

The Role of Special Education Training in the Development of Socially Just Leaders: Building an Equity Consciousness in Educational Leadership Programs

Educational Administration Quarterly
49(2) 243-271

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DOI: 10.1177/0013161X12463934

eaq.sagepub.com



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Abstract

Over the past two decades, colleges of education along with a number of national organizations and specialized professional associations have sought to improve educational administration programs through the incorporation of a broad policy framework designed to develop socially just leaders. Central to the growth of these new leaders is a commitment to acknowledge and embrace difference and to create educational spaces within which all children can learn. As the notion of social justice within education has been evolving, certain students, particularly those with disabilities, have been railing against persistent inequities within schools. Special education has emerged as one of the most litigious issues that school leaders must confront in their daily practice. Nevertheless, content related to special education and special education law has been a long neglected area within university-based administrator preparation programs and has been strangely absent in conversations relevant to the creation of administrator preparation programs that embrace a social justice model of leadership. Beginning

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with the current literature base of social justice and leadership preparation in special education and special education law, and using the recently revised Educational Leadership Constituents Council Advanced Programs in Educational Leadership Standards for building-level administrators for context, this article proposes an imperative to include curriculum content and leadership training that embraces and honors the inclusion of students in K-12 special education programs and enables building-level administrators to fulfill their role as socially just leaders.

Keywords

social justice, administrator preparation, special education, special education law, leadership preparation standards

For school administrators, it is impossible to ignore the pressures and responsibilities of facilitating special education programs within their schools. Unfortunately, much of this is due to legal pressures imposed by sweeping federal legislation with very little dollars attached. Federal disability law affecting school-age children has been chronically underfunded since its introduction in the mid-1970s. Yet the numbers of students with disabilities being served in public schools has nearly doubled over that time.

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), in 1976-1977, approximately 3.6 million children were receiving services. In 2008-2009, almost 6.6 million children were in special education (NCES, 2011). To make matters worse and in light of the dire financial straits of many states, the federal government funds only 16% of the cost of special education, despite an initial promise to fund up to 40% of the cost (see Diament, 2011). Under the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), schools are required to deliver a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) to students with disabilities, providing whatever accommodations and modifications are necessary regardless of cost. Such an enterprise takes enormous commitment, understanding, and creativity. Indeed, "special education may be the most litigated educational law issue school leaders face" (Strader, 2007, p. 178). Significant liability exists for administrators and instructional personnel who fall short of performing their duties and responsibilities with respect to students with disabilities. Parents, advocates, lawyers, and even government agencies may seek and successfully hold administrators and the districts they represent accountable for their failures (Passman, 2008; Wagner & Katsiyannis, 2010).

Administrators often complete their graduate training with the belief they have been adequately prepared until they are faced with accusations of inappropriate services or are confronted with a lawsuit and potentially substantial costs for their school district (Burton, 2008; Cooner, Tochtermann, & Garrison-Wade, n.d.; Davidson & Algozzine, 2002; Militello, Schimmel, & Eberwein, 2009; Strader, 2007). As such, it makes sense that administrator preparation programs should provide developing leaders with opportunities to develop the necessary knowledge and expertise with regard to special education. Research, however, indicates that this is not the case (Cusson, 2010; Powell, 2010). A discussion of children with disabilities is rarely an integral part of leadership preparation programs, and disability issues remain outside of the leadership discourse.

At a time when the latest trend in educational leadership is a social justice orientation, the scarcity or absence of general training about a historically underserved population is particularly troubling. Even within the social-justice-oriented leadership discourse, issues related to children with disabilities are rarely touched upon, relegated to the purview of specialized teachers and administrators who are designated as the “experts” (Capper, Theoharis, & Sebastian, 2006; Riestler, Pursch, & Skrla, 2002). Such an approach flies in the face of a social justice framework in which, at least in theory, inclusion is key and responsibility is transferred to all personnel, not just a few. In fact, special education as well as other equity-oriented educational issues have long been a neglected area within administrator preparation programs (Brown, 2004; Capper et al., 2006; Marshall, 2004). To truly develop socially just leaders, these issues must be addressed.

Relying on a definition of social justice developed by Theoharis (2007), one of the few scholars specifically addressing special education issues within the social justice practice of school leaders, this article adopts his position that social justice leadership entails making “issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States central to their [school leaders] advocacy, leadership, practice and vision” (p. 223). Theoharis extrapolates that such a focus on eliminating marginalization necessitates an adherence to inclusive schooling practices and further argues that inclusion is itself about social justice. Quoting Sapon-Shevin (2003), he surmises “by embracing inclusion as a model of social justice, we can create a world fit for all of us” (p. 28, as cited in Theoharis, 2007, p. 223).

As noted, requirements of federal laws such as the IDEA (2004) and the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB, 2002) as well as an understanding of the potential changes to the reauthorized Elementary and Secondary Education

Act, highlighted in the *ESEA Blueprint for Reform* (U.S. Department of Education, 2010), have significant implications for the roles and responsibilities of school administrators with regard to special education. The current focus of educational reform on instructional leadership and student achievement issues creates a complex maze of legal requirements made even more difficult by considerations of disability and accommodations. Administrators struggle with accountability for all students within an environment of limited resources and competing priorities (Bays & Crockett, 2007; Lashley & Boscardin, 2003; Robicheau, Haar, & Palladino, 2008; Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2006). Thus, it is essential that knowledge of special education, special education law, and legislative requirements pertaining to children with disabilities be incorporated into the preservice training of every teacher and administrator, not just individuals within the field of special education (Bertrand & Bratberg, 2007; Conderman & Pederson, 2005; Finn, Rotherham, & Hokanson, 2001). Educational administrators should be informed of students' and parents' rights as well as the responsibilities of school personnel to appropriately serve students with disabilities. The greater their understanding of these rights and responsibilities, the better able they are to inform students and parents and the more likely they are to empower them to advocate for their own needs and services. Giving voice to students and parents is an essential part of social justice leadership (Council for Exceptional Children, 2008; Pazez, Cole, & Garcia, 2012).

The legal liability being imposed on administrators and the districts they represent speaks to the need for school leaders to be informed about special education. Zirkel, in a soon to be released article, tracks special education litigation over the last several decades. Since the 1970s, court cases have remained relatively stable at approximately 7,000 reported cases every 10 years. In the last decade (2000-2010), more than 8,000 reported cases (as cited in Samuels, 2011) have been reported. Wagner and Katsiyannis (2010) documented the legal issues in special education that often trouble administrators, citing discipline, placement, parental rights, and FAPE as significant areas for concern. On behalf of students with disabilities, they note that "schools must ensure that students' rights are protected and that they receive substantive educational benefits" (p. 48). Socially just leadership practice would address many of the litigation issues as administrators would be better aware of students' rights and their own responsibilities to provide for and serve all students in their schools.

If a new direction within educational leadership is the furtherance of social justice principles and the application of inclusive models that account for the diversity of students who are attending school, then it behooves the

profession to ensure that leaders are being prepared to apply those principles. This article addresses the current lack of special education training for school administrators and the fundamental need for additional training in the area of special education and special education law. It opens with a survey of the theoretical literature pertaining to this identified need for educational leaders to be more familiar with and knowledgeable about special education and special education law. In addition, it explores the empirical literature looking at the level of training relevant to special education and special education law offered through educational leadership preparation programs. To provide important context, this is followed with an examination of the educational leadership standards, particularly those developed by the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) and its inclusion of special education and legal knowledge as well as social justice in its performance expectations for school leaders. The article concludes with a call for an equity consciousness (McKenzie, Skrla, & Scheurich, 2006), an internal and external awareness within educational leadership that recognizes the rights of children with disabilities and the responsibility of school leaders to account for these students on all of their campuses. Finally, specific recommendations for revisions to and further development of leadership preparation programs in relation to the provision of a socially just curriculum are offered to ensure administrators can and will provide a “high quality education for all children” (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education [NCATE], 2008, p. 6).

Unmet Needs: A Review of the Literature

The amount of literature pertaining to special education and special education law within educational leadership is relatively sparse. Indeed, there is a paucity of research in the field, and what does exist tends to use limited or emerging theory or small sample sizes. Given that special education has been a legislated reality of public schools for more than 35 years, scant attention has been paid to the subject within leadership discourse. Clearly, there is a hole that needs to be filled. What does exist can be identified by two main categories: theoretical and empirical literature. The former addresses social, political, and moral as well as practical needs of incorporating special education training into leadership programming. The latter, relying heavily on survey research, documents the apparent lack of that training programmatically, personally, and experientially. What follows is a brief review of the literature on special education and special education law with regard to educational leadership training.

Special Education Training: A Critical Skill for School Administrators

Nearly 20 years ago, Valesky and Hirth (1992) alerted states of the need for coursework pertaining to special education and special education law in their general education administrative endorsement program. Valesky and Hirth's warning was later confirmed by Sirotnik and Kimball (1994), who revealed the sad reality that "special education has little or no place at all in these programs" (p. 599). The absence of special education's inclusion in educational administration programming was further examined by Quigney (1997), who asserted the need for a comprehensive knowledge base of special education law in light of the relationship between special education and the definitive requirements and ongoing revisions to legislation and developing case law.

There is no absence of theoretical papers attesting to the need for training in special education and special education law. Within the field of educational administration, knowledge of special education and special education law continues to be identified as a critical component in the preparation of future school administrators (Bateman & Bateman, 2006; Carpenter & Dyal, 2001; Crockett, Becker, & Quinn, 2009; Deisinger, 2007; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Hirth & Valesky, 1990; Johnson, 2009; McLaughlin, 2009). Responsibility for monitoring systems and procedures, facilitating services, and the overall academic performance of students with disabilities remains in the hands of the building-level administrator (Lashley, 2007). The principal must be familiar with specific timelines as well as procedural requirements of the law to ensure that building programs and activities comply with the legal requirements of IDEA (2004) and align with best practices within the profession (Goor, Schwenn, & Boyer, 1997).

According to Passman (2008), "the skill sets for both special education administrators and building principals are very similar . . . as services and systems are merged, training and development of leadership at all levels will require a common set of skills" (p. 47). Nevertheless, school administrators continue to discount their own responsibility and rely on their colleagues, who may have more experience or training in special education (Lashley, 2007). This is a dangerous game as the professional and legal responsibility clearly falls at their feet. Within the overarching context of statewide accountability and assessment, the provision of a FAPE in the least restrictive environment (LRE) for students with disabilities, and the overall implementation of special education programs, both building- and district-level administrators are professionally responsible (Bays & Crockett, 2007; Lashley, 2007).

Numerous scholars have highlighted the ever-increasing demands being placed on school leaders and the need for leadership-training programs to respond appropriately by providing the knowledge base necessary to fulfill their job requirements (Bays & Crockett, 2007; Burton, 2008; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Lashley, 2007; Lasky & Karge, 2006; Militello et al., 2009; Passman, 2008; Petzko, 2008; Powell, 2010; Robicheau, 2008; Wakeman et al., 2006).

University and college officials as well as researchers in educational leadership continue to stress the need for preparation in special education and special education law due to the inconsistencies that exist within and across preservice administrative training programs in the nation (Hirth & Valesky, 1990; Valesky & Hirth, 1992; McCarthy & Forsyth, 2009; Powell, 2010). A myriad of amendments that have been made to education-related legislation within the past decade, particularly with respect to special education, have resulted in an increase in the number of complaints, appeals, and court decisions related to students with disabilities.

Despite the increase in course curriculum that has occurred between 1992 and 2006, a substantial percentage of administrator preparation programs have not increased their curriculum offerings devoted to special education or special education law (Cusson, 2010; Powell, 2010). Cusson (2010) conducted a synthesis of literature and identified 12 components in which all educational administrators should receive training to provide services for students with disabilities, which were as follows: (a) relationship and communication; (b) leadership and vision; (c) budget and capital; (d) special education laws and policies; (e) curriculum and instruction; (f) personnel; (g) evaluation of data, programs, students, and teachers; (h) collaboration and consultation; (i) special education programming; (j) organization; (k) professional development; and (l) advocacy. She surveyed 293 professors at University Council for Educational Administration member institutions to determine the level of training in each of the components. Components relevant to the topic of this article that were incorporated the least were advocacy and special education programming. Only a few were aware of whether these components were a requirement of the program. Nevertheless, as stated by Powell (2010), "a principal is accountable on a daily basis for the management and provision of special education services outlined in IDEA 1997 and IDEIA 2004. Nothing less than adequate knowledge of special education law, practice, and policies is a requisite for all successful principals" (p. 34).

Interestingly, although special education and special education law is highlighted as a core skill for school administrators, within the context of social justice and school leadership, it is all but ignored. Capper et al. (2006)

reviewed social justice literature searching for articles that provided recommendations for educational leadership preparation programs. Interestingly, “none of the recommendations for preparation specifically addressed anything related to educating students with disabilities,” nor did they offer “ideas for examining the intersection of disability with other areas of difference” (p. 210). Theoharis (2007) notes that that educational leadership literature that addresses social justice tends to examine disability in the context of the overrepresentation of culturally and linguistically diverse student groups in special education as opposed to the creation of an inclusive education for students with disabilities within the context of the general education classroom. This oversight is problematic, particularly because a touchstone of social justice proponents is the elimination of separate educational programs and a shift to an integrated, socially just school (Capper et al., 2006; Capper, Rodriguez, & McKinney, 2010; Theoharis, 2009).

Limited Access: The Scarcity of Programs

Although the number of university preparation programs that offer coursework in special education law has gradually increased since the Valesky and Hirth (1992) study, the availability of substantive training in the field remains limited. Powell (2010) examined data from state departments of education and universities from all 50 states concerning content and course requirements for administrator preparation programs. The two universities with the largest producing administrator preparation programs were selected from each of the 50 states. Of the 97 programs included in the study, only 8 programs provided a separate course in special education law. The majority simply responded that curriculum relevant to the knowledge of special education law and administration was embedded in a mandatory education law course. It is highly questionable whether such a course spent any significant time on special education issues given the abundance of other school-law-related matters that such a course would need to cover. A course that more comprehensively surveyed not only the practical implementation of special education programs but also the legislated requirements would give developing leaders the extensive knowledge they need to fully serve students with disabilities.

Limited Knowledge: Personal Experience and Accountability

A number of studies have explored educational leaders' own feelings and their training or lack of training in special education and special education

law. These studies indicate that school leaders are aware of the need for more training but rarely receive it in their programs. Davidson and Algozzine (2002) surveyed 264 fellows in a principal preparation program regarding their perceived need for training in special education law. Almost all respondents expressed a need for additional training. Nearly half of those surveyed reported they possessed “limited” or only “basic” knowledge of special education law and, upon completion of their training program, believed their understanding of special education law was either “below” or “well below” standard.

In a similar study, Robicheau et al. (2008) used survey material as well as a review of course content and curriculum collected from several university administration programs. She found that special education and knowledge of legal issues was a critical skill for school leaders. However, principals interviewed reported receiving “limited to no preparation in special education” (p. 3). In addition, foreshadowing the findings of the Powell (2010) study, only one of the programs studied actually offered a specific course in special education law.

The impact on administrators that are not exposed to special education training has also been documented. Angelle and Bilton (2009) examined not only practicing principals’ exposure to special education training but the effects on their practice after graduation. Their findings indicate that the comfort level of principals in their first year of administration who reportedly were exposed to special education or special education law in one or more classes was statistically significant when compared to those who stated they were not exposed to special education or special education law in any of their classes.

Likewise, Burton (2008) surveyed nearly 200 principals to assess their perceptions of acquired special education knowledge and skills and level of preparation pertaining to their ability to address responsibilities relevant to special education. Nearly half of the principals reported that they took no courses in special education as part of their administrator preparation program of study. When asked to select the major sources that contributed to a knowledge base in special education, direct experience or “on the job” training and professional development were the most frequently named sources. The source receiving the least percentage of selections by principals pertained to their administrative preparation coursework and training. Rodriguez (2007) found similar results in his multiple case study of three elementary school principals in South Texas. They, too, reported they received little training in special education services within their educational leadership programs. Although one of the three principals took a special education law

class, all three indicated their course content failed to provide them with basic knowledge of disability classifications and the provision of services for students with disabilities. The other two lacked any understanding of special education or special education law. McHatton, Boyer, Shaunesy, and Terry (2010) reached the same conclusion with their survey of administrators. Nearly half of their respondents indicated there were no courses offered in their training programs pertaining to special education or special education law. Furthermore, in their ratings of “preparedness” for administrative practice, the categories in which they believed they were “least prepared” specifically highlighted the initial placement meetings for students with disabilities and the development of their Individual Education Program (IEP).

Additional studies related to principals’ personal perceptions of their level of knowledge, understanding, or preparedness of special education and special education law as provided by their administrator preparation programs indicated the following: (a) a lack of understanding in areas related to special education or curriculum (Nelson, de la Colina, & Boone, 2008), (b) a perceived importance of knowledge and skills and a consequent lack of preparation in student services and the administration of special programs (Petzko, 2008), (c) an emphasis on and need for more practice in the form of “on-the-job” learning (Bertrand, Dalton, & Roberts, 2009; Lasky & Karge, 2006) as a “starting point for all fundamental knowledge regarding special education leadership” (Bertrand et al., 2009, para. 1), and (d) a desire to combine coursework with field-based experiences so special education competencies and skills can be applied within authentic learning environments (Cooner et al., n.d.).

Educational Leadership Program Standards: Where Special Education Meets Social Justice

Almost every profession has its own set of professional standards: a set of rules or guidelines by which members of the professional association measure their conduct and performance. Educational administrators are held to professional standards to which they are expected to adhere in the performance of their employment duties. They represent the expectations of the profession, the gold standard to which members are held accountable.

Over the past two decades, universities have sought to improve their leadership preparation programs in cooperation with a number of specialized professional associations and state education agencies resulting in a number of reviews, analyses, and revisions of professional standards for administrative preparation programs as they apply to practicing school administrators

(Beyer, 2009). National standards for leadership and administrator preparation programs “provide a policy framework for the knowledge and skills thought to be important to the foundations of professional identities” (Boscardin, McCarthy, & Delgado, 2009, p. 69). Furthermore, they are “designed to serve as broad national policy standards that states use as a national model for developing their own standards” (National Policy Board for Educational Administration [NPBEA], n.d., para. 2).

Central to the standards within educational administration is the concept of social justice, which is also advanced in the language of inclusion. Inclusion and an equity-consciousness are reflected in the language of the ELCC standards, which in turn bring together both special education and social justice. The standards provide a perfect context in which to highlight the need for special education and special education law training and its connection to the development of socially just leaders.

The ELCC Standards: Bridging the Gap With Special Education

Although previous versions of professional standards for administrative preparation programs may have contained an absence of explicitly stated standards relevant to special education and students with disabilities (see Burton, 2008), the most recent standards of the Educational Leadership Program Standards (NPBEA, 2011) for advanced programs designed to prepare building-level educational leaders have implicitly stressed a call to incorporate and mandate curriculum content related to special education and special education law.

Specifically, Standard One of the 2011 ELCC Standards supports the need for building-level administrators to be knowledgeable of the needs of students with disabilities through the application of “knowledge that promotes the success of every student by collaboratively facilitating the development, articulation, implementation, and stewardship of a shared school vision of learning” (NPBEA, 2011, p. 2). The importance of developing skills related to consensus-building with teachers, school-based staff, and external stakeholders, such as parents, underscores the need to foster a team-based response to the social, emotional, and academic needs of students from a diverse array of cultures, linguistic backgrounds, and learning needs. From a special education and special education law standpoint, building-level administrators must be armed with specific knowledge and skills related to, for example, the implementation of response-to-intervention strategies and prereferral interventions as well as nondiscriminatory evaluation requirements as stipulated

by IDEA (2004). Key to a well-informed administrator is the reduction or elimination of inappropriate referrals to special education and the overrepresentation of culturally and linguistically diverse students in special education classrooms. A well-trained administrator should be able to apply a critical eye to assessment practices that may contribute to inappropriate labeling of certain students and their marginalization within the school context. These responsibilities are further reflected in the broader concepts of social justice inherent within the standard of promoting success for all students. Although combating disproportionate representation of some students in special education is important, the overriding responsibility for educational leaders is to ensure the appropriate services are provided to all learners. A diverse array of students' needs must be met.

The original purpose of Congress in enacting the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (EAHCA) in 1975 (P.L. 94-142, 20 U.S.C. Sec. 1400(d)), reauthorized as IDEA (2004), was to integrate general and special education as complementary rather than separate disciplines. The EAHCA created a federal commitment that all students are entitled to a FAPE in the least restrictive educational environment (LRE). Through federal law, the inclusion of children with disabilities into public school was not only made possible but required. It necessitated the need for specific training to rethink the ways in which children with disabilities are educated in schools. The complexity of IDEA (2004) reinforces the demand on educational leaders to be informed, skilled, and experienced in developing, maintaining, and supporting programs for students with disabilities.

The responsibilities of educational leaders to be instructional leaders for all students are ever present in the ELCC standards. Standard Two (NBPEA, 2011) states:

A building-level education leader applies knowledge that promotes the success of every student by advocating, nurturing and sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning through collaboration, trust, and a personalized learning environment with high expectations for students; creating, monitoring and evaluating a comprehensive rigorous and coherent curricular and instructional school program; developing and supervising the instructional and leadership capacity of school staff to maximize time spent on quality instruction; and promoting the use of the most effective and appropriate technologies to support teaching and learning within a school environment. (p. 6)

Standard Three of the ELCC standards specifically addresses the need to provide a learning environment for each individual in the school that is safe and secure through the creation of a building management and crisis plan. The building administrator must be able to apply “knowledge that promotes the success of every student” (NBPEA, 2011, p. 9) and protect “the welfare and safety of school students and staff” (p. 9) so quality instruction and student learning can occur. The capacity for providing such an environment requires school administrators to be knowledgeable in special education and special education law. Without appropriate knowledge of the principal of zero reject inherent in IDEA (2004) and the legal requirements pertaining to student discipline, procedural safeguards, and due process, an incident involving a student with a behavioral or emotional disability might result in administrative action that fails to consider the specific nature of the student’s disability in connection to the student’s offense. In effect, the absence of such consideration opposes the goal intended for social justice leaders to be prepared so they can “become equally ‘expert’ across student differences” (McKenzie et al., 2008, p. 114).

Furthermore, the ability to “involve families and caregivers in decision making about their children’s education” (NBPEA, 2011, p. 15), an administrative behavior that is nonnegotiable according to the procedural requirements of IDEA (Strader, 2007; Turnbull, Stowe, & Huerta, 2007), is underscored in Standard Four of the ELCC standards. Decisions regarding the education and placement of students with disabilities require the input and involvement of the student’s parents or legal guardians and, when appropriate, the individual student. Administrators are charged with establishing and maintaining those relationships throughout the decision-making process so the best interests of the child can be served. If they encounter disciplinary situations, they must include the parents in the decision-making process and take the necessary steps to ensure the student continues to receive a FAPE. A strong knowledge base in special education law is paramount. Only with such knowledge can they successfully “balance their legal responsibilities for the education of students with special educational needs, with their responsibility to act in a manner that is socially just and equitable for all” (Faircloth, Ritter, & Wilson, 2007, p. 28).

The overall intent of IDEA (2004) since its original inception (EAHCA, 1975, P.L. 94-142, 20 U.S.C. Sec. 1400(d)) is expressed in both Standards Five and Six of the ELCC standards. Standard Five requires building-level leaders to apply knowledge that “promotes the success of every student by acting with integrity, fairness, and in an ethical manner to ensure a school

system of accountability for every student's academic and social success" (NBPEA, 2011, p. 14). Furthermore, school leaders are expected to uphold "the values of democracy, equity, and diversity" (p.15); to consider and evaluate "the potential moral and legal consequences of decision-making" (p. 15); and to promote "social justice within the school to ensure that individual student needs inform all aspects of schooling" (p. 15). Each of these requirements can be extrapolated to pertain to students with disabilities, clearly linking their inclusion in administrator responsibilities with the furtherance of their roles in social justice leadership.

Standard Six translates Standard Five into administrative action and practice. Administrators are expected to promote the success of each student through legal action and advocacy for children and their families or caregivers. This would be impossible without a sound grasp of special education and special education law. Informed consideration of the best interests of each student is the way to create socially just leaders that promote equitable, inclusive school cultures. If administrator preparation programs are to align with professional standards, then special education and special education law coursework and training must become commonplace.

A Challenging Task: Building an Equity Consciousness for School Leaders

Osterman and Hafner (2009) contend that a social-justice-oriented curriculum views leaders as primary change agents, arguing that "preparation programs should develop skills and dispositions that will enable school leaders to recognize, critique, and change inequitable structures, policies, and practices with our nation's schools" (p. 176). The time is ripe to engage in a critique of the past and current paucity of curriculum related to leadership preparation and special education administration. One of the primary ways to ensure that issues of social justice make it to the educational forefront is to demand that special education leadership be given full weight in educational leadership preparation programs.

Fostering a knowledge base in educational administration informed by instruction and training in special education and special education law fosters an "equity consciousness" (McKenzie et al., 2006). "Equity consciousness" occurs when leaders understand that all children can achieve academic success, regardless of race, social class, gender, sexual orientation, learning difference, culture, language, religion, and so forth. Leaders must recognize that traditional school practices have failed to yield equitable results and may even perpetuate inequalities. Furthermore, they must acknowledge that

they are responsible for moving adults in their school community toward a common vision so that students can achieve their greatest success (McKenzie et al., 2006).

Shepherd and Hasazi (2008) define social justice in the context of the commitment that schools, as institutions, make to provide “access to equal opportunities and outcomes” which help students to achieve “full citizenship and actualization of their full potential” (p. 476). Schools committed to social justice “recognize, understand, and promote the cultural contributions of everyone in the community, including those who have been de-valued, marginalized, and under-represented in society” (p. 476).

Crockett (2011) furthers the discussion of access, equity, equal opportunity, outcomes, and the need for administrators to adopt an “equity consciousness” to ensure that each student receives an equitable and beneficial education. She stresses the critical considerations of *individualization* and the provision of adequate services that *accommodate individual differences* in students’ IEPs. She also emphasizes the importance of a “collaborative culture” that consists of school personnel, parents, the student, and service agencies. Moreover, Crockett (2010) asks the paramount and most perplexing question that any socially just educator must ultimately address: How can we prevent students from being included—but underserved?

Simply creating a place for students with disabilities to interact with their nondisabled peers does not mean that they will receive the types of services and instruction they require. Students with disabilities must be considered on a continuum of needs, where placements are dependent upon what they individually require whether that be full inclusion with their nondisabled peers or a more segregated placement with limited inclusion. The driver in any decision is about how best to serve the student. This requires an understanding of the student as well as special education programs and services and special education legal requirements regarding LRE. These decisions are complex and cannot be made without a full consideration of all these issues. Always central to the final decision is what will best serve the student. Once services are determined, then decisions can be made about the best environment in which to provide those services. In this guise, decisions are avoided that physically include students with disabilities with their nondisabled peers but effectively exclude them from the social and academic opportunities afforded to their peers.

When considering ways in which socially just leaders can address the needs of students with disabilities, Theoharis’s (2009) four components of social justice leadership offer direction. These components include (a) advancing inclusion, access, and opportunity; (b) creating a climate of belonging;

(c) improving core teaching and curriculum; and (d) raising student achievement (see Theoharis, 2009, Figure 1.1., p. 12). Utilization of this framework, however, is not possible without a strong understanding of special education and special education law.

Crockett (2011) calls for actions framed by a fully inclusive philosophy that works toward the provision of an equitable education of all learners. She acknowledges, however, that equality does not equal sameness. Differences must be accounted for and addressed. Drawing upon an argument advanced originally by Kauffman and Landrum (2009), she stresses the need for “thinking through the differences among differences and thinking about what is possible and what is not” (p. 186). According to Crockett, leadership practices for students with disabilities should guard against an overemphasis on inclusion or oversimplification of the complexities involved in providing instruction to students who face significant struggles in their effort to learn.

In a similar vein, Zigmond, Kloo, and Volonino (2009) challenge us to consider the following when assessing the particulars of the provision of a “full inclusion” instructional model:

If a differentiated education is provided in the same place as everyone else, on the same content as everyone else, with adapted instruction that is not unique to the student with disabilities, is the student receiving a special education? And if the educational experience (where, what, and how) doesn't need to be special, or if everyone is getting a special education, why does the law differentiate between protected and unprotected students with disabilities? (p. 201)

Researchers have made it clear that to include students with disabilities, leaders must possess an understanding of not just what must be done but how to do it. They must be engaged in more than just placement decisions but also services and instruction. This is where the idea that a school leader is also an instructional leader takes real shape. To be an instructional leader, a school administrator must be knowledgeable about evidence-based practices within the field of both general and special education. He or she must fully grasp the challenges of inclusion, particularly in terms of the paradox that exists between an expectation to individualize instruction within a school-wide context of general accountability (Voltz & Collins, 2010). To engage in such dialogue, one must receive the requisite training in special education and special education law. The special education knowledge base underlies what has long been at the heart of special education policy and reflects the legislative intent behind the law. To attain equity in education, leaders must be

committed to the implementation and practice of social justice, leadership programs, and research agendas. To engender such a commitment, preparation programs will need to delve into both the procedural as well as the ideological principles behind the law. At the same time, they must provide future leaders with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to implement a socially just education for every student.

Social Justice, Special Education, and Special Education Law: Tying It All Together

Social justice and education have been inextricably linked since the court decided the *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) case. Although the concepts are not particularly new, they have grown and blossomed over the past 58 years. In this new age of accountability, bolstered by more legislative requirements and new debates of equity and access, social justice is an increasingly powerful concept in the world of education.

Initially, the concept of social justice was traditionally associated with issues of race, socioeconomic status, and gender (Polat, 2011; Shepherd & Hasazi, 2008; Theoharis, 2009). But more recently, the literature has linked disability to social justice (see Capper et al., 2006; Theoharis, 2007). It has stressed that disability is socially constructed tying negative social meaning and attributes to differences producing inequitable learning opportunities for the marginalized (Shepherd & Hasazi, 2008). Through this lens, when social justice is placed at the core of how schools operate and function, a paradigm shift must occur. The cultural and organizational aspects of schools and communities must fundamentally change. This requires a strong sense of will and purpose. Paradigm shifts are not easy, and to facilitate one, leaders need to identify both their goals and the underlying foundation of those goals. A surface understanding will not suffice. Real change requires a fully informed consciousness, a true equity consciousness.

Schools that abide by social justice principles embrace the belief that the practice of inclusion of students with disabilities within the school community leads to positive outcomes for every student. Inclusive school leaders engender democratic decision making and replace authoritative, hierarchical structures with participatory structures and team-based practices (Pazey, 1995). For example, these leaders believe in the democratic ideals of sharing power and distributing responsibility so that all members of their educational community have a common understanding and commitment to serve all students. They also serve as change agents, helping others to recognize the varying abilities of each student and the complexities inherent in understanding

the “challenges of individuals with disabilities, and the interaction of their disabilities with their cultural and linguistic backgrounds” (Shepherd & Hasazi, 2008, p. 477). In doing so, they are willing to confront the overrepresentation of students with diverse backgrounds in special education through self-examination of biases and stereotypes that may exist. These reflective practices drive schools to critically examine their perceptions of student ability and their interactions with students and their families. True awareness comes from constant self-reflection and learning. Such an undertaking cannot occur in a vacuum. It needs to be developed over time, with teaching, additional training, and constant learning.

Simply focusing on social justice without providing the necessary training in special education and special education law produces detrimental effects, particularly due to the risk of overlooking disability issues. While emphasizing the need for leaders to be prepared to “address social justice concerns and issues of inequity” (p. 306), Osterman and Hafner (2009) note that little attention is paid to social justice in relation to special education. Hawley and James (2010) stress that “a fundamental priority of colleges of education” should be to provide school leaders with the necessary training so “school leaders have the capacity to meet the learning needs of students of color, students from low-income families, students who are English language learners, and students with disabilities” (p. 1). In their own suggestions to improve the responsiveness of leadership preparation programs, however, they narrow their focus to students from ethnically and racially diverse backgrounds, all but ignoring children with disabilities.

This article would not be complete if it failed to account for disproportionality within special education, a well-documented trend in the field (see Losen & Orfield, 2010). Although we continue to advocate toward ensuring that any student with a disability can derive educational benefits from their public school experience, certain students—that is, students who are economically disadvantaged, ethnically and culturally and linguistically diverse students—must bear an additional burden. These students run a risk of being both misidentified and overrepresented within the population of students receiving special education services. They often fare the worst in terms of quality programming and access because their cultural and linguistic needs are not only ignored but often penalized by the system. For example, many English language learners are inappropriately funneled into special education classes, misidentified as learning disabled when the obstacles to their academic development may be more related to language acquisition issues and even opportunity to learn (García & Ortiz, 2008). Darling-Hammond (1997) references such student populations as representative of the “the disparities

of the system” and states, “It is not that U.S. teachers and students cannot succeed when they are well supported, it is that the system fails to support so many of them” (p. 27).

This lack of attention is cause for concern, particularly when inclusion for all students correlates to the furtherance of social justice. No child should be excluded from the conversation, children with disabilities least of all. In so doing, we alienate and exclude a population of students who cross all boundaries of class, race, and gender, perpetuating the inequities that *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) sought to remedy nearly 60 years ago.

To guard against such a setback in administrative action, school leaders must be equipped with the tools needed to act on a fully acquired and comprehensive equity consciousness. Their training must include an understanding of the rights of all children and administrative responsibilities in upholding those rights. As instructional leaders, they must be grounded in the principles and practice of culturally responsive pedagogy and know the risks involved when children are identified based on faulty assumptions of race, class, and culture. A social justice lens takes into account all these inequities and, through knowledge of special education and special education law, strives to ensure that school leaders do not make the mistakes of their predecessors.

Special Education Law and Equity: What Cannot Be Ignored

If social justice is the framework out of which special education and special education law that supports it evolved, then the legal obligations imposed are the practical application of that framework. Nevertheless, legal obligations for administrators go far beyond simple paperwork. Administrators must possess a comprehensive understanding of IDEA (2004) in relation to procedural and substantive due process, zero reject, and school discipline policies. There is a cornucopia of disability-related law that justifies the incorporation of a course within programs of study for educational administrators that provide detailed and specific content pertaining to both special education law and individuals with disabilities.

We should be clear that it is not our intent to argue that one course alone could possibly fill in the gaps that exist in educational leadership programs in regard to educating emergent leaders on issues of disability and the furtherance of social justice principles. What really needs to happen is a far greater revolution of thought, where discourse on special education and special education law becomes an integral part of leadership development and social justice leadership agendas. Disability must cease to be on the fringes of

current conceptual thought on how to teach and prepare educational leaders. On the contrary, it must be infused throughout their training and the curriculum content of each course. The dispositions and attitudes of educational leaders toward ability and disability must be addressed by each of us, with the same focus and attention toward detail that is advanced toward the development of core competencies for administrators necessary to address issues such as testing and accountability. In each of their classes, future leaders should be exposed to relevant literature, conduct research, complete projects, engage in simulations and internship activities, and share their dilemmas, challenges, and experiences on aspects of disability. There are many ways to incorporate disability into leadership training to the extent the topic can be integrated into other program areas within educational policy and leadership departments. But first, they need to be exposed to such issues, and a concentrated, dedicated course is the best way to begin the integration.

Codified mandates have broadened the scope of education, service provision, and delivery to facilitate the inclusion of students with disabilities who were absent from public classrooms for decades. Without question, equity of opportunity for children, including students with disabilities, requires a clear and solid understanding of special education and special education law.

Concluding Thoughts and Recommendations for Future Action

Attention paid to the training and preparation of educational administrators in the topics of special education and special education law has been limited. Moreover, building administrators have indicated they lack the knowledge and necessary training on how to address the needs of students with disabilities. Educational leadership preparation programs have been releasing graduates who are soon-to-be building-level administrators. Studies reveal that many graduates have reported concerns about being fully prepared for the challenges they will face in their schools and communities. Others are entering the profession, unaware and uninformed about their educational, professional, and legal obligations.

At the same time, policymakers have recognized the need for more equity-minded approaches to education and have infused a commitment to social justice into the preparation of building-level administrators into the recently revised professional standards for administrator preparation program. As noted, social justice has been used as a powerful framework applied to leadership, instruction, and educational reform. At the same time, many school administrators possess little knowledge about our most vulnerable populations. They are

at risk of perpetuating historical inequities that cannot and will not be resolved if they are not informed practitioners, armed with the weapons they need to combat systemic injustice. It has been said that a society can best be judged by the way it treats its most marginalized groups. The possibility that current knowledge gaps continue to exist in the area of special education and special education law in the preparation of our schools' leaders are cause for concern, particularly in the context of the imperative that we produce socially just leaders who are capable and ready to address the needs of all students.

Theoharis (2007) identifies principals as "social justice advocates" as they are responsible for driving school agendas that ensure equity of opportunity for all students, including those with disabilities. As school administrators, they set the tone and climate for the school and dictate to school personnel whether students will be included or excluded. The role that administrators play in creating an inclusive or exclusive learning environment underscores the rationale and underlying imperative that they be given the resources to assist them with incorporating inclusive and equitable policies into their school and surrounding communities.

Those who stand at the helm of departments of educational administration may wish to take heed to the implied meaning behind their failure to incorporate special education and special education law into their program of study for school and district administration programs. As Jenlink (2009) explains:

All educational leadership preparation is a form of ideology. Each preparation program is related to the educational ideology held by a particular faculty member or parent institution, even though the relationship may not be made explicit. There is no such thing as value-free leadership preparation just as there is no such thing as a value-free education for children. People are infused with the ideologies and biases of their society. Faculty in leadership preparation programs and educators who enter these programs are members of the society. They do not stand objectively outside of it as observers of its social problems. The ideologies and biases of society infuse in the subjectivities of the individual, and when faculty and students engage in a teaching and learning relationship, they enter a relationship where biases and subjectivities are exchanged and experienced, often resulting in conflicts. (p. 2)

It is time for those who educate the educators to ask what kind of schooling they wish to promote. If social justice is to be the driver of our educational policy and is to be turned into meaningful practice, then we need to

engage in critical conversations that address the educational and social needs of every student. Educational administrators must be armed with what they need: the knowledge, skills, and attributes necessary for engaging in “social justice leadership” for each student.

Clearly, additional research in the field is needed. For example, when a program integrates special education and special education law into the educational curriculum, what is the overall impact within schools, in areas of litigation, and in creating a more socially just school? A stronger knowledge base and further discussions that address ways in which professional standards and the special education law interface or intersect, with practical guides related to their requirements, are also needed. In short, we need to establish a larger and fully inclusive context among leadership preparation programs that justify the inclusion of a course on special education and special education law into the curriculum of educational leadership programs.

Most importantly, then, we advocate for a core course specifically devoted to special education and special education law to be added and instituted into the curriculum of each leadership preparation program within the United States. There is no counterevidence to support the ongoing absence of such content. Of course, this is just a starting place. Although we want a revolution of thought, we know that change rarely happens immediately. It is incremental. A course would be the first step and open up the discourse in educational leadership to include issues of disability. The imperative clearly stands: Students are being excluded and our schools seem to be moving further and further away from any model of equity. Special education and the law that informs it must be integrated into any practical training provided to educational administrators. School leaders need to experience for themselves the responsibilities associated with integrating children with disabilities into their schools, not relegate those responsibilities to the “special education experts.” Everyone must share the responsibility.

To conclude, to bring about the type of fundamental paradigm shift, that revolution of thought alluded to in this article, the raising of a new equity consciousness among school leaders is required. Disability can no longer be excluded from conversations of social justice, educational reform, and equitable schooling. It, like its relatives race, gender, and class, must all come together as integral points of any discussion or debate about change, inclusion, and the education of *all* students. Knowledge and expertise of special education and special education law are powerful forces and tools that can supplement and strengthen equality and equity of opportunity in our schools. That will only happen if they are part of the conversation.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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