Lindy Zaretsky
Simcoe County District School Board, Ontario

Louise Moreau
York Region District School Board, Ontario

    and

Susan Faircloth
Pennsylvania State University, University Park

Voices from the Field:
School Leadership in Special Education

This study focuses on four key issues: the perception of the role played by principals in Ontario in the administration and supervision of special education programs and services; the extent to which the construct of the principal as the instructional leader accurately depicts the role of the principal in schools with high concentrations of students with special needs; the knowledge and skills needed by principals for them to assume responsibility for the administration and supervision of special education programs and services in school contexts of diversity and difference; and the [re]structuring of leadership preparation programs to bridge the gap between current knowledge and leadership/classroom practice.

Cette étude porte sur quatre questions principales: la perception du rôle que jouent les directeurs d'école en Ontario dans l'administration et la supervision des programmes et des services d'éducation spécialisée; la mesure dans laquelle le concept du directeur comme chef de l'enseignement reflète le rôle des directeurs d'écoles ayant une forte concentration d'élèves à besoins spéciaux; les connaissances et les habiletés dont ont besoin les directeurs pour assumer l'administration et la supervision des programmes et des services d'éducation spécialisée dans des contextes caractérisés par la diversité et la différence; et la [re]structuration des programmes de préparation au leadership visant la réduction de l'écart entre les connaissances actuelles et les pratiques courantes.

The increasing diversity of the school-aged population coupled with demands for educational reform and accountability pose challenges for school leaders in both the United States and Canada. This requires that school leaders be knowledgeable about effective instructional practices and interventions that can help

Lindy Zaretsky is Superintendent of Student Services and Leadership and Staff Development. She has been a teacher, consultant, and administrator in the Greater Toronto Area in a variety of school settings for 17 years. Her research and writing focus on parent advocacy and special education, values and educational leadership, and social justice.

Louise Moreau is Superintendent of Special Education for the York Region District School Board.

Susan Faircloth is an assistant professor of educational leadership. During the 2007-2008 academic year, she is on leave from Penn State while she completes a Ford Foundation Postdoctoral Fellowship with the Civil Rights Project at the University of California-Los Angeles. Her research focuses on the education of American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) students with disabilities. She is specifically interested in the factors that account for the referral and placement of AI/AN students in special education programs and services in the early grades, the preparation of school leaders, and the moral and ethical dimensions of school leadership.

to support sustained student achievement. Research suggests that principals who engage in instructional leadership are best able to support others in the development and implementation of purposeful interventions that improve student performance (Blase & Blase, 1998; Fullan, 2003; Lambert, 2003). School leaders who lack these essential knowledge and skills are often unable to identify the relevant instructional priorities in their roles.

As more students with disabilities and other special educational needs are educated in regular education settings, school leaders must also be attuned to the legal underpinnings and requirements inherent in special education programs and services (Bowlby, Peters, & Mackinnon, 2001). School leaders must also communicate, and ensure compliance with, these requirements by faculty and staff. However, legal compliance alone does not ensure the provision of appropriate education. This requires the nurturing of relationships and the development of partnerships and networks aimed at ensuring accountability and success for all students, including those with special educational needs (Kalynpur & Harry, 1999; Vincent, 2000). Thus the school leader's relational role is to communicate the school's purposes effectively and to facilitate the mobilization and distribution of social, political, and economic resources, while developing a culture of inclusiveness (Burrello, Lashley, & Beatty, 2001; Ryan, 2006).

A review of administrator preparation programs in Canada and the US indicates that special education is given inadequate treatment. For example, principal qualification courses in Ontario typically integrate special education content in three core components relating to legal issues, curriculum, and human resources, but it is not addressed as a separate component. The Ontario Principals Council (OPC) also offers one-day workshops in special education for school administrators, as well as additional qualification courses in special education for teachers; however, there is no requirement that aspiring or practicing school administrators be certified in special education.

In order for school leaders to facilitate the development and maintenance of inclusive educational environments, and the provision of educational and other supporting services for all students, including those with disabilities and other special educational needs, they must be adequately trained to assume leadership for special education programs, services, and personnel. This is particularly evident in the province of Ontario, which is moving away from an atmosphere of compliance toward accountability and results, from deficit-driven and remedial support to prevention and early intervention, and from an emphasis on deviance from the norm toward honoring difference and success for all using curriculum-based measures and a universal design for learning. This is in sharp contrast to traditional educational approaches that have "often attempt[ed] to retrofit the child with inappropriate interventions after they have failed in school rather than design the instructional program from the beginning to allow for access and success" (Hehir, 2005, p. 35).

Part of this process involves increasing students' access to the general education curricula by modifying instructional strategies and assessment practices to address individual needs and strengths. This requires increased inter-disciplinary efforts and the use of inclusive practices (Begley & Zaretsky, 2004; Zaretsky, 2005). For example, educators are asked to view the existence of a

disability as part of the overall diversity of the school (Ryan, 2006). However, little has been done to assist educators in exploring the theoretical underpinnings of sociocultural understandings of disability and special education. As a result, students who are thought to be disabled are often deemed to have different physiological attributes not considered to be social constructs. This has led to the prevailing medical perspective in schools that attributes pathology to students with disabilities. This type of discourse continues to influence practitioners' values, beliefs, and actions in schools (Slee, 2001; Van Rooyen, Le Grange, & Newmark, 2002).

Inevitably, school leaders continue to face a plethora of issues and challenges in their efforts to guide teachers and other school personnel in striving for educational equity and academic excellence for all children. This is particularly challenging given the increasing diversity of the student population as evidenced by a wide range of socioeconomic, ethnocultural, and linguistic backgrounds, as well as differences in academic and physical abilities. In response, principals have indicated a particular need for increased knowledge of the various types of disabilities, as well as increased understanding of the laws that protect the rights of students with disabilities (Zaretsky, 2004a).

Purpose of this Study

The goal of this study was to understand better the role of the principal in the administration and supervision of special education programs, services, and personnel from a cross-national perspective. We contend that such an understanding can assist in the development and/or restructuring of professional preparation programs and subsequent professional development activities that have as their focus an approach to instruction and instructional leadership in an accountability context that may better serve the needs of exceptional and non-exceptional students alike.

In conducting this study, we recognize that as the complexity of the politics of educational reform increases and as its influence on special education intensifies, we must concern ourselves with theory and practice that transcend traditional perspectives and examine how principals come to know and understand special education leadership and administration in contexts of diversity and difference, in both national and international arenas. A number of scholars have also suggested the need to examine school administrators and other school personnel's conceptions of disability, diversity, inclusive instruction, and governance (Burrello et al., 2001; Jordan, 2001; Ryan, 2003, 2006; Skrtic, 1995; Slee, 2001; Thomas & Loxley, 2001; Zaretsky, 2005).

Given the richness of data garnered from this study, this article focuses on the initial results of the interviews with the Ontario principals. Future publications will address recommendations for further research on both national and international levels, as well as implications for practice, theory, and administrator preparation including preservice and inservice training.

Framing the Research Study

This study examined principals' perceptions of their leadership roles and responsibilities in special education. Four interrelated questions guided this study: (a) What does it mean to provide leadership in special education? (b) How is this leadership demonstrated in the day-to-day management of special

education programs, services, and personnel among principals? (c) How well prepared do principals consider themselves to be engaged in these roles and responsibilities? and (d) In what areas of special education do principals perceive the need for more professional development for themselves? These questions provide the central analytic foci of this study and allude to the larger goal of considering how we might best influence the development of meaningful professional leadership preparation programs.

Methodology

This study included in-depth, semistructured, open-ended interviews with six elementary school principals and two secondary school principals from a large district school board in Ontario. The schools represent a mixture of suburban, small town, and rural neighborhoods and a wide array of racial, ethnic, and cultural groups. More than 100,000 students are enrolled in the district. Priority was given to principals in schools with a high proportion of students with special needs in a variety of regular and special education programs and placements in their schools. Each participant had a minimum of two years experience in his or her administrative role. The interviews were used to understand better the roles of principals in schools where they have identified special education as one of their primary leadership responsibilities. We were particularly interested in each participant's concerns, interpretations, and unique contexts in which he or she practiced school leadership. Descriptive narratives are provided as appropriate. Subsequent cross-case analysis allowed for the identification of common circumstances shared by participants as well as those that remained unique to the individual principals.

Limitations

Although the findings from this study have potential implications for theory, practice, and future research in the fields of educational leadership/administration and special education in both the US and Canada, it is important to acknowledge that the methodology used in this study limits our ability to generalize these findings beyond the districts/boards included in this study. Limitations of the data reported in this manuscript include small sample size and selection of participants from one board in one Canadian province.

Analysis of Findings

Analysis of the data from the Ontario portion of this study yielded a number of themes as described below.

Identification of Multiple Layers of Instructional Leadership in Special Education

Analysis of the data suggests that definitions of instructional leadership are becoming increasingly diversified. For example, instructional leadership includes the use of data-informed decision-making practices and processes (Elmore, 2000; Lambert, 2003); and an emphasis on curriculum, instruction, and assessment as they are embedded in school improvement planning processes (Elmore; Fullan, 2003). Leadership has also been defined in terms of guidance and direction of instructional improvement framed in the building of collaborative learning communities (Bredeson, 2003; Kugelmas, 2001; Planche, 2004). Further, a growing number of researchers discuss the distribution of instructional leadership responsibilities among and across organizational

membership (Belchetz, 2004; Elmore; Harris, 2002; Lambert 2003). This model interweaves relational leadership practices and processes (Regan & Brooks, 1995) with authentic leadership practices (Begley & Zaretsky, 2004; Richmon, 2004) to create a more responsive, inclusive, and sophisticated repertoire of knowledge and skills for educational leaders.

The participants in this study identified the following roles and responsibilities in providing services to students with disabilities and other special educational needs: (a) support of regular and special education teachers in their efforts to provide sound instructional and assessment practices embedded in individualized education programs; (b) coordination of services; (c) development of effective communication strategies and protocols among teachers, parents, regional support staff, advocates, agencies, and associations; (d) establishment of procedures to ensure compliance with provincial legislation in special education; and (e) identification and arrangement of effective inservice training opportunities in the area of special education for all staff in their schools. As one principal explained,

> Instructional leadership basically means involving the staff in a number of different activities so that they can look at their practice. The teachers have all been involved in assessment and evaluation training programs and literacy projects. Our regular monthly staff meeting is predominantly professional development.

As another principal described it,

> The Teacher Performance Appraisal process (TPA) … one of the things it allows you to do is to be able to share some of your strategies. And it forces you into classrooms again which I love. I do see myself as an instructional leader but it is a fight to maintain that time.

Participants identified key issues, including strengthening parent/community ties to schools, developing teachers' knowledge and skills, and promoting a school-based professional community. They were committed to helping teachers improve their classroom performance and making academic instruction the school's top priority. Equally important, most principals provided opportunities for teachers to share information and work together to plan instruction. They saw themselves as stewards and coaches in the development of a school culture of high expectations and achievement for all students.

These findings support earlier research that has demonstrated that principals are [re]defining and refining their conceptions of instructional leadership. These personalized understandings offer a more integrated approach to addressing their responsibilities as educational leaders committed to providing quality professional development for teachers in support of enhanced outcomes for students with disabilities. Effective principals encourage teacher leadership, team learning, flexibility, and collegial self-governance (Belchetz, 2004). As such, they emphasize innovation, collaboration, and professional growth (Planche, 2004).

Relational leadership. Central to these principals' conceptions of instructional leadership in special education was the emphasis they all placed on building effective relationships and collaborative work teams in their schools. Of particular relevance to instructional leadership was the language of caring, vision,

courage, and collaboration that counterbalanced most principals' focus on achievement and standards embedded in their understandings of instructional leadership. All principals articulated values, beliefs, and attitudes that were consistent with the philosophy of relational leadership. The strength of their beliefs was influenced in part by their own personal experiences (Regan & Brooks, 1995; Richmon, 2004, 2005; Richmon & Allison, 2003). They were genuinely interested in what others had to say, and they made time to listen. These principals reported that they worked hard to provide necessary supports and services. Whether it was scheduling collaborative planning time or arranging for professional development opportunities, they were continually engaged in the active support of their staff. One principal articulated his or her thinking as follows.

> Instructional leadership is not just about the academics, it's about developing the whole child … it's the emotional caring piece, the empathy piece, the kinesthetic, the hands-on, it's all of that. It's showing your staff what you say and believe and follow through. You try to model that. You've got to have that relational piece first with community, with kids, with parents, with staff.

According to the participants, relational leadership involves a strong caring ethic with value placed on inclusivity and connectedness. Six of the eight principals spoke directly about their life experiences, both professionally and personally, and connections between their life experiences and their thinking about how they lead in special education. As one elementary school principal described it,

> I had a sister who had multiple sclerosis and so that's my own personal bias in terms of having people understand what her strengths were and what her needs were. I don't think it had anything to do with educational experiences, per se. I think that's who I was and who my family was.

Seven principals recounted at least one story involving effective collaboration built on a foundation of excellent interpersonal communication skills. In particular, they indicated the need to understand school and system expectations, procedures, and processes related to communication and collaboration. This knowledge, coupled with effective skills, facilitated their relationship-building efforts. One principal summed it up as follows.

> I think principals need to have a better understanding of the exceptionalities. Second, they need to have some legal background in terms of our legislation in the province. But there are other issues that come around in terms of dealing with parents and parent demands and so on that have to come into play. And I guess there's that relational piece. And I don't know how you coach somebody through that. But for me that coaching element, that personal issue, is paramount.

According to Begley and Zaretsky (2004), school leaders play a crucial role when they nurture more authentic relationships among educators and members of their school communities. They are ideally situated to model a genuine appreciation for the contributions that others can bring to the social process of knowledge construction. Planche (2004) points out that effective leaders must be able to translate the ambiguities of collaboration into tangible goals. These principals' emphases on more relational processes suggest a need for com-

prehensive models that integrate facilitative processes with instructional tasks. Evidence from this study indicates that tasks associated with instructional leadership need to be approached in more collaborative ways. Such leaders maintain a clear focus on high achievement for all learners, and they demonstrate support and reassurance for their teachers, families, students, and others about the value of their contributions to the teaching and learning process.

Distributive leadership. All participants stressed the importance of learning in a context where knowledge could become specific, usable, and distributed. These principals created ways for knowledge building and sharing to take place. For example, by identifying teachers who have exemplary knowledge and skills related to effective instruction, and developing ways that they could share their skills in context through mentoring, coaching, and observation processes, principals were able to provide opportunities for shared leadership, recognition of talent and effort, and structures for collaborative and professional growth.

These principals understood that their teachers often had a higher degree of expertise in particular areas than they did and were willing to learn from their own faculty. They fostered a culture of shared ownership and responsibility for all learners. They made an effort to build expertise from within and beyond their schools. Furthermore, they initiated and supported non-hierarchical organizational systems and structures in the school that reflected a need on their part to distribute leadership with respect to specific knowledge domains in special education. For example, one principal remarked,

> This place does run itself now because there are committees that do everything and teams that do everything. Special education is represented on every single solitary thing. I need their input and they bring a different perspective, so they sit on the budget committee, and staffing committee to help define where the needs are.

These findings on distributive leadership are similar to those of Ainscow (1999), Dyson and Millward (2000), and Ryan (2006), who report joint problem-solving as a feature of their case studies of inclusive schools. The importance of collaborative processes points to the significance of distributed leadership and participative decision-making. The principals in those studies, as well as in this particular study, claimed that they were supporters and enablers of staff as they engaged in collaborative processes focused on professional development. Each principal distributed day-to-day responsibilities in special education to a variety of staff. There was a clear understanding that certain people assumed more specific leadership roles and responsibilities based on their current knowledge base in special education. However, evidence suggests that the principals in this study were also committed to learning more about special education. Although the complex and often overwhelming knowledge domains in special education necessitated the practice of distributive leadership, they remained dedicated to shared leadership practices.

Identifying the Critical Knowledge Domains and Challenges
in Special Education Leadership

The principals in this study identified several substantive knowledge domains and processes that they perceived as critical to their success as leaders in special

education. These included (a) the development of sound instructional and assessment practices linked to measurable goals; (b) an in-depth understanding of the Individual Education Plan (IEP) and Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC) legislative processes; (c) current research and best practices associated with various categories of exceptionality; (d) a deeper understanding and acceptance of varying conceptions of inclusive education; (e) accessing and equitably distributing scarce resources; (f) nurturing relationships and networks within and beyond their schools; and (g) the development of effective mediation and negotiation strategies for interactions with parent advocates.

Sound instructional and assessment practices. Many school districts have struggled to demonstrate adequate progress in academic areas among students with disabilities. Consequently, some districts have shifted their focus from the identification and placement of students with disabilities to the students' academic achievement of core curriculum. Principals appear to understand the need to develop processes and practices involving standards-based goals and objectives, as well as practices to monitor the progress of students toward meeting these standards (Matlock, Fielder, & Walsh, 2001). They also must ensure that teachers have the knowledge, skills, and support needed to use student data effectively to make appropriate instructional modifications.

Four of eight principals in this study expressed their concern with teachers' competence in special education. In particular, the secondary school principals emphasized the current shortage of qualified and competent personnel in special education due to the demands of the paperwork. One principal noted,

> In secondary school, the content is more sophisticated than elementary. Many
> of the special education teachers don't have the math and science deep
> content/subject knowledge to help the kids who experience a great deal of
> difficulty in math and science

Two principals attributed increasing standards and accountability to parents as the primary causes of increased shortages of teachers seeking positions in special education.

> I think there is a sense from teachers coming into the system to stay away from
> special education. They are staying away from the paperwork. They don't have
> the tool kit, the repertoire of the instructional and assessment strategies they
> need. There's a fear of the legalities in special education. I think that the
> parents present a challenge to special educators who see the rights of the child
> at the forefront. Parents are afforded more time to talk about rights and
> teachers don't want it.

IEP and IPRC legislative processes. Educational leaders have become increasingly concerned about the law. They frequently view legal compliance issues as playing a large role in their leadership decisions. The principals in this study understood their responsibility to ensure the delivery of educational services to students with disabilities and meet the procedural requirements of the law in addition to avoiding litigation (Valesky & Hirth, 1992). As one principal stated,

> You need a background on the legal parameters within which you're working.
> You need to know the legal aspects of the IEP and IPRC processes and any new
> developments as they occur.

Linking category of exceptionality to appropriate instruction. Seven of eight principals expressed a fundamental curiosity to seek out new knowledge and research related to categories of exceptionality and instructional interventions to support learners with special needs. In particular, principals often referred to the challenges associated with including students with autism and various emotional/behavioral disorders. They reported a significant increase in the numbers of students with these two labels entering the public school system. The following comments from two principals illustrate the current challenge.

> I would like to see some PD [professional development] for administrators that perhaps highlights the characteristics of the different disabilities and attached to that, sort of the dos and don'ts. I'd also like to know what other schools are doing successfully to support kids so that I don't have to reinvent the wheel.

> And autism might be one exceptionality that we're all struggling with. I think that's the biggest challenge I've seen over the last few years including mental health issues and I don't think we're well equipped to deal with those.

Understanding and accepting multiple conceptions of an inclusive education. Seven of eight principals related their conceptions of inclusion to their personal visions for education. All the participants supported a philosophy of inclusiveness, appeared to believe in success for all children, and articulated a personal belief that all children could learn. These principals were committed to providing all children equal access to quality instruction. Six principals emphasized the importance of recognizing a range of placement options that could still provide inclusive settings in the school. In this way the political nature of inclusive education was also acknowledged by each of the principals as they struggled to reconcile demands for academic accountability and improved achievement levels with the immediate social and emotional needs of their students.

One elementary school principal described his or her philosophy of inclusion as follows.

> I do believe in special education community classes. We need to meet the significant needs of some of our kids and two, to also give them the kind of support that I don't think all special education teachers have. So to collectively group kids together who have similar needs and put them with somebody who has acquired the skills to teach those needs, is to me much more advantageous for that child than to place them with a teacher who has a much more generic skill base.

A secondary school principal offered a similar perspective.

> I am a firm believer that all students belong in school. But I am a firm believer that specialized programs work. I don't believe that it serves a child any good to sit in a regular class that has high needs with 25-30 students, even through osmosis or even through an educational assistant helping that child, that they're going to be able to keep up because they have different needs and we have to recognize that.

Two other elementary school principals favored regular education class placements for students with special needs. One offered the following rationale for supporting this particular orientation.

> I've seen students in the smaller classes and there's been no gains or very, very minimal. I'm thinking that we need more solid teachers in any class who want to understand what it means to have a problem.

One secondary school principal described a similar understanding, yet spoke to the notion of adolescence and difference.

> I think we're really doing a good thing in that we're integrating students as much as possible. They don't want to be seen as different … very vulnerable, teenage years. But what I'm also finding is a problem in transition in that a lot of my kids are removed in elementary for math and other courses. But when they come into grade 9 they are not going to be successful.

Principals' perceptions about what constituted an inclusive learning environment varied considerably and for the most part were dependent on the disability category. For example, these principals most often preferred the special education classroom setting for students with serious behavioral/emotional disabilities and autism. These findings are consistent with the results identified in Praisner's (2003) study that found that a student's disability label was related to the recommended placement by principals. Similar findings have been reported in research related to inclusive education (Faircloth, 2004; Zaretsky, 2004a, 2004b).

The principals in this study defined inclusive education in broader terms and with broader aims. Inclusive education was seen less as an approach to serving children with disabilities in regular education settings, as one in which diversity and difference among learners was welcomed and celebrated. According to the participants, the goal of an inclusive education was to increase meaningful participation and achievement of all students who were increasingly vulnerable to the effects of marginalization in existing educational arrangements. More deeply, participation means being recognized, accepted, and valued for oneself (Gallagher, Heshusius, Iano, & Skrtic, 2004; Shields, Bishop, & Mazawi, 2005).

Their perceptions most closely align with the definition of inclusion offered by MacKay and Burt-Garrans (2004) who explain,

> When we talk about an inclusive school system, or inclusion, we are not referring to a specific program, service, or methodology. We are referring to a school system that in both its design and its effect continually strives to ensure that each student has access to and is enabled to participate in the school community, to be part of the community in positive and reinforcing ways and whose identity is reflected in the operations of the school community. (p. 6)

Equity in allocation and distribution of resources. Prevailing practices generally accord principals responsibility for special education programs in their schools. However, resources are often budgeted and allocated through the central office administration. Participants articulated a need to know how to access the various kinds of resources available to them in order to support student achievement.

Time for on-site experiential instruction and learning. Principals also stressed the need for quick access to information (i.e., new legislative action, regulatory changes, relevant research, online resources, and professional development opportunities that are germane to their local instructional and managerial

needs in special education). Six of eight principals also expressed their frustration at not having sufficient time to devote to special education leadership in their schools. As one principal put it,

> I think that we still continue to see problems in special education because I think it is an overwhelming task of which we, as principals in a school, don't have the time, even though we'd like to devote the time.

Five principals noted the importance of on-the-job training, six pointed to the importance of substantial inservice opportunities for teachers and administrators to refine (or develop) the requisite attitudes and skills needed for working more effectively in the specific contexts of their local settings. For example, one principal remarked,

> One of the things we can give people are the experiences, and I don't mean us reading about what autism is, it's about experiencing it, seeing it in action, hearing from a parent of an autistic child as part of the programming. If I were creating a course, I'd definitely make it human-based versus textbook based.

Technology. Principals in this study understood that many students with special needs required assistive technologies in order to benefit from instruction and to meet the goals and objectives outlined in their IEPs. Five principals identified the challenges of accessing appropriate technologies and of offering the necessary professional development to teachers so that they too could become more proficient in embedding these technologies in the design and delivery of their instructional programs. One principal explained,

> Having a whole class of kids you're teaching in science that come in with laptops, and we're working through a whole other scenario where the teachers can put all their stuff on disk so the kids can have the notes. But it's not a quick process. And the buy in is different for different skill levels of staff. So we're increasing the technology skills of a lot of our staff who have minimal skill sets in this area.

Nurturing Relationships and Networks: Interactions With Parent Advocacy Groups
Parents of children with disabilities also frequently become advocates for educational reform as an outcome of their personal experiences with school systems. Advocates are often parents who over time and seemingly out of necessity transform themselves into social activists (Zaretsky, 2004a). These parents view advocacy as a series of actions aimed at empowering themselves and other parents to represent children with special needs effectively and to monitor and improve the quality of the educational programs developed.

Participants emphasized the importance of addressing tensions and conflicts when attempting to foster dialogue that is responsive to the diverse needs of the individuals who make up a school community. In order to promote a more innovative, collaborative, and inclusive decision-making arena, principals reported that they needed to engage alternative perspectives that might help to clarify mutual purposes and achieve collectively desirable ends, even when this process led to escalating tensions and conflicts. From their viewpoints, this critically reflective, interactive practice has the potential to promote the overarching shared goals of providing all children with equity and excellence in inclusive education while reconceptualizing parents' involvement in the decision-making processes. As one principal described it,

> Having political savvy when you're working with a new group of stakeholders and the biggest thing now is people coming in with their advocates. However sometimes, I found the advocate to be really good in being able to reframe what we were trying to say to the parents in a language that the parents understood.

Evidence suggests that principals are beginning to adopt a broadened perspective on dialogical practice that includes an increased understanding of a relational leadership. Critical and creative thinking combines with empathetic communication, valuing each other's contributions to knowledge-building processes and engaging in effective problem-solving.

Inventing a New Paradigm of Instructional Leadership in Special Education
The principals in this study expressed an uncompromising commitment and belief that all children could learn, belong in, and contribute to a school community. They viewed differences as enriching their schools. They focused on the personal and interpersonal. Many saw themselves as problem-solvers, mediators, and facilitators of inclusive education. They also expressed an understanding of and appreciation for the expertise found among their staff. They articulated the importance of making strong connections between schools, homes, communities, and other agencies and organizations. Thus they were able to facilitate the distribution of knowledge and other valuable resources that would enhance the learning of all students.

Governed by an ethic of care and responsibility, participants were moved toward relational stewardship for the people and events in their professional lives. Their conceptions of instructional leadership were interwoven with their views on relationships built on trust, kindness, honesty, and doing what they perceived to be in the best interests of all children. Scholarly work on ethics and authentic forms of leadership (Begley, 2001; Gross, 2004; Starratt, 2003), relational leadership (Planche, 2004; Regan & Brooks, 1995; Ryan, 2006), and distributive leadership (Belchetz, 2004; Harris, 2002; Lambert, 2003) are helping us to transform and transcend traditional notions of instructional leadership. The integration of multiple models of leadership appears to be necessary when leading and managing special education programs and services.

What Principals Say They Need in Professional Development Programs
Although half the principals in this study had completed at least one additional qualification course in special education while teachers, all reported a need for ongoing professional development that targeted their roles as school leaders in special education. They also described their development of a more diversified understanding of inclusive curriculum and assessment design and delivery; a greater appreciation of inclusive resource/support models; a heightened awareness of related policies, procedures, and legislation; and a broader sense of collaborative partnerships in regular and special education. However, they emphasized that their knowledge was acquired largely through experiential learning on the job. Given the complexities of special education, it is not surprising that many principals felt that this learning needed to be embedded in ongoing professional development in order to equip them with the knowledge and skills necessary to lead with confidence.

Six of the eight principals readily conceded that their expertise in special education was limited due to the enormous amount of knowledge and skill required to lead responsibly in special education. Most comments focused on on-the-job training, yet participants endorsed more formal training, as more of their time was spent on special education issues as a result of ongoing legislative change. According to the principals in this study, professional development opportunities in district school boards and university settings should include opportunities to experience, via dialogue with other administrators and through direct observation in schools, successful programming for the inclusion of students with a variety of disabilities. The focus of such leadership preparation should be on connecting theory and research with the critical issues and dilemmas of practice that practitioners face. These critical issues included inclusionary practices, increasingly complex legislation involving human rights issues, and building and maintaining positive relationships with multiple stakeholders in special education.

The participants also stressed the need for leadership preparation programs to reexamine current course offerings and identify possible gaps in special education leadership. In particular, they felt that the content covered in their formal training did not align well with their experiences and the increased complexities of their positions. They recommended the infusion of case studies and interprofessional collaboration with content that was locally determined and focused on current special education issues in their schools. This training could include cross-site visits and other gatherings that would provide opportunities to share knowledge and expertise in the curricular, pedagogical, and legal aspects of special education. From their viewpoints, a substantial block of instructional time should be devoted to this model of professional development for both aspiring and practicing school leaders.

Conclusion

Implications for Leadership Preparation Programs

Educational reforms aimed at instructional improvement and student achievement have contributed to the heightened complexities of administering special education in today's schools. The emphasis on improving the educational outcome of all students has led to increased scrutiny of the nature and outcomes of school leadership in special education. Invariably, principals who are required to administer regular education programs are also responsible for a broad range of special education programs in areas in which they have had minimal training and/or experience (Monteith, 1994; Praisner, 2003; Sage & Burello, 1986).

This study provides university preparation programs and district school boards with preliminary recommendations in order to improve the quality of leadership in special education. The principals in this study recommended that their critical issues and dilemmas of practice in special education be explicitly integrated into the curricular design of leadership preparation programs. The incorporation of this knowledge would most certainly benefit the design of the programs. Rich examples and experiences from the field could be critically examined through a case study/problem-based learning approach. Special education scholars could work alongside practitioners in the planning of instruction across curricular areas. Using this approach, practitioners' personal

and professional values, beliefs, and experiences could be more closely aligned with the design and delivery of the curriculum. Preparation programs could also encourage administrators and aspiring administrators to be more reflective and avail themselves of opportunities to explore alternative ways of knowing and doing in special education leadership.

To date, administrator preparation programs largely neglect leadership as it relates to special education issues (Torgerson, 2003). Data from this study suggest that administrator preparation programs should emphasize the development of instructional, distributive, relational, and authentic leadership skills that enable principals to organize their schools in ways that capitalize on and validate the professional knowledge and skills found in interactions among a variety of stakeholders in special education. Principals who understand effective research-based practices and recognize the instructional demands that classroom teachers and specialists face can provide more appropriate support to these professionals. Preparation programs can further build the capacity of aspiring and practicing school leaders by helping them to recognize their own professional strengths and interests, mediate highly contentious ethical and legal issues, recognize their staff's talents and professional growth needs, and nurture relational networks with multiple stakeholders in special education. School leaders who truly understand the needs of students with disabilities, the legislation, and the instructional challenges that teachers face working with these students are better prepared to provide appropriate support and to realize improvement in learning and achievement for all students.

Implications for Theory, Research, and Practice

Theory and practice in special education belie a world in which meaning is in continual negotiation and particular types of understandings are privileged and negated. As debates continue, and as scientific advances lead to new understandings of how to teach an increasingly diverse student body, scholars and practitioners are being asked to engage in more interdisciplinary efforts and inclusive practices (Begley & Zaretsky, 2004; Zaretsky, 2005). The fundamental point here is that a more flexible approach to examining increasingly complex issues in education must be adopted in order to be more responsive and inclusive when considering the professional needs of practitioners and the educational needs of students and their families.

Central to this process is a belief that there are other perspectives outside of the dominant professional discourse from which to view special education. These alternative perspectives generate different implications for students identified as exceptional (Zaretsky, 2005). In encouraging this paradigm shift in special education, practitioners in district school boards need to be able to view their respective roles through lenses that focus on sociocultural aspects that define the lives of people with disabilities. This may also help to facilitate a shift in the predominant biomedical view of disability. To do so requires that professional development courses in special education diversify how they present or explore the causes of disability.

This presents a challenge for the field of special education. Like all disciplines, special education embodies particular sets of values and broadly shared assumptions emerging from the social context. Through an examination of theories and practices, it is apparent that alternative knowledge should

complement empirical data. Shared beliefs and practices, as well as personal and professional experiences, can and should be usefully employed. Personal meanings and intentions that individuals construct in their everyday lives should contribute to the knowledge base of special education and educational leadership/administration that involves complex socially constructed meanings. Engagement in special education requires the careful mediation of tension between what is pursued in practice as social and biomedical conceptions of disability. It should not be about negating or embracing one particular set of values over another.

It is also critical that we begin to promote through our professional development activity more engagement in dialogical interactions about special education theorizing in the practitioner's arena. For example, few educational leaders or administrators understand what theoretical underpinnings are associated with the practice of full inclusion or why others might favor a range of alternative placement options from segregated to integrated special education settings for students with special needs. To this end, there is a considerable need to support practitioners in understanding how they have come to know and understand special education, disability, and inclusion in varied ways. In the absence of these theory and practice connections, special education in practice will remain a highly contentious and conflicted school arena. In sum, considerable pragmatic work remains to be done in leadership preparation programs if schools are to address and enrich the learning of all children, ostensibly the prerequisite function of all democratic values and leadership practices.

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