

Developing a Course in a P-12 Educational Leadership Doctoral Program to Support Disability Education

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Abstract

Educational leaders can be the biggest support and resource in schools and districts for special educators who teach students with disabilities in preschool-12th grade settings. Although candidates in preschool-12th grade doctoral leadership programs assume assistant principal, principal, and director positions in public school settings that service students with disabilities, many have not had a single course that prepares them to support this student population. The absence of their pedagogical knowledge on historical context as well as law and policy in special education is particularly concerning as these leaders will be expected to support students with disabilities, their teachers, family members, and support personnel to meet student needs. To address this issue, one instructor developed a university doctoral leadership course covering historical context, law, and policy in special education, and their application to future preschool-12th grade leaders.

Keywords: Educational Leadership, Special Education, Disability Education, Instruction

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Introduction

Educational leaders can be the biggest support and resource in schools and districts for special educators who teach students with disabilities in preschool-12th grade settings (Benz et al., 2000; Brownell et al., 2003; Cobb, 2015; DiPaola et al., 2004; Klinger et al., 2001). Although candidates in preschool-12th grade doctoral leadership programs assume assistant principal, principal, and director positions in public school settings that service students with disabilities, many have not had a single course that prepares them to support this student population. The absence of their pedagogical knowledge on historical context as well as law and policy in special education is particularly concerning as these leaders will be expected to support students with disabilities, their teachers, family members, and support personnel to meet student needs. Roberts and Guerra's (2017) mixed methods study of 84 principals in South Texas located in schools with high Hispanic populations, indicated principals needed more curricular knowledge in the area special education. However, principals also reported they were most in need of special education laws surrounding Individualized Education Plans (IEPs) and Section 504. The second were that principals needed support in was course content to support the implementation of Response to Intervention (RTI) within the school setting.

Likewise, in a more recent study, Sun and Xin (2020) found principals had limited knowledge of special education and thus did not engage in special education in their leadership practice. In addition, their understanding of special education, and their experiences are related to their practice, but their gender, levels of schools they employed are not correlated with their practice. Higher education leadership programs including special education content is encouraged in order to prepare more school leaders to better support teachers and students in special education. To address this issue, one instructor developed a university doctoral leadership course covering historical context, law, and policy in special education, and their application to future preschool-12th grade leaders. The research provides a guide for how one instructor determined relevant topics and issues to discuss in a doctoral course focusing on special education. It also highlights important elements of a special education course in an educational doctoral leadership program.

Determining What to Cover

The challenge to creating a course is determining what might be important to cover. The question posed was what aspects of special education and disability are needed for an educational leadership doctoral program? Using prior research to inform what aspects to address in an educational leadership program was also crucial. The researcher decided to use the following to inform course creation: prior literature on educational leadership, special education doctoral leadership courses, local due process hearings, and course alignment to the doctoral program's goals.

Literature on Educational Leadership

Literature in the area of educational leadership to support individuals with disabilities was reviewed. Literature on educational leadership indicates that principals face many challenges when supporting special education programs. For instance, principals have challenges promoting collaboration when differences exist, establishing a clear vision for inclusive practices, and supporting differentiated instruction (Cobb, 2015). Additionally, principals are concerned with avoiding litigation and teacher attrition (Cobb, 2015). Administrators of

special education programs have complex responsibilities (Gilson & Etscheidt, 2022). One of the responsibilities that were reported to be crucial where administrators were lacking was understanding and overseeing the policies and practices that ensure compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Principals specifically report needing additional skills to support implementing and evaluating programs and systems of support for students with disabilities (DiPaola et al., 2004). Moreover, Crockett et al. (2012) argue that leaders who are highly knowledgeable about special education along with educational administration are better equipped to promote equity for students with disabilities, foster collaborative partnerships among school personnel and families, encourage effective teaching practices, and promote students' learning. Other researchers stressed a need to have leadership programs develop candidates as advocates and promoters of social justice (Frattura, 2006; Pazey & Cole, 2013).

Special Education Doctoral Leadership Courses

Special education doctoral leadership courses were researched to determine what aspects of special education leadership were important to the profession. While programs differed on some aspects covered most programs in special educational leadership were consistent in their focus on disability education, the history of special education, and major laws and policies that govern special education. Covering disability education meant addressing the inclusion and lack of students with disabilities in general education school environments. Thus, disability as a study- termed disability studies - would also need to be addressed since many special education leadership programs have a disability studies lens. For context, disability studies is a field of study that emerged from the civil rights movement. Rather than focusing on individual impairments, it utilizes a social model to understand the world of disabled individuals. This includes understanding the structural and attitudinal barriers that contribute to the ableism of individuals with disabilities.

Local Due Process Hearings

Working with students with disabilities in the P-12 public education setting requires an understanding of basic law and policy pertaining to special education. However, it can be argued that an administrator or leader does not need to know every aspect of special education to support teachers and their students' needs. However, they should know the laws and policies that their districts, schools, teachers, and support staff need to adhere to in order to support students with disabilities and prevent litigation. Given that educational leadership doctoral candidates would only have this one course in special education, it was crucial to determine the most pressing laws and litigation issues to cover. To determine what aspects to cover in law and policy, local due process hearings from the state of California were assessed. The last three years of due process hearings were pulled from California's Office of Administrative Hearings (OAH) and examined to determine the type of issues that were frequently mentioned and resulting in due process litigation. Prominent issues surrounding IEP and student rights violations were found across due process hearing documents. For instance, many hearings challenged whether school districts had broken the law by denying the student with a disability their services as outlined in their IEP. In other instances, the IEP disputes were disagreements with what would be considered the most appropriate placement for the student and changing placements without proper notice. This included disputes over access to general education settings and curriculum.

In terms of student rights violations, districts were frequently accused of not adhering to deadlines set by the state of California. One of the contested violations was whether a student had been unlawfully suspended, while another dealt with the length of time a student could be suspended and whether they were still receiving access to services during the suspension period. Violations of parents' rights consisted of including parents during student decision-making meetings and adhering to parent request for testing and IEP meetings. The findings from review of local due process hearings indicated a need to cover federal mandates that govern the IEP process, such as the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). However, it also pointed to a need to address state level laws and policies to help district and school leaders acquire knowledge about deadlines and timelines related to suspension procedures, as well as student and parent rights.

Alignment With the Goals and Objectives of the Doctoral Program

The doctoral program that this course was being developed for had several competencies for its candidates. It was important that the topics addressed within this new course met these competencies as goals for candidates. First, students needed to be able to demonstrate functional area knowledge. This meant that the student would be able to show advanced literature-based knowledge in functional areas of education and leadership that developed equity in educational opportunities and address social justice issues. This goal aligned well with disability education as inequities within society and the education system that serve to oppress and other individuals with disabilities could be addressed through the history of special education and civil rights issues. The second goal was for students to demonstrate oral and written communication skills, presenting professional systematic and inquiry-based analysis. To support this goal, a research paper and presentation on regarding an issue or phenomenon in special education was required.

The third goal was for students to demonstrate problem-solving skills through advanced reasoning and critical thinking skills to address long-standing barriers to equity and to provide social justice in educational opportunities. This goal was threaded throughout each session of the course. The fourth goal was for candidates to develop leadership skills. To support this, the course needed to focus on building interpersonal skills by learning about conflict resolution and de-escalation of IEP issues. For the last and fifth goal candidates needed to develop ethical personal and professional decision-making to equip candidates with the ability to identify and address equity and social justice issues in their schools.

The Doctoral Course Design

Based on the research considering what to cover, the following main topics were identified: historical context, law and policy, California policy & litigation, evidence-based practices, multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), research in special education, current issues, and research presentations. The session on historical context covered the history of special education, disability rights, and the civil rights movement. The session on law and policy covered federal laws that impacted special education and how those laws are enacted in schools. Session three addressed special education timelines and policies in the state of California. The session also reviewed litigation, due process and due process hearings that have occurred in the region of the doctoral program. The fourth session explained evidence-based practices and ways to identify evidence-based practices for any area of instruction to support the needs of students with disabilities or students in need of additional support in English language arts, math, behavior, and social emotional learning. Session five addressed

RTI and MTSS by teaching candidates about school-wide strategies design to provide layered and ongoing support that meets the needs of all students. The sixth session allowed for candidates to discuss their research topics on an issue or phenomenon in special education that they were interested in knowing more about. In this session, the instructor led discussions about how to write a literature review paper, and alignment across research questions and the methods used to examine them. For session seven, candidates suggested topics based on interest and issues they were experiencing in schools, which was termed the current issues session. Lastly, for the eighth and final session, candidates presented on their research topics.

Conclusion

The success of P-12 students with disabilities is linked to the support they receive from their administrative leaders. Thus, having administrators who are knowledgeable about special education is vital. Individuals who go on to receive doctorates in educational leadership programs should, after extensive years of experience, have basic knowledge of disability issues and concepts related to special education in order to support all students in their schools and districts. Yet, many do not receive such instruction in their doctoral programs or prior educational programs making the need for doctoral programs to create courses that focus on special education imperative. The current work sought to develop a doctoral course that focused on special education and disability issues needed to support special educators and students with disabilities in school settings. This work detailed the process for developing the course. Currently, the course is being taught, providing opportunities for doctoral candidates to reflect on their learning. These reflections are designed to provide insight into what aspects of the course were impactful and best support various leadership positions as well as opportunities to improve the course. This work is ongoing.

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