

Special Education Representation and Ratings of School Leadership

- By Rene S. Parmar, Ph.D.

Abstract

Teachers from 1,050 schools in New York City completed a survey, administered annually by the school district, based on the Framework for Great Schools model. Publicly available results were analyzed. Multiple regression analyses revealed a significant effect of representation of students with special education needs, school attendance rates, and principal experience on teacher ratings of Effective Leadership. Schools with high economic needs also served the highest percentage of students with disabilities and tended to have the lowest ratings of leadership effectiveness. The research offers insights into areas where principal leadership for effective programming for students with disabilities is most needed. The information can be useful for both preservice and professional development of school leaders.

Introduction

This research study explored whether school leadership effectiveness, as perceived by teachers, was impacted by the representation of students with special education needs (SEN) within a school. Over the past two decades the educational system has witnessed several significant changes that directly impact educational practices for school building leaders as related to SEN, such as and increased emphasis on inclusive programs, higher academic standards, and services for students with multiple educational needs related to language, economic needs, and diversity.

Research on Leadership for Special Education Needs

Many researchers have observed that school building leaders play a key role in ensuring that special education programs are implemented by (a) defining a climate where inclusion is a priority; (b) remaining engaged in the student identification and referral process; (c) building trust with special education personnel; and (d) having a long-term vision for meeting State and Federal guidelines. The present study presents a comparison of teacher ratings of principals in general education schools with varying degrees of special education representation within the New York City Department of Education (NYCDOE).

Participation of All Students in Academic Programs

In response to federal and state legislation (the No Child Left Behind Act of 2002 and the Every Student

Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015), which sometimes are not consonant with the focus on the individual child, as mandated by the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), there has been a rapid increase in inclusion programs where SEN receive the general education curriculum and prepare for high stakes assessments. Principals are often tasked with designing management plans that adhere to the mandates. In a study of eight schools from three different states, Salisbury (2006) rated school quality using the School subscale of the Program Quality Measurement Tool and followed up with an analysis of the ecological context of the school. The research revealed that there was an inverse correlation between program quality ratings and implementation of inclusion. Principals who embraced inclusion spoke from perspectives of social justice and stated a philosophy of valuing diversity, acceptance, and membership among students. Principals of schools with lower levels of inclusion focused mainly on compliance with Least Restrictive Environment provisions and tended to have a higher percentage of pull-out services for SEN.

Using critical discourse analysis, O'Laughlin and Lindle (2015) reported the findings from principal interviews and policy document analysis in five urban elementary schools regarding inclusion of SEN. They found that many principals constructed definitions of "normal" and "not-normal" environments, based on their understanding of the IDEA regulations. They struggled to articulate their decision-making practices for student placement, and several participants expressed that inclusion in general education was something SEN "earned" based on their academic performance and ability to handle the general classroom. Some felt they were in a power struggle with parents who demanded services which they were not necessarily willing to accommodate, leading to a discourse of "winning" and "losing." Many principals ceded power to teachers and other decision-makers within the schools, citing them as the experts, and others looked to district mandates.

Increasing Rigor of Academic Programs

In 2009 the U.S. Department of Education proposed Common Core State Standards to provide curriculum guidelines in English Language Arts and Mathematics for educators and parents (National Governors Association Center for Best Practices & Council of Chief State

School Officers, 2010). For SEN, this has implied an increase in the academic focus of their Individual Education Programs, increases in the time they spend in general education classrooms, and participation in supplementary programs designed to enhance their academic performance (e.g., after school tutoring, online study support; computer-based adaptive study programs).

A phenomenological study by Frick, Faircloth, and Little (2012) investigated the moral dilemmas faced by principals as they attempted to make decisions that balanced the best practice for SEN with the collective needs of the general education student body. Increasing requirements for accountability based on standardized test score performance heighten the tensions related to creating appropriate educational programs. The authors interviewed 13 elementary schools principals across rural and urban locations, including both small and large schools. The findings revealed a focus on learning and achievement as driving forces behind decision-making regarding inclusion. While the best interest of the child may be a socially safe and comfortable environment, principals felt pressure to produce results in terms of test score improvements. When the behavioral needs of SEN could interfere with the classroom learning environment, they usually sought alternatives.

Changes in the Student Population

Changes in student demographics may have an influence on principal leadership with regard to inclusion of SEN. Research on students who are "dually diagnosed" with both disabilities as well as English language learning needs has indicated that these students benefit from programs and practices that go beyond the services provided to each group separately (Nguyen, 2012). A survey-based study of 84 principals of schools with primarily Hispanic populations conducted by Roberts and Guerra (2017), revealed that the greatest areas of need for further information were in the areas of meeting IDEA requirements, implementing Response to Intervention, and working with aggressive and challenging behaviors.

Changes in Policies and Practices for SEN

The move toward Response to Intervention (RTI), an identification process that requires documentation of supports provided to students prior to referral for disability services, and Multi-tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) has placed additional responsibilities on school leaders at both the elementary and secondary levels (King, Lemons, & Hill, 2012). Cusson (2010, cited in Pazey & Cole, 2012) surveyed 293 members of the University Council on Educational Administration, and found that only a handful were aware if their preparation programs for school leaders included 12 critical components of special education program administration: (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. Pazey and Cole (2012) argue that it is not possible to pursue an agenda of social justice for students with disabilities in school settings unless school leaders are aware of issues related to IDEA implementation, and willing to take on the responsibility of implementing equitable programs.

In a review of research supporting the need for special education leadership personnel, Seltzer (2011) noted that of the approximately 20,000 administrators responsible for inclusion programs, 20% had no background in special education. The situation persists, although a survey of 205 school leaders revealed that they report often spending more than 19 hours per week dealing with special education student matters (Lasky & Karge, 2006).

Research on Teacher Perspectives

A case study by Sindelar, Shearer, Yendol-Hoppey, and Liebert (2006) included interviews with 95 teachers at a middle school in Florida where changes in leadership affected the attention and resources given to inclusive programs. The authors found that leadership that was directed toward increasing school test scores resulted in decreases in special education supports and promoted the implementation of direct instruction programs over those that emphasized social and cognitive growth.

Rationale for the Present Study

There is insufficient research on the perspectives of teachers with regard to effective leadership practices in schools serving SEN within complex urban and diverse settings. The present study adds to the current professional literature in this area.

Method

Sample

Teacher responses from 1,500 public schools were aggregated by school within the New York City school system. Schools excluded from the present analysis were schools with incomplete data, alternate schools, charter schools, and early childhood centers. The enrollment within schools ranged from 61-6040 students, with an average of 600 students. The teacher survey response rate per school ranged from 19% to 100%, with an average of 86%. The representation of SEN within schools, English Language Learners, and Students in Poverty are reported in **Table 1**. It is noted that the NYC average percentage of SEN in schools, 23.13%, is higher than the statewide average of 15.6%.

Instruments

The Framework for Great Schools model (Byrk, Sebring, Allensworth, Easton, & Luppescu 2006) was adapted in survey form by the New York City Department

<i>Representation of Students with Special Education Needs Within Participant Schools</i>				
	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Percent Students with Disabilities	0	56.9	23.13	7.27
Percent Self-Contained	0	33.8	6.80	5.00
Percent English Language Learners	0	100	14.75	12.05
Percent HRA Eligible	3.9	96.2	65.07	22.72

A linear regression analysis was conducted to examine which school demographic factors had the greatest predictive ability for Effective Leadership ratings. The overall R2 value of .355 was statistically significant ($F = 15.56, p < .000$). When all factors were considered, the overall SEN representation was a significant positive predictor ($\beta = .085, p = .05$) but the representation of students in self-contained ($\beta = -.174, p < .01$),

of Education (revised 2018). The present study focuses on the Effective Leadership dimension (19 items out of 105 total items). The survey items were in a Likert format with 4 response choices (Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, Strongly Disagree). The current version of the survey has internal consistency Cronbach's Alpha coefficients of $>.70$ for each subscale (Merrill & Lafayette, 2018). Data were obtained from the publicly available files at the NYC website InfoHub <https://infohub.nyced.org/>.

indicated a significant negative effect (**Table 3**). Other significant predictors were student attendance and years of principal experience at the school.

Results

Correlation analysis evidenced that an increase in the percent of SEN was inversely correlated with teacher positive ratings on Effective Leadership ($r = -.185, p < .01$), as was the percent of SEN in Self-Contained classes ($r = -.257, p < .01$) (**Table 2**).

Discussion and Implications

The study provides an initial look at whether percentages of included and self-contained SEN are related to differences in leadership ratings of building principals. While the average ratings on Effective Leadership were highly positive (85.3%, range 41-99%), the correlational analysis indicates that as special education enrollment in a school increases, ratings of leadership effectiveness decrease. As an added observation, high special education enrollment occurs concurrently with high poverty and high minority representation among students being served.

<i>Correlations of SEN Representations with Demographic Characteristics of Participant Schools</i>								
	% ELL	% SEN	% SEN-SC	% HRA Eligible	% Black	% Hispanic	Years of principal experience	Student Attendance Rate
Effective School Leadership Score	-0.028	-.185**	-.257**	-.218**	-.200**	-0.061	.150**	.308**
% ELL	1	-0.045	.132**	.467**	-.363**	.534**	-0.017	0.010
% SEN		1	.610**	.465**	.333**	.249**	-.142**	-.591**
% SEN-SC			1	.540**	.316**	.236**	-.091**	-.527**
% HRA Eligible				1	.322**	.540**	-.096**	-.608**
%Black					1	-.354**	-.105**	-.507**
%Hispanic						1	-0.015	-.214**
Years of principal experience							1	.133**

Note: ** = significant at $p < .05$; *** = significant at $p < .01$; ELL = English Language Learners; SEN-SC = SEN in Self-contained classes.

In prior research, principals have reported spending 19 hours per week or more on administering special education programs in their schools (Lasky & Karge, 2006). As noted by Salisbury (2006) principals who were found to prioritize high academic standards frequently were more likely to indicate that managing special education meetings, dealing with litigation, and communicating with parents represented a drain on their time. Principal instructional leadership and support of teacher autonomy were the main components of Effective Leadership defined in the NYC School Survey. The results of the present study reveal that teachers in schools with a high special education enrollment rate believe that their leaders could be more effective in developing and implementing integrated programs, and enhancing curriculum consistency across grades. O'Laughlin and Lindle (2012) observed that when principals were willing to give teachers more power and support their initiatives, it was more likely that Least Restrictive Environment provisions of IDEA were implemented in schools.

Given the high minority representation in the participating schools, principal professional development for effective leadership for SEN should include practices that address students who are "dually" diagnosed as having both special education as well as other learning needs related to English language proficiency

and poverty which require increased coordination of services and interventions (Roberts & Guerra, 2017).

Limitations of the Study

While the large sample size provides considerable power for the statistical analyses, limitations of the study include restricted information based on pre-designed questions and aggregation of positive teacher responses across schools. The items within the EL component do not focus specifically on SEN, although the movement of students toward less restrictive environments is now part of school quality ratings within NYC schools. There is the possibility of response bias on the part of teachers as the response patterns were negatively skewed. Further analyses could include a breakdown by school type, as well as examination of individual items. Future research could be conducted that more directly examines school leaders' knowledge and ability to implement inclusion through focused surveys, interviews, and observations, particularly at sites where dually diagnosed students are being served.

Implications for Future Practice

It is beneficial for policy-makers to be aware of how the presence of SEN influences school leadership roles and school climate, which could lead to clearer

Table 3				
<i>Regression Coefficients for Predictors of Effective Leadership</i>				
	B	β	t	sig.
Percent Students with Disabilities	0.677	0.085	1.959	0.050*
Percent Self-Contained	-2.001	-0.174	-4.064	0.000**
Percent English Language Learners	-0.239	-0.049	-1.064	0.287
Percent HRA Eligible	0.135	0.053	0.843	0.399
Percent Black	-0.132	-0.060	-1.125	0.261
Percent Hispanic	-0.022	-0.010	-0.193	0.847
Years of principal experience at this school	0.012	0.106	3.476	0.001**
Student Attendance Rate	5.412	0.253	5.455	0.000**
School Level	0.025	0.052	1.644	0.101

Note: "*" = significant at p < .05; "**" = significant at p < .01.

guidelines for developing academic programs and meeting inclusion mandates through effective RTI and MTTs. The press for higher academic standards, as per the CCSS, can have an immense impact on teachers who are charged with teaching inclusive classrooms. As recommended by DeMatthews et al. (2020) and Boscardin and Lashley (2018), based on analysis of prior research, effective leadership for special education programs begins with establishing a vision for inclusion of students, a focus on high quality learning for all, and the building of professional capacity and teacher communities. Some of these principles are evident in the New York State Systemic Improvement Plan (2019), and it is hoped that they will become widely adopted.

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