Paper DP001
Special Education Practice and Policy: What Principals Know and Need to Know

Dr. Wendy Dickinson, University of South Florida, Tampa, FL
Dr. Tanice Knopp, University of South Florida, Tampa, FL
Dr. Janice Fauske, University of South Florida, Sarasota, FL

ABSTRACT

The changing demographics of public schools across the nation have channeled attention and resources toward meeting the needs of a student population that is diverse in many ways. Students categorized as having special needs have captured much political attention, resulting in increased expectations for both the schools and school leaders (principals). Federal law requires the 'inclusion' of special education students into the classroom as educationally appropriate.

The purpose of this study was to examine the special education knowledge base (with regard to inclusionary practice and policy) in four Florida school districts. Sampling consisted of all Principals currently serving in 4 school districts, providing for a census sample survey (N= 121). A written survey instrument was constructed, consisting of 41 Likert-type items with a four-point response scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. A mid-scale (neutral) position was not included.

Principals were asked to read each statement regarding inclusion, and respond by selecting the scaled category corresponding to their item response. Survey results were analyzed using SAS programming code written by the researchers to determine differences across principals based on level of gender and level of school. Both descriptive and inferential measures were calculated.

Within SAS/GRAPH, several visual displays of quantitative information were created, utilizing PROC GCHART, PROC GPLOT and PROC GREPLAY. A 4-district comparison was enabled using PROC GREPLAY to combine the SAS-generated graphs into one visual image.

The resultant summary image contained 'small multiples' from each district, arranged 4 to a printed page. Tufte (1983) described the utility and ease of small multiples in providing a basis for constant comparison using the same scale and parameters.

INTRODUCTION

"Inclusion is often overlaid upon the existing fabric of the school; few programs, however, have succeeded in interweaving inclusion into the tapestry of the school" (Gourley,2002, p.91).

The purpose of this study was to empirically explore the special education knowledge base of public school principals (with regard to inclusionary practice and policy) in the state of Florida.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Implementing the Least Restrictive environment (LRE) creates new needs and places new demands on public school personnel (Monteith, 1994,p. 3).Principals consistently report a lack of knowledge and experience in effectively implementing special education inclusion in their schools. Even with good intentions and some basic knowledge, principals say that they struggle with implementing differing expectations for special needs students, especially with regard to certain instructional standards and with discipline (Evans, 2002). This study explored the question of what principals report that they know and what they need to know about school leadership related to the current context of inclusion and its ancillary requirements and obligations.

The following research questions were investigated :

1. What knowledge skills and dispositions do principals report having expertise with regard to inclusion; and what do principals report lacking with regard to inclusion?
2. How do principals assess the effectiveness of their university certification programs in preparing them for implementing inclusionary practices and procedures in schools?
3. How do principals assess school district support and provided resources for implementing and sustaining inclusion in their school? What additional district support or training formats for inclusion do principals desire ?

SAMPLING AND DATA SOURCE

The source of the study data was all Principals currently serving in four Florida public school districts. All current Principals were included in the study, providing for a census sample survey of the 4-county area (N = 121).

METHODS

The researchers used a mixed-methods design for data analysis. Both qualitative and quantitative approaches were employed.

Qualitative data analysis methods employed were:

1) content analysis (Altheide, 1987) to identify perceived categories of expertise or need shared across interview data from principals; and
2) a constant comparative strategy (Bogdan and Biklen, 1998) for identifying emergent perspectives in principal interview data. Interviews and focus groups with principals were conducted for member checking purposes.

Quantitative techniques utilized were survey research techniques, with subsequent statistical analysis of collected data. PROC GLM was conducted using the independent variables of gender, ethnicity, and school type, with the dependent variable being the reported item response raw score. Customized SAS 8.12 programming was written by the researchers to determine differences across principal response based on level of gender, level of school district, and level of ethnicity.
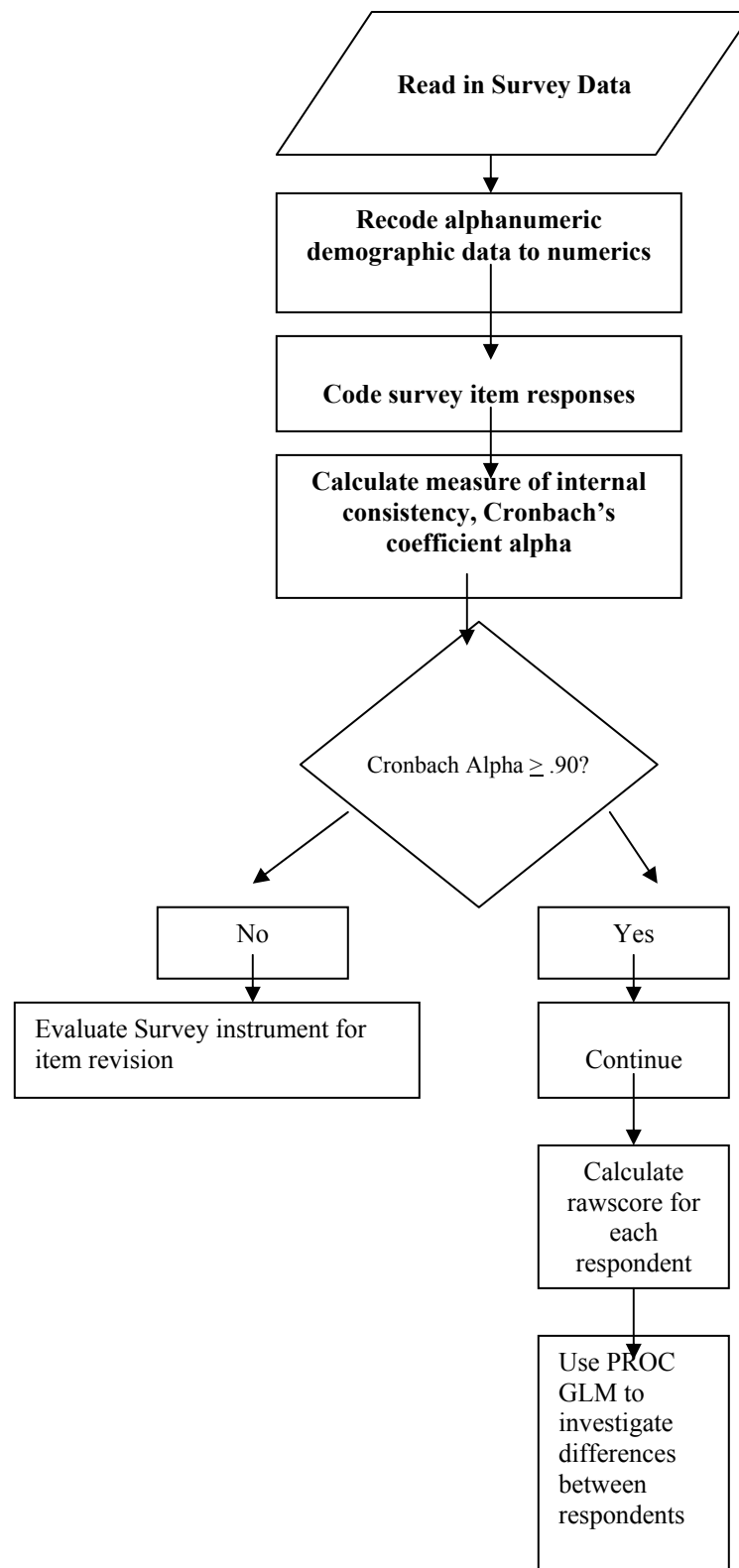
SURVEY INSTRUMENTATION

The Principal Survey was mailed to each school principal in the 4-county area. The Principal Survey was constructed using 41 Likert-type items scaled from (1) strongly disagree to (4) strongly agree. To maximize psychometric item response properties, a neutral (mid-scale) position was not included as a possible response. Principals were asked to read each survey statement, and respond to each statement by selecting the scaled category corresponding to their item response.

Each item response category was assigned a numerical value corresponding to subject's level of agreement (or disagreement) with the provided statements. Survey results were stratified by both level of gender and level of school to provide delineated study information and recommendations.

To address the issue of non-response, a second survey mailing was conducted one month after the initial survey mailing. A second survey package was mailed to each of the current principals. A total of 121surveys were mailed, and surveys received, for a return rate of 42%.

Shown in Figure 1 is the Flowchart for the constructed SAS algorithm. Shown in Table 1 are the variable assignments for each system variable within the SAS algorithm.

Read in Survey Data

Recode alphanumeric demographic data to numerics

Code survey item responses

Calculate measure of internal consistency, Cronbach's coefficient alpha

Cronbach Alpha $\geq$ .90?

No

Yes

Evaluate Survey instrument for item revision

Continue

Calculate rawscore for each respondent

Use PROC GLM to investigate differences between respondents

```
                            ┌──────────────────────┐
                            │ Use PROC GPLOT to    │
                            │ produce graphs by    │
                            │ gender and ethnicity │
                            └──────────────────────┘
                            ┌──────────────────────┐
                            │ Sort principal data file │
                            │ by district          │
                            └──────────────────────┘
```

| District 1 | District 2 | District 3 | District 4 |

```
            ┌────────────────────────────────────────────┐
            │ Use PROC GPLOT to produce graphs by        │
            │ district of rawscore * respondent          │
            └────────────────────────────────────────────┘
            ┌────────────────────────────────────────────┐
            │ Use PROC GREPLAY                           │
            │ to generate small multiples                │
            └────────────────────────────────────────────┘
            ┌────────────────────────────────────────────┐
            │ Print summary statistics                   │
            └────────────────────────────────────────────┘

                         ( END )
```
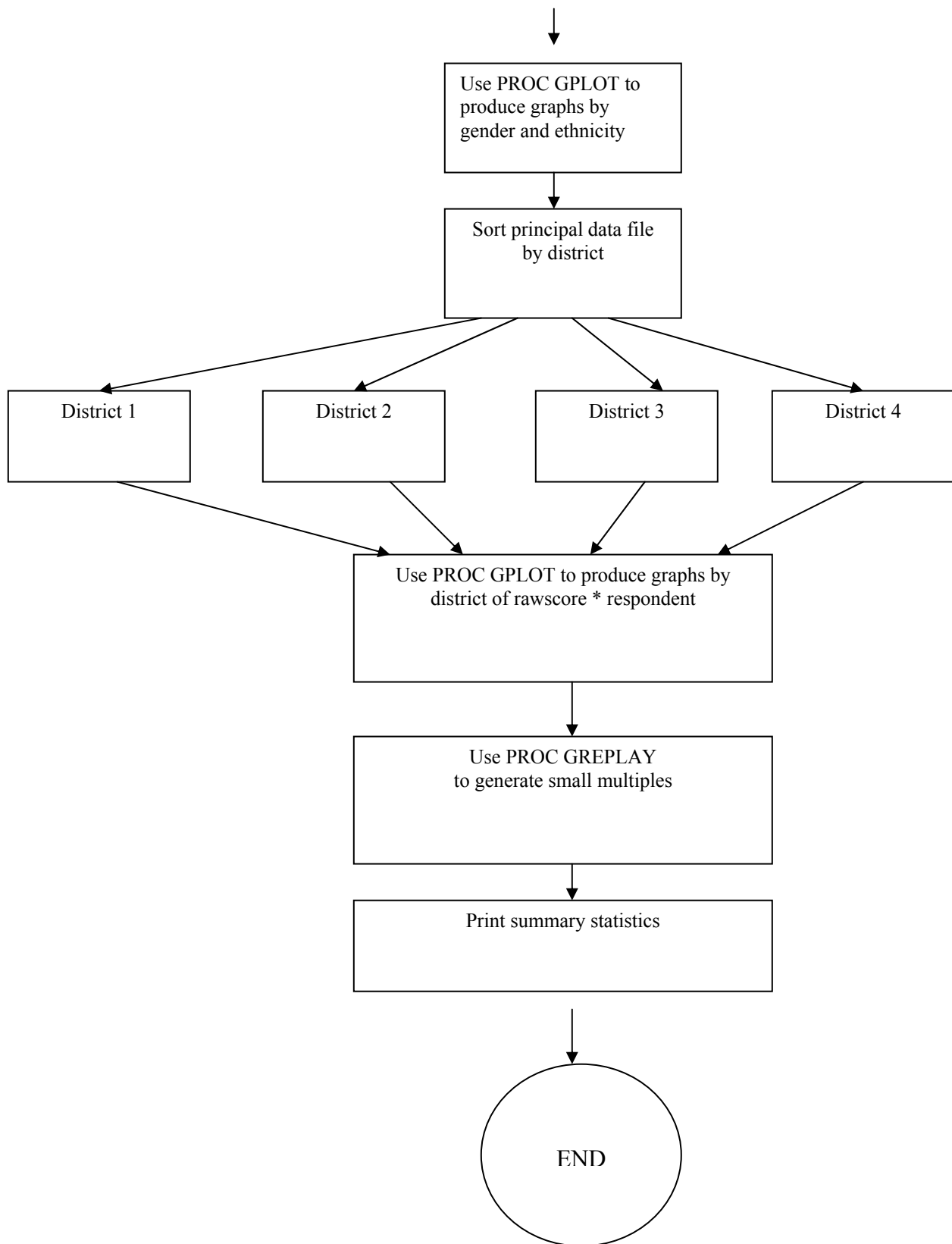
Figure 1. Algorithm Flowchart

Table 1

Algorithmic Variable Assignments

System Variable	SAS Variable Name	Type of Variable
School District	District	Categorical

Age	Age
	  5 levels:
	    1=20-29
	    2=30-39
	    3=40-49
	    4=50-59
	    5=over 60
		Quantitative, coded as categorical

Ethnicity	Ethnic
	  6 levels:
	  1 = African American
	  2=Caucasian (non-Hispanic)
	  3=Hispanic
	  4=Asian/Pacific Islander
	  5=Native American/Native
	    Alaskan
	  6=Other
		Categorical,

Gender	Gender
	  2 levels:
	  1=Male
	  2=Female
		Categorical, assigned

Survey Items	Item 1 – Item 41	Quantitative
Survey response summary	Rawscore	Quantitative

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Principal Survey was constructed with Likert-type items, with item responses taking on a range of values from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). Cronbach alpha (Cronbach, 1951) was calculated as a measure of internal consistency to measure the extent to which the scores of the individual survey items agreed with one another (Ary, et al, 2002). Cronbach coefficient alpha was calculated at .92 for the principal survey instrument. Corresponding code is shown below:

```
Proc corr nocorr nomiss alpha;
    Var item1-item41;
    Title1 'Internal Consistency: Principals survey';
    Run;
```

Data obtained from the survey instrument items indicated similar levels of principals agreement (or disagreement) regarding practice and policy. Based on the factors of gender and district, no statistically significant differences were shown by the principals' responses to the survey items.

The principals in the districts expressed a need for further education about inclusion. An informal discussion with principals in these districts indicated a need for more systematic assessment of the principals' individual knowledge skills and dispositions regarding inclusion. Data indicated that principals do not view their administrative preparation programs as

effective in preparing them for issues and practices of inclusion in schools.

Perceptions are that little is covered about specific special education legal considerations and requirement in university programs and that minmal information is included in program content about day to day interpretations and strategies for approaching inclusion.

Principals further indicate that district procedures have not been clearly laid out and, although school districts provide support for legal practices and considerations, training in handling everyday decisions and issues is neglected.

EDUCATIONAL IMPORTANCE

The changing demographics of schools across the nation have channeled attention and resources toward meeting the needs of a student population that is diverse in many ways. "Legal and sociopolitical perspectives play important roles in defining what special education is and how it is practiced" (Heward, 2003, p. 187).

Students categorized as having special needs have captured much political attention resulting in changing expectations for schools and school leaders. The "goal of educating students with special needs in regular educational settings to prepare them for future lives in mainstream society is inherent in special education legislation" (Doyle, 2001, p.4).

Fullan (1996) talks about change in terms of three stages: initiation, implementation and institutionalization. This study explored the status of implementation of the practices and procedures of inclusion in the schools and seeks to clarify, using the voices of the implementers, what expertise and deficiencies school leaders report in their implementation efforts. The study findings will help inform those who prepare school leaders as well as coordinators of professional development.

In addition, the study can offer a tentative assessment of the overall success of the school change focused on inclusion. Such data analysis can help avoid the pitfalls that prevent school change from becoming fully institutionalized and a part of the organizational fabric of the school.

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CONTACT INFORMATION

Your comments and questions are valued and encouraged. Contact the Authors at:
Dr. Wendy Dickinson
University of South Florida
4202 E. Fowler Ave. EDU162
Tampa, FL 33620
(941) 350-7150
(813) 974-4495
statgirl@aol.com