

## Systemic Issues of Administration Regarding Students with Disabilities

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### Abstract

The author conducted a literature review to explore the extent of current themes in educational research relevant to systemic management and administration of schools specifically related to students with disabilities. A single database was accessed using broad search terms to allow for an ample thematic representation. The author asks three questions: a) What are key systemic issues of school administration of students with disabilities reflected in the current literature; b) How are legislation and policy related to students with disabilities being interpreted and applied in States, districts and schools; and c) is there evidence of uniformity in interpreting policies and legislation to students with disabilities among States, districts and schools. An abundance of themes was revealed, yet prominence was evident in the areas of including students with disabilities and academic assessment. This review of literature will provide researchers, practitioners, policy makers and others interested in the schooling of students with disabilities an overview of the major themes involving schooling of students with disabilities addressed in current research.

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**Keywords:** administration; school policy; disabilities; systems management

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### INTRODUCTION

The education of children and adolescents in the United States appears to be in turmoil. Rarely a day goes by when one can open a newspaper, turn on a radio or television, or hear someone speak of the need for reform in public schools. It also appears that the basis for many proposed school reforms take their philosophies and methods from the business world – for example, standardization and pay incentives for productivity with their industrialist heritage. The argument that business-like reforms applied to schools will lead to efficiency, productivity and student success seems reasonable. Large, fiscally successful corporations that emulate these qualities are held in high esteem, and their successes are revered, emulated, recreated, and turned into a religion with zealots, disciples, martyrs and sacred writings. Applying the doctrine of free-market success to public schools requires only a short leap of faith. However, unlike businesses, schools are organized anarchies that possess business-like structures yet have little control over their employees or work processes (Ingersoll, 2003). The loose couplings in school structures (Weick, 1976) extend far beyond the schoolhouse walls to define school structures and operations. Some couplings are stronger than others and have significantly stronger or weaker effects on schools. For instance, the federal government's influence on policy and practice in schools is quite strong through mandates such as the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) (2002) demand for research-based practices to improve educational outcomes. While research-based practices

are required, the loosely coupled relationship between federal, state and local authorizes allows for multiple definitions, interpretations and forms of policy enactment. Anderson and Grinberg (1998) maintain that none of the disciplinary practices in education are inherently more empowering than others, though the interplay of power leads to the manifestation of practices.

Since the enactment of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975), schools have been redefining policy-making and service delivery systems to meet the needs of an increasing population of persons with disabilities. From federal mandate for a free and appropriate education, the movement to include students with disabilities in schools settings with their typical peers continues to gain momentum. The debate over appropriate placement, services, instructional methods, curriculum, assessment, and qualifications of service providers to meet the legislative and moral requirements for inclusion receives strong debate (Kauffman & Hallahan, 2005; Frederickson, Jones & Lang, 2010; Kavale, 2002). Seen by some as another *bandwagon*, others view inclusion as an issue of civil rights. A holistic approach to administering diverse services for diverse populations has not yet taken hold in school systems. As such, separate issues of administration are creating a sub-culture of students within schools in which a student with a disability is treated differently from his or her typical peers, with different expectations for performance and for outcomes. Understanding popular emphasis of those separate

issues in current literature may help researchers, policy-makers and practitioners find common ground for collaborative reform in the administrative practices of schools related to students with disabilities. As such, I conducted this review of current literature to address three questions:

- a) What are key issues of school administration of students with disabilities reflected in current literature?
- b) How are legislation and policy related to students with disabilities being interpreted and applied?
- c) Is there evidence of uniformity in interpreting policies and legislation?

## **METHODS**

I made the decision to search a single database to identify literature on issues of administration regarding students with disabilities published from 2007 through 2011. Although a single database does not provide an exhaustive source of research and discussion on any issue, I believe it to be an appropriate source for identifying current issues and trends. I searched ERIC using the keywords *school policy* and *disabilities*, restricted to peer reviewed articles. During initial review of titles and abstracts, articles were excluded if they did not relate to policy and administration of students with disabilities or were not research based. A second review was conducted of titles and abstracts to determine general topic area of each article. Only one topic was determined for each article. A third review involved a comprehensive examination of each article in which thematic characteristics were determined. Although each article could only possess a single guiding topic, each article could also contain multiple themes within its content.

## **RESULTS**

Twenty themes were identified in the 28 articles reviewed: Inclusion; academic assessment; service delivery; international policy; accountability; curriculum; organizational structure; academic standards; equity; alternative assessment; access; cultural responsiveness; discipline; early identification; enacted policies; infrastructure; law; philosophy and vision; professional conduct; and professional development. Results within major themes are reviewed below.

### **Inclusion and Access**

Challenges to enacting inclusion of students with disabilities with their typical peers include the potential for increased bullying of students with disabilities (Gil & da Costa, 2010; Hoover & Stenhiem, 2005). However, inclusion policy is developing globally to protect the educational privileges of students with disabilities. In a study of the history and status of China's initiative to include students with disabilities with typical peers, Fei

(2007) found progress being made toward social tolerance in schools as a result of policy implementation. However, Johnstone and Chapman (2009) found implementation of inclusion in Lesotho limited, and where inclusion was present, teacher knowledge, skill, and positive attitude were strong predictors of success. They concluded that policy alone did not have the power to transform the education structure of the nation and that successful implementation will require significant infrastructure supports. Urwick and Elliot (2010) examined the effects of inclusive policy shift in Lesotho and reflected on the relevance of an internationally driven orthodoxy of inclusion in an economically disadvantaged nation. They determined that international influence pressured the Lesotho government to transform its education system from one of high exclusion of persons with disabilities to almost immediate inclusion that created an unrealistic path toward inclusion that did more harm than good.

Hardman and Dawson (2008) found students with disabilities being excluded from the general curriculum as a result of legislation and research that indicated lowered expectations. Although most teachers reported being required to attend trainings as a result of legislation, Shealey, Mchatton and Farmer (2009) found fewer reporting positive changes in their instruction or in school supports for the implementation of NCLB mandates. While a large number of teachers supported higher standards for students, they felt that current legislation failed to understand the nature of special education. Similarly, Rude and Whetstone (2008) proclaimed that ethical considerations teachers face on a daily basis are central to effective policy implementation in determining what choices are made about inclusive practices. Matanga and associates (2008) examined problems and opportunities in creating inclusive environments in Canada, finding a need to strengthen home-school partnerships, improve the commitment to teachers' professional development, adoption of a more holistic approach to education, and extending inclusion.

### **Academic & Alternative Assessment**

Drame (2010) found that when students with disabilities were assessed using a static (standardized) measure they did not appear to perform well in either reading or math. He also found that when examining growth scores academic progress of students with disabilities did not differ significantly from typical peers. Additionally, when individual growth was examined, students with disabilities performed significantly better in both reading and math. Towles-Reeves, Kleinhart & Muhomba (2009) found a need for experts in significant cognitive disabilities and academic content domains to establish alignment criteria for students participating in alternate assessments, recommending linking alternate

assessments to Individualized Education Plans (IEP) to reflect standards-based skills. Zigmond and Kloo (2009) also addressed alternate assessment policy, highlighting the challenges States face in determining the target population for alternate assessment and the implications of creating a group of students who struggle yet do not qualify for alternate assessments. Duke's (2011) study of assessment policy and practice resulted in suggestions for school leadership to make sense of policy for staff, develop shared beliefs and actions among staff, and arrange collaborative curriculum planning and co-teaching structures and supports.

Huang and associates (2011) discussed major issues in assessing English language learners (ELL) who are also identified with learning disabilities (LD). They cite lack of accuracy and validity, lack of test and/or item fairness, and the over referral for special education as the major issues of assessment in their target population, and point out that teachers are rarely prepared for the challenges of assessing ELL who also have a learning disability.

Johnson, Stout & Thurlow (2009) found that high-stakes testing and diploma options continue to challenge policy makers and educators to include students with disabilities in state- and district-wide assessment systems. Students who were required to complete exit examinations for graduation experienced the same chances for employment and same wage rates as those who were not required to complete exit examinations.

Cawthon (2007) examined the assessment of students who are deaf or hard of hearing (DHH). She found that State assessment policies are at times at odds with local-level decisions with uneven application of its components. Cawthon (2009) also addressed an element of this breakdown by studying the professional development of teachers of students who are DHH finding that teachers receive greater exposure to topics of assessment in school or district trainings and through peer discussion than from teacher preparation programs.

### **Service Delivery**

Kozleski and Smith (2009) determined through case studies of districts that service system redevelopment may be daunting but possible to achieve, pointing out that systemic change requires systemic thinking across participants. Fei (2007) observed that revision in a national service delivery policy resulted in fundamental changes in people's understanding and viewpoints of disability and highlight the importance of teacher professional development to successful implementation. Palenchar and Boyer (2008) examined systemic implementation of Response to Intervention (RTI), identifying three phases of RTI implementation that involved development of model

schools, indoctrination of faculties, and information dissemination to families.

Daley, Munk and Carlson (2011) observed that Kindergarten children with disabilities from larger and higher poverty districts entering from a different district were less likely to receive supports during the transition period. They also determined that teachers were more likely to provide transition services to children transitioning from within the same school than those coming from another school. Downs and Carlson (2009) also looked at systems of transition service delivery, yet their study involved third-party government services leading to transition from school to work. Their findings suggest that substantial variations exist among the processes of providing transition services that appeared to provide a continuum of services single government structures may not have been able to deliver.

### **Academic Standards, Accountability, and Curriculum**

Examining standards-based reform initiatives and their effect on students with significant cognitive impairments, Browder and associates (2007) found few guidelines for the teaching and assessment of skills linked to grade level content. They cited the absence of a clear conceptual framework as a challenge to linking teaching and assessment with grade level content and indicate that without a framework, schools have been left to determine what instructional content to include. Johnson, Stout and Thurlow (2009) cited another challenge as the need to develop academic standards for students with severe cognitive disabilities within generalized systems of accountability. They indicate that segregation in schools creates a sense of *otherness* that may create prejudicial systems of assessment and accountability. Hardman and Dawson (2008) point out that the IEP process as a system of educational accountability was widely audited as an act of paper compliance rather than as an accountability tool for student success.

Cawthon's (2007) study looked at the hidden benefits and consequences of NCLB policy. She determined that holding all schools accountable to the same standard challenges schools to design and enact structures to ensure student success. Although the bar had been raised for students to achieve, state policies sometimes conflicted with local decision making, creating the appearance of *them and us* practices of enacting policies for accountability. As cited above, Drame (2010) proposed a growth model of assessment as potentially more responsive to the learning needs of students with disabilities and allows students to demonstrate actual growth across time rather than compare standardized scores across annual assessment administrations. McLaughlin & Rhim (2007) detailed standards driven and market driven frameworks of accountability, describing the

two frameworks as potential replacements for a current legalistic model of accountability in special education. While the standards driven model is prescriptive, assuming standardized curriculum, assessment and accountability will motivate schools to improve, the market driven frameworks assume that consumers will hold individual schools accountable when allowed to choose the school their child attends and that this consumer driven accountability will pressure schools to improve.

Gagnon (2010) confirmed that exclusionary schools are operated outside of typical school oversight mechanisms. Almost two thirds of exclusionary schools received little supervision by State Education Agencies regarding curriculum and assessment. Also, since students assigned to exclusionary schools are often transitory and eventually return to their parent schools or elsewhere, not much time was invested by schools in obtaining IEPs, validating prior assessment data, making accommodations to instruction for students with disabilities.

Bouck (2008) found that seven factors contribute to the enactment of a functional curriculum: Policy/legislation, community, school, teachers, paraprofessionals, students and curriculum materials. Hardman & Dawson (2008) looked at larger issues of federal policy's impact on curriculum. Their review of policy and school practice reflects a strong drive to hold schools accountable and prompt curriculum reform to meet the learning goals of all students.

#### **Organizational Structure and Infrastructure**

Kozleski and Smith (2009) found that imposed standards and performance criteria fail to be implemented unless educators participate in constructing and interpreting standards. Downes and Carlon (2009) and Palenchar and Boyer (2008) each looked at elements of state wide systems. The former addressed decentralization of transition services, looking specifically at the organizational structures that appear to have provided flexibility in service delivery. The latter examined West Virginia's implementation of RTI and the structures that support implementation of such initiatives. Cawthon (2007) examined the effects of NCLB on educational structures that serve students who are DHH. She determined that because of usually low enrollment of students who are DHH, these students have little effect on AYP and for this reason, less attention is paid to this population than others. Two articles contained a theme of infrastructure that dealt with charter schools and alternative schools and their unique situations (Drame & Fruttura, 2010; Lehr, Tan & Ysseldyke, 2009).

#### **Equity and Cultural Responsiveness**

Four articles contained themes of equity and cultural responsiveness (Kozleski & Smith, 2009; Matanga,

Freeze, Duchesne, & Myachoti, 2008; McCarthy & Soodak, 2007; McLaughlin, 2010). All four highlight the challenges reforming systems to provide equitable educational services to students with disabilities. While legislation has motivated policy for reform, multiple factors are involved in enacting policy, each with their own expectations and demands. Returning students with disabilities from the margins involves more than official script and relies heavily on the skills of those involved to negotiate, educate, and activate others.

#### **DISCUSSION**

If one looks only at the number of articles addressing a topic, it would appear that inclusion holds the greatest interest in current research, closely followed by assessment of students with disabilities. However, topical writing can include multiple themes. From this premise, I coded a total of twenty-one themes across all articles. Among these themes, the same pattern appears in that inclusion received the most interest, followed again by academic assessment. From a nationalistic viewpoint, this could be construed being manifested by legislation such as NCLB and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 1990). However, inclusion is perhaps *the* civil rights movement of this generation and extends far beyond the bounds of schools and education. It is a movement that has gained global interest, thus appearing in the writings of international scholars. Including students with typical peers in schools requires a paradigm shift (Kuhn, 1962) that relies on an action net (Czarniawska, 2008, p. 19) with enough power to effect meaningful change. Unfortunately, reforms in the realm of education, particularly in the area of civil rights, are initiated through legislation and not spontaneous expression of good will. Legislative initiatives are impositions of power that are played out at all levels in education (Anderson & Grinberg, 1998). The success or failure of implementing legislative policy does not require obeisance, but belief in the intent and efficacy of the policy along with some sense of ownership for decisions about of how the policy is enacted. In loosely coupled systems (Weick, 1976), power is played out such that the system often features lack of coordination and divergent means to achieve similar results. As schools and school systems attempt to implement inclusive policies, they can become confused, overwhelmed, or fail to achieve a balance of power within the organization between policy makers, schools, and communities, as evidenced in Lesotho (Urwick & Elliot, 2010).

Cawthon (2007) states, "The group of students least affected by NCLB are those in regular education settings" (p. 483). Assessing students with disabilities has received significant attention in recent years with the enactment of NCLB. Researchers,

practitioners and policy makers appear to be interested in alternative assessments, accountability through assessment, and participation of in standardized assessments. In each of the studies reviewed, standardized assessment has been assumed with the exception of one that proposed a growth model of assessing students with disabilities (Drame, 2010). The focus on standardized testing for students with disabilities not only exemplifies the squandering of student creativity and talent (TED, 2006), but also appears to have all but silenced the discussion of needs based accommodation and instruction. Combined, the themes of inclusion and academic assessment of students with disabilities play a significant role in how education systems function. Within schools, structures must be developed to support policy directives that account for the academic achievement of students who have traditionally been marginalized. Issues of systems administration involving students with disabilities are shared internationally. Westernization has its influence on developing schools with similar structural characteristics. Globalization (again with a western flair) is spreading educational activism to the most remote corners of the Earth, reshaping education structures for all students, yet particularly so for those with disabilities.

Heck (2006) points out that educational administration is more effected by politics than by the by research to solve disciplinary problems. Yet the reactions to policy throughout systems of education, from highest official to most inexperienced member of a school faculty and the family of the most recently enrolled student enact those policies, shape the delivery of services, and are accountable for outcomes. In almost all the articles reviewed, the hint of individualized implementation is present.

It appears that States retain tremendous power to interpret legislation, enact federal policy, and establish State policies. Rarely were school based initiatives cited, with the exception of articles pertaining to charter schools. Schools rarely have the opportunity to contribute to policy design at the district or state level. However, school level implementation often includes some element of 'professional development' that informs actors of their responsibilities and demonstrates how they are to enact policies. Because the elements of school systems are loosely coupled, any uniformity in enacting policy is achieved only through external oversight. Uniformity of educational policies and standards may appear to be a goal of legislators, however uniformity of systems in education in a nation the size of the U.S. may be impossible. Perhaps this is why Chicago Public Schools attempted a decentralized approach to school reform as described by Bryk, Sebring, Allensworth, Luppescu and Easton (2010). Those structures

retained oversight of policy and existed within the hierarchy of the larger system, but schools were allowed to express their individuality of needs through a cooperative effort of design in implementation, goal setting, and accountability. Uniformity of policy implementation does not appear to be extant in the studies reviewed herein, and may indicate either a divergence in philosophy between power structures, or indicate a lack of consensus among researchers' specific interests.

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