

Principal Preparation and the Need to Adequately Address Special Education

Author: Pamela Gándara Ed.D.

Statement of the Problem

Careful guidance and strategic leadership on the part of a knowledgeable school principal is critical when considering the need to build effective inclusive settings for students. Principals need solid grounding regarding Special Education legal requirements as well as the practices that fulfill these requirements. Principals' perceptions of students with disabilities on their campus are another important variable in determining access for students. Research indicates that when principals do not employ a social justice perspective when working with students with disabilities, inadequate modeling and coaching are imparted amongst the teaching staff (Ashby, 2018).

In looking at the components of an Educational Administration (EDAD) university program and the training involved regarding special education law and educational programming for students with disabilities, it is evident that EDAD programs have not satisfactorily met the requirements in preparing principals in this area (DeMatthews & Edwards, 2014). Research indicates that principals must be appropriately prepared and professionally supported before and during their careers as school leaders (DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014). When examining the coursework offered within a EDAD program, DeMatthews, Kotok and Serafini et al. (2020) found that there was a limited focus on special education training that related to inclusive programming for students with disabilities as well as legal guidance regarding basic implementation of individualized education programs.

The findings reported here result from a study of the implementation of a newly revised EDAD program at a California State University. Interviews were conducted with a faculty group who were currently teaching in the program as well as program graduates currently servicing as school principals or educational administrators. The purpose of this study was to determine a new objective for program reform, which focuses on school leadership training in Special Education within the EDAD programs and ensures greater success for school leaders as they work to build inclusive settings for students with disabilities.

Major Findings



Inadequate preparation in special education law and programming

- Understanding Special Education law and programming for students with disabilities via the EDAD program was a major finding within the study. Most principals shared their perspectives on their experience in their EDAD preparation program and stated that they did not feel prepared to lead their school when they faced issues related to Special Education law.
 - Both students and program faculty observed a lack of Special Education coursework within the EDAD program. EDAD program requirements align with state expectations when considering coursework and state credentialing for individuals but do not necessarily provide a comprehensive framework related to Special Education law.
 - Although the program did not provide designated Special Education coursework, students reported that informal conversations and trusting relationships with the program faculty regarding students with disabilities assisted in their personal growth in understanding the skills necessary to build inclusive settings for students.

Policy Recommendations

- Regarding state policy, it is imperative for the California Commission for Teacher Credentialing department to change the requirements for EDAD programs to secure a more direct approach in including special education standards in coursework and fieldwork for EDAD candidates including an additional Special Education law course.
- Secondly, regarding local policy, EDAD university programs in California should be required to complete an exit process for EDAD graduates upon completion of the program to test the base level knowledge of students regarding special education law and programming prior to their entry into a school leadership position.

Major Findings

Continued



Social justice leadership

- The impact of Special Education training on social justice leadership was another critical finding within the study. Equity-focused discussions with peers provided a positive effect to the learning experience for EDAD candidates as well as modeling from faculty as it related to working with individuals with disabilities.
- The lack of explicit focus on Special Education across the program's coursework, however, resulted in the negative effects of marginalization of students with disabilities. Training that directly addressed the requirements of Special Education law and programming was not delivered within the program and was not readily available to participants, which inadvertently encouraged a theme of unimportance to the very laws that protect this marginalized group of students.

Practice Recommendations

- University EDAD programs should change coursework requirements to secure dedicated activities and projects directly addressing special education law and programming to be included as one of the components within the EDAD's Legal Aspects course, which is required by the California Commission for Teacher Credentialing.
- And finally, EDAD programs should include a deliberate focus on addressing the internal perceptions of program candidates as they relate to individuals with disabilities as a social group and how a program revision is necessary to improve services and supports for students with disabilities. Encouraging interested candidates who hold a Special Education credential to enroll in the EDAD program can be critical in improving the rate at which educational administrators have at minimum a base knowledge about special education law and programming.

Major Findings

Continued



Need for EDAD faculty with special education background

There was also a concern about how the EDAD program reflects social justice perspectives considering that not all EDAD faculty members have a background in Special Education. It was recognized by most participants that the EDAD faculty did not have experience or knowledge in the areas related to Special Education and were therefore unable to provide the critical perspective that supported the theoretical framework surrounding individuals with disabilities.

References

- Ashby, C. (2018). Disability studies and inclusive teacher preparation: A socially just path for teacher education. *Research and Practice for Persons with Severe Disabilities*, 37(2), 89-99.
- DeMatthews, D. E. & Edwards, Jr., D. B. (2014). Preparing school leaders for special education: old criticisms and new directions. *School Leadership Review*, 9 (7). Available at: <https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/slr/vol9/iss1/7>.
- DeMatthews, D. E. & Mawhinney, H. (2014). Social justice leadership and inclusion: exploring challenges in an urban district struggling to address inequities. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 50(5), 876-877.
- DeMatthews, D. E., Kotok, S., & Serafini, A. (2020). Leadership Preparation for Special Education and Inclusive Schools: Beliefs and Recommendations from Successful Principals. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, 15(4), 303-329.
- Gándara, P. (2022). Special Education and the Impact to School Principals: A Case Study of the Perceptions of a Principal Preparation Program. (29212698) [Doctoral dissertation, California State University, Long Beach].

Author Bio

Dr. Pamela Gándara is in her 27th year as an educator and is currently assigned as an Educational Administrator within a local public charter district in Orange County California. Holding credentials in both California and Texas, Pamela's prior experience spans across several different positions within various settings. Before her time within the public charter, she worked at two other California public schools, including the Los Angeles County Office of Education. Pamela is an outspoken educational leader that is passionate about training school leaders in the areas of equity and inclusive practices. She received her Ed.D. in Educational Leadership from the California State University, Long Beach and her M.Ed. and her B.I.S. from the University of Texas, El Paso.



Contact Author: Pamela Gándara, Ed.D. – pamgand@gmail.com