

Need for Special Education Courses in Principal Preparation

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the educational instruction of Texas principal preparation programs in the area of special education and the impact on the educational needs of students who have been diagnosed; show signs/symptoms of a psychiatric disorder or who have been identified as special education students. Using qualitative methodology, course offerings of forty-two universities in Texas that offer principal preparation programs or principal certification were reviewed for courses with the desired content as defined by the author and noted. The study found that none of the Texas universities studied provided a curriculum in principal preparation which included detailed study of special education topics, such as: attention deficit, behavioral, emotional, psychiatric, or social disabilities. Due to the increasing numbers of students needing special education assessment and instruction, it behooves preparation programs throughout the state and country to provide the necessary skills to identify and plan the proper curriculum for these students. Federal legislation dictates increased accountability by guaranteeing students with disabilities an appropriate education in a least restrictive environment. Principal preparation programs must therefore recognize the need to provide leaders with the knowledge and skills to identify and serve these students.

The significance of the principal's impact on the academic performance of all students is second only to the teacher's impact (Marzano, 2005). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) expanded the principal's instructional leadership accountability by guaranteeing students with disabilities individualized academic and social education in the least restrictive environment. Consequently, more students with disabilities are educated in the general classroom (United States Department of Education, 2006), requiring principals to spend more time involved in special education related activities than in the past (Lasky & Karge, 2006). Today's schools are challenged with an increase of students who enter school with dissimilar personal histories, economic circumstances, health needs, and educational inadequacies. Numerous students and their families need assistance from their local school, health agencies, and social service providers (Herrity & Glassman, 2010). Consequently, it is important to understand the value of universities educating administrators to be mindful of the distinctive educational, emotional, health, psychological, and social necessities of students and their families (Herrity & Glassman, 2010).

Defining the Problem

Instructional educational leadership is an important foundation of effective schools. Effective school principals set high expectations and standards for the academic, emotional, physical, and social development of all students. A school principal is an educational leader and facilitator for all the programs within the school, including special education (Gersten, Keating, Yovanoff, & Harniss, 2001). There are many mental disorders that can impair the mental health of children and adolescents (Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013). School principals, consequently, have a vital interest in identifying and promoting mental health in their schools. However, principals face an overwhelming collection of difficulties and concerns from

children suffering from stress due to poverty, anxiety or depression, and prescribed psychotropic medication

The school principal's capacity to assist all students is a demanding task. It can become even more daunting if the principal lacks adequate preparation in the area of special education (Goor, Schwenn, & Boyer, 1997). Entry into special education programs by school-aged children is increasing (Crooner, Tochtermann, Garrison-Wade, 2005), consequently, the role and accountability of principals has also increased, particularly in the scope of identifying and accommodating to ensure appropriate special education services (Crooner, et al., 2005). Even though the responsibility of the principal has expanded, no universities in the United States require inclusion of special education courses in programs that certify school principals (Bateman & Bateman, 2001).

The aim of this study was to evaluate the university principal preparation programs in the State of Texas. The information in Table 1 supports the need to train future school administrators in the area of special education, but predominantly, in the area of attention deficit, behavioral, emotional, social and mental health.

Table 1

Number of students in Special Education in Texas Public Schools

Special Education Services	The State of Texas
Orthopedic Impairment	4,277
Auditory Impairment	7,125
Visual Impairment	4,108
Deaf / Blind	208
Intellectual Disability	38,114
Emotional Disturbance	25,663
Learning Disability	167,086
Speech Impairment	89,515
Autism	41,206
Developmental Delay	N/A
Traumatic Brain Injury	1,382
Non-categorical Early Childhood	5,249

Counts less than 5 and greater than 0 are masked with the value "N/A" to comply with FERPA.

Source: Texas Education Agency, (2013). Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS). Data 2012-2013. Retrieved from TEA Website:
<http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/cgi/sas/broker>

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify and ascertain which Texas universities that grant Principal Certification and/or Master's Degrees in Educational Leadership offered a course in the area of child or adolescent psychiatric disorders as part of their standard curriculum. To accomplish this goal, the programs of forty two universities were reviewed and categorized.

Categorization included reviewing the description of the specific courses offered for each university Master's Degree and Principal Certification Program. Only Universities in the State of Texas were analyzed to prevent mixing of differently required criteria that could be mandated by other states' educational agencies.

Literature Review

Stress Due to Poverty

In 2012, the overall poverty rate was 15% in the United States, representing a total of 46.5 million people (United States Census Bureau, 2013). Of these, 13.1% were families and 21.8% (16 million) were children under the age of eighteen (U. S. Census Bureau, 2013). Economic issues increase the risk for psychological distress (Sweeting, West, Young, & Der, 2010) and socio-emotional problems (Chang, Halpern, & Kaufman, 2007). This additional mental tension and stress can also cause parental marital relation problems (Sweeting, et al., 2010), have harmful effects on siblings (Wadsworth & Compas, 2002), influence aggression, family disputes and violence (Evans & English, 2002), which can contribute to family dissolution.

Social interconnection studies indicate that poverty can also play a role in the formation of child and adult psychopathology (Wadsworth & Achenbach, 2005). Additionally, underprivileged adolescents have a stronger possibility of participating in uncertain deviant behaviors, creating critical physical and/or social outcomes such as substance abuse, legal issues, teenage pregnancy (Farrington & Loeber, 2000). Research has found that stress causes similarities between poor socio-economic status and adolescents demonstrating signs of aggression, anxiety, depressive behavior (Wadsworth et al., 2002) and is insidious to their physical health as well (Wadsworth, Raviv, Reinhard, Wolff, De Carlo-Santiago, & Einhorn,

2008). Mothers in the low economic status level are more likely to have complications when giving birth, increasing the health risks for the offspring which may lead to cognitive, neurological, and respiratory problems (Crooks, 1995).

Anxiety/Depression/Aggressive Behavioral Issues

Approximately 5% to 10% of adolescents with psychiatric disorders have problems with daily life's functions (Roberts, Roberts, & Xing, 2007). In an estimated 21% of youngsters in the United States ages 9 to 17 had a symptomatic psychiatric or drug abuse issue (Opler, Sodhi, & Zaveri, 2010). A correlation between preschool-aged conduct issues and behavioral issues in adolescence exists (Bongers, Koot, van der Ende, & Verhulst, 2004). Additional research indicates that certain kinds of early behavioral symptoms place youngsters at greater risk for poor school results later in life (Montague, Enders, Cavendish, & Castro, 2011). Although a large quantity of youngsters are afflicted with mental issues (Office of the Surgeon General [OSG], 2000), 75% of children's psychiatric issues are never identified or treated (Gopalan, Goldstein, Klingenstein, Sicher, Blake, & McKay, 2010). Children with Psychiatric issues affect children academically, and socially, and their thinking processes can be inhibited (Falk & Wehby, 2001).

Anxiety disorders affect 15% to 20% of children, and are a prevailing type of mental distress in youngsters (Beesdo, Knappe, & Pine, 2009). Anxiety is recognized as the most important mental health concern, primarily because it is linked to suicide, abnormal behavior, and misuse of drugs (Costello, Pine, Hammen, March, Plosky & Weissman, 2002), and can be an obstacle in academic performance, including family and societal relationships (Langley, Bergman, McCracken, & Piacentini, 2004). The specific combination of stress and hopelessness can lead to issues in behavior and peer interaction (Connell & Goodman, 2002). This particular

combination is widespread amongst children and adolescents and, if not treated appropriately, can be tragic for the child and the family. Early recognition of problems and effective intervention programs are critical to minimize the potential for mental illness to continue over their life span into adulthood (World Health Organization, 2004).

Children with learning disabilities are susceptible to emotional problems such as anxiety, loneliness, and hopelessness (Lackaye, Margalit, Zir & Ziman, 2006). Having a difficult time adapting to situations or making appropriate decisions may lead to stress in children (Al-Yagon & Mikulincer, 2004). Adolescents who exhibit signs of nervousness, hopelessness, and social withdrawal are frequently grouped as internalizers (Gresham & Kern, 2004). Studies have confirm that internalizers' characteristics negatively impact educational performance, social adjustment and personal happiness throughout schooling but frequently go undetected (Flook, Repetti, & Ullman, 2005), resulting in a lack of qualified and trained psychological assistance for their disorders and accommodations for their education (Merrell & Walker, 2004). Aggressive, disruptive, and violent behavior by students at home or in the school environment has a negative effect on mental health, as well. (Basch, 2011). In a study of 42,000 teenagers, violent behavior in educational settings was characterized as having both internalizing features such as nervousness, unhappiness, and isolation as well as externalizing characteristics evidenced by difficulty with conduct, socialization, and peer intimidation (Youngblade, Theokas, Schulenberg, Curry, Huang, & Novak, 2007).

A principal's understanding of the relationship between disorders and early identification of behavioral, emotional, and learning issues in children can affect the development of that child in their school. Such knowledge is necessary to prevent destructive outcomes in adolescence such as delinquency, violence, substance use, teen pregnancy, and school dropout (Montague, et

al., 2011). Children with emotional and learning disabilities function significantly poorer on intelligence and age related tests (Fletcher, Morris, & Lyon, 2004), than their non-affected peers. Studies suggest that children with learning disabilities are prone to social and emotional trouble (Elksnin & Elksnin, 2004). Consequently, these children may be at higher risk for anxiety and depressive-related disorders when contrasted to their normally developing peers (Gallegos, Langley & Villegas, 2012). Academic success in children with learning disabilities is minimal when combined with poor emotional skills (Semrud-Clikerman, 2004).

The Need for Psychotropic Medication

Psychotropic drugs are medications used to adjust emotional, intellectual, or behavioral performance (Werry, 1993). Even though psychotropic medications do not heal mental illness, they may improve a child's ability to function within society, their family, and at school (Werry, 1993). Psychotropic medications have developed into a progressively prevalent intervention for unacceptable behaviors demonstrated by children and adolescents (Ryan, Reid, & Ellis, 2008). DeBar, Lynch, Powell & Gale (2003), approximate that two to three percent of all children and adolescents are currently being prescribed some kind of psychotropic medication. Medication rates grow significantly (26%) if the student is identified as having a special education disability (Runnheim, Frankenberger, & Hazelkorn, 1996). Medication rates are even higher (52% to 71%) for students who exhibit maladaptive behaviors such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder or a conduct disorder (Safer & Zito, 2000). But, the highest medication rates are for those students who are emotionally disturbed (Conner, Ozbayrak, Harrison, & Melloni, 1998).

Drug treatment is generally the most extensive medical intervention for improving the behavior of children and adolescents with emotional disturbance (Epstein, Singh, Luebke, & Stout, 1991). The increased use of this type of medication is due to the accessibility of new

medications that demonstrate success at changing moods and behavior, as well as to an increased understanding of mental health problems amongst children and adolescents (Thomas, Conrad, Rosemary, & Goodman, 2006).

Researchers have become supporters of a new medical model, which incorporates a behavioral and psychopharmacological component for handling students with emotional disturbances. This design utilizes the child's school, administrators, and special education educators to furnish necessary feedback to the child's physician concerning a medication's effectiveness (Forness, Kavale, Sweeney, & Crenshaw, 1999). This is a valuable and essential process because, although physicians are eventually accountable for checking for medication effectiveness, they do not have the accessibility to the child for several hours in a disciplined and structured classroom environment. Therefore, physicians depend on the feedback that the educators provide to monitor the medication's effectiveness.

A survey of Special education educators of students with emotional disturbances determined that nearly two thirds (63.8%) of those educators were taking part in the pharmacological process by supplying information on a medication's effectiveness to either a parent, school administrator, or the student's physician (Ryan, et al., 2008). Therefore, it is essential that educators to understand that medications prescribed to students with emotional disturbances present both benefits and risks for the child's health. Even if educators support the therapeutic benefits these medications can provide to the child with regard to managing behavior, they also need to be cognizant of the possible adverse physical and behavioral side effects associated with their use (Ryan, Reid, & Ellis, 2008).

Schools' Responsibility for Identification

There is a growing obligation for schools to stay abreast of childhood psychiatric issues identified in the public schools. The United States Department of Education-National Center for Statistical Information (2011) states that 13% of all students age 3-21 years received some type of special education service. Of those 13% identified as needing help, over 54% spend the majority of their school day in the general education classroom. Studies have indicated that many major mental health issues in adulthood began as students at the age of 14 years old (Friedman, 2006).

Between 12% and 22 % of America's youth under the age of 18 are in need of mental health services, but are not being identified in schools as having psychiatric problems (OSG, 2000). Based on the figures from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2013), several children with mental health issues are in every classroom in the United States. If appropriate interventions are not implemented, children in the classrooms, under-perform in academics, peer socialization, and mental stability, and could be a disruption to the entire classroom (Rowe, 2010). Since children rarely seek help when faced with psychiatric issues, their parents, teachers or school administrators are usually the first to recognize the issues and try to find appropriate support (Carlson, 2000). According to Rowe (2010), only one in five children receive treatment that meet, the criteria for mental health assistance. The local school system is obligated to offer support so that students can benefit from their education when a concern is identified (Rowe, 2010), but the local school system may lack sufficient resources, evaluation methods, experience, or intervention training to help solve student's problems (Quin, Gable, Fox, Rutherford, Van Acker, & Conroy, 2001).

School personnel routinely practice “reactive” methods to find students in need of behavioral services, which may take years to notice a problem exists (Walker, Cheny, Stage, & Blum, 2005). Numerous children with learning disabilities are faced with psychosocial difficulties, but detecting some disorders is difficult because the physical symptoms are not as visible as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, or conduct disorders (Dadds, Spence, Holland, Barrett & Laurens, 1997). Professional development support for teachers conducted by trained school administrators for immediate intervention and classroom facilitation will decrease the placement of at-risk learners in special education classes (Hardman, Drew, & Egan, 2002). Attention and collaboration must be strengthened between school administrators, general education educators and special education teachers in identifying and intervening psychiatric and behavioral concerns. This effort may be achieved by incorporating information or suggestions from health-care and mental health professionals in the school district’s professional development training for all stakeholders responsible for the identified student (McReynolds & Garske, 2003). Informing the school community about the prevention or early identification of mental health is for the benefit of all affect children. If mental issues are left untreated, adverse effects can occur, especially if the children are experiencing declining academic performance, low self-esteem, or negative community and family relationships (Bastiaansen, Koot, & Ferdinand, 2005).

The Role of the Administrator

The role and responsibilities associated with today’s principals in the United States have changed (Searby, 2010). Historically, the principal functioned as the school’s disciplinarian and the teachers’ supervisor (Mills, 1974). Now, the principal’s role has changed to include more multifaceted and challenging accountabilities (Brown, 2006). Academic performance,

instruction, personnel, students, public relations, finance, and cultural and strategic planning are important responsibilities and demands of today's effective school leaders. (Cruzeiro & Morgan, 2006). Customarily, the principal was in charge of the general education students, but as part of the evolving responsibility as an instructional leader, he must now supervise special education issues earlier addressed by the school district's special education personnel (Boscardin, 2005).

No Child Left Behind (NCLB, 2002) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) moved the principal's role as instructional leaders to the forefront of public education in the United States. Under NCLB, schools must meet adequate yearly progress (AYP) to obtain federal funding. Adequate yearly progress, an evaluation system centered on student proficiency on standardized assessment performance (Collins, Hawkins, Keramideas, McLaren, Schuester, Slevin, and Spoelker, 2005), focused the principal's job performance on the accomplishment of all students, including students with disabilities. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) increased the principal's instructional leadership accountabilities by ensuring that students with disabilities received individualized academic and/or social education in the least restrictive environment. Consequently, more children with special needs are instructed within the general education classroom environment (U.S. Department of Education, 2006), obligating principals to devote additional time to special education related activities than before, IDEA (Lasky & Karge, 2006).

Special education personnel have opportunities to interact with school administration by taking advantage of processes in programs which help with the instructional delivery in school classrooms (Sheldon, Angell, Stoner, & Roseland, 2010). Teachers and school administrators perform a vital role for students who have mental issues. Due to the amount of time these special needs students spend in school daily, teachers, school administrators, and school employees are

in the appropriate setting to recognize students who display characteristics of mental illness and to present recommendations to school counselors and informing parents (Gallegos et al., 2012). As a result of being knowledgeable of the signs and symptoms of psychiatric disorders, teachers and school personnel can guarantee that students who exhibit these behaviors will receive assistance to accomplish their goals in a learning environment (Rowe, 2010). Timely and effective interventions are essential for students with learning disabilities. Otherwise, they continue experiencing frustration, disappointment, and possible anxiety and depression, along with being at higher risk for academic difficulties in the future (Lackaye, et al., 2006).

To correspond successfully with medical professionals and to clarify how medication influences the learning environment, educators must become knowledgeable about drug treatment (Snider, Busch, & Arrowood, 2003). Unfortunately, new research examining medication information and/or awareness between general education teachers (Snider et al., 2003) and special educators (Ryan, et al., 2008) found that both groups were uninformed concerning the most regularly prescribed psychotropic medications their students were taking. Discoveries from both the Snider, et al. (2003) and Ryan, et al. (2008) studies indicate educators are not receiving acceptable training on medications, despite of almost 93% of these surveyed having expressed an interest in learning more about drug treatment (Ryan et al., 2008). In both studies, nearly half of the educators were waiting for school-district initiated staff development to strengthen their knowledge of medications. The results of these studies magnify the value of principal preparation programs educating administrators in these areas, so they, in turn, may include pharmacological training in professional development sessions to meet the needs of their staff (Ryan et al., 2008).

Method

The researcher compiled a list of all Texas universities and reviewed the universities' websites for the presence of a Master's Degree in Educational Leadership or Principal Certification. If the university had such a program, the researcher noted whether a course was offered that was similar in the desired description to a "study of students with characteristics or signs/symptoms of learning disabilities, attention deficit, and behavioral, emotional, psychiatric or social disorders". Based on the courses offered by each university in their Principal Certification Degree Plan, each course was identified, listed and tallied for documentation of the most frequently offered courses in the degree or certification program. The researcher also made a notation of course titles that suggested inclusion of special education topics or that could fulfill the desired course description as previously mentioned.

Results

Forty-two Master's Degrees in Educational Leadership Programs and Principal Certification Programs were identified, and seven University websites were under construction and/or the links to the desired information did not function properly. Of the forty-two programs, no university proposed a course in which signs/symptoms or characteristics of attentional deficit, behavioral, emotional, psychiatric, or social disabilities were identified, described or explored. The majority of the courses offered by the principal preparation programs were identified as being focused on Assessment, Curriculum, Instruction, and Leading Organizations for Learning, School Improvement, and the Culture of Learning. These recognized courses help develop values and skills needed by administrators to lead, supervise academic instruction, organizational change and school program development for regular education.

The researcher identified three dominant course descriptions as being closely related to the area of special education after reviewing the forty-two identified universities. Three offered courses with similar descriptions were identified as:

Course 1. Special Populations and Special Programs.

Course Description - “Study is made of special programs offered in public schools including special and compensatory education, bilingual and ESL education, adult and continuing education, and vocational and technical education” (Sam Houston State University, 2014).

Course 2. Legal Issues in Special Education.

Course Description - “Special education in a legal context, including regulation through federal and state legislation, judicial decision and administrative process. Authority and legal responsibility of the special educator and the administration of the school district” (West Texas A&M University, 2014).

Course 3. Overcoming Learning Barriers.

Course Description - “Prepares students to investigate institutional forces that inhibit constructive school improvement and explores alternatives including curricular approaches addressing literacy, learning communities, and emotional intelligence” (Abilene Christian University, 2014).

The three course descriptions do not meet the definition established by the author as: a “study of students with characteristics or signs/symptoms of learning disabilities, attention deficit, and behavioral, emotional, psychiatric or social disorders”.

Recommendations

Demands have increased for teachers and administrators to create the best learning environment for all students (Hollenweger, 2011). Teachers are in need of further information and guidance to address specific disabilities (Prpic, Korotaj, Vlastic-Cicvaric, Paucic-Kirincic, Valerjev, & Tomac, 2003) and to enhance their teaching of children with special needs. A failure to meet those needs could impede teachers' significant understanding of the various disabilities children may exhibit and compel them to rely on the information of others less knowledgeable than themselves. Such information is critical to enable teachers to converse and interchange information with other professionals and obtain added information applicable to their work (Hollenweger, 2011).

According to McHatton, Boyer, Sharenessy, & Terry (2010), principal preparation programs, have ineffectively laid the foundations on the responsibility of the instructional leader, especially regarding students with disabilities. Davis (1980) analyzed principals on the subject of the extent of their special education coursework taken throughout their principal preparation programs. He found that 50% of the principals indicated that they received no formal coursework in the areas of disabilities or disorders that affect school-aged children. McHatton, et al., (2010) and Angelle and Bilton (2009) described related issues in 2010. Especially, Angelle and Bilton (2009) found that 53% received no formal special education instruction in the preparation program. McHatton et al. (2010) found that merely 49% received a little special education instruction and not more than 30% received education on the learning characteristics of students with disabilities. Even with the principal's absence of special education training, principals described numerous occasions in which they were involved as the administrator responsible for leading the special education department meetings. Some of their tasks were to appraise special

education teachers annually, attend Annual, Review and Dismissal Process (ARD) meetings, and in many to discuss the best educational approach to help children with disabilities. These tasks also included cases to discipline students that may demonstrate inappropriate behavior due to their disabilities (Lasky & Karge, 2006). Principal preparation programs need to prepare principals with special education information, to make sure that principal's efficiently function as an instructional leader for all students, which preparation programs are not currently doing (Angelle & Bilton, 2009; McHatton et al., 2010). School leaders are required and are mandated by school law to participate as an ARD committee member due to the requirements within the Individual with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004).

Due to national and state regulations, principals' main focus is on continuous growth in the academic performance of all students, on decreasing the knowledge gap between ethnic groups, on increasing high school completion rates, on improving enrollment rates to higher education and in developing workplace readiness among disadvantaged students (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012). As a result of mainstreaming of special education students into the least restrictive environment, justification is made for the value of improving the collaboration of all teachers within the schools. A majority of students with disabilities are presently being instructed in general education classroom by general education teachers who have no experience or training in special education. Consequently, a high need arises to prepare administrators better with the theoretical approaches in the field of disabilities and disorders. Recognizing the functions, concerns, and experience of all professionals within the school will create a better learning environment for all students.

One university in South Texas has developed a course that will be offered to future school administrators as part of their instructional program. Students will explore how research

in the cognitive and neurosciences has the potential to inform the field of educational leadership in the area of special education. This new course will focus on how differences and disabilities in brain development impact the ability to learn. Particular attention will be given to Autism Spectrum Disorder, Specific Learning Disabilities, Attention Deficit Disorder, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, and Psychiatric Disorders that are recognized as emotional disturbances.

Conclusion

As schools encounter and serve a more diverse student population, the debate is no longer whether to make available inclusive education, but how to practice inclusive education in ways that is reasonable and successful in making achievement attainable for all students. Sound educational strategies and collaboration among all the school's educators can create effective, purposeful, planned instruction to assist all diverse students as required for effective learning (Moore, Gilbreath, & Mairuri, 1998). The principal's role as instructional leader is essential to the academic performance of all students, particularly students that have been diagnosed with specific types of disabilities or disorders. Principals, however, are not prepared to supervise special education programs because they are inadequately prepared in the necessary academic information concerning special education policy, and most importantly, the learning characteristics of how these disorders or disabilities affect the student (Lynch, 2012). Based on the findings from this study, it is this author's recommendation that universities develop and deliver principal preparation programs that bring to light the expectations the future educational leaders will be encountering in dealing with students that have psychiatric issues. School administrators are acquainted with facts about certain disabilities and disorders, but often have trouble identifying symptoms in students.

Implications of This Study

The findings from this study provide insight for future principal preparation programs on the need for a course on students with learning and behavioral disabilities. Both findings and recommendations should be of interest to institutions of higher education, school districts, education agencies, and those responsible for developing and creating differentiated instructional strategies. Most important is the need to meet the needs of special education students by better preparing educational leaders to meet their needs.

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