

Preparing Effective Administrators of Special and Gifted Education Programs: The University's Role

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At the helm of overseeing any special program in K-12 schools, effective leaders are responsible for ensuring quality. Some key components at the foundation of effective leadership are shared decision making, teamwork, and group problem solving ability. This paper focuses on the university's role in preparing leaders of special programs that serve children with different learning needs. Specific suggestions and strategies are drawn from a vast body of research and include suggestions related to the university's preparation of effective program level administrators with collaboration as a central variable.

INTRODUCTION

Since the initiation of PL 94-142 enacted by the United States Congress in 1975, special education has been mandated, funded and regulated by the federal government. There have been both benefits and drawbacks to this initiative. In positive terms and most importantly, children who require different educational services are identified, and programs with trained personnel are provided. As a result of the federal mandate, schools receive federal funds to operate programs for children who need special services. Some might contend, however, that with mandates and funds, the regulatory processes are a burden to educators and get in the way of serving the learning needs of children (Perkins, 2011).

Education of the gifted is unique to the field of special education in terms of the mandates and federal involvement. Gifted education is not federally mandated; thus, there are no federal funds available to operate programs at the local level. However, it was over three decades ago that Sidney Marland addressed congress with a concern for the educational needs of gifted learners (Marland, 1980). In his address he called attention to the need for identification and differentiated service for advanced learners. He clearly defined giftedness and made 'gifted' a term of interest. Yet, no federal mandate was initiated and to this day gifted education remains a matter of state choice.

Regardless of one's perspective on the matter of federal or state involvement or any differences that exist between the programs due to a mandate or lack thereof, one consistent need remains between the two programs. Effective leadership by specialists in both areas of special education is essential to the operation of programs. At the helm of overseeing the services for the children, effective leaders ensure that quality programs are implemented. Some key components at the foundation of effective leadership are shared decision making, teamwork, and group problem solving ability (Robinson & Moon, 2003; Woodcock & Vialle, 2010; Zirkel, 2004). *Qualities of Effective Leadership*

It was approximately two decades ago that a paradigm shift occurred in the field of educational leadership in general. This shift included a change from autocratic leadership to shared decision making. There was suddenly an emphasis on teamwork and the need for understanding cultural and environmental influences when addressing decisions that pertained to personnel, stakeholder involvement and student accountability (Bridges & Hallinger, 1995; Mulkeen & Tenenbaum, 1990; Muth, 1989). As a result, university training and professional development shifted to a more authentic learning, authentic assessment, and reflection model for training educational leaders (Mulkeen & Tenenbaum, 1990; Wiggins, 1993). This training had as a central theme the need for teamwork in the realm of shared decision making and group problem solving.

Benefits from leadership through shared decision making, teamwork and group problem solving certainly apply to all school leaders, but those of special programs must meet a unique set of problems and issues. Inherent to both special education and gifted education, administrators make decisions relevant to 1) compliance at the federal, state or local levels, 2) effective identification procedures, 3) maximizing program options to meet individual learning needs, 4) parent involvement to plan and maintain effective individualized services and 5) program changes based on program evaluations (Council for Exceptional Children, 2007; Woodcock & Vialle, 2010; Zirkel, 2004).

One example of a support program for effective leadership and problem solving in the field of special education is the Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network - PTTAN (www.pattan.net). The PTTAN offers a program called The Leadership Initiative which is offered to educational leaders with responsibility of administering special education programs. Through collaborate leadership efforts this program is designed to improve student achievement, compliance monitoring, and service delivery. One of the training elements, that has proven to be successful, is the Pennsylvania Fellows Program - PFP. During the 2010-2011 academic year, approximately 130 administrators and educators of special education programs engaged in the PFP. This group met to initiate program changes based on Council for Exceptional Children and the Council for Administrator Standards. Following the institute, participants reported the experience to be a positive influence, one which provided usable and practical strategies as a result of shared decision making.

Opportunities were also provided at the PTTAN's Summer Academy to help administrators examine research and data driven strategies to improve skills of children receiving special education services. After attending seminars sponsored by PTTAN, educational leaders reported a renewed sense of confidence, leadership abilities, and shared problem solving to better ensure the success of students being served in their districts.

Problem solving strategies common to those described in PTTAN are plausible for administrators and facilitators of gifted programs, too. But educators of gifted children face another issue that requires creative problem solving and shared decision making. Since gifted education is mandated by less than half of the states in the US, support and funds for programs are not valued by all governmental agencies, community patrons, or local educators (Gallagher & Gallagher, 1994; Rimm, 2008; Wiskow, Fowler, Christopher, 2011). Thus, administrators of programs for the gifted have an ongoing challenge to educate those outside and inside schools about educational and affective needs of advanced learners (Wiskow, Fowler, Christopher, 2011) to garner support. According to Zirkel (2004) three broad categories emerge regarding state-mandated support for gifted students: silent (no specific provisions); weak (collective or permissive provisions); and strong (mandatory, individual entitlement approaching the IDEA model) with few states utilizing the mandatory features of IDEA with regard to gifted students. This lack of support for programs or funds to operate them requires the organization of advocacy.

ADVOCACY

Special education was founded upon and supported by various law-making entities that were challenged by parents of children with significant disabilities. Parents demanded to know why their children could not be educated in the public school system—that is, why they were told to keep their children at home, put them in institutions, or send them to private agencies for their sons' and daughters' education. These parents began to win landmark court cases on their children's behalf.

For example, in the 1972 court case *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children v. The Commonwealth of Pennsylvania (PARC)*, parents won the guarantee that children with intellectual disabilities could benefit from education tailored to their needs. Further, children could not be denied access to public schools, and they were entitled to a free public education (Robinson, & Moon, 2003). In *Mills v. Board of Education*, a class action lawsuit on behalf of the 18,000 children in Washington D.C. schools containing children with a range of disabilities, the court ordered the district to educate all students, including those with disabilities.

Other cases highlighted biases against certain students. In the 1970 case of *Diana v. State Board of Education of California*, a Spanish-speaking child was placed in a class for students with mild intellectual disabilities after she scored low on an intelligence quotient test because it was administered in English. The public school system was ordered to test Spanish-speaking children in their native language. Finally, *Larry P. v. Riles* court case concerned an African American student and discrimination in assessment. The court ruled that schools had to ensure that tests administered to students did not discriminate based on race. The *PARC*, *Mills*, *Diana*, and *Larry P.* cases together highlight the power of advocates and stakeholders in guiding public policy and legislation in the field of education (Wiskom, Fowler, Christopher, 2011).

Based on these and similar examples of advocacy by parents and educators, the first special education law in 1975, Public Law 94-142 changed the face of education in this country. Congress has reauthorized and amended P.L. 94-142 five times. The 1990 amendments renamed the law the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The primary purpose of IDEA has been to provide a free, appropriate public education for children with disabilities.

The most recent reauthorization of IDEA is titled *The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004*. IDEA has profoundly influenced what takes place in schools throughout the United States. It has changed the roles and responsibilities of general and special educators, school administrators, program administrators, parents, and students with disabilities in the educational process. The passage of IDEA marked the culmination of the efforts of advocates and stakeholders regarding the education of children with disabilities. Yet, the only circumstance, under which a gifted child's rights may be addressed under IDEA, or any disability legislation, is when the gifted child is also identified as having a disability.

Knowledge of the legal boundaries and precedents set within education can serve to assist individuals interested in the continuance and expansion of gifted programs in making informed decisions about their advocacy efforts (Zirkel, 2004). Gifted education faces similar issues that plague special education; however, the lack of a federal mandate for gifted education often exacerbates disparities. A recommendation for a mandatory statute, modeled on IDEA (2004), remains a goal for many gifted administrators, educators, and parents.

As noted earlier, in the absence of federal legislation, identification of and services for gifted students often fall to the states. Even without federal mandates, the *Jacob Javits Gifted and Talented Student Education Act*, provided funds for research and grants related to the education of the gifted and talented. However, the program, that was established by congress in 1994 and was reauthorized in 2001, and once supported projects of scientific research and innovative strategies related to the education of gifted children, no longer exists.

The variance in gifted policies nationally makes any reform effort less cohesive, comprehensive, and inclusive. Until lawmakers make the necessary changes that allow for gifted education's inclusion under the IDEA umbrella, gifted students will not find a receptive court system. Given the lack of support by

law making bodies, various individuals connected to the school environment play a vital role in advocacy for gifted children and programs (Wiskow, K., Fowler V. & Christopher, M., 2011). Ideally, all interested stakeholders (i.e., educators, parents, administrators, school board members, and students) should come together and form a partnership that results in increased services for exceptional students. But even partnerships begin with leadership. It is then vital that administrators of programs be innovative in their attempt at advocacy as they strive to gain the support of the school and community.

STAKEHOLDERS

Educating children with disabilities and those with gifts and talents is a responsibility of multiple stakeholders. Collaboration and shared responsibility require the creative use of all staff, as well as the understanding that the greater community may partner in this effort (Davis, 1997). It takes a strong instructional leader to create a positive learning climate that embodies a unifying philosophy of respect for all children and all stakeholders in the total community. And administrators may increase their responsiveness by involving all stakeholders – parents, community administrators, and teachers (Rakow, 2007).

The need for stakeholder involvement has been reinforced with each reauthorization of IDEA. IDEA continues to raise expectations through a very clear message that children with disabilities have a right to learn and achieve to high standards. Gifted and talented students, while not covered by IDEA, are afforded that same right. Both populations deserve the right to be included in standards-based reform, receive effective instruction and service from qualified personnel, attend schools with safe and supportive learning environments and benefit from opportunities in which the families contribute to their development and progress. To realize this vision for special education students, the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) knew that it would take all stakeholders—families, administrators, service providers, policymakers, and advocates—working together to implement IDEA.

The importance of the stakeholders working together was demonstrated in OSEP's need to create committees to focus on forging relationships between these stakeholders. The committee created opportunities for the stakeholders to 1) develop an understanding of the law 2) strengthen relationships and understand each others' needs and priorities and 3) contribute their expertise in addressing key issues (Horn, 1993). The partnerships between the stakeholders have been successful in responding to the critical needs of children, families and schools with high quality methods and materials that their respective constituents find meaningful. They have done this within a context of creating lasting relationships among themselves in which they share information, draw insights from one another, and expect diverse voices to be heard.

There are several key elements to ensuring that stakeholders work together for the best of students. First, there has to be an atmosphere of trust. The school and the stakeholder must surrender some of its defensiveness and the stakeholder must transcend the limits of its theories and adapt its approaches to the messy realities of public education (Lutz, 1991). Next, the administration must provide a vision for the stakeholders and the school. The administrator's vision and shared understanding of the role of the stakeholder must be clearly communicated for the relationship to be successful. The vision must originate with and be owned by the administration. The administrators must embrace the relationship. They must unequivocally associate themselves with the reform and continually embrace the implementation strategies of the stakeholders. There must be staff and community "buy in" and the administrators must also be willing to demand change when some teachers and other administrators resist. It was ten years after Sidney Marland addressed congress with a definition for giftedness, which remain the most widely used and accepted guide for schools today, a study was commissioned by the U.S Department of Education related to giftedness. The 1982 report was entitled the National Report on Identification: Assessment and Recommendations (Richert, 1985). In the report five major themes emerged as important to successful program services: advocacy, defensibility, equity, pluralism, and comprehensiveness. Another ten years past before another national report spoke positively about the education of gifted learners. This report was the 1993 U.S. Department of Education National Excellence: A Case for

Developing America's Talent (Ross, 1993). In the report a strong argument was made for the support of all teachers in an effort to best meet the needs of gifted learners. This initiative comes full circle back to the administrator of the gifted education program. It is the responsibility of the program leaders to plan, prepare, and deliver professional development to classroom teachers and other school administrators so they may be informed. These stakeholders must buy into the notion that gifted children's learning needs are important and that serving those needs takes a concerted effort by all involved in the child's education.

Just like in special education, the parents are another key stakeholder. Alliance with parents for successful educational planning has several components according to Rimm (2008). These include 1) forming allies between parents, classroom teachers, and the gt specialists, 2) all stakeholders listening to what has been observed about the child, 3) combining a list of what educators and parents think is best for the child, 4) negotiating to find appropriate adult and peer role models, 5) working together to discover the child's strengths and weaknesses, and 6) working together to educate the child with appropriate curricular and extracurricular activities.

SUCCESSFUL PREPARATION OF ADMINISTRATORS

The successful preparation of administrator for special and gifted education is a key factor in the ability to solve problems, lead, work effectively with all stakeholders, and provide training and support to classroom teachers. This preparation comes from graduate programs that include a variety of authentic opportunities while educators are developing administrative skills. These opportunities include: 1) field-based problems, 2) observations of effective special education programs, 3) authentic involvement in the oversight of identification and program planning with the supervision of a mentor, 4) authentic projects that focus on student performance and data-based decisions about services, 5) an internship with a variety of authentic learning opportunities (Bridges & Hallinger, 1995).

An interesting debate exists regarding qualifications of gifted education administrators in professional literature. Some experts (Rakow, 2007) propose that gifted education specialists should be identified as gifted before being qualified in the field. Others (Croft, 2003; Eddles-Hirsch, Vialle, Rogers, McCormick, 2010; Woodcock & Vialle, 2010) contend that personal and social qualities are much more important than intellectual qualities. Regardless of one's opinions about pre-qualification, preparation for the task of gifted education administrator certainly requires a complete portfolio of authentic experiences in order to meet the demands of the job.

Studies have been conducted to examine the characteristics of specialists and program leaders of special programs (Johnsen, VanTassel-Baska & Robinson, 2008; Starko, 1999). Starko (1999) interviewed teachers who were working to become specialists of gifted education. Some themes emerged in their successful transition to a leadership position. They credited 1) their knowledge and expertise gained from university professionals, 2) field experiences required through graduate studies, and 3) support of other administrators to assist them with their initial supervisory obligations. As we consider all the variables for one to become a successful program administrator, a variety of ideas emerge from a synthesis of professional literature.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ADMINISTRATORS OF SPECIAL PROGRAMS

IDEA and the basic need for competent administrators in the fields of gifted and special education has increased the need for better preparation programs. High quality administrative preparation programs have some similar qualities. Following are some recommendations for how to prepare future program administrators for the challenges they will face.

- 1) Graduate programs and professional development must to be grounded in practice and include field-based experiences. Field-based simulations or projects, that require future program administrators to work with other professionals to solve problems, provide a safe haven for

problem solving and critical thinking before being confronted with them in the real world (Johnsen, VanTassel-Baska & Robinson, 2008; Milstein & Krueger, 1997).

- 2) Quality programs require a sound mentorship component. Sound mentorship programs require highly qualified mentors that are willing to give the intern real and significant responsibilities, the opportunity to try without risk of reproach, time for constructive feedback and processing of those experiences, and understanding of “inside stories” and thinking that underlie administrative decisions and actions (Leitwood, Jantzi, & Coffin, 1995, Milstein & Krueger, 1997; Starko, 1999).
- 3) Internship programs, that guide future administrators in practice and include field based activities, better prepare them to engage in advocacy campaigns. The internship experience can be strengthened when universities and local school districts enter into partnerships that acknowledge the realities and complexities of the administrator job and stay focused on successful teaching and learning for all students (Leitwood, Jantzi, & Coffin, 1995, Milstein & Krueger, 1997). Internship opportunities give future specialists and administrators the opportunity to spend time in the field interacting with other school leaders.
- 4) Cohort models also help prepare future program administrators in shared decision making, problem solving and teamwork. Cohorts give future school leaders the opportunity to come together in a safe setting to share, process, challenge and make sense of their field with other individuals going through the same experiences (Dunn, 97; Vornberg & Harris, 1997). Experience shows that many groups continue as an informal support group as the student completes his/her program and takes a more prominent role as an administrator. Thus, the new administrator will have a person that they can go to for ideas and solutions to problems they encounter in the job.
- 5) A sound preparation program has a focused and specialized set of study topics and skills. Many programs offer specialization in communications and intergroup dynamics. The sequence of study in these programs emphasizes listening, meaning, reflection, decision-making, group processes, and management of differences. All these traits have been identified as essential to becoming not only an effective educational administrator but an effective leader in general. Another important aspect of these types of programs is an introduction to the culture of educational administrative positions. Through the participation in state and national organizations and attending local and national conferences the participant is able to understand the culture of administration as well as the issues and problems facing educational administrators across the state and nation (Dunn, 97; Vornberg & Harris, 1997).
- 6) One of the most controversial recommendations for improving and maintaining a good preparation program is the concept of providing stipends to the students in the program. The concept of providing a stipend allows the student to receive a salary comparable to what they would earn as a full-time administrator. The thought behind this concept is that it allows students to become more interested in entering and completing the program because of the incentive of the salary. The intern will become more focused as they will not have financial concerns (Vornberg & Harris, 1997).

CONCLUSION

In the past century many developments have occurred in the field of special education and the education of children with gifts and talents. In special education, public laws, governmental funding and mandates to educate all children has strengthened programs for children with special needs. Even so, it is the responsibility of the specialists, who oversee the programs, to ensure that proper identification and program services are in place.

In gifted education strides have been made to better serve gifted learners needs. The definition of giftedness has been broadened to include cognitive, creative and talent abilities. And awareness of inequities in identifying and serving students, who are gifted and talented, has been heightened. And

while giftedness is not addressed in IDEA; advocates for gifted children must remember the educational experience for these students will only improve through a combined effort that maintains the focused drive to enact change.

Gallagher and Gallagher (1994) stressed the importance of advocating for gifted children by stating:

Failure to help gifted children reach their full potential is a societal tragedy, the extent of which is difficult to measure but which is surely great. How can we measure the loss of the sonata unwritten, the curative drug undiscovered, or the absence of political insight? These gifted students are a substantial part of the difference between what we are and what we could be as a society. (p. 4)

Successful advocates and stakeholders never become complacent with their efforts and understand that change only occurs with vigilance (Robinson & Moon, 2003). Effective leadership improves the unity of advocates and increases the chance for stakeholder support.

Effective leadership does not happen by accident. The organized and systematic efforts of those who educate them make a difference. Thus, universities are responsible for preparing administrators of programs for children with special needs. University professionals and mentors must provide experiences that engage the future leader in authentic learning, authentic assessment and performance-based tasks. With these experiences in place teamwork, shared decision making, advocacy, and stakeholder support can become a reality.

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