</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private Day</td>
<td>Harbor Schools (closed in 2012)</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Current special education directors who are graduates of the ACLA classes of 2012 and 2013 were asked to participate in this study. Three focus group interviews were conducted with four to six persons in each. An additional attempt will be made to choose focus group participants who represent various geographical regions determined by the Massachusetts DESE. The DESE geographical areas with Leadership Academy participant districts are listed in Tables 5 and 6.
### Table 5

**Geographical divisions for ACLA 2013**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Massachusetts region</th>
<th>Number of directors</th>
<th>Participating school districts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Berkshires &amp; Pioneer Valley</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Lee, Ludlow, Palmer, Holyoke Community Charter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Central</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Clinton, Fitchburg, Marlborough, Mendon-Upton, Quabbin, Tantasqua</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater Boston</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Dover-Sherborne, Natick, Revere, Walpole</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Beverly, Community Day Charter, Gloucester, Reading, Rockport, Tewksbury</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Southeast &amp; Commissioner’s</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>Alma del Mar Charter, Dighton-Rehoboth, Fall River, Greater New Bedford, Middleboro, Old Colony</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>27</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 6

**Geographical divisions for ACLA 2012**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Massachusetts region</th>
<th>Number of directors</th>
<th>Participating school districts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Central</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>West Springfield</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greater Boston</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Brookline, Boston, Lynnfield, Swampscott Minuteman Vocational-Lexington, Harbor Schools-Newburyport, Wilmington</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Northeast</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>Stoughton, Mansfield, Lincoln, Cape Cod Regional Vocational, Ashland, Milford, Norwell</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Selection of the participants for the focus group interviews will begin with the collection of demographic data, such as number of years the participant has filled the director position, the district profile, and the departmental responsibilities charged to the participant. Although all participants have responsibilities pertaining to special education students, the departmental responsibilities will all be gathered because the program graduates hold different job titles, as indicated in Tables 7 and 8. The ACLA 2013 focus groups will contain a division between those with responsibilities outside of special education and those whose roles are limited to special education. The ACLA 2012 focus group will be a group of directors with and without experiences outside of special education. The focus group interview questions will focus on the experiences of the graduates during their ACLA participation year and the successive years since program completion.
Table 7

*Job titles of study participants ACLA 2013*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position title</th>
<th>Number of directors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Director of special education, Special education director, Director of special education services</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director of student services, Director of special services, Director of student support services</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant superintendent</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Executive director of special education and student services</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special education academic coordinator</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director of pupil personnel</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrator of pupil and special education services</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special-services coordinator</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director of operations &amp; human services</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>27</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 8

*Job titles of study participants ACLA 2012*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position title</th>
<th>Number of directors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Director of special education, Special education director, Director of special education services</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director of student services, Director of special services</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrator of Special Education</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrator of Student Support Services</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Director of Special Education</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special education academic coordinator</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Academic Support Director</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director of Academic Services</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrator of pupil and special education services</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordinator of Student Services</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>20</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Recruitment and Access**

Potential participants will be informed of this study via a group e-mail to the graduates of the ACLA classes of 2012 and 2013. Upon approval by the IRB, follow-up email and telephone contact will also be attempted for all non-respondents. Study participants will be chosen from the respondents given the aforementioned criteria. The sample will be comprised of a minimum of 12 and maximum of 18 Massachusetts special education administrators.
Data Collection

The data collection process in this study will focus on what directors perceive as the benefits of having participated in the ACLA and if they have continued the CoP in successive years. If they have, the continued access to a network of peers will be examined. Data will be gathered via the three focus group interviews.

**Pilot focus group.** Prior to the identified study focus groups, the focus group interview protocol and questions will be trialed through a focus group with previous ACLA graduates who are known to the researcher and have given their consent to participate in the pilot focus group. The pilot will consist of an hour-long focus group and follow-up session where they will be able to ask questions of the researcher about this study. The directors will be informed that they are participating in a pilot focus group interview and queried on question clarity and probed for understanding following the focus group interview. The focus group interview protocol will be revised as a result of the pilot group if needed.

**Primary study interviews.** Directors participating in this study will participate in a focus group lasting one to one and a half hours (Appendix A). The focus groups will be scheduled before and after a free professional development seminar for special education directors offered at a central location in Massachusetts. The sessions will be audio recorded. The focus group process will be designed to facilitate the collection of data conducive to answering the research study questions.

Data Storage

The data collected will be password protected on my personal computer. Participants will have the opportunity to review the group’s transcript prior to data analysis as an accuracy check. Any misquotes or misinterpretation will be adjusted as requested by participants.
Because I am a peer to the participants and am not in an evaluative role, there is no threat to job security or professional status for the respondents. The only possible perceived threat to individuals involved in this study could be the distance needed to travel or the loss of productivity time during the interview. I may have established relationships with some members prior to the study, but I won’t know this until the list of focus group participants is established.

**Data Analysis**

An understanding of the perceptions of special education directors will be attempted through an analysis of the data collected from the focus group transcriptions and analytic memos written by me during the data collection process. Significant words, phrases and sentences will be highlighted that point to the participants’ experiences in the shared phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). The data analysis will begin with an analysis of the transcriptions from the three focus groups. A transcriber or transcription service may be hired to transcribe the recorded interviews if I am unable to manage the transcription.

I will code the data will at least twice to develop the emerging themes. See Figure 5 for a visual representation of coding stages (Hahn, 2008). Coding is a type of qualitative analysis that deciphers participant’s comments into words or phrases (Saladaña, 2009). During the first cycle, descriptive coding will be used. Descriptive coding is a useful tool for beginning qualitative researchers to begin to make sense of transcription data. A descriptive code of one to two words will label the data and provide topics (Saladaña, 2009).
The topics gleaned from the descriptive coding cycle will provide a basis for the second cycle of coding which will seek to further refine the data. Pattern coding will be utilized at this stage to “pull together a lot of material into a more meaningful and parsimonious unit of analysis” (Miles, Huberman, & Saladaña, 2014, p. 69). Major themes will be identified at this stage and each piece of data will be sorted as a result of developing patterns (Saladaña, 2009). This process will assist with sorting through individual perceptions of participation in ACLA from the focus group transcripts and code the data into the identified themes.

MaxQDA software may be used as an additional stage to assist in coding the data from the transcriptions. I will also use analytic memo writing (Maxwell, 1996) to reflect throughout the data collection and analysis processes of the research. These memos will record thoughts on the data as it is examined. Memos will be directly linked to each theme or datum as a check for personal bias. Perceptions of the participants will also be sorted by the applicability to the research questions. Although I am also a graduate of ACLA, I will, set aside or “bracket” my
own experiences to focus on understanding the participant’s experiences through their eyes (Creswell, 2009). Through careful data analysis of the focus group transcriptions and the analytic memos, the perceptions of the graduates of ACLA will be analyzed for common themes. The research questions will be answered and the findings shared to advocate for the continuation of ACLA to improve the preparation of special education directors, establishment of an effective CoP, and ultimately the education of the student populations they serve.

**Trustworthiness**

This research study could affect director preparation programs or future ACLA participation, so care will be taken to ensure the study will be trustworthy. Lincoln & Guba indicate that trustworthiness must be considered in evaluating the worth of a study (1985). This study will utilize their four criteria for examining trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Credibility involves developing confidence in the truth of the findings. Transferability ensures that the findings can apply or easily transfer to other situations. Dependability shows that the findings could be repeated with similar results. Lastly, confirmability considers any researcher bias and examines that the study is neutral and shaped by the data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All four criteria will be essential to ensuring this study is deemed trustworthy.

This study is limited to the ACLA classes of 2012 and 2013 and special education directors who are still in the role in a public school district in Massachusetts. Because I am a graduate of ACLA, this study could be the victim of researcher bias, so care will be taken to reflect on personal experience and bracket those experiences to ensure the four criteria of trustworthiness are considered in the data analysis process.
Protection of Human Subjects

No information collected in the study will be discussed or shared with any third party without written consent of the respective participant. The specific districts will not be named and school districts will be referred to solely by their type (town, city, charter, or regional) and general geographic location. The consent forms will communicate to all participants that they are free to reduce or withdraw their participation at any time.

The study sample in this study will include special education directors who are 2012 or 2013 graduates of ACLA. I will ensure no harm is experienced by any of the study participants. I will include safety measures for confidentiality and I will obtain the necessary consent from participants and agencies. Because I am required to have my proposal reviewed by an institutional board (Creswell, 2009), the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board (IRB), will be contacted for approval of this study. The IRB protects the human subjects from any potential harm from the study and ensures that vulnerable populations are also given special safety considerations (Creswell, 2009).

Summary

The purpose of the research is to examine the perceptions of graduates of ACLA in response to two study questions. Methods are a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach. The researcher will conduct one pilot focus group interview followed by three focus group interviews. These focus group interviews will be the vehicle for attaining perceptions of directors' participation in ACLA. They will help determine the benefit of ACLA to new directors and if an effective community of practice develops after the conclusion of the initial year in the program.
Chapter IV: Research Findings

The purpose of the study is to determine the perceived benefit to new special education directors of attending ACLA and if they additionally benefited from the development of a sustainable Community of Practice. Based on the goals of the research proposal, the theoretical framework adopted for the study and the methodology of the study, the following two research questions were developed:

1. What benefits are perceived by directors who participated in ACLA?
2. What is the perceived benefit to members of a CoP that developed as a result of ACLA?

This chapter outlines the study questions in comparison to the focus group sites, participants, data collected followed by an analysis of the themes that emerged.

Study Sites, Participants, and Data Collected

Participants in the study were 14 Massachusetts special education directors. The first focus group was held in Clinton, Massachusetts, the second in Worcester, Massachusetts and the third in Holyoke, Massachusetts. Each site hosted directors from various district demographics (see Table 9). The first two focus group interviews contained directors who attended ACLA during the tenth cohort year (2012-2103). The third focus group contained directors who attended ACLA during the ninth cohort year (2011-2102).

Directors were contacted via e-mail and asked to participate. Volunteers from the tenth cohort were arranged into two groups by geographic location so travel time was reduced. Experience in the role of special education director varied at the time of attending ACLA, but all had been in the role for three to seven years at the time of the focus group interviews.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Position title</th>
<th>District Grades Enrollment %SWD* Level Location</th>
<th>Focus Group/ Cohort</th>
<th>Years as Director</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Other Titles Held</th>
<th>Massachusetts Certifications Held</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Director of Special Education Services</strong></td>
<td>PK-12 660 13% SWD Western MA</td>
<td>1/10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Teacher, Autism Specialist, Behavior Specialist, Board Certified Behavior Analyst (BCBA)</td>
<td>Moderate Special Ed Intensive Special Ed Administrator of Special Education Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assistant Superintendent</strong></td>
<td>PK-12 7,170 15.1% SWD Level 2 Metro Boston</td>
<td>1/10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Teacher, Student Services, Assistant Principal, Principal</td>
<td>Superintendent Principal Administrator of Special Education Special Education Teacher Social Studies Teacher Truancy Officer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Director of Operations &amp; Student Affairs</strong></td>
<td>PK-12 2,186 21.2% SWD Level 5 Central MA</td>
<td>1/10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Special Ed Attorney, Special Ed Teacher, Special Ed Program Director</td>
<td>Administrator of Special Education Business Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Director of Pupil Services</strong></td>
<td>PK-12 5,192 22.2% SWD Level 3 Central MA</td>
<td>1/10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Autism Specialist, ASD Teacher, Life Skills Teacher</td>
<td>Administrator of Special Education Intensive Special Ed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Assistant Director of Special Education</strong></td>
<td>PK-12 25,076 19.1% SWD Level 4 Central MA</td>
<td>2/10</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Principal Assistant Principal District Wide PT Specialist</td>
<td>Principal Administrator of Special Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Director of Student Support Services</strong></td>
<td>PK-12 2,699 16.2% SWD Level 3 Central MA</td>
<td>2/10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Evaluation Team Leader Teacher of the Deaf Special Ed Teacher Special Ed Supervisor</td>
<td>Special Ed Teacher Teacher of the Deaf Administrator of Special Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Special Education Director</strong></td>
<td>7-12 1,798 11.4% SWD Level 2 Central MA</td>
<td>2/10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Special Education Teacher Program Coordinator</td>
<td>Special Education Teacher Administrator of Special Education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Position</td>
<td>School District</td>
<td>Level</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Role</td>
<td>Special Ed Teacher</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>--------</td>
<td>-------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director of Student Support</td>
<td>PK-12</td>
<td>2/10</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Special Education Teacher</td>
<td>SWD Level 2 South Central</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Team Chairperson</td>
<td>General Ed Teacher</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Administrator of Special Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director of Student Services</td>
<td>PK-12</td>
<td>2/10</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Private School Teacher</td>
<td>SWD Level 2 Northeast MA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Guidance Counselor</td>
<td>General Ed Teacher</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Curriculum Coordinator</td>
<td>Administrator of Special Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Team Chairperson</td>
<td>Special Ed Teacher</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Evaluation Team Leader</td>
<td>General Ed Teacher</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Supervisor</td>
<td>Administrator of Special Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director of Academic Support</td>
<td>7-12</td>
<td>3/9</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Reading Teacher</td>
<td>SWD Level 2 Western MA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Special Education Teacher</td>
<td>General Ed Teacher</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Special Ed Teacher</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director of Academic Support</td>
<td>9-12</td>
<td>3/9</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>General Ed Teacher</td>
<td>SWD Level 2 Western MA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Special Ed Teacher</td>
<td>Principal/Assistant Principal/</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Special Ed Teacher</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Administrator of Special Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director of Special Education</td>
<td>PK-12</td>
<td>3/9</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Speech/Language Pathologist</td>
<td>SWD Level 2 Southern MA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Team Chairperson</td>
<td>Special Ed Teacher</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Interim Special Ed Director</td>
<td>Special Ed Teacher</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Hearing Impaired General Education Teacher</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Director of Special Education</td>
<td>PK-12</td>
<td>3/9</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Paraprofessional Special Ed Teacher</td>
<td>SWD Level 2 Southern MA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Special Ed Facilitator</td>
<td>Special Ed Teacher</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Assistant Special Ed Director</td>
<td>Special Ed Teacher</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Preschool Coordinator</td>
<td>Administrator of Special Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>DYS Facility Teacher</td>
<td>Special Ed Teacher</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant Director of Special Education</td>
<td>PK-12</td>
<td>3/9</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Speech/Language Pathologist</td>
<td>SWD Level 2 Southern MA</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Special Ed Teacher</td>
<td>Special Ed Teacher</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Administrator of Special Education</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Students with disabilities*

Data was collected by way of several recorded focus groups and the collection of relevant documents. A demographic worksheet and an ACLA speaker/topic ranking activity were the documents reviewed for this study. The semi-structured format of the focus group allowed...
directors to interact, which resulted in increased depth of responses. Following each focus group, the recordings were sent to rev.com to be transcribed. Transcripts were reviewed and edited with the aid of the original recording as a guide. Transcripts were reviewed again, and emergent topics were coded into themes.

The second data set was a demographic worksheet completed by each director at the beginning of the focus group and an activity at the culmination of the focus group. Directors completed a demographic data worksheet upon arrival at the focus group location (see appendix D). The directors were then asked a series of open-ended questions during the focus group interview sessions, followed by the speaker/topic-ranking activity (see appendix B & C). During the activity they were each given a list of the dates and corresponding speakers/topics for each ACLA session. They were asked to rank these in order of most beneficial to least beneficial (see Tables 12 & 13). Due to differing topics/speakers for each cohort, there are separate charts for each cohort year.

**Research Question 1: What benefits are perceived by directors who participate in ACLA?**

Through a careful analysis of the focus group transcripts three themes were derived in direct relation to research question 1. These are presented in Table 1 and discussed below.

Table 10

*Themes emerging from Research Question 1.*

| Professional development in the ACLA program provided participating directors with a great deal of useful and relevant resources and strategies to more effectively do their work. |
| Participation greatly enhanced directors’ confidence in the aspects of the directorship that their college courses and previous training did not previously provide. |
| Participation supported the development of supportive and helpful relationships with members across the cohort. |
Professional development in the ACLA program provided participating directors with a great deal of useful and relevant resources and strategies to more effectively do their work. The directors who participated in the study shared their perceptions about the usefulness of the professional development sessions at each ACLA meeting. Additionally they provided their preferences on ACLA speakers/topics which provided additional information for the group to discuss. The list of speakers/topics can be found in appendix B and C. All participants mentioned the accumulation of resources and strategies in the focus group interviews in one way or another.

Upon arrival at the first ACLA session (Summer Institute) all participants received a resource binder of special education compliance templates as well as guidance and organizational strategies. The resource binder was originally created in 2003 by Dr. Susan Rees and is updated annually for each new group of directors. Data collected in the focus groups and the ranking of speakers/topics indicated the importance of the sessions provided by Dr. Susan Rees on creating a procedural manual in each district and the resource binder provided by ACLA. One director shared that school leaders in her district were jealous of the resources she was given at ACLA. She shared her resource binder with two new principals who were going through an administrative training. As she said, “They both looked at the binder that I have . . . and they’re like, ‘we didn't get anything like this, nothing we did [in our training] really prepared us like what you have.’” Another director remarked on the resources provided in ACLA as, “I felt well prepared but nothing really prepares you [for your first year in the role.] I think Susan Rees' [ACLA] program was a godsend to me. I still use her materials today.”

The templates and boilerplate letters in the ACLA binder were a resource that many directors liked. The templates saved directors extensive amounts of individual time that would
have been needed to craft the documentation needed for situations that would inevitably occur. ACLA provided a session by Dr. Susan Rees on how to utilize templates and personalize them for each district. One of the more experienced directors shared, “the procedural manual was huge, and how to build that compliant, responsive system with all those boiler plate letters and all of that was awesome. I think the stuff you walked away with in your hand was really good.”

This director hadn’t taken the ACLA training until after she had a few years in the director’s role, so she had already created many of the templates herself during the first few years. She instantly realized how much time she would have saved if she received the resource binder during her first year like most did, and how helpful it would be for the other new directors.

In addition to the resource binder, directors highlighted the benefit of having the brief sessions with experienced directors as beneficial. “I liked the follow-up sessions where they do a presentation and then there was a seasoned special ed director who would sit at our table and kind of brainstorm or question what we needed. That was always very helpful.” said one director. Another commented about the cracker barrel sessions “I don’t remember exactly the participants in my group but I do remember who we did our cracker barrels with and it was helpful for the general information and our cracker barrel leader giving her perspective on things.” Directors benefited from having their “in the moment” questions on specific cases in their districts answered instantly. It was described as “I think they were real people giving you advice. Sometimes you left with more questions than answers but I don’t think that’s a bad thing sometimes.”

In summary, the cracker barrel sessions with seasoned special education administrators assisted new directors with an opportunity to brainstorm personal district challenges. Directors benefited from learning from those already in the role who were able to assist with current
challenges and help avoid potential pitfalls. While peer-to-peer interaction was beneficial, the additional opportunity of assignment to a cracker barrel group with an experienced director added another level of beneficial support at the monthly seminars.

Others mentioned specific speakers and topics that were timely based on what they were challenged with in their districts at the time of the training. One of the directors ranked the speaker on building programs as the most beneficial as they were experiencing challenges with that in their district. “We were having in our district great difficulty with our substantially separate programs and we were losing a lot of kids to out of district placement . . . that was the first thing we really wanted to focus on across the district: working on our programs, supporting the staff, and rebuilding them.”

Lastly, many directors said they learned many shortcuts and timesaving tips about where to find resources (beyond the resource binder) from these professional development sessions. One director said that it was like breathing a sigh of relief with the newfound knowledge in an extremely challenging new position:

It gave us an opportunity to realize that the resources are there, and it kind of gave us direction if we didn't know something, because we don't obviously know everything. We know where the resources are. The Accept Collaborative gave us some of the resources in the Leadership Academy, but I think the most important thing that I kind of picked up from this is that I can do this job because I can find the resources. . . I think, to be successful in this position, its more personality than anything. Being able to relate to people and relate to the students and just don’t be so bogged down in all the difficult portions of the job and being able to just cut all the regulations away and not have to worry about that because I can figure that out, I can find that information and be able to
say ‘I don’t know, I’m going to have to get back to you.’ I think that was the good take
away.’

It was clear from the focus group data that directors appreciated the resources ACLA created for
their specific needs as a director of special education. In addition, they appreciated opportunities
to ask questions of experienced special education directors. They learned that although they
might have experienced fears about their competency, they had the needed direction to locate the
resources they needed to begin the problem solving process.

**Participation greatly enhanced directors’ confidence in the aspects of the
directorship that their college courses and previous training did not previously provide.**

There were three described areas of needed additional training. The first was specific strategies
in the areas of management and organization. The second was the realization of needed fortitude
and perseverance for the position and the third was preparation for responsibilities beyond
special education.

Directors in all focus groups discussed their preparation programs with a critical eye
during the focus group sessions. Most directors appreciated the college and university programs
they attended, but many of the programs prepared them for roles other than special education
director. For example, a master’s degree in special education prepares one for teaching special
education students, not directing staff, developing programs, or managing a multimillion dollar
budget. One director summed up the missing components from her preparation program as,

I’ll say that what was missing was really the kind of brass tacks of situations that you’re
going to encounter each and every day. When you take those school law courses, they’re
so general. It would have been far more helpful, I think, if we were able to apply some of
the things that we were already [doing], like I was already in the job . . . that would have
been helpful. These are the people you need to go to. I mean I sought them out myself, but these are the steps you can take. These are the resources that are going to be available to you. Rather than the general, you’re going to figure it out on your own and here’s the umbrella that you’re going to use.

Another director shared her thoughts on her preparation program, “They don’t give you the information in those courses as to how to deal with those extremely difficult parents and situations. That’s all your own real life kind of experience that you need to rely on.” It is worthy of mention that a flexible personality, empathy through the experience of parenthood, and good social skills are all important preparation elements for directors that really cannot be included in a preparation program for various reasons.

As Table 9 demonstrates, directors moved from various educational experiences into the directorship with varying degrees of preparedness. These included: Special Education Attorney, Principal, Assistant Director of Special Education, Assistant Principal, Team Chairperson/Evaluation Team Leader, Special Education Supervisor, Curriculum Coordinator, Preschool Coordinator, Program Coordinator/Director, Behavior Specialist/BCBA (Board Certified Behavior Analyst), Teacher of the Deaf, Autism Specialist, Physical Therapist, Speech/Language Pathologist, Guidance Counselor, Special Education Teacher, Reading Teacher, DYS (Department of Youth Services) Facility Teacher, and Paraprofessional. The variance in background of 14 special education directors was astonishing and perhaps one of the reasons that effective professional development programs for this group is so challenging to find.

**Management and organization.** One of the ACLA sessions focused on moving from the teacher or service provider role into the management role. It specifically taught directors how to work with their secretaries to maximize the effectiveness of the relationship by increasing
communication and minimizing the paperwork associated with special education. The workshop was based on a two-day seminar program and was provided as an introduction or enticement to take that seminar, The Breakthrough Coach. Many cohort members shared that they went on to take The Breakthrough Coach and found it very useful; they applied the strategies from the course in their districts. One of the directors explained its benefits:

We come in [to the directorship] and we're service providers and we're teachers and we're doing that, and when you're shifting to a management position, your thinking has to change. We're really not trained to be managers; we're trained to be doers. “The Breakthrough Coach” really helped clarify those two roles, and to shift me to being more of a manager or a leader as opposed to a doer. It’s still hard for me. I still have more of a tendency to problem solve to say “Oh, I'll take care of that.”

Acknowledgment that the shift from direct service provider to manager of direct service providers was not easy during the first year of the position is another reason the ACLA support was needed. Delegating responsibilities to others can be challenging without the proper training. One of the directors shared a story about taking on the reading instruction for a student during her first year as director to assist one of her teachers. She reflected on how improper her decision was, but she hadn’t yet made the shift from “doer” to manager:

I remember somebody saying—I think it was Susan [Rees], I'm not going to quote anybody exactly—but it was, “you can't be a coach if you're on the playing field.” When I started, I took on this job [administrator of special education] and I was also needed to teach reading to a student who came to us who had really significant needs far beyond

---

5 The Breakthrough Coach is a workshop developed by Malachi Pancoast that teaches administrators how to communicate with their secretaries and maximize time in the classroom observing the learning that occurs. It instructs school leaders how to minimize the volumes of paperwork involved in running schools and programs. (Connerly & Smith, 2013)
what we had been prepared to do. I had left the job as the special education teacher who would have taught the student. I would have felt very competent teaching the new student. In my new job, I had hired somebody who was incompetent to do the reading [instruction]. Gosh, talk about live and learn. I said, “Well, I'll teach them.” You're laughing. Yeah, it was ridiculous because I was in the special education meetings as the administrator and the teacher and wow, I learned that lesson way too late. I still think about that, and it was really good advice, but until I had actually lived it, I didn't know how important that advice was.

Special education directors in all focus groups shared the benefit of management and organizational strategy training in their new position. All felt that their teaching experience and college preparation programs were helpful, but found the management training provided by ACLA was excellent, targeted professional development for fostering the skills they needed to move from the teaching ranks to administration.

**Realization of needed fortitude and perseverance for the position.** The special education director position in any district can be challenging. The opportunity to participate in ACLA appeared to assist new directors to realize theirs is a difficult job and they needed to determine what type of leader they would become. One director reflected on absorbing the intensity of the special education director position while at ACLA. “There were some helpful comments by some of the presenters about supervising, supervision, and all of us being so new, just how to do it and how not to do it . . . I remember saying to myself, ‘I’ve got to do this, I’ve got to turn how I’m focusing, maybe I don’t need to be a powerhouse.’ Because I think we tend to because these jobs are so intense and you have to know this and you have to know that, and realizing that I can let go of some things and still do a good job.” Her ACLA participation
helped highlight her need for perfection and the needed shift to prioritize needs instead of attempting to fix everything at once.

The introduction to ACLA was a three-day Summer Institute at Northeastern University’s Warren Center in Ashland, Massachusetts. Directors were required to commit to two overnight stays at the Warren Center Inn and were expected to participate in activities from 8:00 a.m. to 9:00 p.m. daily. One director shared that she appreciated the initial ACLA Summer Institute as a way to absorb immediately the challenges that were in store:

I think it was at that summer, the three day, I had been a special education director for a year at that point and, I don’t know if it was an insight or just a validation for me was ‘oh my gosh, this is going to be the hardest job I’m ever going to do in my entire life.’ Your first year, you don’t know what you don’t know kind of a thing. That first year was kind of just like clean up and oh my gosh, there’s just so much work to do. Then, sitting there through those three days and getting the binder and getting all the information, I can remember going ‘what have I gotten myself into?’ This is going to be a really hard job. I mean, I already knew it, but just listening to everything that we were listening to, and listening to everybody else, it just validated the way I had been feeling, but not in a bad way. It wasn’t a bad feeling. It was just like okay, you really know what you’re in for now. Do you know what I mean?

Another director responded to her thoughts and reflected on the high turnover rate in the position:

I do because I was in the public school for ten years and of the ten years, I had eight different special education directors. I think that says it all, you know, the high level of turnover is pretty significant and I thought, I hope I don’t become a stat because I really
enjoy what I do and I don’t want to do another job. It’s all I want to do. I don’t aspire to be a superintendent or assistant [superintendent]. This was the job I was aspiring to be in. Now that I’m here, I just want to be the best.

Yet another director shared her feelings on attending ACLA,

It was after my first year and it opened my eyes to everything that’s out there and that I do need to be very persistent to really bring my district to where I think it needs to be, and I think it validated what I was already doing but it also gave me the resources. I’m like, okay I’m not in this alone, and I know I can move forward because I have the information to do it.

Lastly, there was a sense of personal validation expressed by another director, who said that participating gave her the needed confidence to be successful. “For me, I would concur that that is what it was, it was validating. The enlightenment was; I was also a year in, is oh it certainly is a tough job. Do you know what I mean? It’s not me, it’s a tough job.” Directors in all focus groups expressed gratitude for the opportunity to participate in ACLA and learning the personal attributes, skills, and strategies that could help them persevere and become a successful director.

**Responsibilities beyond special education.** Many public school districts opt for the Director of Student Services position instead of the more traditional Director of Special Education position. The director of student services position encompasses many other departments and students in addition to the typical director of special education title. Special education directors in smaller districts tend to be assigned more than just special education responsibilities as well. Many have responsibilities for other at-risk populations beyond students
with disabilities. Of the directors in this research sample, two from each focus group (six in total) had responsibilities outside of special education.

There was some discussion in the focus groups about assignment of other areas and lacking the necessary background to feel confident and successful. Regardless of their titles, focus group participants had responsibilities for management of some general education groups and programs: guidance counseling, English Language Learner programs, nursing services, homeless students, section 504 accommodation plans, preschools, home schooling programs and Response to Intervention programs. These additional responsibilities were not addressed specifically in the ACLA training; however, the management strategies and organizational tools taught were applicable to assisting with these responsibilities. One charter school director shared feeling overwhelmed with the additional responsibilities. “I’m the director of academic support at my school which includes special education, Title 1, 504, student success plans, sweeping the floor, doing cafeteria duty, painting the walls.” While there is some humor evident in her response, other directors were nodding in agreement when she spoke. While not currently required to be licensed as Administrators of Special Education in Massachusetts, charter school directors fulfill the same roles and responsibilities as the directors in public schools. She went on to share that she utilized the organizational and management strategies from ACLA to apply to her responsibilities beyond special education and felt more comfortable with the breadth of her position as a result of participating in ACLA. Another director shared how she found out that she was also the preschool director for her district. “When I took the job a big part of my role was the out of district [students] and I said, ‘okay.’ Then when I was going to sign on the dotted line they said ‘oh yeah, we need a preschool coordinator’ and I was like, ‘oh, that’s fine. I’m already in the building’ not knowing anything about preschool. This was not explained to her
until the last minute and while she agreed to take on the additional responsibility, no additional support or training was provided.

The focus group directors were asked about mentoring support within their districts to assist with the additional responsibilities outside of special education. One director responded with laughter to the question posed.

I think that’s funny because there’s really nobody. The only time [people understand my position] is when I’m with you guys [other directors]. I’m totally on my own with that and people look to me as if I’m an expert. Every day I’m not because there are new situations. I was laughing because I was thinking of someone I know who just got this job. I know she’s not ready, she’s totally talented but she is going to be the director of a big, urban district and I’m thinking again of that isolation. She doesn’t have anyone.

There’s really not a lot of mentors out there for that.

As ACLA is funded and approved by the Massachusetts State Special Education Director, Marcia Mittnacht, its primary intention is to improve compliance statewide in the area of special education. An unintended benefit to directors evident in this study is that the strategies taught and resources provided also apply to their other areas of responsibility.

**Participation supported the development of supportive and helpful relationships with members across the cohort.** There were a number of benefits discussed in focus groups regarding relationship building benefits. They were sharing problems and solutions and supporting each other through the process of identifying each district’s strengths and areas of need in special education compliance. Many directors commented on feeling supported at the initial Summer Institute and then reuniting and accessing the network during that first year after the summer induction followed by the annual reunion meetings of all cohorts together.
**Sharing problems and solutions.** A benefit cited by directors was the ability to continue to relationships from the summer conference into the school year with monthly, day-long ACLA conferences. This seemed to assist with feelings of isolation and low confidence:

“Every time you go [to ACLA] you hear that everyone is struggling with the same things you’re struggling with so there is that sense of ‘oh my God, I haven’t done it right’ but everybody else also hasn’t done it right at a time or two. Do you know what I mean? I don’t know even how to describe it beyond what you were saying, the mental health portion, social/emotional effect but even the applicable skills that you get or manual you get. Everything seemed to work.

Some of the other directors benefited from learning not to take themselves too seriously while taking on some of the challenges of the position. As one said,

Somebody [at ACLA] told me nobody is going to die if you screw this up. Really, that was really helpful for me. It's kind of a funny thought, but I went into [the job] like, I can’t get worked up about needing to do things right, and that was so helpful, honestly. [I learned from others] it's going to be okay.

Another benefit to the ACLA professional development sessions as mentioned by one director pointed to the power of the cohort in assisting with her isolation and feelings of stress:

I think for me it's useful to talk to other people that are in the same situation I'm in, that can give me feedback that's meaningful. I can talk to the building principals, I can talk to the superintendent, but they don't necessarily understand special education law, special education dynamics and that whole thing. It's [ACLA sessions with other directors] helpful for that. I think it's also helpful because this is a very stressful job and it's helpful to meet with people, be able to blow off steam.
Another director shared her thoughts on how beneficial it was to belong to a group that understood the intricacies of the position she found herself in. She describes ACLA as,

> It was kind of like a support system at the same time. Just being able to connect with people and just walking in and knowing that the details of the situations might be different but the overall it was the same. Whether it was public school or private school or charter school, we are all trying our best to move forward and just having people that will even listen and not glaze over or not fall asleep like when you try to talk to somebody that’s not in our field. They try to understand but they have no idea at all. So, having people that would go, ‘oh yeah it’s intense.’ Just the whole not feeling alone while we’re taking this journey and all going down different paths but we’re starting from point A.

It is clear that belonging to a group with peers all starting out in the position at the same time made for an instant connection and provided comfort for participants.

Directors in each of the three focus groups referenced brainstorming solutions to problems with the ACLA group informally during meals and breaks and also during the cracker barrel sessions with their assigned experienced special education director as very powerful as compared to other professional development groups.

I have to say, the thing that probably has benefited me the most and people have spoken about it in other questions is the gathering of people I met through ACLA or other gatherings where really it’s other colleagues and we’re brainstorming ideas together. The formal memberships, I think are something good in getting broader information or access to vendors . . . but I have learned more and gained more through the collaboration and informal meetings with other colleagues than through those memberships.
The directors also compared attending ACLA to participating in the statewide conferences offered by the organization that represents their statewide cohort of directors. Directors shared that they found their statewide organization valuable, but insufficient to provide the type of colleague interaction that they found at ACLA. One director described the comparison:

The ASE [Administrators of Special Education Statewide Conference] is useful sometimes to go to kind of hear a broader perspective, but I do find the more intimate colleague to colleague, I do find it's much more valuable for me to bounce ideas off, to get other people's perspectives [as in ACLA sessions].

Another director shared her priorities for professional development when comparing participating in the statewide conference verses the small ALCA cohort reunion meetings. “I can tell you, from my point of view, in my previous district and more so in this district, it is very difficult to arrange ahead of time to do these things and that is probably why I prioritize. So, ASE is not my priority.” When forced to choose between a larger professional development conference and a small CoP, the CoP is chosen.

Gaining insight into each district’s strengths and areas of need in special education while supporting each other through the process. Directors felt ACLA provided opportunities to explore their district’s strengths and areas of need in terms of compliance. In addition to this, directors felt strongly that they were supported by their peers during this process. A large portion of the job of the special education director is compliance with state and federal special education standards. Each school district is required to undergo a compliance review every six years with a mid-cycle review every three years. These reports can point to many areas that directors need to target for improvement.
For those going through an actual CPR (Coordinated Program Review) audit during the year of their cohort, they were able to send an e-mail out to the group to ask a question about a specific criterion. For example, if the district was cited for not having the correct personnel at team meetings on the last CPR, a director could e-mail the group and would receive numerous responses with attached documents they could personalize for their district to meet the criteria.

As directors shared information from their “clean” audits, new directors benefited from information that had already been vetted by the state auditors. As one of the directors said,

I know that [name] did it [correctly], but I need the procedure, I need the forms, I need the PowerPoint, I need the stuff. Boom, here’s the thumb drive. I’d give it to a whole bunch of people that way they’d have the same stuff. Everybody is sharing the information.

This demonstrates the power of receiving and examining an exemplar in comparison to simply reading the compliance regulations (the only information provided by the state in preparation for the audit) and the networking of the materials assisted directors with managing the time constraints of preparing for an audit. They weren’t creating all the materials for trainings or new procedure descriptions and forms from scratch.

Directors in the focus groups reflected on their feelings of inadequacy when they were required to review their district’s compliance reports during an ACLA activity. One said, “Sometimes I would leave [an ACLA session] and I'd go, ‘Oh my gosh, I have to go back and fix this …oh my gosh, oh there's more to do, or oh no, I'm going to look the other way on that thing.’” She used the instruction at ACLA immediately in wanting to bring her district closer to appropriate compliance levels prior to the CPR audit. Some directors made lists of
improvements needed and others saw opportunities to grow and learn in their new position. One
director summarized it this way:

I’d just say that I think there were a lot of sessions in there that piqued my curiosity,
brought up things I wanted to know a little bit more about; and listening and talking a
little bit about programming and best practices. That probably wasn’t the place for it, but I
think that could be a real extension of what’s going on. I agree with you: that’s where
you’re going to learn the most.

Lastly, directors realized some of their procedures, such as their district special education
procedure manuals, required updating as a result of viewing others at ACLA session. One
director shared her obsession with instantly applying the information learned at ACLA when she
returned to her district: “You went back to the office and immediately started tweaking the
manual and did the tickler file and did all of those things. I created a different relationship with
my secretary which was helpful. Just everything. Everything was very helpful.” Another
director shared sheepishly that when she was asked to bring her district manual to an ACLA
session as part of a show and tell session, she honestly shared she had nothing to bring: “there
was none, not a single ounce of paper for procedure in [district name].” She realized she had a
big job ahead of her to create one, but the benefit of seeing exemplars at ACLA and asking
others to provide her with an electronic copy of theirs, made the task manageable.

In special education, compliance with regulations and laws is the key to obtaining a clean
review by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education in the district
Coordinated Program Review. Superintendents may consider this the ultimate evaluation of the
director’s competency. The acronym for the Coordinated Program Review “CPR” applies
because many directors feel that is exactly what they need when results are reviewed. Having the
opportunity to learn more about this process, and being given the time to review their district’s historic performance on the CPR during the ACLA compliance seminar resonated with directors: “I would say the building a compliant program was probably the best little section of training,” said one of the directors.

During the focus groups it was apparent that the directors had formed a bond with the other members of their cohort and were supportive of each other. There were many times during the interview process where their body language could be interpreted by the researcher as supportive. When a director shared a vignette about a situation, it was almost always followed by an affirmative comment by a peer or at minimum a head nod. One of the directors affirmed comments made by her peers about the support of the cohort in doing the challenging work that was ahead:

I have to say I agree with what all three of you have said. I remember I felt a level of confidence. I don’t know where it came from going into this job, having not been an administrator before, and it was maybe a bit of a false bravado. It [ACLA] taught me what I didn’t know and what I needed to think about. I don’t know what the heck got me these really warm feelings about the group I was with. I always say it was the best professional development experience I’ve ever had.

The themes that emerged from Research Question 1 were perceived benefits of the specially designed professional development and excellent resources provided by the ACLA training. Directors perceived an increase in confidence from this training that their graduate preparation programs did not provide. They also perceived a benefit by establishing relationships with members of the new director cohort. All three themes emerged from focus group discussions and activities.
Research Question 2: What is the perceived benefit to members of a CoP that developed as a result of ACLA?

Three themes emerged from a careful review and analysis of the focus group transcripts in relationship to Research Question 2. These are presented in Table 11 and each discussed below.

Table 11

*Themes Emerging from Research Question 2*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Directors perceive one benefit of the CoP is establishing an ongoing network of peers as a support system for perseverance in an isolating, stressful position.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directors perceive one benefit of the CoP is a professional development group that continues to meet to provide role specific skill development, program development/expansion knowledge, and resources to utilize when confronted with unique special education quandaries.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directors perceive one benefit of the CoP is increased public school placement options for students to remain in the least restrictive environment (LRE) and opportunities for shared staffing resources. This is enabled through the trusting relationships with CoP member directors.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Directors perceive one benefit of the CoP is establishing an ongoing network of peers as a support system for perseverance in an isolating, stressful position.* The position of Director of Special Education can be isolating and stressful. One director described feeling like an inferior member of the administrative team in her district,

Even at school committee meetings it’s always building principals . . . building principals. I feel like I’m the red-headed stepchild when it comes to the administration in the district. I feel like saying to them, ‘you realize if I f-up, I’m going to cause the biggest amount of damage than any of the other people in this district.’ They should be
like ‘we love you. We think you’re great.’ You know what I mean? I feel like we’re the underappreciated people when it comes to the administrative team because nobody knows what we do, because nobody asks. I think they just assume we run IEP meetings all day.

This director is very honestly portraying feelings of marginalization while she clearly feels that her role should garner much more respect. Feeling underappreciated can be stressful especially when no one notices small successes on a daily basis. A description of his position by another director with a more positive tone is also extremely honest, “I do love what I do in terms of being a student services director, it is a very challenging position, as you all know, and it really requires a lot of brain power to keep those plates spinning on the spindle sticks because we have constant information and keeping everything in order and organized is very challenging, but I really enjoy that.” Both directors feel their job is challenging and important, but one appears resentful while the other is more positive.

A network of peers is helpful in any situation, but while in the role of director of special education, it is a life line to competence and sanity. A director shared that, “I definitely formed relationships [in ACLA]. Everyone was dealing with obviously the same things, in theory. When you got right down to it, [they were] very different because it’s based on our schools but I think we became resources for each other.” This director references the differences in individual districts, but she recognizes the issues are the same on a theoretical level, no matter the population size, socioeconomic status, or geographical location.

Another director from a small district in rural Massachusetts realized she would feel more isolated without her ACLA contacts, given the lack of peers in her area: “It definitely created a good network that you might not have otherwise had.” Especially in an area where there are
many miles between districts, having the opportunity at ACLA to meet each other and exchange contact information to have for the coming years was extremely valuable. Another director shared his frustrations with dishonesty in his district. He was supplied with a mentor by his superintendent, but it wasn’t sufficient support for learning a new budget process.

I think budgeting is probably the biggest problem that I had. Just the amount of paperwork that is involved. Even though you have a mentor, the mentor is great and everything, but they’re not there to [support] the immense amount of responsibility and paperwork. Until I sat down and took a look at everybody: the parents, special education teachers, you’ve got all the specialists. I don’t know how many people I had because on different parts of the budget you would have people in high school, you’d have people in the middle school. You didn’t know what the hell you were working with, coupled with the fact that you were working with a different type of business manager who would keep things from you. Then you would have people who would lie to you. Sometimes the superintendent would try to take some of your budget. Those are the kinds of things that I really would like to have [support]. Your mentor is good at ‘okay here are some of the land mines you’re going to run up against.’ I had [mentor’s name], she was great, but she lives in a world where everybody loves each other, everybody’s honest and nobody lies to you.

This director pointed to many of the situations that can make one feel isolated while trying to navigate and learn about some of the responsibilities of a special education director, such as the budgeting process and trusting other central office administrators. He wasn’t the only one who cited budgeting is the most challenging part of the job. In response to a question on which preparation courses were helpful one director said, “I think it’s easier to answer what I struggled
with my first year, probably [it] was budgeting because it was something that was thrown at me, all these grants were thrown at me. I really wasn’t prepared for that aspect . . . “You can almost sense the isolation of the position in these words and the need for support and networks to counteract that.

Directors perceive one benefit of the CoP is a professional development group that continues to meet to provide role specific skill development, program development/expansion knowledge, and resources to utilize when confronted with unique special education quandaries. The director of a large, urban district shared her thoughts on the importance of the CoP meetings that developed from her cohort. This group meets every few months since they graduated from ACLA:

When we were holding this group, I actually put in for a personal day because I didn't want anything to disrupt it. That's how important it is. When I was asked, I mean I could have put it as school business, but school business means that I'm on call and this time it’s that valuable. … I have to make a great effort to do the things that are important and the things with colleagues really trump anything else as far as the time to give up. Her comments indicate a commitment to the group by a willingness to utilize valued personal release time to attend sessions. This demonstrates her appreciation for the benefit of liaising with the CoP. Her fellow urban director from her cohort echoed her sentiments of the importance of making time to meet as it actually saves time in the long run.

There's so much information to understand your job well that it's good to get together and hear what other people are doing around curriculum, program development so you can generate ideas and try to keep the pace. I don't know about you, but I'm getting phone calls and emails five or six times a day of a new company with a new product. I don't
have time to examine all of them so it's nice to get together with colleagues to see if some of the districts are using them or how they're working.

Many of the smaller districts may not feel the same push to “keep pace,” nor do they necessarily possess the budget to purchase “new products” like the urban directors, but they can benefit from sharing ideas. A director commented on his group of colleagues that formed a CoP from their ACLA participation. He cites the additional benefit of social emotional support received from the CoP meetings:

I definitely benefit far greater from the informal groups—particularly with other directors in the area—when we get together, we bounce things off [each other], but also from ACLA there's a group of five of us that are still really tight, even though we're throughout the state and we meet frequently and/or call each other just for support [and we rely on each other for] emotional support and guidance.

Another aspect of an already isolating position is to consider is the added layer of being a male director in a predominately female position. The two cohorts of new directors examined in this study contained a higher percentage of female directors to male (see Table 12) While there is no data statewide on this trend, it appears to mirror the percentages evident visually at the statewide ASE conferences. In cohort 10 there were a cadre of males and they referred to themselves as “the wolf pack” although the women referred to them as “the guy table.” This group was referenced in the focus groups by the self-appointed members.
Table 12

Ratio of male to female directors in ACLA Cohorts 9 & 10

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cohort</th>
<th>#Male</th>
<th>#Female</th>
<th>Ratio Male to Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cohort 9</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>1:9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohort 10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>1:3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The male directors formed an all-male CoP and are often sighted at statewide conferences sitting in their “pack.” In one of the focus groups one of the men shared they kept in touch, “there were some wolf pack e-mails going around for a while” even after the conclusion of the ACLA sessions. It seems important to note that males in this profession are at an even greater risk of experiencing isolation in the position.

When discussing continued meetings with the cohort group, one said “In terms of meeting with other directors in the area, I make that a top priority because I find that we all need more time to talk and to hear each other and to talk about the same thing essentially.” Another referred to the group as the catalyst he needed to affect change in his district. When learned of another’s success he gained the confidence to proceed with a new initiative, “Because you know somebody else pulled it off, now you know that you can do it.” Another shared of his CoP that when he formerly gave up on a challenge in his district, he renewed his resolve when he shared it with the group and learned of a successful solution to a similar problem, “There’s 50 reasons why you can’t [find a solution to a problem], but when somebody does, you listen.” His sentiments are echoed by another director in speaking about attendance at another CoP: “Some people do not make it a priority, but I would say that the core group that does show up seems to have the best handle on what’s going on in their districts, and we can receive the support from each other.”
Lastly, director discussed reaching out to the group for needed resources:

We also got that [resources] from other people [in the cohort]. "How do you guys do that?" I think that's the insight, or that was the most helpful thing: the contact of everybody. I could call [name of cohort member], I could call [name of another cohort member], and I could call you guys and say, “What's going on? What can I do?” Or, “Hey, I need a PowerPoint. Do you have one?” That was always the best thing.

The male CoP that developed from ACLA cohort 9 is worthy of mention given the isolation inherent in the position compounded by their minority status. The men have found a way to try to offset their minority status in a profession dominated by women, given the continuation of a male dominated CoP that developed from meeting each other at ACLA.

Directors noted that they gained confidence from their cohort members to solve an issue in their own district after having a peer share a successful solution at ACLA sessions and reunion meetings. Lastly, a director summed up the benefit of participation in a CoP and interfacing with fellow directors:

I think when we talk about that too, I have an advantage now in a large district that there are other special education administrators but in most districts, I was the only person. Other principals had principals to talk to. Other teachers had teachers to talk to. We often are the only special education directors and there's one special education director for every district. If we don't have colleagues, we have nothing.”

Directors perceive one benefit of the CoP is increased public school placement options for students to remain in the LRE and opportunities for shared staffing resources. As a result of the ACLA cohort, directors collaborate, and through trusting relationships, they examine the resources in neighboring districts that could benefit their students and their budgets. For example,
a director from a small, rural one-town district in Western Massachusetts echoes the benefit of the CoP that developed as a result of her ACLA attendance. Her group met every few months during the school year, rotating locations in each member district. The hosting director created the agenda of hot topics and picked a few programs to showcase to the visiting group of directors. The group met at the host district’s central office and then drove to schools in the district to visit programs and then discuss observations over lunch.

It was good when we went and visited each other's schools. We picked a different program each year then went and looked at each school's program. I thought that was helpful, too. You think you have a great program and then you [visit another district.] We had a pretty good functional life skills program, but we vamped it up a little bit just with that information. I think that was really helpful, too, because I think there's a lot of out-of-the-box thinking going on in special education, because there has to be.

Another member of the group shared a similar reflection about the CoP that continues to meet years after ACLA and visits programs in each other’s districts,

I think it's these epiphanies that we all have - I know I have them when I'm mowing the lawn and I go, ‘Oh, I can do that.’ It's not something that's taught in school, and it wouldn't be something that you might come up with on your own. You'd go somewhere else and say, "Oh, look you have this. You can do this in a public school. It doesn't have to be an alternative location.

These comments indicate increased knowledge in program development as well as the benefit of the opportunities to share successes and obtain advice from the CoP for areas of need within each member district.
Students that smaller districts cannot support due to lack of a proper program are able to remain in the LRE by attending school in another district that has the appropriate program. There is a group in Western Massachusetts created by one of the ACLA members who has started taking in neighboring district students for her programs to offset students she places into programs in other districts. She outlined the process they utilize to keep students in local public school districts instead of more restrictive and expensive private day settings. The opportunity was facilitated by monthly meetings of the area directors who established relationships as a result of ACLA.

‘I have a kid that I'd like to put into your program. Do you have a kid you want to barter back and forth? No. How much will it cost to tuition him?’ It's cheaper to tuition into another [public] school than it is to tuition out [of district]. I think that's one of the things that's kept my budget floating: We have so many programs that other school districts don't have. We have behavioral programs in both buildings. We have life skills programs in both buildings. We have transitional programs in both buildings. We get a lot of students that tuition into our district [from other directors] and that really keeps my special education budget afloat, I think. That's what we talk about.

Besides the obvious cost savings to districts, the more important benefit is that students can attend schools closer to their residences. This means less time on special education transportation to and from school and opportunities for social interactions like sports or play dates outside of school since students reside in the same general areas. Most districts in central and eastern Massachusetts have nearby collaborative programs they can utilize. In the western part of the state, there are great distances between the few collaboratives and many districts. One director commented, “I’m not close enough to put any kids in in any of the collaboratives
because it’s too far away. We do a lot of creating program in house because we don’t have the collaborators as an option.” She went on to say that through relationships built in the ACLA cohort, she can house students from neighboring districts so that they don’t have to travel great distances to attend school. This is one more example of when directors work together as a result of the CoP that developed from attending ACLA, students and school districts benefit.

**Low incidence and part-time consultants can be shared among districts which provides consistency and more highly skilled employees.** Directors discussed sharing staff to help keep high-quality, certified people in the area employed full-time. When a specialist needs full-time employment and a district only needs a part-time or temporary consultation, sharing one person in two districts fills that staff person’s need for full-time employment. It also meets the district’s need to find a qualified, certified individual. One of the directors shared that he used this model between districts for mental health counselors:

> It’s a core group of the administrators that get together, and we’ve actually been able to collaborate on mental health counseling for our students. For instance, we share resources on that so it's critical to do that.

In Western Massachusetts, the small districts have begun working together to provide opportunities to collaborate on summer programs for special education students.

> I've been the one pushing to keep it going because we've been trying to do more shared services. We set up our own summer program. Before I was the director at [district name], I was the administrator of a summer school program that was run by the collaborative [in our area]. When the collaborative folded, I wanted us to be able to still run the program. That was the initial push to have us meet [as a CoP]. Who's going to house the program? How are we going to build out? How are we going to staff it?
This discussion illustrates that many small districts collaborate to share staff to provide the best quality teachers for a summer program that all districts can utilize. This maximizes the ability to fully staff the program and benefits all. In years past, they struggled with each district trying to staff a program from a very small group of teachers who were willing to teach during the summer months. As a result of their cohort experience and trusting relationships built at ACLA they are able to maximize the offerings for summer programs for their students.

**Differences Across Focus Groups**

In examination of the three focus groups, there were many similarities. Focus Groups 1 and 2 were members of cohort 10 (2012-2013). Focus group 3 contained members of cohort 9 (2011-2012). Here are the differences noted:

- Focus group 3 only contained men while the other two were co-ed.
- Members of cohort 9 did not continue to meet on a formal basis after ACLA while cohort 10 members did.
- One theme was unique to cohort 9: Directors perceive a benefit of the CoP is increased public school placement options for students to remain in the least restrictive environment (LRE) and opportunities for shared staffing resources through trusting relationships with CoP member directors.

Given their comfort level with each other, it was instantly clear that the directors in Focus Group 1 & 2 had continued their relationships beyond their participation in ACLA. This was evidenced by hugs on arrival and the ribbing and casual language used with each other and with the researcher. Focus Group 3 was much more reserved in their interactions, and the language utilized was formal in nature. It was the only group that contained charter school directors as well.
The focus group participants from cohort 9 did not appear to have formed a CoP that met on a regular basis following participation in the ACLA year. While members formed friendships and relationships that continued at successive ACLA annual reunions, they did not meet on a regular basis in the years since they participated. While cohort 10 members continue to meet regularly, I was unable to verify that this occurred in more than one cohort and this could be an area for a future study.

**Document Analysis**

In addition to utilization of focus groups for data collection, a questionnaire was completed by each focus group participant. Cohort members were asked to indicate years of experience, prior roles held in special education, and Massachusetts areas of certification (Table 9). A secondary document was created by each member of the focus group. This was a ranking of all ACLA speakers/topics in order of perceived benefit. Responses were tabulated by cohort and are listed below in tables 12 and 13.
Table 12

*Ranking by Cohort 9 Members of ACLA Activities/Topics (in order of most beneficial to least beneficial)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Presenter/Topic</th>
<th>Average Ranking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Susan Rees: Policy Manuals and Student Records, Proactive Leader</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tickler Files and Meeting Calendars, Entry Planning, DESE Website</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Patti Grenier: How to Build a High Performing Team</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Susan Rees: Procedure Manuals</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lauren Gilbert: How to Build a Complaint Responsive System-the team process,</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>boiler plate letters, forms and practices</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attorney Colby Brunt: Special Education Legal Boot Camp 101</td>
<td>5.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audrey Seyffert: Special Education Program Development</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan Rees &amp; Kirsten Esposito-Balboni: Office Management 101</td>
<td>6.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Susan Rees: Recruitment and Retention of Special Education &amp; Related Service Personnel, Program Development &amp; Cost Effective Practices</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lauren Gilbert: How to Monitor Your Special Education Budget</td>
<td>8.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Thomas Heir: New Directions in Special Education Leadership</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rees Erlichman, Bureau of Special Education Appeals: Dispute Resolution Options</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marty Mittnaucht: Presentation by the Massachusetts State Director of Special Education</td>
<td>11.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christine Brumbach: Managing Fiscal Resources-using data (grants, budgets,</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>improvement plans)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jay Sullivan, DESE: Special Education Finances</td>
<td>12.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breakout Sessions at each meeting-Professional learning Communities by District location or size-cracker barrel sessions</td>
<td>12.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenneth S. Chapman: Building Effective Management Practices to Implement IDEA</td>
<td>12.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 13

*Ranking by Cohort 10 Focus Group 1 & 2 Members of ACLA Activities/Topics (in order of most beneficial to least beneficial)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Presenter/Topic</th>
<th>Average Ranking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Susan Rees: Procedure Manuals</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Susan Rees: Structural Management, Proactive Leadership, Building a Complaint System</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attorney Colby Brunt: Legal Issues in Special Education</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John D’Auria: Difficult Conversations</td>
<td>4.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Thomas Heir: Leadership for Effective Inclusion</td>
<td>5.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jay Sullivan: Special Education Finance</td>
<td>7.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Susan Rees: Recruitment &amp; Retention of Special Education &amp; Related Service Personnel, Program Development &amp; Cost Effective Practices</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reece Erlichman, Bureau of Special Education Appeals: Dispute Resolution Options</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breakout Sessions at each meeting-Professional learning Communities by District location or size-cracker barrel sessions</td>
<td>8.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenneth S. Chapman: Building Effective Management Practices to Implement IDEA</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christine Brumbach: Managing Fiscal Resources-Using data (grants, budgets), Improvement Plans</td>
<td>10.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Margaret Reed: Indicators for Reporting &amp; Measuring Progress</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Susan Gala &amp; Kirsten Esposito-Balboni: Office Management 102</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There were 10 speakers/topics shared by both cohorts. Table 14 provides a visual representation of the different rankings between cohorts on the shared material. Please note that the sample size for cohort 9 is significantly smaller than cohort 10.
Table 14

Comparison of Speaker/Topic Rankings between Cohorts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Speaker/Topic</th>
<th>Ranking Cohort 9</th>
<th>Ranking Cohort 10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Susan Rees: Procedural Manuals</td>
<td>2nd</td>
<td>1st</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attorney Colby Brunt: Legal Issues in Special Education</td>
<td>5th</td>
<td>3rd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Susan Rees: Recruitment &amp; Retention of Special</td>
<td>8th</td>
<td>7th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education &amp; Related Service Personnel, Program</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Development &amp; Cost Effective Practices</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Thomas Heir: Leadership for Effective Inclusion</td>
<td>12th</td>
<td>5th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breakout sessions at each meeting: Professional</td>
<td>10th</td>
<td>9th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kristen Esposito-Balboni: Office Management 102</td>
<td>7th</td>
<td>13th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jay Sullivan, DESE: Special Education Finance</td>
<td>16th</td>
<td>6th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kenneth S. Chapman: Building Effective Management</td>
<td>11th</td>
<td>10th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practices to Implement IDEA</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reece Erlichman, Bureau of Special Education Appeals: Dispute Resolution Options</td>
<td>13th</td>
<td>8th</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christine Brumbach: Managing Fiscal Resources-using data (grants, budgets, improvement plans)</td>
<td>15th</td>
<td>11th</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There are several trends in the comparison data. Similar rankings were given to procedural and legal topics as well as effective management practices, recruiting and retaining staff, developing programs, and professional learning community breakout sessions. Of particular mention is the increase in popularity for Dr. Thomas Heir’s presentation on Leadership for Effective Inclusion. This was due to a new article on inclusion that had not been completed during the cohort 9 year. Cohort 10 had access to his statewide study results on inclusion in Massachusetts and this could be attributed to the jump in popularity for Cohort 10.

Another trend is an increased interest in fiscal management. This could be due to the budgetary demands on districts that increase annually. Cohort 10 consistently ranked topics on fiscal management as more beneficial than Cohort 9. This speaks to the increased pressure on directors to manage increasing special education costs. Less and less revenue is available from state and federal governments and the costs of out-of-district special education tuitions and
transportation keeps rising. This creates situations where districts must siphon funds from the general education setting and students to supplement the increases in special education costs.

In conclusion, the questionnaire indicated the importance of many of the speakers and topics from the ACLA sessions but there were many other comments by directors about the importance of the facilitator, Susan Rees. Just one example of a director describing her importance is “. . . part of ACLA all revolves around Susan Rees. I don’t know how you replace her . . . She can snap her fingers, get anyone from DESE, anyone in there currently. She’s amazing. That’s got to be systematized somehow because I can’t imagine anyone functioning at a high level [facilitating ACLA] unless you’re exposed to that [Susan’s connections]. While Susan’s sessions at ACLA were some of the most popular, her facilitation of the group was also pointed to by many directors as key to the program’s effectiveness.

Summary of Findings

The findings of this study were collected through three semi-structured focus group sessions with special education directors from the state of Massachusetts. These focus group interviews, along with a review of demographic data and a ranking activity illustrate the director’s perceptions of the benefit of attending ACLA and participating in a CoP after graduation.

Regarding the perceived benefit of attending ACLA:

- Directors perceive a benefit of participation is specifically designed professional development allowing for an accumulation of resources and strategies
- Directors report gaining confidence in the aspects of the directorship that curriculum of college courses and previous training did not provide
• Directors perceive a benefit of participation is establishing relationships with members of the new director cohort.

Regarding the perceived benefit of participating in a CoP that develops as a result of attending ACLA:

• Directors perceive one benefit of the CoP is establishing an ongoing network of peers as a support system for perseverance in an isolating, stressful position.

• Directors perceive one benefit of the CoP is a professional development group that continues to meet to provide role specific skill development, program development/expansion knowledge, and resources to utilize when confronted with unique special education quandaries.

• Directors perceive one benefit of the CoP is increased public school placement options for students to remain in the least restrictive environment (LRE) through trusting relationships with CoP member directors.

In summary, directors who participated in focus group interviews and by submitting documents were extremely grateful for their experience in ACLA and the continued benefit of participating in reunions and CoP meetings over the years. While not the focus of the research questions, mentorship was discussed frequently in all focus groups. Directors spoke candidly about the lack of support from their districts such as not being assigned a mentor, or being assigned a mentor who did not have the credentials to assist them. They were open to examining their own weaknesses in learning a new job and spoke candidly about their struggles in their first few years of their directorships and their continued challenges in the position.
Chapter V: Discussion of the Findings

Revisiting the Problem of Practice

While the role of a special education director can be personally rewarding, directors often feel isolated and leave the position due to stress and burnout (Carter, 2011). Certification and coursework alone do not guarantee the new director is prepared to tackle the demands of the position. Supplemental preparation programs can assist with the isolation and provide skill development and networking opportunities. This allows new directors to feel more connected and better able to meet the demands of this challenging position. If directors are better prepared they may remain in the position longer. As a result, a school district’s teachers and students benefit from more consistent and knowledgeable leadership in the area of special education.

Special education directors in Massachusetts are invited to participate in a leadership academy at no cost to their districts. It is designed specifically to assist with the unique demands of their position. Unfortunately and for various reasons, not all directors take advantage of this opportunity. Many, but not all, are assigned a mentor by their superintendents. Some mentors do not have the appropriate background or knowledge to assist with the many facets of the special education position. ACLA can assist directors with the confidence and competencies to be successful in keeping their district in compliance and operate within the confines of their budget during their first years in the position.

Directors must constantly seek information from surrounding districts, special education collaboratives, and private schools; a network of peers is essential to this work. The ability to ask a peer for a reference for a particular program or private school in an area saves valuable time for the special education director. The opportunity to call a neighboring director to learn how they handled a particular legal matter, if they can send a job description for a new position
posting, or if they have any experience with a teacher training for a particular low incidence disability are just a few examples of the network benefit.

All new teachers and administrators in Massachusetts should be given mentoring opportunities as mandated, but this is not always the case in practice. There are rumors of a new initiative now from the statewide organization (ASE) to support new directors with mentors assigned directly by the organization. If true, this will be extremely helpful for new directors.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to collect and analyze the perceptions of special education directors of two ACLA cohorts (2012 and 2013) to examine differences in their perceptions of its usefulness, and to determine if a CoP developed and remained active after the ACLA year ends. The data from this study will be useful to assist with a probable solution to the problem of practice and provide support for special education directors in their first years in the role.

**Discussion of Major Findings**

The focus of the study was to determine if directors benefited from attending the state-sponsored leadership academy for new special education directors and if participation increased networking opportunities after graduation from the program. The themes from Chapter IV are the basis for the findings in this chapter. Data provided by participants provides their perceptions of how participation in ACLA increased their effectiveness in the position and their connectedness to a network eased feelings of isolation in a challenging position. After reviewing and analyzing the data and developed themes intensively, six major findings emerged:

1. Directors who participated in focus group interviews and by submitting documents were extremely grateful for their experience in ACLA and the continued benefit of participating in reunions and CoP meetings over the years.
2. While individual mentoring was not the focus of the research questions, mentorship was discussed frequently in all focus groups. Directors spoke candidly about the lack of support from their districts such as not being assigned a mentor, or being assigned a mentor who did not have the credentials to assist them.

3. Directors were open to examining their own weaknesses in learning a new job and spoke candidly about their struggles in their first few years of their directorships and their continued challenges in the position.

4. New Special Education Directors in Massachusetts benefit from learning and networking with cohort peers and seasoned directors at the state-funded leadership academy and form a bond as members of a cohort of new directors statewide.

5. Most directors attending ACLA formed networks that continued to remain in contact on an informal basis.

6. After attending ACLA, some directors formed self-governing networks that continued to meet formally for professional development and networking purposes.

**Finding 1:** Directors who participated in focus group interviews and by submitting documents were extremely grateful for their experience in ACLA and the continued benefit of participating in reunions and CoP meetings over the years. Each of the focus groups discussed extensively how thankful directors were to be offered the Leadership Academy (at no charge to them and their school district) and they felt very lucky as compared to principals, business manager, and curriculum directors who did not have this opportunity. Meeting all of the new directors in the state during the first few weeks on the job was a perfect plan. It allowed new directors to meet and create a bond that would last. One director described her feelings as
“When I became the director, both the current director and assistant director left. The assistant
director left me with some of the files, but the director took all of his files. I didn’t have a lot of
stuff.” Having the support of the ACLA resources and a network of peers gave her a sense of
relief in a very challenging situation. This story was common and repeated in all of the focus
groups. ACLA provided a level playing field to ensure that all new directors had a minimum of
the same resources and information.

Another director referenced continuing to remain in touch with her ACLA cohort and a
well-developed e-mail list serve that members utilized on a regular basis. She felt it was more
useful than paying for professional development sessions as it was timely to exactly what they
needed to know when they needed to know it. When a director has a question they e-mail it out
to the group list. “That list serve from our ALCA group . . . those e-mails come out every so
often with people asking questions and so I think that information is more helpful than some
conference or things like that.” She discussed how members were encouraged to use “reply all”
when sending a response so that all members can see and benefit from the various responses to
the questions. Hearing all of the different perspectives and additional follow up questions
allowed for the maximum benefit from the group’s shared expertise. Having 35 directors to
consult with in a few minutes time was deemed extremely valuable.

Conversations in the focus groups as well as on the documents provided indicated that
directors found their experiences in ACLA to be professional development of the highest quality
and the most useful to them in the positions. In addition, they welcomed the opportunities to
continue to network and learn from each other in subsequent years. Their feelings went beyond
grateful and some used the word “lucky” to describe how they felt about the opportunity to
participate in their ACLA cohort year program and the subsequent reunions.
Finding 2: While individual mentoring was not the focus of the research questions, mentorship was discussed frequently in all focus groups. Directors spoke candidly about the lack of support from their districts such as not being assigned a mentor, or being assigned a mentor who did not have the credentials to assist them.

While not expressly covered by the research questions, a finding emerged in the area of mentoring. Directors expressed the lack of a mentor assignment as disappointing, and others felt unsupported by their districts when they were assigned an inappropriate mentor. Table 14 indicates the mentor assignments for the 14 directors in the focus group interviews.

Table 14

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mentor Assignment</th>
<th>Number of Directors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No Mentor Assigned</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal, Superintendent</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Former Special Education Director</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informal Mentor</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Current Special Education Director</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One of the directors shared her tenacity in moving beyond her town’s unwillingness to fund a mentor for her in her first year as director:

When I became the head director, I asked about a mentor but the town politics . . . at times can be challenging and the school committee members at that time felt that because they just worked on their initial director for two years—the superintendent was a former special education director—I didn’t need a mentor, and they were not willing to give me one. With that, I said to the superintendent, “look I need a little something,” so she told me if I could find the money in my contracted service budget, I could get a few hours from somebody. I found a retired special education director and I knew her knowledge
base and her presentation style is not my presentation style, but I would do the phone
calls at my home and be like, “you know I’m kind of thinking this, can I just bounce this
off of you?”

It is appalling that this director had to obtain funding for her own mentor when districts in
Massachusetts are mandated by DESE to provide them to all new teachers and administrators.
Another director shared that her mentoring experience was less than helpful: “I guess I was
informally appointed a mentor. She was the special education administrator before me, [she
was] moved to the elementary principal position, [and] imploded for other reasons, so she wasn’t
able to be much of an assist.” When asked if she was assigned a mentor in her first year on the
job, one of the charter school directors indicated that her mentor was not able to meet her needs:

That was one of the things I asked for, sort of in lieu of continuing my education that I
had a seasoned special education director that would work with me. I think I hoped for
more out of it than [it] became. Number one, she wasn’t familiar with charter schools so
that was kind of a mistake, because the regulations are the regulations but things that
happen within the charter school are kind of unique . . . She was a lovely woman, but it
wasn’t that helpful but I’m not sure why.

Assignment of a mentor who has not worked in the same role as his or her mentee seems
inappropriate at best. On the other hand, directors who were assigned former or current special
education directors as mentors found them very helpful. Two directors were mentored by the
retiring/exiting special education director they were replacing, which was deemed to be very
productive. Of those who were mentored by superintendents or principals, comments included:
“we were given this person but she didn’t have the special education background but she was a
great person to bounce things off,” and “if I ever had any questions, he would be there for me.”
This finding indicates that a former or current special education director is the best choice as mentor for a new special education director and this assignment is extremely important to supporting them in their first year.

**Finding 3: Directors were open to examining their own weaknesses in learning a new job and spoke candidly about their struggles in their first few years of their directorships and their continued challenges in the position.**

The directors in the focus groups were honest about their feelings of inadequacy in sharing the struggles they faced in the first years in the role. Many had been promoted from the teaching or related service provider ranks from within a district and were unprepared for feelings of self-doubt as compared to their career success at that point. They spoke frankly about coming into disorganized, cluttered offices or offices that had been totally removed of all resources and files. One director described her indoctrination as “learning on the fly. It is going with your gut instinct. It’s reaching out to colleagues who may have been in a similar situation.” The last sentence describes the importance of attending a program like ACLA. If she were not able to meet and bond with her cohort of new directors, she would not have the colleagues to access when needed.

Directors shared stories of coming into the position after significant and consistent turnover. They wondered if they would even last a year in the job. Some directors were recruited to a position that remained unfilled for a period of time. They walked into problems left unattended, which compounded their challenges. One described it as “when I got hired we had a revolving door of special education directors and I filled in a few times out of need and then ultimately it was open again and I got asked.” Another said “I was special education director number 5 in 7 years.” The support of ACLA and sharing their war stories at the summer
institute helped them to turn a challenging situation into a manageable one. Most directors in the focus groups referenced in one way or another feeling relieved when meeting other directors in the same boat and were able to realize they were not alone or they were in a better situation than others!

Many directors shared feeling like lone wolves in their districts in their first directorships. Comments were not negative toward other central office faculty, it was more because the others had no expertise in special education. One director referred to his relationship with his superintendent as “if ever had any questions, he would be there for me but I don’t think he really had a solid understanding of my role.” Another said “it was the leadership academy that really provides that level of mentorship.” ACLA provided the resources and support for directors in their first years in the position that allowed them to examine their own weaknesses and come to grips with meeting the challenges of their new position.

**Finding 4: New Special Education Directors in Massachusetts benefit from networking with peers and seasoned directors at the state-funded leadership academy and form a bond as members of a cohort of new directors statewide.** Special education directors who attended ACLA had many positive comments during the focus group interviews. I appreciated this director’s feelings about connecting with her new director cohort at the ASE conferences she attended in following years:

Some of my really good takeaways from [ACLA] were the connections that I made with the other special education directors. I feel like you go to ASE and you see these people and you go to these conferences and you see people from the cohort and it’s awesome because you get to commiserate together. The Leadership Academy also let me know a little bit about who they were as people. I think by staying there you get to see people
have families and . . . it’s kind of nice when you see someone you can say, “hey, how are your kids?” Because we’re people. I said that to a family during a team meeting [once], I may be a special education director, but I’m a human being. I feel like [attending] these forums [is helpful], to come away with a binder full of stuff is amazing.

There are many aspects to the position that require directors to exercise caution with personalization, so it is refreshing to have a director reflect on the human aspects of belonging to a group of directors who have the shared experience of ACLA. Another director eloquently addressed the bond she developed with her ACLA peers, especially those in the charter school cracker barrel group:

I think the most important thing that I got from the special ed academy was walking into a room and looking around and sort of like knowing I wasn’t alone; that the experience I have in my head, that I really feel that a lot of people who don’t understand unless you’re in our shoes, that other people have them, too. It’s like ahhhhh. Just kind of feeling that support and that isolation kind of broken. That I think was certainly the most important thing. Also that it wasn’t on an adversarial level, especially when you’re in a charter school dealing with district special education administration there can be some contention. In this particular [group] we had our own little table of charter schools because our experience is different, but really everybody was on the same page, looking for the same answers for the same kinds of kids. I think that was huge for me.

This vignette also hints at the contention that can be present between school districts and charter schools who can become territorial over students when each tuition amount is so important to gain or lose.
Finding 5: Most directors attending ACLA formed networks that continued remain in contact on an informal basis. One of the directors from a regional district in western Massachusetts relayed a story about bonding with a director from a large district on the south shore. She cited that although their districts could not have been any farther apart or more different in socioeconomics, they formed a friendship and remained close over the years since attending the academy. They make plans each year to meet at the ACLA reunion and frequently call and e-mail with questions that arise in their work as special education directors. This director described their reunions as, “you e-mail and then you get back together and it’s weird. It’s like a cousin you haven’t seen in forever.” As they could now be described as seasoned directors, they have held fast to the connection and bond formed during their ACLA cohort year. These connections were echoed by many participants in the focus groups.

Another western area director shared that the opportunity to network at ACLA with the urban directors from the east continued beyond the initial year. He was surrounded by tiny, rural district directors, so having access to directors with similar needs was helpful.

I had a lot of legal issues in the beginning. That’s why I looked to [director’s name] and the other urban districts who had a lot of litigation. It was nice because we all got together, we had our own little group, and it was great . . . I had more issues dealing with homeless, dealing with litigation stuff, a lot of unilateral placements, a lot of stuff that was more on the east coast where they saw that all day long. In the west, we really didn’t see that as much. It was nice.”

Although there were vast differences in the sizes and locations of their districts, the shared issues that arise in a more urban setting brought them together. He later indicated that they meet informally and the support has continued in the years following the first year at the academy.
Finding 6: After attending ACLA, some directors formed networks that continued to meet formally for professional development and networking purposes. Cohort 9 members did not report any formal groups, but as indicated in Finding 3, they meet on an informal basis and at the ACLA scheduled annual reunions. Cohort 10 members shared about groups that continued to meet on a regular basis after the conclusion of their ACLA year. They would pick dates over the summer and each director would elect one date to host the others in their district. The hosting director would prepare the agenda and they day would usually involve time to discuss current topics or brainstorm solutions to a presented problem, observational time in buildings/programs, and a networking lunch.

A director commented on how important he felt this group participation was for him when he looked around at his colleagues at the ASE conference, “One thing I find interesting at these ASE conferences is that I’m not recognizing people anymore and it just suggests how transient the group [special education directors] is and so if you don’t have a group that you can really attach yourself to, you’re alone.” This is in stark opposition to another director’s assertion that “we actually got together three to four times a year for several years.”

Some of the special education collaboratives form networking groups for directors. Several directors in the focus groups mentioned belonging to a specific group run by the collaboratives such as an out of district coordinator group or even a group made up of the special education directors from the collaborative member districts. These groups become potentially stronger with the ACLA relationships formed that cross geographical regions and as directors share the same information from the ACLA group meetings with their member collaboratives, the information spreads much more rapidly.
In conclusion, as a way to demonstrate the usefulness of continuing to meet as a network after ACLA, perhaps it would be helpful to look at what the perception is of directors who do not continue to participate in a network as one director noted:

I would like to add also that in our region where we have several new directors, I think it would be some new directors in their first or second year, what I’ve observed is that, when they don’t have a proper mentor or a proper network, then they have an overreliance of legal counsel and attorneys have a different perspective and they will give you that perspective that is not necessarily in the best interest of all parties except for their invoices.

Aside from the assertion of wasting precious district resources on legal fees, on a more serious note, it is perceived that directors with networks appear to stay longer in the position.

**Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Theoretical Framework**

This study utilized the lens of social learning theory and specifically the aspect of social learning theory called community of practice theory (Wenger, 1998). Selection of the theory was based upon the connections between the professional development cohort model and the creation of self-sustaining member networks. As detailed throughout this study, participating directors felt that interacting regularly with the ACLA cohort improved their effectiveness as special education directors on many levels including knowledge acquisition, experience, and creativity. It also created healthy competition as directors share evidence of a creative solution and inspire others to do the same.

**Community of Practice Theory.** There are four tenets to learning in CoP theory: we are social beings, knowledge is a matter of competence with respect to valued enterprises, knowing is a matter of participating in the pursuit of such enterprises, and our ability to experience the
world and our engagement with it, is learning. (Wenger, 1988) There are four components to CoP theory: managing, practice, community and identity. (Wenger, 1988) CoP theory is based in social learning theory. (Giddens, 1971)

**CoP as applied to ACLA.** ACLA creates social experiences for new directors. It provides mentoring and facilitates relationships between experienced and novice directors. A CoP develops organically when directors meet at a summer institute for three days and then on a monthly basis and these ties are renewed at annual reunion two-day conferences. The cohort model of ACLA equates to a multilayered CoP and as such, CoP theory provides the optimal lens to examine the perceived benefits of ACLA for novice special education directors.

The findings in this study are consistent with the CoP stages of development as outlined below:

**Potential:** New directors are appointed into their positions without shared practice. One director felt she had the advantage of moving up within the ranks in a district instead of the situation of moving to a new district like most new directors.

I also was in a district I had been in for ten years so I knew the players. I think I was at a distinct advantage than if I had gone to be a special education director in a different district than the one I had taught in or worked in because I think that you are really starting from scratch; you don't know the players, you don't know the families, you don't know the budgetary parts of it, that kind of thing.

The solitude new directors face in their first year in the position is evidenced above prior to moving into the coalescing stage.
**Coalescing:** The ACLA Summer Institute provides a venue for directors to come together and recognize their potential. They bond over shared experiences. One director felt like she was in decent shape compared to what others at ACLA were sharing.

For me, I remember thinking how blessed I was to have [overlap with former director] and that I had that time to work with her before I left. I remember listening to people being like, "I walked into the office and all the piles had been shredded," or "Things were missing." I was like, "Holy shit, I can't even imagine trying to pick up the pieces in that situation." I remember thinking that.

In the process of sharing their initial days in the job, some were validated that things weren’t that bad, and others were experiencing support and assistance to help them through.

**Active:** The monthly meetings throughout the year provide an opportunity for members to engage in developing their practice in the position. In one of the focus groups members discussed what strategies taught at ACLA were utilized the most. One of the directors outlined several strategies she learned from her peers and the facilitators

I put blocks of time in [my schedule] to check my email, I put blocks into make parent phone calls. I did sit down with my secretary and be like, "I need you to throw out all the junk mail and stop putting it on my desk. I need you to start screening calls and stop putting them all through." I think I made myself a more affective person in that respect.

That I think was definitely helpful from ACLA.

This sentiment was echoed by others in the focus group indicating the yearlong ACLA meetings were in the active stage of CoP development.

**Dispersed:** After graduating from ACLA, there are no more intense engagements, but the cohort remains alive and provides knowledge to the group through e-mail, network meetings,
and reunion workshops. A director responded with a comment that ties with the dispersed stage as she references a discussion about personal connections continuing.

There is that personal connection that we do have to be able to have the personality to make connections to be a leader but also to make personal connections with people or we're not going to be able to make good decisions if we really don't have both.

The support a director needs can be provided by the cohort members as they are experiencing the challenges of the position after ACLA has concluded.

**Memorable:** While the ACLA cohort is no longer central for members, its memory continues as the catalyst for the formation of existing networks of directors. One of the directors indicated a fond memory of her experience in ACLA:

All I can say is I thought that the [ACLA] we did was excellent. Like I said, talking to other principals who have done NISTL [a training for principals] and that kind of thing, [they said.] "We didn't come back with even a quarter of the information and resources that you came back with."

It’s clear from her words that she felt her professional development experiences were memorable and beneficial to her training.

This research study centers on the perceptions of directors in regard to their participation in ACLA and its extension via networking groups. Findings suggest they value the original ACLA trainings and continue to benefit from the CoP that meets informally or formally in the years since graduation. Mentoring is also seen as a continuing function of the CoP. This is consistent with the theoretical framework chosen for the study.
Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Literature Review

A review of the relevant literature was discussed in Chapter II which demonstrates an investigation of the role of the special education director, preparation programs and professional development models for new special education directors in Massachusetts. This section compares the literature review with the findings of this study. The sections that follow are: the role of the special education director, certification, standards for special education directors, preparation programs, supplemental training, cohort model, and mentoring.

The role of the special education director. Marshman (1965) and Finkinebinder (1981) define the role of a special education director in similar ways. Both cite the position as multi-faceted and the variance of responsibilities as tremendous. Fiscal management skills must be balanced with humanistic or empathetic characteristics. Thomson and O’Brien’s findings in their 2007 study supported the multi-faceted definition. They manage the ethical considerations of what is best for students and must rationalize the cost the school district must absorb to provide a particular service or program. This relates exactly to what directors in this study expressed as the challenges of balancing the position’s responsibilities.

Directors in this study reflected all tremendous weight of their positions and the balancing act of trying to please all parties in their decision making process, but they also indicated that it wasn’t all negative. One said “In regards to the job, it’s a job that you love but it’s also a job that you hate sometimes . . . it is the most challenging, demanding but also rewarding job that I think I ever had.” Another director described her position as, the scope of the responsibilities and the variety of unexpected situations, I think, that a special education director position brings, is a different challenge I see every day and
from month to month there can be something completely brand new that we never ran into before that we’re always constantly problem solving to look at what that situation is. Directors continue to be challenged by the demands of the position, but the findings from this study suggest the support of a mentor, a supplemental training program (ACLA), and a continuing network of peers creates the ability to be successful and to find creative solutions to those novel problems as they arise.

**Certification.** There are no studies that address content specific to Massachusetts certification of special education directors, but research has been conducted to examine special education administrator licensure on a national level (Whitworth & Hatley, 1979; Stile & Pettibone, 1980; Finkenbinder, 1981; Stile, Abernathy, & Pettibone, 1986; Lashley & Boscardin, 2003; Crockett, Becker, & Quinn, 2009; Boscardin et al., 2010). In these studies, the standards for certification were found to vary widely from state to state. Given the considerable shortage of qualified special education directors for available positions (Lashley & Boscardin, 2003) national certification standards could make it easier to find qualified candidates.

The literature available on the certification of special education administrators highlights the need for national certification and consistency among the states. Given that many states will not relinquish local control and may add elements to their state process that are not addressed in national certification, it appears this need will never be realized. One director stated in response to a question about the special education content of her preparation program: “there was a small component of it, but it was mostly just around school leadership.” The cross pollination of certification for general education and special education administrators in some states, while well-intentioned, has created a critical problem of generalizing two very different roles.
Standards for special education directors. The standards or competencies for special education directors vary from state to state, and no national standard has been developed by the Office of the Secretary of Education. Although the CEC developed the standards for special education administrators in 2003, these have not been adopted or referenced within many state documents. Now that more states are beginning to institute the Common Core Standards (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010), the time is ripe to initiate dialogue on the national standards or nationally sponsored training programs for school administrators.

The findings in this study indicate that some directors are developing the competencies required to be successful in the position, but not all skills are taught in formal professional development training sessions. Many are learned from their peers and some are learned in the role experientially. Collaborative skills for example is something that requires reliance on others to be successful. One director shared trying to balance decision making as a team with doing it in isolation: “It’s [collaboration] not taught around operating as a team and how you do that. Because these are such difficult situations you’re dealing with, trying to do a good job, you’re the district coordinator . . . that’s your deal. When you get down that road, if you’re making those decisions in isolation, it’s horrible.”

Preparation programs. A review of literature related to preparation programs for special education directors requires an examination of studies addressing leadership programs targeting school principals, special education directors, and inclusive programs for both directors and principals. Such programs are developed with components that will be important to consider as principals and special education directors currently share the responsibility of educating students with disabilities, a change from the lines of responsibility that existed previously when
principals were responsible for general education students and special education directors were responsible for special education students. Given the blurring of lines that currently exist in the responsibilities for special education students, improvement and updates to preparation programs in universities is warranted (Murphy, Moorman, & McCarthy, 2008) to address these changes.

There has been an effort dedicated to rebuilding preparation programs in educational institutions. Multistate collaboration is moving toward the improvement of university education leadership programs by developing programs to conform to specific standards and instituting them across state universities to ensure uniform implementation. A 2008 study cites a rebuilding effort aimed at 54 universities within six states (Murphy, Moorman, & McCarthy, 2008). It points to the need for reform and updates to preparation programs, but cites the many stumbling blocks in the way: state law and legislation, culture, structure and professional norms inside universities, faculty assignments, admissions criteria, and resource allocation. The largest struggle was the ingrained notion of teaching theory at the expense of integrating knowledge (Murphy, Moorman, & McCarthy, 2008).

The findings in this study suggest that we haven’t progressed that far with appropriate, skill-based college preparation courses for special education directors. There have been talks recently with ASE and Bay Path College of a partnership that will put the training of special education directors in the hands of the most knowledgeable and appropriate teachers (ASE members or current special education directors). This is monumental and well overdue.

To illustrate this point, a director from this study indicates what he deems lacking from his preparation program:

I think there is a missing aspect in preparation training around leadership because I think more so in special education than any other discipline, those who know the regulations
and know the procedures tend to be the people you seek out. You’re responding to regulations, you’re responding to laws . . . playing a lot of defense. You don’t get to get out there and plan ahead, lead people, and be creative and innovative. You’re typically always responding to something.

This is clear evidence that directors are asking for more clinical practice programs conducted by those in the role who understand the grass roots level demands and nuances of success and failure in the role of a special education director.

**Supplemental training.** Directors of special education must complete course work for a required degree, take the necessary tests or attend a state/district preparation program, but supplemental programs can provide access to a cohort of peers and some of the missing content knowledge. Minnesota developed a pilot program in 1974 (Weatherman & Dobbert) but it was discontinued. A master’s program was developed to meet the needs of special education directors in rural areas in New England by three universities in collaboration (Berkeley & Harriman, 1994) As we see more and more overlap of the principal and director of special education, these types of programs may be the answer to increasing the collaborative task of educating all students in the same classroom.

In Massachusetts, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education has provided supplemental training programs for special education administrators through various vendors such as educational collaboratives and independent educational research or professional development organizations. The Accept Collaborative’s Leadership Academy I (ACLA) is a state-sponsored training program for directors with one to three years of experience in the role of director. It is designed to provide training and a peer network for new directors. It is funded by a grant from the Massachusetts DESE and is in its thirteenth year.
Findings from this study suggest directors find some disconnectedness from the training program and the reality of working in a public school district, “I think our cohort of the Leadership Academy teaches a collaborative leadership team and that’s wonderful, but that’s not the reality of a lot of districts. Are you teaching to the other side of it, which is: how do you manage if it’s not a collaborative environment?” The question is a good one, and it might be suggested that the ACLA curriculum include team building exercises or ideas for shifting culture for directors who find themselves in untenable, non-collaborative leadership teams.

One of the directors who was also an assistant superintendent from a large, urban district compared the ACLA sessions with attending the Massachusetts superintendent’s conference,

The things with ACLA . . . half those things I had already seen in the superintendent’s association . . . that means they were current . . . Susan Rees was doing her homework . . . it [ACLA] was just for special education directors, which was great. The three-day course, it’s probably not enough. She has the ability to get all those people [speakers] in.

That’s huge.

This illustrates the power of the program and its leader. Curriculum that is current and speakers who are current are the most beneficial to directors. The speakers introducing the topics are also the parties directors will contact if any questions arise throughout their initial years in the role.

**Cohort model.** The ACLA program utilizes a cohort or class model. Cohorts are used in college programs and can also be used in supplemental training programs. They are defined as “intact student groups in lock-step course patterns” (Hebert & Reynolds, 1998, p. 253).

Research has been conducted on cohorts within the realm of education, specifically their use in teacher education programs (Basom, Yerkes, Norris, & Barnett, 1996; Barnett, Basom, Yerkes,
& Norris, 2000; Ross et al., 2005; Teitel, 1997; Tooms, 2007; Unzueta, Moores-Abdool, &
Donet, 2010; Salazar, Pazey, & Zembik, 2013

Cohort members in all studies report positive results in belonging to a cohort as compared
to proceeding through a course of study or training as an individual and this is also true of the
findings in this study. Directors overwhelming identify with their ACLA cohort and will seek
each other out at ASE conferences like old friends. One director described the feeling of
belonging when directors share the trials and tribulations of the position, “It’s good to know
you’re all in the same place.” This is juxtaposed to one director describing how he felt in the
role prior to attending ACLA in his second year: “You’re just an island and you’re swimming
alone.” The findings in this study support the benefit of the cohort model and although not all of
the literature indicates measureable benefits, the qualitative data from directors in the study
support it as the best model for escaping the isolation in the role of Director of Special
Education.

Mentoring. Mentoring by an experienced special education director is as important as
the cohort model in the ACLA program. At ACLA meetings, new directors are grouped with an
experienced director from their geographical area of the state. Discussions are focused on
current events in special education and the experienced directors share needed resources and
advice. The literature on mentoring is expansive.

Mentoring theory has been criticized for its inability to stand alone without the concepts
of training or socialization (Bozeman & Feeney, 2007; Higgins & Kram, 2001). It appears that
the best-intentioned mentor can only impart the wisdom of his or her own experiences. In the
educational administration field, mentors assigned to novice administrators are ideally very
experienced and possess a wealth of knowledge and pedagogy. On the other hand, they may be
rooted in outdated curriculum methods and lacking an understanding of current research on leadership.

Findings in this study suggest not all new special education directors are assigned a mentor despite the DESE mandate that this occur. When the cohorts in this study participated in ACLA, they provided all special education directors with a seasoned mentor in their cracker barrel groups. It is my understanding that now they assign each director a one-to-one mentor. In any case, even when assigned a mentor by their district, some directors feel the mentor does not possess the experience to assist or has never functioned in their role and may not understand how to assist them with their daily challenges. One of the best suggestions that came from this study is the suggestion that directors should complete a type of internship or student teaching type experience prior to accepting the reins of the district’s special education students. In response to a question about what was lacking in her mentoring situation, one director responded:

I think it’s one of those positions, it’s hard to teach it, you have to live it. Would there be a component where you have your mentor but it’s more of an intern, like a student teaching opportunity? Because you’re feeling it and living it, day to day.

Given the shortage of special education directors for open positions, it doesn’t appear that adding additional hurdles for new directors to be trained or certified will be welcomed.

**Conclusion**

This study was intended to examine special education director’s perceptions of the benefit of a state-sponsored leadership academy during their first years in the role of Director of Special Education. It was also intended to determine if a beneficial CoP developed after graduation and continued through subsequent years. This topic was analyzed through a qualitative research study and the questions posed were:
1. What benefits are perceived by directors who participated in ACLA?

2. What is the perceived benefit to members of a CoP that developed as a result of ACLA?

To answer the research questions, three focus group interviews were held in three Massachusetts locations and data was gathered via these interviews and an artifact review of demographic worksheet and a speaker/topic ranking activity. Data was reviewed, coded, and analyzed for emergent themes and eventual findings.

Results show that special education directors found ACLA extremely beneficial to their development as a special education director. They found the resources provided and opportunities for conversations with new and seasoned directors were optimal to their development of the skill set necessary to find success in a challenging position. These sessions were more beneficial than the assignment of a personal mentor. The formation of networks or CoPs were also deemed to be a continuing provider of necessary support and professional development sessions long after graduation from ACLA.

**Significance of the Study**

The position of Special Education Director is challenging and many do not remain long in the position. Current administrative preparation programs are inadequate to provide the needed curriculum and skill development of a special education director. Directors must sometimes find their own mentors and are challenged to utilize funds from an already empty district pocketbook to provide the support needed to survive the first few years in the role. Given the current state economic decline of public school budgeting, programs provided to districts free of charge are preferred to more costly mentoring options. This study points to the need for a state funded program to support directors during the early years to hopefully keep them in the
role and enable more longevity in the position. These programs also have a positive unintended benefit of uniting a cohort of new directors into a network that can meet and continue to develop professionally long after the leadership academy has ended.

The results of this study point to the benefit of directors meeting with each other on a regular basis in smaller formats than the usual statewide ASE conferences. Building relationships through opportunities to discuss successes and failures in each district assists all directors with increasing their tool kit of problem solving skills. Directors interviewed in this study indicated the benefit of meeting on a regular basis in small groups to discuss hot topics and new initiatives within special education. These meetings enabled them to stay abreast of mandated changes which assisted with management of a compliant special education department where students with disabilities could thrive.

The findings gleaned from this study can help the State Special Education Director and her team to determine if funding for the Leadership Academy should continue. It can assist the Accept Collaborative Program Director of ACLA in guiding the future cohorts by encouraging the continued formation of CoPs to continue after graduation. Given the importance cited by the directors interviewed about these networks, it would behoove the collaborative to examine ways to assist in their formation during the initial yearlong training. It could also be utilized by the Massachusetts statewide ASE executive board to revamp some of their professional development offerings. Perhaps they could examine other benefits to membership other than the large group daylong conferences they offer. While the state conferences are beneficial and the speakers are phenomenal. It might be suggested that they utilize these findings to create an additional layer of professional development such as regional groups in which directors have more opportunity to
participate via interaction and conversation rather than attend a lecture session with a keynote speaker.

**Limitations**

The findings of this study are helpful to further examine the training of special education directors as a group. Unfortunately the small sample size limits the conclusions that may be inferred from the data. Given that special education directors have extremely busy days and are inundated with meetings, asking them to give up an afternoon to travel to a focus group meeting was challenging to accomplish. Focus groups were selected over individual interviews to provide breadth and depth of the director’s perceptions, but it was extremely challenging to schedule four directors to be in the same location at the same time and place. It would have been ideal to have all focus groups contain larger numbers of directors, but the minimum of four-five directors at each focus group was the norm. The time set for each focus group was 60-90 minutes and each focus group exceed that time period by an average of ten minutes. As directors stayed as long as they dared, it was apparent to the researcher that data may have been missed given the need to end conversations due to the pre-set time constraints.

**Validity**

Threats to validity were previously discussed in Chapter III including researcher bias and remaining objective throughout the data gathering and coding process. An additional threat to validity was the objectivity of the researcher given that the researcher is also a member of ACLA cohort 10 and had a relationship with all of the members of cohort 10. One member of cohort 10 was also known to the researcher due to a mutual group membership. The researcher followed the focus group protocol and script exactly to order to sustain objectivity throughout the focus group interviews.
In addition “member checking” (Creswell, 2009, p. 191) was conducted. A one page document listing the themes that were interpreted from the data was e-mailed to all focus group participants. This task was completed to check for any presence of researcher bias. All members indicated that the themes resonated with their experiences. Thus, validity can be assumed and researcher bias considered and rejected.

**Future Research**

As the leadership academy session have all been organized and implemented by the same facilitator for 13 years, there is a unique opportunity to look at perceptions of directors who attend ACLA in a longitudinal study to determine if there has been change over time. The two cohorts in this study had mostly similar experiences, but it would be interesting to learn if the perceptions remained constant over time as the program evolved. Cohort 9 indicated that members continued to stay in touch informally, while cohort 10 members continued to meet formally with meetings planned quarterly with noted professional development topics and visits to district programs on the agenda. How many of the 13 cohorts created formal groups and has this increased over time as the pattern from cohort 9 to 10 seems to suggest?

In addition, the one significant difference noted between cohort 9 and 10 was that the CoP for cohort 10 met on a regular basis in the years following their participation in ACLA. I would be curious to survey all cohorts to determine how many cohorts continued to meet on a regular basis in the years after participation. The small sample size in this study did not provide this data.

One of the directors suggested that ACLA could utilize parent surveys completed by districts to “come up with common themes across districts that parents [of students with disabilities] are having concerns under your management of the district.” This could be a way for
directors to include parent input into their entry plans in the first year in the role. It could have been helpful information for this study if we had compared the ACLA curriculum to see if it covered any challenges noted by a survey. Perhaps contacting the Massachusetts Federation for Student with Special Needs or parent advocacy groups to question what their constituents feel needs to be improved upon in special education leadership could be another area of related study. Another thought is to examine the results of the Massachusetts State Performance Plan Indicator Parent Survey and compare each district’s results against the new director curriculum and programs offered.

This year the mentoring component of ACLA has changed with cohort 13. They are no longer utilizing the cracker barrel group sessions for new directors with an experienced directors. Each new director in the cohort was assigned a personal mentor by ACLA. The mentors visited the mentees in their districts and consulted with them on issues particular to them and their district on site. It would be interesting to look at if this one-to-one model of support rather than the group meetings had an impact on director’s perceptions of the benefit of ACLA and on the formation of the continued networking groups.

**Recommendations**

While this study points to ACLA’s effectiveness in training and connecting special education directors through the cohort and developed networks, I feel this is not enough. Directors in Massachusetts could benefit from a more cohesive training program for new special education directors, participation in ACLA during their first year, and a formal statewide mentorship component. As directors are at the mercy of their individual districts as to the quality and appropriateness of mentors provided, the statewide organization could assist districts with this important task.
After graduate programs, I feel the two major sources of professional development for directors in Massachusetts are: state-sponsored leadership academies (currently provided by ACLA) and the statewide director organization (ASE) should work together to provide a more comprehensive training structure for new and seasoned directors. It sounds like they are on the right track with the Bay Path College collaboration, but we will have to wait to see how it is created.

My recommendations for the mentorship program is that ASE partner with the Leadership Academy to provide the mentors for the cohort. I think both pieces are important. All directors are usually ASE members, so they would be assigned an ASE mentor that could assist them with their learning at ACLA. An unintended consequence could be that directors assigned a mentor would drop out of the ACLA program. I wouldn’t want any directors to think they should not continue to participate in the ACLA program, as they would lose the important networking opportunities and the feeling of belonging to their new director cohort. They must be encouraged to participate in both the mentoring and the leadership academy. State-mandated participation for new directors in both programs could also assist directors if their superintendent is hesitant for them to be out of the district for training and discourages participation.

My last recommendation would be that Massachusetts look to the ACLA model in establishing this type of program for other constituent groups in education. Examples are: guidance counselors, school social workers, school psychologists, speech/language pathologists, etc. Many of these groups require highly specialized professional development and could benefit from a network of job-alike peers just like special education directors. As with the special education director’s participation in ACLA, this could promote longevity in the position and better services for general and special education students.
Personal Commentary

This research study was initiated after I attended ACLA during my first year as a special education director. A challenging, isolating position seemingly became more manageable after the three-day summer workshop at the Warren Center in Ashland, MA. Prior to the workshop I felt irritated that we were required to stay overnight for two days, but by lunch on the first day I realized that was part of the magic. Conversations and sharing over meals (I have this student…what would you do?) created a bond that has lasted through my first five years in the directorship. I left the workshop with a binder of resources, and a contact list of many new and seasoned directors from around the state of Massachusetts. A group of five directors and I continued to meet on a regular basis after our first year at ACLA. As it had been a vital component to feeling effective in first years as director, I was driven to investigate through this study if other directors had the same experience as I had.

I have since taken the second course in the Leadership Academy Series. Massachusetts contracts with a professional development company in California to provide the course for experienced special education directors with more than five years of experience in the role as director. I was cautioned by a few directors against the second course, but as I had such a great experience in the first course, I decided to participate. I found the criticism to be valid. One of my cohort members from ACLA participated alongside me in the second course. I felt we had a unique opportunity to take the leadership course I and II in consecutive years together and could compare and contrast genuinely. As the second training was not provided by a local special education collaborative, but instead by a professional development company, we found the flavor of the training to be very different. There were three facilitators instead of one, and none of them had taught or practiced in Massachusetts. This was definitely a drawback to the localized
support of the training. A fair comparison cannot be made between a special education collaborative and a national professional development firm. Given that there are many layers to special education within the Massachusetts regulations above the federal regulations, the specialized, intimate topics and speakers provided in ACLA were unavailable in the second course. Specifically, the legal workshop provided by an out of state attorney was geared toward the federal regulations, without the desired commentary on Massachusetts cases. Another example is that in the first training we were able to meet all the heads of our state department of education. We were taught by the leaders of the Massachusetts departments we had to work closely with the Bureau of Special Education Appeals, the Finance division, the Federation for Children with Special Needs, the State Special Education Director, etc. In the second training the speakers were hired nationally.

While the networking with other directors was still valuable in the second course as with the ACLA cohort, that was essentially the most valuable aspect of the second training. I formed a new group of directors with whom I was able to access for questions and resources. Given that this group was more seasoned, I was definitely the most inexperienced and learned more from them than they from me. This was a different feeling from my ACLA cohort, given I had been a special education assistant director for three years and many of the new directors there were coming right from the teaching ranks.

Just last year I was asked to become an executive board member for the statewide ASE organization. I was extremely flattered to be asked, and welcomed the opportunity to advise the President and Executive Director. As a first year member of the board, I did not offer a lot of suggestions, but at a recent ASE board meeting, there were conversations about starting a mentoring program for new directors and partnering with Bay Path College to begin a new
licensure program for special education directors. The curricular focus of the program was described to be exactly the type of experience provided to directors in the ACLA cohort. I was very pleased to hear ASE acknowledge the need to become more involved in the preparation and mentorship of new directors. I am very proud of this study and of the opportunity to assist my fellow special education directors with support for exceptional professional development opportunities in Massachusetts.
References


doi:10.5465/amr.2001.4378023

Executive Director [personal interview].

Revue, 18(1), 42–54.

practice at work*. Retrieved from [http://www.icwconsulting.com/a-new-mindset-on-
mentoring-creating-community-of-practices-at-work/](http://www.icwconsulting.com/a-new-mindset-on-
mentoring-creating-community-of-practices-at-work/)


Lashley, C., & Boscardin, M. L. (2003). *Special education at a crossroads: Availability,
licensure, and preparation of special education administrators*. Gainesville, FL: National
Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education, University of Florida Gainesville.

Cambridge University Press.


Corwin.

Mackie, R.P. & Engel, A.M. (1955) Directors and Supervisors of Special Education in local

Marshman, L.R. *Job description for director of special education. Jefferson Township School
Massachusetts Department of Education. (2004). *Guidelines for administrator routes to initial licensure 603 CMR 7.00.* Retrieved from [http://www.doe.mass.edu/Educators/03adminguide.pdf](http://www.doe.mass.edu/Educators/03adminguide.pdf)


Rees, S. (2013, January 5). Accept Leadership Academy Director [E-mail interview].


Appendix A: Focus Group Protocol

INTRODUCTION
Hi; I am Kristin Campione. We met at the Leadership Academy [my cohort]. Thank you so much for agreeing to meet with me today. I know your time is valuable and I will move the focus group along, but you can plan to be here for 1 hour minimum and 1.5 hours maximum.

INSTRUCTIONS
I’m going to explain the purpose of my research and then ask you some questions regarding your thoughts on participation in the Leadership Academy program. I know we all have different titles so, for ease and consistency, I will use “special education director” to refer to your role, and I will be audiotaping this session.

ESTABLISH RAPPORT
It’s great to see you again. I really enjoyed your participation at the sessions [for my cohort]. I am still serving in the role of special education administrator for the Quabbin Regional School District and may have met some of you in my additional role on the Executive Board for the Administrators of Special Education in Massachusetts. Do you have any questions before we begin?

INTENT OF THE STUDY
I am conducting a study on the impact of the Leadership Academy as a preparation program for special education directors. I will be asking the group to discuss some questions and to engage in an activity to determine your perceptions about the benefits of the Leadership Academy.

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW
First, I will facilitate some group discussions around specific questions. Then I will ask you to complete an activity together which includes reviewing some information and ranking items from a list.

Licensure:

1. How many of you began your first directorship without the necessary certification?

2. What experience did you have within the field of education prior to your current role [teacher, team chair, psychologist, related service provider, principal, or assistant principal] and what other certifications do you hold?

Preparation:

1. How many of you attended a college preparation program for school administrators?

2. For those that did, how did you feel the program prepared you for your current role?
Organization Participation:

1. How many of you are members of any Massachusetts groups for special education directors? Which one(s)?

2. Do you attend their meetings regularly? How often do they meet?

3. Is this a formal organization or an independent group?

4. What do you find useful about such memberships?

5. Is there any informal interactions between members

Leadership Academy:

1. Since graduating from the Leadership Academy I with the class of 2013, have you completed the Leadership Academy II program?

2. What are your strongest memories of your experience at the Leadership Academy?

3. How many of you attended all sessions?

4. Have you remained in contact with peers you met at the Academy? How?

5. Tell me about your “cracker-barrel” group. What were the relevant or helpful aspects of that interactive group?

6. Do you recall having any moments of insight during the Leadership Academy sessions?

Activity
In the folder on the table are copies of the ACLA sessions you attended during the first year and the opportunities in subsequent years for reunions. Could you each take a copy and rank each session by ordering them 1-10 on how beneficial you found the session? You will have 5 minutes to complete this activity.

Now that you have ranked your sessions could you each take a packet of numbered stickers from the folder and record your responses on the chart paper around the room. You will have 5 minutes to complete this activity.
Now that we can all look around at the responses to the rankings, does anyone want to comment on your rankings either as an individual or the group responses?

DEBRIEF
That this concludes the focus group session. I really appreciated your thoughtful responses and I am so thankful that you volunteered to participate. I would be happy to send you the results of the study upon its conclusion. I can share these results via snail mail or e-mail, whichever you prefer.
Appendix B: Activity at Culmination of Focus Group Cohort 9
Cohort 9 Focus Group Activity

Please reflect on your time at the Leadership Academy and its sessions and rank each session/speaker by using 1 as the most beneficial and continue numbering until all are marked.

Summer Academy July, 2011

1. Dr. Thomas Heir: New Directions in Special Education Leadership
2. Dr. Susan Rees: Policy and Procedural Manuals and Student Records, Proactive Leadership, Tickler Files and Meeting Calendars, Entry Planning, DESE Website
3. Attorney Colby Brunt: Special Education Legal Boot Camp 101
4. Susan Rees, Susan Gala & Kirsten Esposito-Balboni: Office Management 101
5. Lauren Gilbert: How to Build a Compliant Responsive System-the team process: boiler plate letters, forms and practices
6. Audrey Seyffert: Special Education Program Development
7. Dr. Patti Grenier: How to Build a High Performing Team

School Year 2011-2012

1. BREAKOUT SESSIONS AT EACH MEETING: Professional Learning Community by District Location- Cracker Barrel
2. Christine Brumbach: Managing Fiscal Resources: Using Data (Grants, Budgets, Improvement Plans)
4. Dr. Susan Rees: Procedure Manuals
5. Reece Erlichman, Bureau of Special Education Appeals: Dispute Resolution Options
6. Dr. Susan Rees: Recruitment and Retention of Special Education & Related Service Personnel, Program Development & Cost Effective Practices
7. Jay Sullivan, DESE: Special Education Finances
8. Lauren Gilbert: How to Monitor Your Special Education Budget
9. Marty Mittnaucht: Presentation
Appendix C: Activity at Culmination of Focus Group Cohort 10

Cohort 10 Focus Group Activity

Please reflect on your time at the Leadership Academy and its sessions and rank each session/speaker by using 1 as the most beneficial and continue numbering until all are marked.

Summer Academy July, 2012

_____ Dr. Thomas Heir: Leadership for Effective Inclusion

_____ Dr. Susan Rees: Structural Management Proactive Leadership, Building a Compliant System

_____ Attorney Colby Brunt: Legal Issues Involving Special Education

_____ Susan Gala & Kirsten Esposito-Balboni: Office Management 102, Breakthrough Coach

School Year 2012-2013

_____ BREAKOUT SESSIONS AT EACH MEETING: Professional Learning Community by District Location- Cracker Barrel


_____ Christine Brumbach: Managing Fiscal Resources: Using Data (Grants, Budgets, Improvement Plans)

_____ Kenneth S. Chapman: Building Effective Management Practices to Implement IDEA

_____ Dr. Susan Rees: Procedure Manuals

_____ Reece Erlichman, Bureau of Special Education Appeals: Dispute Resolution Options

_____ John D’Auria: Difficult Conversations

_____ Dr. Margaret Reed: Indicators for Reporting & Measuring Progress

_____ Dr. Susan Rees: Recruitment and Retention of Special Education & Related Service Personnel, Program Development & Cost Effective Practices

_____ Jay Sullivan, DESE: Special Education Finance
Appendix D: Demographic Worksheet

Focus Group #1
Demographic Data

Name:

Current Job Title:

Current District:

If you are in a different position from the year you participated in the Leadership Academy I please list position during 2012-2013:

Number of years in special education administration:

Number of years as a special education director:

Other educational titles held (i.e., teacher, SLP, etc.):

Massachusetts Certifications held:

Could you please provide an e-mail address so that I can share the study results with you?

Thank you for participating today!