

Chapter 4

Rethinking School Principals' Leadership Practices for an Effective and Inclusive Education


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ABSTRACT

School leadership plays a central role in creating an inclusive learning environment that provides opportunities for students with disabilities to thrive. This chapter will shed light on the historical background of schools as they shifted to embrace inclusion and outline the key challenges that impeded school leadership from reaching full-bodied inclusive schools. To that end, this chapter will include an overview derived from the literature regarding the most imperative leadership practices that principals need to possess in order to facilitate the inclusion of students with disabilities into mainstream education: (1) demonstrating basic knowledge of special education, (2) building collaborative structures and processes to work together with students' interests at heart, and (3) embodying positive attitudes and beliefs toward special education. At the end of the chapter, the authors will provide key lessons, recommendations, and possible implications for improving leadership preparation.

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INTRODUCTION

It is not easy to be a principal in the twenty-first century with the ever-shifting expectations of communities, teachers, parents, and students. One of the many responsibilities principals have is to oversee special education services for children within their schools on a daily basis. Laws governing special education instruction have changed dramatically in the past 15 years (Parker, 2016). The principal is not only in charge of the building's daily operations, budgeting, human resource concerns, maintenance, and curricula; but they also need to be well-versed in special education legislation and regulations. Furthermore, principals must have a thorough grasp of the needs of the growing number of special education students and the ability to work effectively with parents who advocate for them (Parker, 2016). Unfortunately, principals often have a hazy picture of what their position entails in terms of daily special education procedures. There has been little, if any, official research on the experiences of special education principals to explain how preparation affects their school leadership performance. This chapter will outline the challenges and issues encountered by principals in implementing programs for special education and identify the key leadership practices that facilitate inclusion. It will begin with a brief historical background about how special education came to be included in school principals' body of responsibilities, and the challenges they encountered as they began to carry out this mission.

BACKGROUND

Historical Influences of Special Education on Administration

The job of instructional leader of the school must be assumed by the principal, but how far does that leadership have to go? Instructional leadership encompasses all instructional areas of education within the school. Unfortunately, however, this is not always seen in practice. Special education is one area where principals can stretch their capacity and provide better instructional leadership. In the United States, special education leadership has been an area of concern since the 1940s, particularly when Berry (1941) demonstrated that administrators struggled to build learning programs in their schools to accommodate children with impairments (as cited in Pazez & Yates, 2012). During this time, it became necessary for school administrators to establish a separate administrative entity dedicated to special education for kids with disabilities.

These special education directors were knowledgeable in mental health, vocational training, and connecting kids with community agencies that could help them with their disabilities (Pazez & Yates, 2012). During the 1960s, textbooks used to prepare school administrators began to include administrative responsibilities for helping students with disabilities. During this period, it became increasingly clear that administrators needed to be aware of special education and have the capability of managing the needs of children with disabilities. Eventually, the General-Special Education Administration Consortium (GSEAC) was founded in 1970 to address the need for both principals and special education administrators to be prepared to manage special education students and programs. This marked the beginning of the push to integrate students with disabilities into mainstream educational settings (Fuchs & Stecker, 2010). Although principals were not yet qualified to direct special education programs in their schools, they were expected to be able to manage and supervise them (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003).

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