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Administrators' Understanding of the Federal Special Education Mandate: Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

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ADMINISTRATORS' UNDERSTANDING OF THE FEDERAL SPECIAL EDUCATION MANDATE: INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES EDUCATION ACT

With the passage of the Education for all Handicapped Children Act (PL 94-142) in 1975, the United States Congress sought to provide educational opportunity to all children. In 1990, with added amendments, the law was renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Turnbull reported in 1993 that Congress had found approximately one-half of the nation's eight million children with disabilities were not receiving an appropriate education and about one million were receiving no education at all. Clearly, in the past two decades since the passage of the Education for all Handicapped Children Act school administrators have, on a daily basis, made decisions that either uphold or violate the rights of students with disabilities as they are set forth in the IDEA. The purpose of this study was to assess the status of administrators' understanding of this important federal mandate, specifically administrators-in-training at three universities. The critical role of the school administrator in the lives of children with special needs was the impetus of this investigation. How well are they prepared for decision-making? How well do they understand the mandates they are required to fulfill?

Valesky and Hirth (1992) stated that the principal, as instructional leader and manager of the total educational system of the school, assumes responsibility for special education at the building level. Hence, the building principal must assure the delivery of educational services to students with disabilities and meet the procedural requirements of the law. Schmidt (1987) stated that when school administrators are uninformed or confused about special education legislation and its interpretation, children with disabilities are more likely to be denied the right to a free and appropriate education.

Anderson and Decker (1993) suggest that principals must know how to develop a positive climate for group interaction if they are going to be effective in facilitating special education programs. Prior to the federal special education mandate, principals sometimes placed students with disabilities in programs without appropriate evaluations, changed programs without parental involvement, and routinely denied students access to a free and appropriate public education through disciplinary practices such as extended suspension from school. Collaborative involvement of parents, general education teachers, and special education personnel, as well as that of the school administrator, was not practiced.

Leibfried (1984) advised that principals need to keep open lines of communication among parents, teachers, and community members in order to be effective in the special education program process. The complexity of this challenge for principals is elaborated by Dunlap and Goldman (1991).

They observe that special education has become an open and continual political process that has multidirectional, multidimensional, broad-based legitimacy rather than a decision structure amenable to authoritative, top-down power. Hence, Dunlap and Goldman advise that the ability to participate actively in the process of special education programming is reinforced by both expertise in special education and familiarity with the law.

As Anderson and Decker (1993) suggest, a principal's effectiveness in facilitating evaluation and individual education program meetings is essential. The principal sets a positive climate which supports special education in all activities and promotes compliance with the law (Leibfried,1984).

At the operational level, building principals must have an understanding of the special education law mandates. Building principals must ensure that student referrals are carried out in a timely manner that represents compliance with the IDEA. Principals must facilitate pre-referral activities that determine appropriate program and instructional modifications for students who are having difficulties in general education classrooms, prior to these students being formally referred for diagnostic evaluations. Furthermore, principals must ensure that evaluations are conducted by qualified personnel, using instruments and approaches that are free of cultural bias, and that all evaluations are conducted in the student's native language. Principals must understand the concept of least-restrictive environment, so that the Individualized Education Programs (IEP) that are developed truly afford students opportunities for an appropriate education. Appreciating the law's emphasis on encouraging parental participation in program development is fundamental to a principal's effectiveness. Ensuring that parents are given opportunities to collaborate with professionals in the development of special education programs hinges upon a principal's skills in creating an atmosphere of mutual respect and open communication. Thus, a principal's understanding of and placement of value in the IDEA enhances his/her chances of success in working with parents and professionals toward the student's well-being.

Leibfried (1984) advises that principals must keep abreast of changes in policies if they are going to remain effective in the special education programming process. For example, when PL 94-142 was amended in 1990 and reidentified as the IDEA, greater emphasis was placed on ensuring transition planning for students with disabilities. Individualized Transition Plans (ITP) were mandated to ensure continuity of services, training, and support for students with disabilities who would be graduating or aging-out of special education programs. Naturally, remaining abreast of policy changes would enable a principal to recognize the point at which developing inservice training programs for his/her faculty would be necessary to keep them current with policy changes related to the IDEA.

Clearly, a knowledge of special education law is essential to effectively implement the requirements of the IDEA. Valesky and Hirth (1992) summarized research findings and suggested that principals' knowledge of special education law needs improvement. In earlier research, these same authors reported that principals showed gaps in their knowledge of special education law and that principals are more knowledgeable about procedural safeguards than about the provision of educational services. (Hirth & Valesky, 1989). The National Council on Disability (1993), reporting on the monitoring efforts of the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) between April 1989 to February 1992, found that noncompliance involving individualized education programs, least restrictive environment, and procedural safeguards were frequently cited.

Specific areas of noncompliance included students not having IEP's, as well as failure to fulfill the least restrictive environmental (LRE) mandate of the law. Huefner (1994) suggests that in their desire to facilitate "full inclusion," school administrators sometimes create situations of noncompliance to the LRE mandate of the IDEA. For example, for some students with learning disabilities, participation in a resource room program is the least restrictive environment, due to the student's individual abilities and disabilities. Placing this student in the general education classroom (full inclusion) and expecting collaboration and consultation efforts between the general education teacher and the learning disabilities specialist to represent an appropriate education as mandated by the IDEA is incorrect. The IDEA mandates that program decisions be made on an individual case basis and always in reference to least restrictive environment considerations. In this same report, noncompliance regarding procedural safeguards included schools not having established safeguards in place, as well as problems with the content of notices sent to parents.

The origins of such noncompliance may very well be grounded in the inadequate training of principals. In calling for reforms in the training of school administrators, Murphy (1992) suggests that across the nation the training of principals has not kept current with the changing realities of the schools in which they must function. Familiarity with the IDEA is a working knowledge and understanding of the six major principles of the law.

Turnbull (1993) explained the six principles of the special education law:

1. Zero reject, or the right of every child to be included in a free and appropriate publicly supported educational system;

2. Nondiscriminatory classification, or the right to be fairly evaluated so that correct educational programs and placement can be achieved;

3. Individualized and appropriate education, so that an education can be meaningful;

4. Least restrictive placement, so that the child may associate with nondisabled students to the maximum extent appropriate to his or her needs;

5. Due process, so the child and child advocates may have an opportunity to challenge any aspect of education;

6. Parent participation, so the child's family may be involved in what happens in school.

In drafting the special education law and its subsequent amendments, Congress's intent has been to provide and protect the rights of all children with disabilities to a public education. The role of the school administrator in making decisions for these children is a crucial one; one that requires a thorough understanding of the IDEA so that the intent of Congress can be carried out.

Methods

In an effort to determine how well administrators-in-training know and understand the IDEA, a knowledge inventory was developed. This instrument consisted of forty-five items that explored the six encompassing principles of the IDEA: (a) eligibility issues, (b) evaluation issues, (c) individual educational programs, (d) least restrictive environment issues, (e) due process rights, and (f) parental participation issues. The content validity of the instrument was ensured through grounding the items in these six encompassing principles of the IDEA. In other words, the requirements of the law became the items on the inventory. The instrument included true and false items, identification items, as well as multiple choice items. A score of 45 (all items correct) on the inventory reflects a thorough knowledge and understanding of the mandate of the IDEA.

The question that guided this research study was: To what extent do administrators-in-training understand the tenets of the federal special education mandate? This is important because these principles should be manifest in the delivery of services and fulfillment of procedural requirements. The design of the study was *ex post facto*, because the intent was not to show cause and effect. In this type of design, Borg and Gall (1989) state that researchers have no control over the independent variable but are only interested in examining variable relationships.

Demographic information items on the inventory included gender identification, current professional employment and title of present position, as well as the number of years as an educator. Specific information regarding the participants' employment situation was also requested, including grade level (elementary, middle, secondary), public or private organization, socioeconomic status of the majority of students in the school, total enrollment, as well as geographic information, e.g., inner city, rural, etc.

The survey was administered to administrators-in-training in advanced degree graduate programs in educational administration at three universities: the University of Hartford, the University of Dayton, and the University of South Alabama.

The subjects included 80 administrators-in-training; 41 were currently employed as teachers while the remaining 39 held administrative staff positions. Of the respondents, 22 were males and 50 were females, with 8 individuals not indicating their gender. The number of years of service in their current position varied from 1 to 22. In this study, 54 of the administrators-in-training were employed in public schools while 14 were employed in private organizations; 12 individuals did not indicate whether their institution was public or private. Nearly 60 percent of the administrators-in-training were employed in middle- and lower-income communities. An N of 79 was usable for most of the analyses.

Data analysis included both descriptive and inferential statistical analysis. The hypotheses that were tested included:

1. Teachers will have less knowledge than administrators regarding the IDEA.
2. There is an inverse relationship between length of time in the profession and knowledge of the IDEA.
3. Subjects will have more knowledge related to procedural requirements of the law as opposed to delivery of educational services knowledge.
4. Administrators' understanding and knowledge differ across the six encompassing principles of the IDEA.
5. Teachers who are employed in schools of less than 400 students are more knowledgeable regarding the IDEA than are teachers employed in schools with larger enrollments.

Results

Profiles of the Respondents

Participants in the study were enrolled in graduate administration classes in three universities. Of the 79 participating, 50 were female, 22 were male, and 7 did not report gender (see Table1). These professionals, as a group, were fairly new in their current roles; nearly two-thirds of them were employed five years or less in their present position (see Table 2). They reported a variety of socioeconomic configurations of the districts where they were employed, going beyond the options on the questionnaire. As a group, the majority of the participants were employed in middle and lower socioeconomic environments (see Table 3).

Table 1

Gender of Participants

Gender	N	%
Females	50	63.30
Males	22	27.80
No Response	7	8.90
Total	79	100.00

Table 2

Number of Years Employed in Present Position

Years	N	%
1-5	49	62.03
6-10	12	15.19
11-15	8	10.13
16-20	4	5.06
Over 20	1	1.27
No Response	5	6.33
Total	79	100.00

Table 3

Socioeconomic Status of the Sites Where Participants Were Employed: Categories Checked by Participants

Category	N	%
Upper Income	7	8.86
Middle Income	27	34.18
Lower Income	20	25.32
Both Upper & Middle	4	5.06
Both Middle & Lower	6	7.59
Both Upper & Lower	2	2.53
All Three Levels	5	6.33
No Response	8	10.13
Total	79	100.00

Note. Participants were asked to check the category "of the site where they were employed: upper, middle, and lower." Many checked more than one category, as evidenced on this table.

These participants came from a wide variety of schools in terms of enrollment (see Table 4).

Table 4

Enrollment in School Where Participant is Employed

Number of Students Enrolled	N	%
0	13	16.46
1-199	10	12.66
200-399	6	7.59

(table continues)

Table 4 continued

Number of Students Enrolled	N	%
400-599	11	13.92
600-799	9	11.39
800-999	7	8.86
1000-1199	6	7.59
1200 and more	17	21.52
No Response	0	0
Total	79	100.00

Table 5

Grade Level Where Participants are Employed

Grade Level(s)	N	%*
Elementary School	26	27.96
Middle School	21	22.58
Junior High School	6	6.45
Senior High School	20	21.51
Grades K-12	6	6.45
University	4	4.30
No Response	10	10.75
Total	93	100.00

Note. Some participants checked more than one category; therefore, the total is more than the number of participants (N=79).

*Percent was calculated on the total of 93 reponses to this item.

Participants were asked to describe their site of employment by checking the grade level where they worked: elementary, middle, junior high, or high school. Many checked more than one category, indicating that their roles included, for example, the elementary and the junior high school. All but four of the participants were employed in public or private K-12 school organizations; these four worked in universities (see Table 5).

The instrument was made up of 45 items; in essence, it was a knowledge test of the provisions of the IDEA. A total score of 45 would indicate, therefore, that the individual correctly responded to all items. The items were categorized into six sections with a different number of items in each section:

1. Eligibility Issues (6 items)
2. Evaluation Issues (4 items)
3. Individual Educational Programs (10 items)
4. Least Restrictive Environment Mandates (4 items)
5. Due Process Rights (5 items)
6. Parental Participation Issues (16 items).

A total score made up of the sum of correct answers was calculated for each participant. The total scores of participants ranged from 5 to 38, with no one achieving a perfect score. The median score, however, was approximately 32, showing a negative skew to the data.

Because a different number of items existed within the categories, the subscale scores were converted into the percent correct in order to make comparisons in the understanding of the law across the categories. Results of testing the five hypotheses are reported next.

Results of Hypotheses Testing

The first hypothesis tested whether or not there was a difference in the knowledge of administrators (principals and superintendents, N=6) and the knowledge of teachers (N=41). The disparities in the N-size of the two groups is problematic here, rendering the meaning of the results speculative at best. The means of the two groups were not statistically significantly different ($t=.69$; $df=45$; $p>.05$) with the administrators mean of 31.5 and the teachers' mean of 32.3.

Interest in the relationship between how well educators understood the law and the length of their professional experience, lead to the second hypothesis. It seemed possible that educators more recently entering the profession would be more knowledgeable about the law. Possibly, the longer one was in the profession, the less knowledge about the law they would display. The hypothesis, then, was a negative relationship between length of time in the profession and scores on the inventory. The correlation, however, was a positive one ($r=.03$) showing a fairly weak relationship. The assumption was unsupported.

The third hypothesis addressed two dimensions of the IDEA: the "legal provisions" and the "direct service provisions." Results were examined to determine whether or not understanding in these two areas differed. To accomplish this, knowledge (percent correct) in each of these two dimensions was inspected. In the areas of "legal provisions," there were five respondents who achieved a score over 90 percent, while in the area of "direct services," the highest score was 76 percent. The first area, perhaps, is more clear-cut in terms of the knowledge measured. Most questions were in the true-false format. The area of "direct services" included a couple of items which required the respondent to check off categories on a check list. Participants would need to have all checks included correctly to receive a correct score for this item. This type of item presents more room for error. The "direct services" items, too, seem less clear-cut, requiring more judgements.

The fourth hypothesis was that there would be a significant difference in the knowledge displayed among the six categories of the law. In other words, the participants would not be equally knowledgeable in all areas. A "goodness of fit" Chi square analysis confirmed this hypothesis ($X2=8783.89$; $df=1$; $p<.05$). The respondents were most knowledgeable about Parental Participation Issues and least knowledgeable about Eligibility Issues (see Table 6).

Table 6

Understanding of the Legal Mandates of the IDEA: Percent Correct Across Six Categories (N=79)

Category	Mean % Correct
Eligibility Issues	33.54
Evaluation Issues	74.68
Individual Education Programs	67.21
Least Restrictive Environment Mandates	55.06
Due Process Rights	76.96
Parental Participation Issues	85.12

Note. Mean percent correct was calculated as the mean number of items answered correctly in each category. Because the number of items varied in each category, conversion to percentages was necessary for comparisons.

The fifth and final hypothesis was that the respondents working in smaller buildings (under 400 pupils enrolled) would differ in their knowledge compared to those in larger buildings (over 400 pupils enrolled). This seemed likely because the experiences of those in smaller buildings may necessarily bring them into decision-making about special needs students more frequently than would be the case with those in larger buildings. When sorted by these two enrollment groups, however, there was virtually no difference. Those in buildings of under 400 had a mean score of 31.0, while those in buildings of more than 400 had a mean score of 31.6.

Discussion

Many interesting implications can be drawn from these data. First of all, it's important to reflect on the population from which the data were determined and the context within which our conclusions can be made. Understanding the attributes of this population will make appropriate conclusions possible. One significant factor regarding the subjects of this study is that they were all individuals currently studying school administration in graduate level courses; one may assume that they were motivated to develop professionally. Regardless of their current employment status, they were all seeking a greater depth of knowledge regarding school administration. Hence, by nature, they are individuals who probably recognize that an indepth knowledge of special education law is essential to being effective as a school administrator. No evidence was found to support the idea that those already in administrative positions differed from teachers in their knowledge of the law.

A second factor germane to the subjects of this study is that, as a group, they are individuals who are relatively new to their current employment position. Approximately 60 percent of the subjects had been employed in their current position between one and five years. One must assume that these administrators-in-training are career oriented professionals with relatively up-to-date credentials and knowledge related to their employment responsibilities. However, it is important to consider that one would be hard-pressed to be employed in an educational setting today and not have had to deal in some capacity with the manifestations of the IDEA. In fact, hypothesis #2 (that the newer educators would have more knowledge) was not borne out. Understanding the necessity of the law does not, however, parallel with understanding the requirements for compliance.

A third significant factor is related to the socioeconomic status of the communities in which the subjects of this study are currently employed. Approximately 68 percent of the administrators-in-training identified the communities in which they are employed as middle- to lower-income

communities, while only 9 percent of the subjects identified their schools as existing in strictly upper-income communities.

The socioeconomic circumstances of the settings where these individuals were employed naturally influenced the emphasis of involvement that they have in special education program development and implementation. Parents in more affluent school districts may express a greater sense of entitlement when seeking special education services for a child. They may feel more enfranchised into the fabric of the school and community. Further, parents from higher socioeconomic communities may be more knowledgeable regarding the rights that they are afforded by the IDEA. Since these parents may be more knowledgeable regarding their rights, the focus for an administrator may need to be very meticulous regarding the procedural safeguards and requirements of the IDEA. Also, in the special education program development process, administrators may of necessity have to spend time helping the parents in more affluent communities, at first, to develop appropriate academic expectations for their children. In less affluent communities, for example middle- and lower-income communities, administrators in the program development process may need, at first, to encourage parental involvement, as well as educate the parents regarding their rights and responsibilities. Because the majority of subjects in this study were employed in middle- and lower-income communities it is understandable that in considering the six categories of the IDEA mandate, knowledge about issues relating to parental participation has the highest mean percent correct (an average score of 85 percent).

School size may be a factor to consider related to special education programming and the IDEA. Approximately 20 percent of the participants were currently employed in school buildings with populations of 400 or fewer students. No difference was found in the knowledge displayed by those in these schools and those in schools with more than 400 students (hypothesis #5). Admittedly, dichotomizing the participants in this way may have been an oversimplification due to the fact that a relatively large proportion of the respondents (21 percent) were in buildings of over 1200 students. This is clearly an area for further investigation which will be pursued. Administrators in relatively smaller schools might more easily implement the provisions of the IDEA for several reasons. Smaller school size might suggest that, currently, the experiences of these professionals in pre-referral, referral, and special education planning and placement activities are conducted in a more intimate atmosphere than those of individuals who are working in buildings with larger enrollments. Communication among professionals and with parents is more easily accomplished. Thus, planning and placement team efforts can involve all members of the team more intimately in both formulating a program and monitoring the program as it evolves. Therefore, teachers and professionals

would probably have opportunities to become more knowledgeable and responsive to the IDEA mandate.

Most of the participants in this study were currently working in schools with younger students. These administrators-in-training were possibly more often involved with initial referral special education cases. Clearly, in initial referral cases the paramount issues are establishing a productive relationship with the parents of the children who have been referred and evaluated, helping the parents to understand their child's abilities and disabilities, as well as developing an appropriate educational program. The administrator must ensure that the parents understand the specific rights and responsibilities that they and their children are afforded by the IDEA. Addressing these issues in initial special education program cases can set the stage for continued productive parental involvement throughout a child's education.

Among this group of administrators-in-training, differences were demonstrated in their understanding and knowledge of the six underlying principles of the IDEA. Mean percent correct scores for each of the principles revealed that these participants demonstrated weaknesses in their understanding and knowledge of eligibility issues and least restrictive environment mandate issues of the IDEA. In addition, "legal provisions" seemed to be better understood than "direct services provisions" of the law. To ameliorate these discrepancies, implications for university training are suggested.

This group of administrators-in-training could benefit by participating in instructional activities that require a greater understanding of eligibility issues and least restrictive environment issues. Knowing and comprehending the definitions of disability categories of the IDEA, for example, could lead to an administration preparation program that is congruent with the mandate of the IDEA. In regard to eligibility issues, for instance, an administrator should recognize that a student with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is eligible for special education services. While ADHD is not one of the disability categories defined by the IDEA, an administrator should understand that students with ADHD are eligible for services through the physical and health disability category, the learning disability category, or through the behavior disorders disability category. Thus, an administrator with this knowledge would advocate for essential educational supportive services for a child with ADHD that are in complete compliance with the IDEA. Or, in another instance related to the least restrictive environment mandate, if an administrator truly understands that decisions regarding program placement need to be made on an individual case by case basis, then overzealous full inclusion placement errors can be avoided. Clearly, in today's era of the inclusion of special needs students into the general education classrooms, an administrator's

understanding of the need for a continuum of services will enable that administrator to meet the mandate of the IDEA effectively.

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INTERRELATIONSHIPS AMONG PROPERTY TAX RATE CHANGES, SCHOOL BOARD MEMBER TURNOVER, AND SUPERINTENDENT TURNOVER IN SELECTED PENNSYLVANIA SCHOOL DISTRICTS

School board members and superintendents have a natural aversion to raising property taxes to fund school programs. Practicing school officials have an intuitive belief, supported by research (Wang & Lutz, 1989; Iannaconne & Lutz, 1970, 1978), that such a scenario frequently leads to the defeat of school board members at the next election and the early departure of the superintendent.

Stability of tenure for top school officials is of practical interest to incumbent school officials, and of theoretical interest to students of school governance. Stable tenure for the top leadership positions is, theoretically at least, based on three premises: a) effective leadership can make a positive difference in the schools; b) incumbent school board members and superintendents may require as much as two years of experience before being able to perform their tasks with optimal efficiency; and c) rapid turnover of top school officials impedes the achievement of positive school reform (Olson, 1995).

Several studies have catalogued the reasons given by school board members for their departure from a school board. A study by the Pennsylvania School Boards Association (PSBA) (Facts & Figures, 1988) lists the following five major reasons given by school board members for leaving school board service:

1. Felt they had served long enough (16 percent)
2. Career demands (11 percent)
3. Found board service too time consuming (10 percent)
4. Personality conflicts among board members (10 percent)
5. Other personal reasons including health, age, and moving from district (10 percent)

The above results were based on a return of 300 questionnaires mailed to 1535 former school board members. This represents a return rate of 20 percent. The personal reasons for leaving board service listed above account for 57 percent of all stated reasons for board member turnover. Such essentially personal reasons for leaving board service would not be easily affected by any changes in public policy that might be designed to increase the tenure of school board members.

The PSBA gathers yearly data on school board member turnover that is submitted each year by school board secretaries. These data are not based on direct testimony from retiring board members, but rely instead on reports by board secretaries concerning the reasons for board member turnover. Data collected for school years 1991-1995 (C. A. Herald, personal communication, October 3, 1995) indicate that board secretaries reported