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Preparing School Leaders for Special Education: Old Criticisms and New Directions

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In the context of accountability and high-stakes testing, professors of educational administration in Texas and across the nation are under tremendous pressure to develop innovative principal preparation programs that produce effective school leaders, especially as research methodologies emerge to disaggregate the effects of such programs. One area few programs adequately address, including more innovative programs, is special education – despite the fact that principals struggle with accountability for all students, but particularly those principals in schools and districts with limited resources and limited professional development opportunities (Bays & Crocket, 2007; Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2006). Principals have long reported that their preparation programs did not prepare them with the legal and instructional knowledge in the area of special education (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Hirth & Valesky, 1990).

However, as instructional leaders, principals have an important role to play in improving special education and supporting students with disabilities. Principals with special education knowledge and expertise employ a range of instructional leadership and managerial actions to improve special education programs and educational outcomes for students with disabilities (Waldron, McLesky, & Redd, 2011; Walther-Thomas & DiPaola, 2003). Many principals without this knowledge either learn on the job or continue to be unable to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Unfortunately, many principals are unable to sufficiently learn on the job and frequently delegate these responsibilities away (Lashley, 2007), making it no surprise that students with disabilities struggle to find academic success.

In Texas, an analysis of student achievement in special education reveals persistent gaps between students with disabilities and their non-disabled peers; general education students were also far more likely to be proficient on state mandated reading and mathematics assessments. Statewide, 88 percent of all students were proficient in reading while only 67 percent of students with disabilities were proficient (TEA, 2013). In mathematics, the gap was wider: 83 percent of all students scored proficient while only 63 percent of students with disabilities met the same level of proficiency (TEA, 2013).

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Within urban districts, the achievement gap in reading is just as disturbing: Austin ISD, 26%; Dallas ISD, 25%; El Paso ISD, 21%; Houston ISD: 26%; San Antonio ISD: 19% (TEA, 2012). Principals in Texas are also forced to reform special education programs with fewer special education teachers than their peers in other states. In Texas schools, there are only 4.7 special education teachers for every 100 students with disabilities, while the national average was 6.67 (USDOE, 2009). The end result is that only 27.4 percent of students with disabilities graduated with high school diplomas in the state of Texas (USDOE, 2009).

Of course, university-based principal preparation programs are not fully to blame for the shortcomings of schools. Principals, teachers, superintendents, and other stakeholders play an important role in ensuring that students with disabilities receive an equitable educational experience and achieve important educational outcomes. However, university-based principal preparation programs can and should take action to further develop the skills and expertise of current students so that they will be better equipped to lead in the area of special education. While principal preparation programs, in general, have been the subject of much debate (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012), a subset of articles and book chapters has also emerged on the importance of special education in particular. In what follows, we present a review of the latter, after first situating it within a critical discussion of the former. In the final section, we offer practical recommendations for enhancing principal preparation programs, with an emphasis on preparation to lead in the area of special education.

University-Based Preparation Programs

In preparing this article, we reviewed literature related, both, to principal preparation programs and to research on principals' experiences and beliefs about their preparedness to lead for students with disabilities. In so doing, four interrelated concerns emerged in relation to principal preparation programs: (a) outdated coursework; (b) misalignment between theory and practice; (c) faculty inexperience; and (d) ineffective clinical experiences. Other researchers have highlighted similar concerns (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, & Orr, 2007; Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012), but have not sought to explicitly connect these concerns to special education. This should not come as a surprise, as many programs – innovative or outdated – have a broad focus rather than a more integrated focus on different subject areas, grade levels, or student populations (Lochmiller, Huggins, & Acker-Hocevar, 2012). Of particular relevance to this discussion is how special education has been almost completely ignored in programs (Cusson, 2010; Davidson & Algozzine, 2002), typically finding its way into programs during one or two course weeks of a semester-long school law course. In our discussion of each of the above-mentioned issues, we begin by summarizing criticism from the literature reviewed and then consider ways to improve principal preparation, both generally and with regard to special education specifically.

Coursework. A majority of programs still consist of a basic compilation of coursework which covers management, school laws, and other broad educational topics, with little attention paid to effective teaching and organizational change (Björk, Kowalski, & Browne-Ferrigno, 2005). In a study of university-based principal preparation programs at major U.S. universities, Hess and Kelly (2007) found that only 2 percent of course weeks addressed issues related to accountability in the context of school management or improvement. The Southern Regional Education Board (2006), for example, found that most programs did not extend much beyond a set of outdated courses that focused on school administration and management. In a review of 28 university programs, Levine (2005) described the programs as “little more than a grab-bag of survey courses” (p. 28). Even at elite universities, principal preparation programs have been criticized for being out of sync with the job requirements of the principalship (Tucker & Coddling, 2002).

Previously, the field of educational administration may not have been ready to respond with new or revised courses and programs when critics of principal preparation began heated arguments. However, the field has made tremendous progress. Some professors of educational administration and special education are now focusing their research efforts on understanding principal leadership in special education, and, in doing so, have identified a number of practices that contribute to greater equity and achievement for students with disabilities (Boscardin, Mainzer, & Kealy, 2011). Separately, between 2008 and 2009, the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) developed standards for special education administrators and the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) revised leadership development standards to further incorporate special education.

These initiatives – along with increased efforts to research the role principals play in supporting students with disabilities and the field’s vigorous focus on social justice leadership – provide a solid foundation for the reform of programs, and research has found that even limited exposure to special education issues through coursework improves new principals comfort level in dealing with special education (Angelle & Bilton, 2009). To that end, departments of educational leadership, with the support of their colleges of education and other departments, have the opportunity, at the present juncture, to engage with emerging research, revised standards, and social justice principles to revise program missions, course descriptions and offerings, and expectations and requirements for student acceptance and graduation. Department chairs have the opportunity to establish interdisciplinary faculty teams that include professors of educational administration, special education, teaching, and others, to begin to review and reformulate coursework, as well as to potentially co-teach courses. These teams might consider consulting and/or conducting a comprehensive literature review of research focused on how principals create more inclusive schools for students with disabilities and more recent survey research associated with principal preparation in special education. After analyzing this literature and coming to meaningful conclusions about what tools and knowledge principals need to be successful with special education, these teams should review current professional standards (ISLLC standards, CEC

standards, and Texas Examinations of Educator Standards [TEXES]) to further detail how each course in the program can provide students with the necessary instruction, experiences, learning opportunities, and critical expertise to be successful in special education. Since reform is needed in most universities across the state and nation, professors across universities should ensure that they share their efforts through collaboration, professional journals, associations, and conferences.

Although a complete discussion of these steps is beyond the scope of the present article, a few of the more urgent actions would be to: (a) infuse dialogue related to social justice and marginalization of students with disabilities into coursework; (b) incorporate CEC standards into core courses; and (c) expand the emphasis of special education in school law courses. These actions would help to ensure program graduates recognize inequities, are aware of some of the actions they can take to create more equitable schools, and be prepared to handle legal challenges that may occur as a result of their reform efforts. The next section further elaborates on how coursework can be improved.

Aligning Theory and Practice. In a review of preparation research, Darling-Hammond and colleagues (2007) found that coursework often “fails to link theory with practice, is overly didactic, is out of touch with the real-world complexities and demands of school leadership, and is not aligned with established theories of leadership” (p. 5). Acker-Hocevar and Cruz-Janzen (2008) identified specific skills and knowledge of effective leaders working in historically low-performing urban schools. In this study, effective leaders were accustomed to working in teams, talking openly, problem-solving, sharing ideas and resources, and understanding their role on a team. However, when the researchers reviewed the principal preparation programs in the same region, the skills employed by effective leaders were not emphasized. Acker-Hocevar and Janzen-Cruz (2008) concluded that programs needed to be built “‘from the ground up,’ through the realities of those in the trenches – away from traditional theoretical role definitions and with better connections to the actual tasks performed at these schools and the skills and knowledge that enable them to be successful” (p. 93).

To continue, principals require specific expertise and a variety of skills to provide effective leadership in special education. For example, principals need the skills: (a) to revise budgets and master schedules; (b) to ensure special education teachers and general education teachers have time to meet, plan, and teach together; (c) to provide appropriate resources and training so all teachers are able to differentiate instruction; (d) to monitor the quality of IEPs, progress reports, and other assessments; and (e) to manage special education teachers’ time to ensure their work is legally in compliance (Billingsley, 2012; Billingsley, Carlson, & Klein, 2004). Principals must also be knowledgeable and ready to respond to unique and complex challenges in a way that is in sync with the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act, Texas Education Agency (TEA) policy, and school district policy. Additionally, principals need in-depth knowledge about effective instructional practices and assessments techniques in the area of special education to

ensure students are receiving the appropriate supports and are placed in the appropriate educational environment (Pazey & Cole, 2013).

University faculty, with or without school leadership experience, may find it difficult to develop courses grounded in theory while at the same time providing practical knowledge and learning experiences, but a few steps can be taken to further the alignment between theory and practice. First, program faculty could shift from the role of “professor as lecturer” to the role of “professor as facilitator,” since each faculty member has their own strengths and weaknesses and cannot be an expert in all things leadership. Coursework and other learning experiences should enable students to share ideas, examples, and best practices while learning assessments tools – such as a school wide professional development plan, student directed professional development sessions, or school budget projects – should incorporate the policies and practices at each student’s school district. Second, where it does not already exist, a strong partnership between the university department and local school district is important because it would create an opportunity for more situated and practical assessments. Third, if partnerships are not available, faculty might consider having their students interview principals and then apply what they learned to their own projects and assignments.

These recommendations have important implications for providing opportunities to incorporate special education into principal preparation programs. While theories of instructional leadership or other leadership theories can remain a central part of courses, special education should be used as a point of reference for engaging in such theories. For example, course assignments could include student reflections on Individualized Educational Program (IEP) meetings; sharing, modeling, or critiquing co-taught/co-planned lessons; or student presentations (based on principal interviews they conducted) on the leadership challenges or legal aspects associated with special education. Another example could be calling upon faculty members in a college of education’s special education department to serve as the expert in special education for the principal preparation program, presenting particular topics to program students. Some issues that could be discussed include: (a) differentiated instruction; (b) using data to drive instruction or response to intervention systems; (c) assessment and eligibility for special education; (d) identifying appropriate transition services; (e) disability classifications and how to best serve students with diverse needs; and (f) other student generated questions. Lastly, professors of educational administration are often aware of effective principals or district administrators from whom students can learn through guest speaking opportunities, which would provide an additional point to connect theory to practice

Faculty Experience. A number of scholars have brought attention to the fact that a significant proportion of faculty lack school leadership experience all together (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2007; Murphy, 2007; Pounder, Crow, & Bergerson, 2004). National surveys of education administration faculty revealed that only about one-third of professors of educational administration have school leadership experience (McCarthy & Kuh, 1997; Murphy, 2007); and, for our purposes, it is reasonable to expect that – among

those with school leadership experience – very few will have had experience with special education. Given that only about 35 percent of new faculty teaching in preparation programs had school leadership experience (Pounder, Crow, & Bergerson, 2004), there is reason to believe that candidates in principal preparation programs will continue to be directed and instructed by faculty without practical experience on which to draw. Even more troubling is the high rate of adjunct faculty utilized in principal preparation programs. The National Center for Education Statistics (2004) reported that 64 percent of faculty in preparation programs were adjuncts.

An ideal response to this situation would be to ensure that principal preparation programs have more faculty with direct school leadership experience. However, in view of the current hiring preferences of university departments – wherein publications are weighted more than successful, first-hand leadership experience – we are unlikely to witness such a response. Consequently, program innovation and the sharing of resources become even more important. Problem-based learning through case studies is a method professors can use to foster a greater alignment between theory and practice. *The Journal of Cases in Educational Leadership* is one example of a teaching resource that provides cases rooted in practical problems. Professors of educational administration will be able to present real-world, relevant school leadership challenges while also utilizing theory to help develop practical and relevant learning experiences. In Texas, professors could enhance the accessibility of teaching cases through the creation of a similar journal specific to school leadership in Texas. This type of research and publication process could enable professors to enhance their ability to instruct a diverse range of students working in a diverse range of school settings but all under the policies and guidelines of the Texas Education Agency (TEA).

Clinical Experiences. The implementation of clinical experiences has been found to vary across programs. For example, internships in many principal preparation programs are underdeveloped, unsupervised, or lack meaningful experiences (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). Levine (2005) found that internship and other clinical experiences were squeezed into student schedules and described as “something to be gotten out of the way, not as a learning opportunity” (p. 40). Such internships can lack hands-on leadership experience and place students in the role of being a passive observer or perhaps make them an additional school resource to complete administrative paperwork (Cunningham & Sherman, 2008; Fry, Bottom, & O’Neill, 2005). Where this is the case, these experiences do not enable students to grow in meaningful ways. Some principal preparation programs utilize student portfolios to enable students to document and reflect on their experiences and learning. However, in many instances, students complete leadership portfolios without ongoing supervision from both faculty and assigned mentors (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). With regard to special education, a survey of 553 current principals found no statistically significant relationship between the comfort levels of principal candidates with special education and a range of internship requirements (Angelle & Bilton, 2009).

Some reforms which could improve clinical experiences are simple and straightforward. To begin, where not already the case, faculty should actively supervise interns, clearly communicate expectations with mentors, and establish meaningful relationships with district administrators to ensure interns have access to a variety of experiences relevant to their preparation as educational leaders. However, programs can also identify new experiences or develop experiential learning projects to further enhance programs. For example, students could conduct in-depth interviews with seasoned practitioners in order to learn from others' firsthand perspective about leadership challenges, educational management issues, school-community interaction, ways to prevent burnout, and policy implementation, among other topics (Oplatka, 2009). Students could also engage in participatory action research projects to gain experience with organizational change processes and the obstacles to them (Sappington, Baker, Gardner, & Pacha, 2010). These experiences can be arranged, facilitated, and supervised by professors to help students become reflective of their own knowledge, skills, and potential areas in need of growth. Much of this work can be done collaboratively, as many programs employ a cohort system which provides a community setting to share experiences, conduct peer review, and build meaningful relationships that will be useful when candidates move into school leadership roles after the completion of their programs (Burke, Marx, & Lowenstein, 2012; Leithwood, Jantzi, Coffin, & Wilson, 1996).

Effective internships and clinical learning experiences must be carefully planned and require both faculty and mentor oversight as well as activities that help students understand, develop, and reflect on school leadership. Topics associated with special education and students with disabilities can be easily integrated into well-developed programs. First, internships and other clinical learning experiences can be co-developed with faculty, students, or program graduates with expertise in the area of special education. Potential learning experiences might include: (a) attending due process complaint hearings, (b) interviewing a school district attorney who handles special education issues, (c) observing IEP meetings and then discussing them with the meeting's chair, (d) conducting focus groups with special education teachers to better understand instructional and behavioral challenges, or (e) working with a school psychologist to better understand the IEP eligibility process, assessment instruments, and how data should be used to drive decisions in the area of special education.

Conclusions

The quality of principal preparation programs has been criticized for years, and professors of educational administration and their colleagues from other disciplines have responded with new research and professional standards that can be used to enhance preparation for special education leadership. It is certainly the case that pockets of innovation exist, though research suggests that they are outliers rather than reflective of national change. Thus, we have suggested here that faculty working in educational leadership departments should invest time and effort to review and revise their programs. Overall, program development should be collaborative and should allow for input and

support from neighboring school districts, program graduates, students, and faculty in other departments, especially special education. Theory and practice should be integrated throughout learning experiences – both coursework and clinical field experiences – in order to provide opportunities for students to observe, practice, and reflect on leadership. Issues related to special education and students with disabilities must be thoughtfully weaved through these experiences.

To that end, it should be noted that special education is highly localized because state education agencies and school districts create policies and standard operating procedures to implement IDEA. Professors of educational administration must remember that their program graduates will confront policies from their school districts, regional education service centers, state education agencies, and the U.S. Department of Education, along with state and federal court decisions. In addition, program graduates working in different school districts throughout the state of Texas will confront numerous challenges associated to the continuum of available placements, resources, and professional support. Moreover, each graduate will work in a unique community context with different demographics. This means programs must be flexible and professors should engage with students as facilitators, and not solely as lecturers.

If universities in Texas and across the nation truly seek to prepare principals who are ready to lead in the era of accountability and in the area of special education, programs must provide quality training and learning experiences while at the same time enabling students to recognize and wrestle with the contextual policies and practices that are unique to their local community. The persistent achievement gap between students with and without disabilities is not a Texas problem; it's a national problem. Professors of educational administration in the state of Texas have the opportunity to set the bar for how to develop innovative principal preparation programs that enable students to be competent leaders, both generally and in special education.

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