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Changing Roles of Special Education Administrators: Impact on Multicultural Learners

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The standards movement has been a part of education for almost the last half century (Popham, 2001; Sirotnik, 2004). According to several researchers (e.g., DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Fullan, 2001; Lashley & Boscardin, 2003; Marsh, 2000; Villa & Thousand, 2000), there have been significant changes in the roles that school leaders must fulfill to implement a standards-based educational accountability system. The requirements of the 2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act appear to be changing the manner in which special education administrators conduct their work (Hochschild, 2003). As it stands, districts and schools are viewed as an amalgam of complex relationships (Harry, Sturges & Klingner, 2005) that comes together as learning communities to meet accountability targets for all students. This means that all students regardless of their cultural backgrounds need to benefit from instruction. The requirements for building a learning community involve the skills of collaboration and empowerment of others. Apparently, developing productive partnerships will exceed the previously defined narrow interpretation of collaboration with families and other professionals (Crockett, 2002). Standards-based accountability practices which disaggregate data based on specific subgroups, one of which is students with disabilities, are a result of the concern that exclusion of students from testing distorts the efficacy of educational reform efforts (Heubart & Hauser, 1999; McDonnell, McLaughlin & Morison, 1997; Schulte & Villwock, 2004). However, concerns have also been raised regarding the validity of conclusions drawn from large-scale accountability data (Hargreaves, 2003; Schulte & Villwock, 2004; Ysseldyke & Bielinski, 2002). As Hargreaves (2003) pointed out, "[T]he rightful pursuit of higher standards has degenerated into a counter productive obsession with soulless standardization" (p. 82).

There is some concern that white and middle class teachers and students who have traditionally done well in the school system will

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continue to perform and that multicultural students with disabilities who have traditionally struggled in schools will be further stigmatized by high stakes accountability measures (Hochschild, 2003). As a result, special education administrators must rededicate themselves as key leaders in the school system to ensure that accountability assessment does not devolve into an exclusionary phenomenon for multicultural students with disabilities. Clearly, they must build learning communities at school sites in order to provide valid and reliable data on the performance of multicultural students with disabilities on large scale assessments. They must continue to be the bridge between special education and general education in regard to accountability issues (Crockett, 2002). Additionally, they must endeavor to use data to make decisions about the implementation of research-based practices (Gable & Arllen, 1997) for students who are struggling as well as multicultural students with disabilities. Providing appropriate instruction based on standards will enhance the use of data-based decision-making to facilitate all students in meeting the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) marker designated by NCLB.

New Ways of Accountability for Special Education Administrators

The current method of determining AYP has been questioned by researchers (Schulte & Villwock, 2004; Ysseldyke & Bielinski, 2002). The concern is not accountability, but the method of determining growth. *Value-added accountability*, a different method for determining AYP, is important for special education administrators to understand and implement. Measuring students' progress based on their individual beginning level allows teachers and administrators the opportunity to demonstrate effective teaching for multicultural students with disabilities. Rather than relying solely on assessments of large groups, a value-added approach uses aggregated results of individual students' performances. Multicultural students with disabilities can demonstrate progress towards standards if measurement systems are designed to facilitate this. As it stands, value-added systems are beginning to receive attention from researchers and practitioners and ought to be an important part of future practice for special educators. In order to provide effective input into federal and state policies, special education administrators must understand the value-added concept.

The concept of measuring students through a *static cohort model* (see Schulte & Villwock, 2004; Ysseldyke & Bielinski, 2002) appears to be another viable option to determine AYP for multicultural students with disabilities. This method relies on a longitudinal approach to data analysis on individual cohorts rather than a comparison of different groups of students at a given grade level. Schulte and Villwock (2004) noted that when using a "growth model," the performance of students in special education was seen to be less discrepant from the performance of students in general education. As intuitive as this may seem to educators, accountability assessment does not currently use this type of analysis. Special education administrators must become familiar with "growth models" and advocate for their use with multicultural students with disabilities.

A thematic shift in educational reform involves dramatic changes in teaching and learning. As Marsh (2000) pointed out, this shift can be viewed as complementary with the shift toward a standards-based approach to education. As systems clarify standards, there tends to be increased scrutiny of curriculum and instruction. The special education administrator's role as an instructional leader is critical in promoting successful outcomes for multicultural students with disabilities.

Instructional leaders are closely involved with the technology of teaching and learning, have a sophisticated conceptualization of professional development, and effectively utilize data in decision-making (King, 2002). One of Crockett's (2002) key principles for administrative responsive leadership in special education requires "...leaders who are skilled at supervising and evaluating educational programs in general, and individual programming in particular, and who foster high expectations, support research-based strategies, and target positive results for learners with exceptionalities" (p. 163). As instructional leaders, special education administrators must support the implementation of evidence-based practices. There is widespread agreement that a gap persists between research and practice in the field of special education (Carnine, 1997; Gersten & Brengelman, 1996; Greenwood & Abbott, 2001), and an emerging understanding that comprehensive and responsive professional development activities play a significant role in bridging that gap (Hiebert, Gallimore & Stigler, 2002; McLeskey & Waldron, 2004; Schiller & Malouf, 1995). Administrators must support the design of effective professional development.

Cochran-Smith and Lytle's (1999) discussion of the relationship between teacher knowledge and teacher practice provides a useful framework for designing professional development that supports effective instruction. They described three types of teacher learning and their relationship to changes in teacher practice. The first, and perhaps most common, is *knowledge-for-practice*. In this model of teacher learning, "experts" generate knowledge about research-validated strategies; teachers consume that knowledge, and teachers are then expected to implement the strategies without attention to their individual contexts. The second conceptualization is *knowledge-in-practice*. From this perspective, teacher knowledge is generated by the teacher engaging in the act of teaching or learning by doing and reflecting on their teaching. Teacher learning from this perspective often occurs as collective inquiry among teachers but does not rely on externally validated research-based strategies. The third conceptualization is *knowledge-of-practice*. From this perspective, teachers and "outsiders" collectively generate knowledge, connecting that knowledge to individual classrooms and broader communities. Learning from this perspective involves teachers and other members of the learning community "challenging their own assumptions; identifying salient issues of practice; posing problems; studying their own students, classrooms, and schools; constructing and reconstructing curriculum; and taking on roles of leadership and activism in efforts to transform classrooms, schools, and societies" (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999, p. 278).

Special education administrators can support professional development from knowledge-in-practice or knowledge-of-practice perspectives by assisting learning communities or communities of practice in their schools. Supovitz and Christman (2005) recommended several steps that can facilitate effective communities of practice. They suggested that school and district leaders must focus learning communities on instruction by:

> Providing communities with tools for systematic inquiry into the relationships between teaching and student learning. Leaders themselves need a firm knowledge base about how effective instructional communities work--including some understanding of the types of collegial relationships that sustain them and the kinds of group practices that result in improved teaching and learning. (p. 650)

Additionally, they suggested that leaders must support these communities by providing consistent opportunities for collaboration through protecting time for conversations about instructional practices and providing opportunities for professional development activities that focus on collaboration.

Supporting communities of practice frequently requires teacher empowerment. Empowered teachers feel supported in their efforts to make decisions, problem-solve, and take risks through implementing innovative practices. Short and Greer (2002) discussed six issues for educational leaders to address in supporting teacher empowerment. These include: (1) assisting teachers in developing an understanding of empowerment through reading and discussion; (2) promoting a risk-taking environment and encouraging innovation; (3) creating shared decision-making opportunities; (4) developing teachers' problem-solving skills and conflict management skills; (5) building trust and communication; and (6) giving up control.

Clearly, instructional leadership on the part of special education administrators necessitates effective collaboration with principals. The standards-based movement and the call for greater access to the general education curriculum for multicultural students with disabilities demand that special education and general education leaders share responsibility for instructional leadership. Special education administrators must promote collaboration between special education and general education teachers, as well as administration, to ensure access to the general education curriculum (Lashley & Boscardin, 2003).

In *Principals and Special Education: The Critical Role of School Leaders*, DiPaola and Walther-Thomas (2003) described the critical roles principals can assume in facilitating success for learners with disabilities. The support of principals may influence the extent to which both special education and general education teachers implement evidence-based practices, as well as special education teacher retention. Principals, however, often lack knowledge and skills related to special education. In one study of the principalship, principals identified assistance with implementing special education programs as their greatest need (see DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003). Special education administrators must advocate for and engage in professional development activities that increase principals' knowledge and skills related to multicultural students with disabilities. In addition, they must encourage shared visions in schools and design communities of practice that bring general and special educators together to improve teaching and learning and empower all learners.

Moving From Rules-Driven to Results-Driven Systems

Within the NCLB Act of 2001 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004, there is a greater focus and emphasis on outcomes-based education. Previously, special education administrators were held accountable for ensuring the rights of multicultural students with disabilities and following the legal procedures involved in evaluation and placement. Currently, however, accountability has been expanded to include ensuring that multicultural students with disabilities are making adequate yearly progress just like students without disabilities. This appears to alter the role of special education administrators by making their job responsibility of curriculum development and monitoring more of a focus as well as increasing the need for administrators to work closely with special educators in their district to ensure that students are making progress. Since this is a relatively new process, special education administrators are still trying to determine the best ways to assist their special

educators as well as the best ways to assist multicultural students with disabilities. According to Marsh (2000), "[T]he system focus on high student performance standards and high stakes assessment that matters to both the school and the student is still being developed. Many issues still abound: should the standards be defined at the local level, should they be the same for all students, and should they have high stakes consequences for the school and/or the student?" (p. 131) The debate continues at federal, state, and local levels causing much confusion and frustration for those administrators who face possible consequences if their students do not make sufficient progress. An additional dilemma for special education administrators is the conflict between the individualized nature of special education programming and the standardized nature of the NCLB Act.

The traditional premise behind special education is to provide an education suited for each student by creating an individualized education plan that can be carried out to assist the student in his/her academic and/or social need(s) through goals and objectives and to provide related services that allow him/her to be on equal academic footing. Nevertheless, the NCLB Act requires standardized testing in reading, math, language arts, and science to ascertain if a school is successful. School systems are inquiring about what can be done for students with special needs so that they can meet the standards by the start of the 2013-14 school-year. The allowance for alternative assessment gives special education administrators another avenue for assessing students with more severe cognitive deficits.

However, with more and more schools not meeting AYP within the special education subgroup, special education administrators may feel pressure from district level administration to try to include as many multicultural students with disabilities in the alternative assessment as possible. These administrators may also need to explain to parents, teachers, and multicultural students with disabilities the impact that the NCLB Act has on them. Each of these groups should understand the impact of standards and the process of accountability testing. The least restrictive environment (LRE) is still important through IDEIA 2004 although LRE may have unintended consequences for students placed in general education classes. For multicultural students with disabilities to be able to demonstrate proficiency on standardized assessments and meet the rigorous academic standards at their grade levels, IEP teams may feel that removal from the general education setting and more intensive services are necessary. In some cases, IEP teams may feel that the more restrictive environment offers more concentrated academic instruction to assist students in meeting grade level educational standards. This disparity between the provisions and requirements of IDEIA 2004 and the accountability testing process and consequences could place special education administrators in awkward positions. The critical question is: How do we ensure that multicultural students with disabilities receive appropriate services in the least restrictive environment and still make AYP as defined through the NCLB Act? As it appears, this question will continue to be discussed and debated as the educational system approaches the 2013 deadline for all students to meet standards.

Leadership Roles in Managing Change

Leadership entails unique behaviors for each set of circumstances in the educational environment. Administrators have traditionally assumed multiple roles through their position, such as planning and directing programs, leading instruction, supervising faculty and staff, and managing the day-to-day activities within their buildings. However,

Rountree and Marsh (1997) maintain that "shifting policies and an overwhelming increase in the rate of change have expanded leadership roles" (p. 16). Superintendents, special education administrators, personnel directors, curriculum directors, finance directors, and principals all have unique sets of behaviors with regards to leadership. According to Sage and Burrello (1994), "the special educator as leader must now portray programs as inclusive, child-centered, demonstrating instructional effectiveness, and projecting a positive image concerning the education of all students" (p. 256). In addition to these skills and requirements, the special education administrator must possess general administrative skills required of other district level administrators, such as budgeting; recruiting and supervising faculty and staff; and completing reports required by local, state, and federal education agencies. Coupled with these skills and requirements is the need for special education administrators to maintain ongoing communication with all stakeholders, including faculty and staff, other administrators, parents, students, legislators, and community members. This kind of communication entails talking with community members as well as parents and advocates. It requires demonstrating the relationship between education and training of multicultural students with disabilities and the post-school contributions of students to their community. In addition, this open communication can provide a spring board for creating policy and discussing issues surrounding current laws and practice.

One of the major roles of the special education administrator has been to provide guidance and assistance to school personnel for matters related to instructing multicultural students with disabilities, both within separate settings and general education classes. The NCLB and IDEIA are currently posing unique challenges for special education administrators as they plan and administer quality special education programs. There are skills which are essential in order for special education programs to be managed both efficiently and effectively. Most importantly, administrators must: (a) have effective communication skills; (b) work with building-level administrators to develop collaborative programs with outside agency representatives, state and federal officials, parents, and legal advocates; (c) articulate their school districts and special education programs' goals in order to help gain and maintain support for their programs; (d) demonstrate working knowledge of legal mandates and requirements to effectively conduct ongoing reviews of their districts' compliance; and (e) have broad knowledge of special education instructional techniques and keep up with new developments in the field (Osbourne, DiMattia & Curran, 1993).

There are other contextual factors that continue to influence the role of the special education administrator, such as the organizational structure and support of schools and districts as well as the culture of school districts. These factors exert great influence on special educators in schools and often are affected by the district administration. Special education administrators must consider these contextual factors in all aspects of their roles and responsibilities. As times change, so do organizational structures and supports. Leaders must look into planning, day-to-day management, communication among all personnel, and program evaluation (Sage & Burrello, 1994). While special education administrators do not always individually determine how these contextual factors will operate, they must be cognizant of what goes on in all areas. For example, the school board or district superintendent may decide what procedures should be used for program evaluation, and then the special education administrator would

implement those procedures. The chief financial officer for the district may decide on the annual budget for special education programs, and then the special education administrator would manage those funds and plan accordingly. Since IDEIA has changed how special education funds can be used, more collaboration and consultation are required between the special education administrator and other personnel to determine the use of federal monies typically earmarked for special education.

Sage and Burrello (1994) noted that district organizations should assist special education programs to:

1) Provide support and assistance to regular education personnel to help them teach and organize instructional services for multicultural students with disabilities and others with special needs;

2) Establish direct services that accommodate the unique learning and behavioral needs of students in the least restrictive environment;

3) Organize building-based team efforts of parents, students, and professionals for program planning and placement of students;

4) Initiate the provision of alternative settings and services at the building and district levels;

5) Provide for the evaluation of students' progress and for decision points at which students can exit various programs and services;

6) Provide for professional staff development to increase teacher and administrator competencies;

7) Develop a field-based action research program that tests the application of basic learning principles to instruction, behavior management, and other factors that affect the mental health of students, parents, and professionals;

8) Negotiate to obtain the participation of other state and community agencies in the support of instructional programs, mental health services for children, and social welfare services for parents and children;

9) Provide direct consultative services to parents and students to assist them in becoming better participants in the educational planning process;

10) Apply criteria derived from considerations of process and least restrictive environment to all individual educational planning and placement alternatives developed at the building or district levels. (pp. 160-161)

The supports within the organization that relate directly to special education are often developed, monitored, and evaluated by special education administrators. Even though these basic supports may remain the same, the implementation and focus of each of them may change due to the current focus on outcomes-based education.

When analyzing the culture of a school or school district, values and morals tend to be extremely influential (Rountree & Marsh, 1997). The relationships among all personnel contribute greatly to the culture within each school or district. Special education administrators have a direct effect on the culture as it relates to special education; their ability to communicate with personnel as well as their leadership skills can have either a positive or negative effect on this culture. With the shift in focus to accountability for outcomes and the confusion surrounding the implementation of NCLB and IDEIA, special education administrators must be more proactive in the planning, implementation, and communication of special education programs and procedures.

The shortage and high attrition rate of special educators may continue to impact the culture of the school, and vice versa. Therefore, special education administrators will continue to see an increase in their need to attract and retain quality special educators. Clearly, recruiting and retaining "highly qualified" personnel will continue to be a dilemma for special education administrators, especially in light of the new statutory requirements. Special education administrators must agree that all students deserve an education with teachers who are proficient in content areas; however, the concern is how to attract and retain those teachers. According to Osbourne et al. (1993), the "recruitment of special education staff is probably the single most important aspect of special education administration. Quality programs cannot exist without quality faculty" (p.42). In a time when there is already a shortage of special education teachers, the requirements in IDEIA could pose an additional issue for special education administrators.

Under NCLB and IDEIA, all teachers of core academic subjects (e.g., English, reading/language arts, math, science, foreign languages, civics and government, economics, arts as determined by the state, history, and geography) must be deemed "highly qualified" in their content areas. For special educators who teach multiple subjects, these requirements could seem rather daunting. Special education administrators must think "outside the box" as much as the regulations will allow when helping these special educators to obtain "highly qualified" status. Each state will be different in its requirements for proving the "highly qualified" status. These administrators will need to be well-versed in their state's regulations as well as remain aware of opportunities available for their special educators to attain this status.

A related issue is how best to utilize paraprofessionals serving students with special needs. Paraprofessionals hired after January 8, 2002 and working in a program supported with Title I funds must have a high school diploma and must have completed a minimum of two years of study (60 semester hours) at an institution of higher education; have an associate's or higher degree; or meet a rigorous standard of quality demonstrated on a state test. Existing paraprofessionals hired prior to January 8, 2002 and working in a program supported with Title I funds must meet the requirements listed above no later than January 8, 2006. Again, thinking outside the box may assist special education administrators in developing effective professional development programs for paraprofessionals. Clearly, providing regular training, as well as collaborating and programming with local and state colleges and universities, can help to provide paraprofessionals with the certification they need.

Conclusion

It is imperative for special education administrators, and all administrators, to adapt to the changing demographic and educational environments. The field of special education has changed dramatically in the last three decades, and administrators can and should be leaders of the continued evolution of special education. One useful organizing framework for focusing the work is Crockett's (2002) "star model." The emphasis on five components of special education administration—ethical practice, individual consideration, equity for all students, effective programming, and productive partnerships—should guide administrators' work. Clearly, one major influence on the field of education generally is the movement away from process to outcomes, embodied in the standards movement. Special education administrators must understand this change in focus and adapt their practice to it.

This overarching change in education has posed challenges for all educators, and in particular, for special education administrators. The field continues to struggle with the balance between providing an equitable education for all students and maintaining the excellence of programs using limited resources. In order to accomplish the provision of excellent and equitable programs in the context of standards-based education, multiple areas of administrative practice must be addressed. The concept of learning communities in schools is one such change in focus that promises to improve educational practice. A conscious effort to bring all stakeholders together and to work toward common goals may provide the basis for improvement. In line with developing community, school administrators must bridge the divide between general education and special education. Learning communities must include students, parents, educators, and community members.

The environment of school accountability has continued to force special education administrators to explore all methods of determining student progress. Maintaining current information about the accountability assessments that policymakers are proposing and enacting will assist educators in meeting those mandates. Reviewing proposals, such as the value-added approach, allows special education administrators to incorporate their voice into the discussion in a meaningful way. In addition, it is incumbent on special education administrators to perform as instructional leaders. The pull of other duties, such as legal issues, must be addressed in a manner that allows a leadership role to emerge. Instructional leaders have to assist their staff in the implementation of evidence-based practices. The role of an instructional leader encompasses an up-to-date knowledge of professional development and adult learning. Educators will improve their implementation of evidence-based practices when the delivery of professional development takes into account their unique learning needs. As instructional leaders, special education administrators must also work to empower teachers so that all persons working with students feel a sense of competence.

Along with the imperatives discussed above are some challenges to special education administrators currently and in the future. Special education administrators must develop and practice highly effective communication skills. We believe effective partnerships are built on communication. The issue of how services will be delivered to multicultural students with disabilities is also a challenge that faces special education administrators. Educating students in the least restrictive environment is a deceptively simple proposition. The decision-making and collaborative processes that are involved are nuanced and require a highly effective administrator. Finally, the mandate included in the NCLB legislation stipulating that all teachers be "highly qualified" is currently, and will be in the future, a challenge. The definition of what constitutes a highly qualified special education teacher is hotly debated and even with an agreed upon definition will be an issue given special education teacher shortages. While special education administration has undergone dramatic changes in beliefs and practices in the last three decades, the potential for having a significant impact on multicultural students with disabilities remains key to those who hold these positions.

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