Special Education Leadership:

Some Foundational Literature

Kim M. Michaud

George Mason University

EDUC 802

**Abstract**

For the purposes of this brief narrative, special education leadership is defined as the collaborative effort to mobilize necessary resources in order to support the success of students with disabilities in school. Some current challenges and corresponding current or hoped for special education leadership trends are identified through a review of some foundational literature. This narrative can lay the ground work for a more extensive review in the field of special education leadership.

Special Education Leadership: Some Foundational Literature

According to Burns (1978), leadership involves a relationship between those who lead and those who are led. This interactional dynamic is both collective, in that the goals of both leaders and followers are mutually held, and purposeful, for resources are actively used to achieve those mutually held goals. In other words, a leader and followers collaborate in order to mobilize resources for the purpose of achieving a goal that both the leader and those who are led share. Hehir (2009) defines special education as the, “vehicle by which we have constructed the support that many students with disabilities need to be successful in school” (p. 47). Therefore, for the purpose of this narrative, special education leadership will be defined as the collaborative effort to mobilize necessary resources in order to support the success of students with disabilities in school. More specifically, special education’s role is, “to minimize the impact of disability and maximize the opportunities for children with disabilities to participate in general education in their natural community”(Hehir, p. 49). It is the intent of this brief narrative to identify some current foundational challenges and corresponding trends in the realm special education leadership.

Two policies converging education policies have caused conflict and confusion recently in the United States. No Child Left Behind (NCLB) has placed great focus on high quality education for *all* students which is to be evaluated through large-scale assessment and annual yearly progress requirements. On the other hand, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) 2004 emphasizes the need to support the education for *each* child through an Individualized Educational Program (IEP) (Boscardin, 2007) within the least restrictive environment. Alwell and Cobb (2006) referred to the philosophical and practical tension that most glaringly exists in the United States in regards to secondary schooling of students with cognitive disabilities: “teaching youth with disabilities the skills needed to function in and succeed beyond school, versus including these same youth in general education classrooms where curriculum is largely focused on academics”(p. 4). Consequent to the No Child Left Behind Act in the United States, national secondary education curricular focus has become focused, almost exclusively, on college preparatory academic achievement. To be able to minimize the impact of disability, maximize the participation in general educational opportunities, while increasing quality standards for *all* students is a daunting challenge. Leadership relationships must be creatively forged on policy, administration, teacher, and community levels.

Crockett (2002) emphasizes a need for developing leadership curricula for aspiring principals, supervisors, and central-office administrators that could help meet this challenge. These curricula would be infused with the five core principles of special education: ethical practice, individual consideration, equity under the law, effective programming, and establishing productive partnerships. In addition to instruction in special education law, the leaders would be prepared in moral, instructional, organizational and collaborative leadership.

True cultural change principals, however, transform through other individuals and teams (Fullan, 2002). “An organization cannot flourish – at least for long – on the actions of the top leader alone” (p. 20). Hehir (2009) calls for transformations that would require significant organizational changes accomplished by teams. He advocates for the application of universal design applied in the areas of reading, content, and behavior. This is the same concept that changed architecture structure/design so that individuals with various disabilities would not be barred access. Ideally, universal design in these areas could be instructed at the university level in the form of teacher and administrative preparation curricula, as well as augmented through various avenues of professional development. Truth be told, as Hehir indicates when he refers to Skrtic’s 1991 essay *The Special Education Paradox: Equity as the Way to Excellence, “*effective education of student with disabilities is uncertain work that requires a problem-solving type of organization in order to be effective, not a typical school where teachers, whether general or special, implement standard programs…”(p. 106).

Billingsley (2007), too, emphasizes that for teacher leadership to properly evolve to most effectively meet all students’ needs, schools must actually have to be “recultured”. Through collegiality, professionalism and the mentoring of new teachers, the school and community members can creatively become problem solvers. Billingsley advocates for the development of collegial learning communities which could greatly improve school health and creativity. Partnerships formed between schools, institutions of higher education and professional organizations (PDSs) are also recommended, for they have been found to prepare new teachers, provide faculty development and improvement of practices, and enhance student achievement.

One could not complete this brief narrative without mentioning special education leadership at the policy level. The Council of Administrators of Special Education, Inc. is a division of the Council for Exceptional Children and provides influence for policies and practices to improve the quality of education. Its recommendations that were adopted to present to Congress on April 18, 2007, address the very issues that were elucidated above concerning teachers, teacher preparation programs, and administrators. Of particular interest to this narrative, is the recommendation that IDEA and NCLB requirements be aligned so that, “individual protections of IDEA…be incorporated into NCLB regarding the meaningful assessment of the full range of students with disabilities. NCLB should permit Individualized Education Program (IEP) teams make ‘individualized’decisions regarding assessment of students based on identified IEP needs and goals”(p. 2). Likewise, the recommendations for inclusion of functional life skill assessment and recognition of high school diplomas earned in more than four years are important special education leadership policy adjustments.

In order to maximize the educational opportunities in general education and minimize the impact of disability, it will be necessary for significant structural changes to take place in educational institutions. Schools will have to become collaborative teams where problems are solved through continual creative readjustments, rather than remaining bureaucratic institutions where standard programs are merely implemented with some adjustments. General education teachers, special education teachers and principals will need to be taught universal design strategies for instruction, assessment and behavior management so that all students will benefit academically. Changes may even need to be made in length of school days, duration of school year and most appropriate setting for certain content learning for some students. As Hehir (2009) indicates, since special education eligibility in most states extends to age 21 or 22, an effective transition program could be offered for students from ages 18 to 22 to refine vocational and independent living skills. These transitional programs could even be offered at the community college or university level. Finally, continued policy changes should be implemented so that high quality education opportunities are provided for all students in equitable formats that are appropriately and accountably assessed and realigned to benefit individual students’ academic and functional needs. Modeling Hehir’s precepts, “disability is a natural form of human diversity that is neither pitiable, nor heroic…[and] is only tragic when the needs of disabled people are not met. The challenge, therefore, is to eliminate ableism by affirming the fundamental rights of disabled children to equitable quality education so that they may take their rightful place in the world”( p. 109-110).

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