

Attitudes of Rural School Principals toward Inclusive Practices and Placements for Students with Severe Disabilities

Martha Livingston
Professor of Educational Leadership
Valdosta State University
Office: EDUCATION CENTER, #73
Valdosta, GA 31698-0090
Phone: 229-333-5924
E-mail: mlivings@valdosta.edu

Thomas Reed
Acting Dean and Professor of Special Education
Valdosta State University

J.W. Good
Associate Professor Educational Leadership
Georgia College and State University

Abstract - Principals, as instructional leaders, are instrumental in leading initiatives in special education. In this study, rural principals were, overall, more likely to consider the self-contained classroom to be the most appropriate placement for disabled students. Of these principals, those with personal experience with disabled students were more likely to consider inclusive placements.

Attitudes of Rural School Principals toward Inclusive Practices and Placements for Students with Severe Disabilities

In today's rural schools, principals are expected to work with varied curricula and methods in delivering instructional services to increasingly diverse school populations. Administrative support may be the most influential factor in the effectiveness of any school program. Certainly, the principal's role and attitude toward inclusive practices are keys to the success or failure of inclusion in the individual school (Dyal, Flynt & Bennett-Walker, 1996). The purpose of this study was to examine the attitudes of rural school principals toward the performance of selected school tasks, practices and class placements for students with severe disabilities in the schools of rural south Georgia.

Inclusion for special education students came to the forefront of educational dialogue during the 1980s. The concept continues to be divisive. In just a generation, expectations of principals concerning placement decisions have changed from placements in self-contained classrooms, to resource rooms, to mainstreamed strategies, to full inclusion. Inclusion expectations of the principal are creating a shared vision, involving advocacy groups, facilitating individualized education plans (IEPs), providing assistance with curricula, ensuring appropriate learning opportunities for disabled learners, working with transition services and facilitating the development of staff (Gunsalus & Morgan, 1997). The continuum of services has expanded, creating the need for increased skills, knowledge and understanding. At the same time, principals feel the responsibility of their key roles in inclusive schools (Roach, 1995). Because educating the disabled learner presents a special challenge, change has come slowly in administrative ranks.

An additional consideration is the natural resistance to change. In the change process associated with inclusion, principals face the assumption of new roles. Initially

negative perceptions generally improve with actual administrative experience with inclusive practices (Villa, Thousand, Meyers, & Nevin, 1996). Roach (1995) claimed that well-supported implementation of inclusion overcame most opposition, even when the particular opposition group was composed of school administrators themselves.

As the instructional leaders of their schools, principals have been key players not only in restructuring regular programs, but also in leading special education initiatives for inclusion. Based upon research compiled by Levine and Lezotte (1990), principals must provide effective instructional leadership for student achievement. Support of principals is essential for the success of inclusion in public schools (Hegler, 1995). McLaughlin and Warren (1992) recommended that an emphasis be placed on the role of principals as the instructional leaders for all students in their buildings. Blackman (1993) also recommended a leadership commitment to the reallocation of resources for support of special education placements in regular classrooms.

Effective leaders may differ in their perceptions of appropriate placement for special education students. Fuchs and Fuchs (1994) noted that inclusion meant different things to different people because stakeholders and others continued to want different things from it. School culture, prior professional experience and administrative communication networks all impacted perceived needs. Certainly principals have felt the need to discuss this concept with their faculties to reduce the natural anxiety which accompanies change (National Association of State Boards of Education, 1995).

Principals' perceptions of inclusion and their overall visions of success for all students have been key factors in the shape of implementation plans. Turner and Traxler (1995) noted in their study of principals' perceptions in two Midwestern suburban

districts that most principals had not needed time to warm up to inclusion but had been at least supportive from the beginning of implementation, if not among the faithful. Other principals surveyed in this study noted that their perceptions improved with experience in inclusion.

Positive performance outcomes for special education students may not be all that principals consider in their overall visions of education for all students. Gameros (1995) studied perceptions of inclusion and found that, in providing services for students, principals perceived positive results for special education students in the affective areas of friendships, positive self-concepts, positive attitudes toward school and motivation to achieve academically.

In a study of Alabama principals, Dyal, Flynt, and Bennett-Walker (1996) summarized their findings by stating principals did not favor full inclusion, noting this perception possibly came as a result of principals feeling more at home with the existing service delivery models, namely, special education pullout programs. Additionally, possible resistance to change may be attributed to the mixed messages in research findings and interpretation. For an example, in a study of three research projects conducted in six schools, researchers found that even significant professional and financial investments produced lackluster achievement outcomes (Zigmond, Jenkins, Fuchs, Deno, Fuchs, Baker, Jenkins, & Couthino, 1995).

Overall, initial class placements and the subsequent achievement of special education students are impacted by the instructional leadership of principals. Their leadership in establishing appropriate instructional objectives and implementing the best practices available for staff development will set the stage for positive outcomes and

learning environments consistent with desired results. Not only are schools undergoing significant transformation, the transformation specifically addresses inclusion strategies (Skrtic, Sailor, & Gee, 1996).

Procedures

This study solicited the opinions of public school principals in rural south Georgia. Researchers developed a survey instrument based on a review of major placement strategies and common tasks known to be used in the region. Using this survey, the researchers requested information concerning the experience of the administrator in selected care-giver tasks, the opinion of the administrator regarding who should perform selected tasks for students with severe disabilities, and the administrator's opinions on the appropriate educational placement for disabled learners. Data were gathered in interviews conducted by graduate students at Valdosta State University during the fall of 1997. The principals represented in the study are typically native to the region. Inter-district mobility of principals is limited. The Council for School Performance (Jones, 1997) characterized the schools of the area as primarily serving at-risk students based on 55% of the students representing low socio-economic status (SES) households.

The interview survey, besides collecting the demographic information on each principal, had three major sections. First, principals were asked the frequency with which they had performed specific tasks with students with severe disabilities. These tasks were associated with the adaptive behavior domains and included feeding, changing clothes/diapers, using a communication board, lifting, and helping during a student's

seizure. Respondents chose from the categories of never, less than five, five to ten and greater than ten.

The second section of the interview survey addressed the principals' perceptions of who should perform those specific tasks in a regular classroom. The principals checked those positions they felt should have job responsibilities for performing the tasks of feeding, changing, communicating, lifting, and assisting during a seizure. The positions included a classroom teacher, a special education teacher, a paraprofessional, an occupational/physical/speech and language therapist, and a student.

In the final section of the interview survey, the principals were given five case studies of students with disabilities and asked to indicate which educational placement they perceived as most appropriate. The case studies included descriptions of assistance to students for toileting, clothing changes and administration of medication; a student requiring sign language; assistance to a multi-handicapped student confined to a wheelchair who was also non verbal; assistance to a legally blind student who was confined to a wheelchair and non-verbal; and, assistance to a Downs Syndrome student who was fairly high functioning. The five educational placements were each assigned a value (x), from least to most inclusive, with residential setting being assigned the value (1), special day school (2), self-contained classroom (3), resource room (4), and regular classroom (5). A total inclusion score for each principal was computed by adding the five values the principal assigned to each of the five case studies. The minimum total inclusion score was 5, resulting from the sum of five values of one (1), in which the principal consistently selected a placement of special day school, the most restrictive environment for each case study. The maximum total inclusion score was 25, resulting

from the sum of five values of five (5), in which the principal consistently selected a placement of regular classroom, the least restrictive environment for each case study.

Results

Sixty-eight principals were contacted by graduate students and responded to the interview survey. This number represented approximately 25% of the schools in the geographic area; however, no information is available to indicate how many principals were contacted who did not wish to participate. Men accounted for 52% of the respondents and women for 48%. An administrator profile emerged of principals with an average of 13 years of school administrative experience plus 14 years of teaching experience. The principals supervised an average of 715 students daily, including three to four special education classes housed in their buildings. The highest degree earned by principals in the group was the doctoral degree (13%), with 80% of the principals having earned the specialist degree, and the remaining 7% indicating they held the master degree, which is the minimum degree requirement for certification in the state. This profile of degrees held and of professional experiences for the respondents paralleled that of principals in the state as a whole. Pertaining to formal special education training, over 90% of the principals indicated they had completed one special education course, which is the minimum required in Georgia. A few reported they had taken no formal special education coursework but had taken several staff development units over a number of years. Two indicated they held certification in an area of special education.

The first section of the survey asked the principals to report their experience(s) in performing certain adaptive behavior tasks for students with severe disabilities. Choosing from responses of never, less than 5, 5 to 10 and greater than 10, the principals reported

experience(s) related to six selected tasks. Response items were calculated using ascending values from 1 to 4 for the categories to indicate increased frequency.

Assisting in the feeding of a student was cited as the most frequent task with which principals have experience in working with students with severe disabilities. Experience by principals in the feeding of a student was followed in frequency by assisting when a student was having a seizure and by changing a student who was not toilet trained. Tasks related to communication activities were the most infrequent as indicated by the principals' responses. The means and standard deviations of each of the six specific tasks are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Frequency of Principal Performing Specific Tasks with Students with Severe Disabilities

Type of activity	Experience(s) Frequency Mean	Experience(s) Frequency Standard Deviation
Feeding a student who cannot use a spoon or fork	2.6	1.13
Changing a student who was not toilet trained	1.5	.87
Communicating with a student who was hearing impaired	1.4	.70
Being the person responsible when a student is having a seizure	2.2	1.01
Lifting a student from a wheelchair	2.3	1.02
Using a communication board/device to talk with a student	1.3	.76

Principals were also asked to indicate in the second section of the survey which persons should perform the selected tasks in the regular classroom. Respondents chose from categories including the regular classroom teacher, special education teacher, paraprofessional, various therapists and the student. It was expected by the principals that the paraprofessional (91% of the time) and the special education teacher (84% of the time) perform these tasks. While the classroom teacher was also expected to perform the

tasks (67% of the time), the principal did not expect the therapist (31% of the time) or the student (13% of the time) to be responsible for these tasks very frequently.

The third section of the interview survey was designed to solicit the opinions of the principals relating to the appropriate educational placement for five students with severe disabilities that are fairly typical in school settings. An inclusion score ranging from 5 to 25 was derived based on the principals' self reported opinions. Placement choices included a residential setting, special school, self-contained special education classroom, resource classroom and regular classroom. When asked about the most appropriate educational placement for the five selected case studies, the average inclusion score for the principals was 15.34, which would translate to a self-contained special education classroom placement.

To determine if principals varied in their perceptions of inclusion based on their age, sex, degree or experience with students with disabilities, analysis of variance was computed for each variable. The only significant difference determined was the frequency of experience the principal reported in working with students with disabilities ($F=6.61$, $df=2.64$, $p = .002$). Principals with greater experience in working with students with severe disabilities favored the more inclusionary placements.

For all five case studies presented in Table 2, principals preferred the self-contained classroom as the most appropriate placement, with percentages ranging from 38% to 59%. Of the principals, 37% indicated the student who is blind, wheelchair-bound and non verbal would be best served in a special school. All other case studies favored regular school placements with the self-contained classroom preferred. The only incident of a significant percentage where principals considered resource or regular class

placement was with the hard-of-hearing student. This student would benefit from a resource room placement according to 32% of the principals. In general, from data gathered in all five case studies, principals did not support regular classroom placement. Scores indicated percentages favoring regular classroom placement ranged from 4% to 15%.

Table 2. Principals' Recommended Placements for Five Students with Severe Disabilities

Case Study	Residential Setting	Special School	Self-Contained Classroom	Resource Room	Regular Classroom
Jessica is not toilet trained and is wheel chair bound. She needs medication 3 times a day.	4%	18%	47%	12%	15%
Joseph is non-verbal, but he does use and understand some sign language. While he wears a hearing aid, he is hard-of-hearing.	2%	13%	38%	32%	10%
Elizabeth cannot walk and uses a wheelchair. She cannot communicate verbally, but does share her needs through gestures and a communication board.	3%	16%	43%	21%	12%
James has been diagnosed as being legally blind, uses a wheelchair, and is non-verbal.	3%	37%	41%	12%	4%
Debbie is a student with Downs Syndrome. She has excellent hearing and she can communicate verbally, only she is limited to two- and three-word utterances.	0%	12%	59%	19%	7%

Conclusions

Interestingly, the activity most often serving as a base of experience for principals was the feeding of a student with severe disabilities as opposed to changing,

communicating, lifting or assisting with a seizure. Administrators have the least experience in communication with a student when training is required for the administrator. It appears the experiences rural principals in south Georgia have with students with severe disabilities are similar to those experiences of principals elsewhere. These experiences are typically ones requiring little or no specialized training. Given minimal training, principals may not feel either competent or comfortable with specialized activities or with unfamiliar low-incidence disabilities.

Rural principals surveyed in this study continue to favor the traditional placements of self-contained special education classrooms for students with severe disabilities. The attitudes expressed were similar to those in the 1996 study reported by Dyal, Flynt and Bennett-Walker. When looking at personal services for students with disabilities, principals in this study expected that the paraprofessional or the special education class teacher would attend to such needs as feeding, toileting or working with a communication board. Principals who had experience in working with students with severe disabilities were more likely to consider inclusive placements, a finding consistent with prior research (Roach, 1995; Villa, Thousand, Meyers & Nevin, 1996).

With the emergence of experience as the only significant factor in determining the willingness of principals to consider inclusive placements, the study may provide inferences for Educational Leadership (EDL) preparation programs. Inclusive placements will continue to be a part of the continuum of services for students with severe disabilities and principals will continue to be involved with facilitating educational programs and curricula as well as ensuring appropriate learning opportunities for all students (Gunsalus & Morgan, 1997). EDL coursework, practica or staff development activities may be

needed to prepare prospective educational leaders to effectively address the educational needs of students with severe disabilities.

Finally, the best principals enjoy and value every student for whom they bear responsibility and they continually seek appropriate programs for their schools. A rapidly growing “track record” indicates that inclusion will continue to be a viable strategy for educating students with severe disabilities (Rogers,1993). It is important for principals to be prepared and equipped to recommend all services within the special education continuum. As experience with students with severe disabilities increases, principals will be more likely to support, and even lead, restructuring efforts that favor inclusion.

References

- Blackman, H.P. (1993). An administrator's perspective. *Exceptional Parent*, 23 (7), 22-24.
- Dyal, A., Flynt, S. W., & Bennett-Walker (1996). Schools and inclusion: Principal's perceptions. *Clearing House*, 70 (2), 32-35.
- Fuchs, D. & Fuchs, L.S. (1994). Inclusive schools movement and the radicalization of special educational reform. *Exceptional Children*, 60, 294-309.
- Gameros, P. (1995). The visionary principal and inclusion of students with disabilities. *NASSP Bulletin*, 79 (568), 15-17.
- Gunsalus, C.C. & Morgan, R.L. (1997, October). *Best practices for inclusive schools*. Paper presented at the National Rural Education Association, 89th Annual Convention, The Many Faces of Rural Education, Tucson, AZ.
- Hegler, K.L. (1995, April). *The "what, why, how and if" of inclusion processes in rural schools: Supporting teachers during attitude and teaching behavior change*. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Council for Exceptional Children, Indianapolis, IN.
- Jones, J. (1997, February). *School improvement and statewide school report cards*. Paper presented at the Regional Education Service Agency / Valdosta State University School Improvement Seminar, Waycross, Georgia.
- Levine, D.U. & Lezotte, L.W. (1990). *Unusually effective schools: A review and analysis of research and practice*. Madison, WI: National Center for Effective Schools Research & Development.
- McLaughlin, M.J. & Warren, S.H. (1992). *Issues and options: In restructuring schools and special education programs*. College Park: University of Maryland, Center for Policy Options in Special Education and Westat, Inc.
- National Association of State Boards of Education (1995). Winning ways for inclusive schools. *The Education Digest*, 61 (4), 28-30.
- Roach, V. (1995). Supporting inclusion: Beyond the rhetoric. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 77, 295-299.
- Rogers, J. (1993). The inclusion revolution. *Research Bulletin*, 11, 1-6.

Skrtic, T.M., Sailor, W. & Gee, K. (1996). Voice collaboration and inclusion: Democratic themes in educational and social reform initiatives. *Remedial and Special Education, 17*, 142-157.

Turner, N.D. & L Traxler, M. (1995, April). *Observations of parents, teachers, and principals during the first year of implementation of inclusion in two midwestern school districts*. Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Council for Exceptional Children, Indianapolis, IN.

Villa, R., Thousand, J. S., Meyers, H. & Nevin, A. (1996). Teacher and administrator perceptions of heterogeneous education. *Exceptional Children, 63*, 29-45.

Zigmond, N., Jenkins, J., Fuchs, L. S., Deno, S., Fuchs, D., Baker, J. N., Jenkins, L., & Couthino, M. (1995). Special education in restructured schools: Findings from three multi-year studies. *Phi Delta Kappan, 76*, 531-540.

All material within the *Journal of Research for Educational Leaders*, unless otherwise noted, may be distributed freely for educational purposes. If you do redistribute any of this material, it must retain this copyright notice and you must use appropriate citation, including the URL. HTML and design by JREL, ©2001.

COPYRIGHT AND CITATION INFORMATION FOR THIS ARTICLE

This article may be reproduced and distributed for educational purposes if the following attribution is made under the title and author's name:

Note: This article was originally published in the Journal of Research for Educational Leaders (<http://www.uiowa.edu/~jrel>) as: "Attitudes of Rural School Principals toward Inclusive Practices and Placements for Students with Severe Disabilities" - Martha Livingston, Thomas Reed, and J.W. Good, Fall 2001. Available online at [http://\(URL\)](http://(URL)). The article is reprinted here with permission of the publisher.