

An Administrator's Philosophy: Impacting Inclusion in Newfoundland's Secondary Schools

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Research Rationale

Successful inclusion depends on “the support and efforts of multiple staff, including administrators [and] general education teachers” (Carter & Hughes, 2006, p. 175). Harpell and Andrews (2010) posited how administrators who are able to empower educators to implement new and differentiated instructional methods can “overcome the challenges of inclusive education” (p. 203). To be more specific, the personal values of administrators regarding special education and students with disabilities have a significant impact on their ability to provide effective leadership to special education (DeClue, 1990; Jacobs, Tonnsen, & Baker, 2004; Van Horn, Burrello, & DeClue, 1992). Administrators have frequently indicated that “they do not feel adequately prepared in some areas related to the inclusion of students with disabilities” (Voltz & Collins, 2010, p. 71), and preparatory programs have been dominated by assumptions resulting in “narrowly focused but insufficient preparation” of administrators (Boscardin, Mainzer, & Kealy, 2001, p. 72). While there has been a considerable increase in the number of students with disabilities participating in the regular classroom, Sharma, Forlin, and Loreman (2008) cautioned that this should not mean that general educators are fully embracing inclusion. Valeo (2008) demonstrated that many administrators seem unaware of the type of support educators need and when administrators considered themselves supportive, teachers felt unsupported. These findings

demonstrate that there is a “need for further research” (Valeo, 2008, p. 16).

Research Question

Prather-Jones (2011) highlighted how special education research often neglects to describe what ‘administrative support’ means, and that data is often based on surveys, creating difficulties when attempting to examine the participants’ viewpoints regarding administrative support. Researchers who investigate the philosophical basis of special education frequently encounter difficulties because there is very little research that is philosophically rigorous (Aspin, 1982), a statement that remains true today. While the literature frequently quantifies the types of attitudes administrators hold regarding inclusion, there needs to be a more in-depth exploration of *why* administrators have these beliefs, *how* they were developed, *what* their impact is on the beliefs and attitudes of their special and general education staff, and ultimately, *how* these attitudes affect the delivery of inclusion. Therefore, my doctoral research question is “What is the impact of an administrator’s philosophy of education in regards to implementing a successful inclusion program within schools in Newfoundland and Labrador?” In order to answer this, I will examine how: (1) administrators impact inclusion; (2) administrators can become better prepared for supporting inclusion; (3) administrators’ philosophical perspectives impact inclusion; and (4) we can integrate a progressive philosophy of education into our current educational system. In doing so, I will give the stakeholders who are directly involved with teaching our students within an inclusive environment a voice, and reveal how an administrator’s educational beliefs and philosophies impact inclusion.

Conceptual Framework

Integrating philosophy into research. Hirst (1974) suggested that since the educational system is premised on values, educational philosophy should be concerned with “determining the value judgments about what ought to be aimed at in education” (p. 52). More recently, Carr (2004) asserted how western societies currently perpetuate and maintain two separate perspectives. On one side is a diverse group of policymakers, teachers, politicians and consultants who are responsible for making educational decisions, yet lack a “systematic reflection on the fundamental philosophical standpoint that informs their decisions” (p. 57), while the opposing side is comprised of an academic community of educational philosophers who discuss and examine these issues within a context of rational enquiry. The role of philosophy in education is not often considered and used to clarify and criticize educational theories (Carr, 2004; Hirst, 1974; Peters, 1966). In addition, professional development often “encourage[s] teachers to improve what they are doing so as to better attain the goals set for them by bureaucratic ‘experts,’ rather than to challenge the underlying assumptions of their work and their environments” (Valeo, 2008, p. 216).

John Dewey. Dewey (1980) described the role of philosophy as an “attempt to comprehend... to gather together the varied details of the world and of life into a single inclusive whole” (p. 334). Dewey explains that on the “side of the attitude of the philosopher... there is the endeavor to attain as unified, consistent, and complete an outlook upon experience as possible” (p. 334), and that when philosophy is taken seriously, it signifies “achieving a wisdom which would influence the conduct

of life” (p. 334). Because inclusion relies on a unification between all stakeholders, it is important to have a unified approach, beginning with the philosophy of education each stakeholder develops and maintains regarding inclusion and how to teach students with disabilities. Unfortunately, these educational philosophies are frequently inconsistent between administrators and teachers. By examining this phenomenon within a Deweyan philosophical framework, these inconsistencies will become more evident, and as such, can be discussed and examined in greater detail.

Hickman (2006) argued that in order to unify these separate perspectives, we need to reintroduce Dewey’s philosophy into the current educational theory discussion. Thomas (2007) highlighted Dewey’s belief that the type of philosophy and theories educators use to solve problems need to be different than what the current research trends have offered. According to Biesta (2006), Dewey saw education as a “process of communication” (p. 33), and as a result, Biesta described Dewey’s philosophy of education as “not a child-centered approach but a thoroughly communication-centered philosophy” (p. 33). Kesson and Henderson (2010) asserted that school is often “characterized by top-down policy making and rigid supervision hierarchies, [and] a discourse of accountability focussed on a narrow, testable range of outcomes” (p. 216); however, the focus should be on preparing students for “life in a democratic society” (p. 214).

John Dewey (1976) explained how the curricula is “inherited from a period when learning and command of certain symbols... were all-important” (p. 17), and cautioned how the “ideals of this period are still largely in control, even where the

outward methods have changed” (p. 17). Consequently, as “civilization advances, the gap between the capacities of the young and the concerns of adults widens” (Dewey, 1980, p. 11), creating a “standing danger that the material of formal instruction will be merely the subject matter of the schools, isolated from the subject matter of life-experience” (p. 11). Dewey questioned why, “in spite of the fact that teaching by pouring in, learning by a passive absorption, are universally condemned, that they are still so entrenched in practice? That education is not an affair of ‘telling’ and being told, but an active and constructive process” (p. 43). Dewey advocated progressive education because of “its reliance upon and use of humane methods and its kinship with democracy” (Dewey, 1980, p. 18). While traditional education is a “matter of routine” (Dewey, 1980, p. 13), educators should not perceive progressive education as a “matter of planless improvisation” (p. 13). Progressive education creates diverse and organic connections “between education and personal experience” (p. 11), thereby ensuring students have the opportunity to “escape from the limitations of the social group” (Dewey, 1980, p. 25) into which they were born.

Contribution to Knowledge

Carr (2004) suggested that by exposing and re-examining the taken-for-granted in educational practice, we restructure and unify educational practice and philosophy. However, education “still eludes philosophers, politicians and everyone else” (Baldacchino, 2008, p. 152), and when governments try to define education, this results in “absolute failure for teachers and moreso for learners” (p. 152). In addition, individuals in the “university need to recognize how we, including Dewey, have never succeeded in making a convincing case for humane

curriculum to the public, or to school practitioners, policymakers, or even within the research community” (Page, 2006, *ibid*). My proposed doctoral research will articulate how an administrator’s philosophy affects inclusion, and will illustrate how integrating Dewey’s philosophical principles at the policy level can contribute to a more successful inclusive learning environment.

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