The Principals' Impact on the Implementation of Inclusion

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Abstract

The principal is the key element in shaping and sustaining educational programs that provide children with disabilities the opportunity to be educated in the general education setting. Federal mandates require compliance in educational services for children with disabilities. This has changed the role of principals in education. As schools strive to meet the challenge of implementing the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requirements, the principals' role is essential for the success of these programs. Principals must personally lead the implementation of the inclusion process. Principals must be effective leaders in regard to curriculum, resources, staffing, professional development, and instructional practices. They must be knowledgeable about special education history, laws and policies, and services pertaining to special education. The purpose of the article is to emphasize the importance of the principals' special education understanding, knowledge, and attitude toward successfully implementing inclusion schools.

The Principals' Impact on the Implementation of Inclusion

Children with disabilities did not have many options before special education gained momentum in the 1950's and 1960's (Rothstein & Johnson, 2010). These children were forced to stay at home, be institutionalized, or be educated in separate, special classes at select schools. Parents of children with disabilities began the movement to improve the educational opportunities for children with disabilities, their movement for equity in education paralleled with the Civil Rights movement. The struggle for equity for minorities in the 1950's and 1960's paved the way for the changes in the way our educational and legal system regard individuals with disabilities. Millions of children with disabilities were not being served appropriately in public schools (Rothstein & Johnson, 2010).

In 1975 United States Congress passed what was known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, or Public Law 94-142 (Walsh, Kemerer, & Maniotis, 2005). This law was passed to make certain that all children with disabilities had access to public education. Provisions of this Act mandates that all children with disabilities have equal access to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE), regardless of the disability. This act mandated the provision of special education programs and services for all children with disabilities. Public Law 94-142 which was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) in 1997 states, "One of the primary goals of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is the concept of educating children with disabilities along with children without disabilities to the maximum extent appropriate, ideally in the regular classroom" (Rothstein & Johnson, 2010, p. 171).

The regular classroom is commonly referred to as inclusion for children with disabilities. Inclusion implies the presumption of placement in the regular classroom with children without disabilities (Rothstein & Johnson, 2010). Federal law expresses a sustained commitment for placing the child with disabilities in the setting in which that child would be served if there were no disability (Walsh, Kemerer, & Maniotis, 2005). The intention of inclusion is to provide children with disabilities equitable opportunities to receive effective educational services in the general education setting with the appropriate support services. Educational programming for children with disabilities is based on the assumption that a variety of service delivery options must continue to be available. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) mandates that children with disabilities are educated in the least restrictive environment (LRE), which is to be chosen from a continuum of alternative placements (CAP; Hallahan & Kauffman, 2006).

The quality of education for children with disabilities has been a focal point since the emergence of special education. Federal law, as outlined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) and No Child Left Behind (NCLB), has made an effort to improve the delivery of services for these children. Children with disabilities should be provided services in the setting that the child would be served if there were no disability. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) admonishes schools to utilize a wealth of pedagogical adaptations and strategies to assist all children in attaining the highest standards (Sailor & Roger, 2005). The law expresses a preference for the least restrictive environment (LRE), mainstream, or inclusion setting. Inclusion is a philosophy that all children have the right to be educated with their non-disabled peers in the general education setting.

Accountability
Special education services have evolved slowly over the years. Children with disabilities have progressed from being denied educational services, to being segregated on school campuses, and now they are educated alongside their age-appropriate peers in the general education classroom with accommodations and modifications. Some give credit to these changes and the recent call for higher accountability standards for schools. Large numbers of children with disabilities were not receiving appropriate instruction, accommodations, or modifications in the general education classrooms (Short & Martin, 2005). The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation is firmly anchored in accountability (Sailor & Roger, 2005). Therefore, there has become a need for additional programming options to meet the needs of all children with disabilities and the trend supports the move toward more inclusion within the public school setting (Short & Martin, 2005). The current model of inclusion is an effort to increase academic and social gains for children with disabilities. The school experiences of children with disabilities can be positively or negatively influenced by the attitudes and behaviors of students, staff, and by general school policies (Milsom, 2006). The philosophy of inclusion, or placing children in regular classrooms, is based on many concerns. One concern is that separation in education is inherently stigmatizing. Another concern is that once a child is placed in a separate special education setting, the self-fulfilling prophecy occurs and the child will only be expected to perform at a particular level, and the expectations will generally be lowered (Rothstein & Johnson, 2010). The premise of inclusion is that students will succeed when the instruction is more rigorous and the expectation is higher.

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Inclusion
The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) has the well-defined objective of enhancing education for children with disabilities, closing achievement gaps, and increasing accountability for children in special and general education programs. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) has a fundamental principle which is the goal of ensuring that education is provided in an inclusive setting for all students. Inclusion has become essential in the effort to improve the delivery of services to children with disabilities by focusing on the placement of these children in general education classes with effective programs of support (Praisner, 2003). Inclusion is not intended as a placement of children with disabilities, the discontinuance of labeling, or the conclusion of special education classes; it is a supportive collaboration by general and special education teachers to assist children with disabilities in the general classroom (Praisner, 2003). Idol (2006) discovered that most administrators agreed with classroom who would provide assistance to all children in the classroom.

Those who advocate for inclusion base their premise on the fact that separation, or special education pull-out programs, have been ineffective. There are a backdrop of publications citing a barrage of studies associating separate classrooms, pull-out programs and practices with negative outcomes (Sailor & Roger, 2005). Hallahan Kauffman (2006) acknowledge the assertion of some educators that state children with disabilities have better, or least no worse, scores on cognitive and social measures if they stay in regular classes than if they are put in special education for all (self-contained classes) or part (resource rooms) of the school day. However, research findings and logical analyses overall support inclusion as a placement for children with disabilities. The social interaction that inclusion allows is a valuable resource for children with disabilities, children without disabilities, teachers, faculty, and staff (Milsom, 2006). Children with disabilities often have negative school experiences related to their having a disability, and administrators and teachers can help to create more positive school experiences that promote their academic, career, personal, and social growth (Milsom, 2006). According to Short and Martin (2005), some of the benefits of inclusion are academics, social acceptance, self-concept, self-control, and increased student ownership. The general purpose of inclusion is to close the achievement gap and create a positive learning environment for children with disabilities in the general education setting.

The philosophy of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) is that all children are active, fully participating members of the school community, and that schools understand the benefits of inclusive education for all children (Venn, 2007). Venn states, "More specifically, full inclusion refers to full membership in the general classroom with all of the supports necessary for successful inclusion" (Venn, 2007, p. 43). According to the courts there are substantial benefits of inclusion. Inclusion is a right, and success in separate, pull-out settings does not negate successful functioning in integrated settings (Cole, 2006). Inclusion shifts children with disabilities into the general education setting and offers them the opportunity to achieve closer to that of their nondisabled peers.

A common issue among parents, educators, and other stakeholders is whether children with disabilities should be placed in separate classrooms with specially trained teachers, or should they be placed in the general education classroom with their age appropriate peers. There are

good arguments for placement in both settings. Some parents, educators, and stakeholders believe there is an unrealistic expectation placed upon general education teachers to meet the needs of such diverse children in the general education classroom (Volonino & Zigmond, 2007). They also believe there are unrealistic expectations placed upon children with such diverse needs to achieve high expectations in the general education classroom. On the other hand, those in favor of inclusion focus on the benefits of inclusion which are the increased academic expectations, positive social interactions, mutual respect, and tolerance for children with diverse needs and abilities (Volonino & Zigmond, 2007). In accordance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) educators have designed research-based instruction to facilitate instructional enhancements to benefit all children in the general education setting (Sailor & Roger, 2005).

Since the early introduction of inclusion, the role of educators' has been in a constant state of change. In the inclusion setting, the general education teachers and the special education teachers work cooperatively to provide quality programming for all children in the general education setting. Children with disabilities are no longer removed from the general education setting to receive one-on-one tutorials or placed in "resource rooms" for below grade level lessons. Following the logic of integration, all services and supports are provided in general education setting and benefit general and special education children (Sailor & Roger, 2005). This instructional arrangement has created challenges for the teachers and administrators.

The Principal
Recent education reform initiatives have changed the image of the typical classroom and student population. Children with disabilities have been placed in the general education classroom to improve their academic achievement and service delivery. This has created a challenge and changed the roles for principals. The leadership role has increased due to recent demands placed upon schools. The principal, as the instructional leader, must take on new responsibilities. Additionally, Idol (2006) indicated in her study that principals need to assume the instructional leadership role by supporting their teachers by providing professional development in the area of special education. The principal must understand the legal and technical aspects of special education, evaluate and support staff, provide needed supports, services, and adaptations to children with disabilities.

The role of the principal is more complex and requires expertise in many areas when working to achieve school goals. Principals must possess necessary leadership and interpersonal skills when working with their staff to accomplish school goals, supervising and communicating effectively with students, parents, and community. The principal's role has expanded to include monitoring curriculum and instruction, conducting teacher evaluations, coordinating district and statewide testing, attending meetings for students with disabilities, collaborating with the general and special education teachers in regards to students with special needs in the inclusive setting, and developing activities for staff development.

The principal's leadership role is distinctive in the inclusion process. A principal's leadership is one of the most important factors to implementing inclusion successfully. To ensure the success of inclusion, principals must exhibit conduct that will advance the integration, acceptance, and success of children with disabilities in general education setting (Praisner,

2003). Garrison-Wade, Sobel, & Fulmer (2007) found that principals lack minimum knowledge needed to implement inclusion such as knowledge of special education law, behavior management, and specific topics that present authentic strategies and processes to support inclusion. Many principals lack knowledge of special education legal issues, specifically in compliance and procedural requirements (Garrison-Wade, Sobel, & Fulmer, 2007). The lack of special preparation for school principals challenges their ability to implement inclusion schools (Garrison-Wade, Sobel, & Fulmer, 2007).

Conclusion

The principal's preparation in leadership programs in special education law is usually conducted as a small part of a more comprehensive education law course in leadership preparation programs (Jacobs, Tonnsen, & Baker, 2004). As accountability increases, the need for principals to be trained in the legal requirements of special education is vital (Jacobs, Tonnsen, & Baker, 2004). The corner stone of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) are accountability. The tenets of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) are to include children with disabilities in the general education curriculum, classroom, and accountability systems (Cole, 2006). Villa and Thousand (2005) contrasted the traditional model and the inclusion model for school management. In the traditional model, the principal places special education programs within the general education facilities. In the inclusion model, principals exercise responsibility for managing the general education program, articulates the vision of inclusion and nurtures the staff, students, parents, and community through the process of implementing inclusion. Principal preparation in leadership programs relative to knowledge and laws in special education is paramount to the successful implementation of inclusion programs.

Principals' attitudes have been linked to the success of inclusion programs in other studies. Praisner's (2003) study demonstrated the importance of principal attitudes for the successful implementation of inclusion. Praisner's (2003) study suggested that principals must display commitment to, support, and have a positive attitude toward inclusion for the successful implementation of inclusion. Inclusion challenges traditional roles of principals as leaders. One of the most challenging roles principals must fill is to be an inspiration for inclusion (Styron, Maulding, & Parker, 2008). The chances of successfully implementing inclusion are greatly increased when principals support inclusion and have knowledge about special education.

Principal preparation programs need to implement a diverse range of courses, workshops, and training. There are several characteristics associated with principals who lead inclusion schools. Principals need training in courses specific to inclusion such as characteristics of students with disabilities, behavior management class for working with students with disabilities, academic programming for students with disabilities, crisis intervention, life skills training for students with disabilities, teambuilding, interagency cooperation, family intervention training, supporting and training teachers to handle inclusion, change process, eliciting parent and community support for inclusion, fostering teacher collaboration, and ffield based experiences with actual inclusion activities (Praisner, 2003). Knowledge in these areas will provide practical strategies for principals assisting them in becoming better leaders of inclusion schools. Principal

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preparation programs must teach leaders to develop a vision for students with disabilities by implementing professional development activities, assigning personnel, strategies used to assign students to classes, identifying resources available for professional development, specially designing curriculum and instruction, and teaching collaboration and team building efforts to ensure the execution of the schools' instructional vision.

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