High School Administrators and Inclusion: A Review of the Literature

Lisa Weber and Gabrielle Young
Memorial University of Newfoundland

Successfully implementing inclusion at the high school level is considerably different in elementary and intermediate levels (Carpenter & Dyal, 2007; Scanlon & Baker, 2012). Secondary inclusion poses unique challenges such as a rigorous and fast-paced curriculum, high stakes testing, and students with poor study skills (Casale-Giannola, 2012; Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2001; McKenna, Muething, Flower, Pedrotty, & Bryant, 2015). As a result, high school students with learning exceptionalities continue to struggle (Sabornie & deBettencourt, 2009), educators and administrators are often unprepared for these unique challenges to inclusion (Dieker, 2007), and research guiding high school faculty is rare (Byrnes, 2008). The authors conducted a review of the North American high school inclusion literature, located 28 articles, summarized the findings, and have suggested recommendations for future research in this often overlooked area of inclusion. This paper presents and discusses four articles that were found to pertain to high school administrators.

Locating Articles/Methodology

The authors first conducted an ERIC database search using key terms such as *high school, secondary, inclusion, administrator,* and *principal,* refining their search to English language journal articles published between January 2010 and December 2015. This time frame was selected in order to ensure that only the latest research was considered, as older articles may reflect earlier (and

possibly less relevant) stages of inclusion research and implementation.

After a general literature search, the authors applied the pearl harvesting method (Schlosser, Wendt, Bhavnani, & Naila, 2006; White, 1994) to locate additional journal articles pertaining to high school administrators and inclusion. The premise of this method is to use multiple articles (pearls) as a starting point from which to locate additional articles. From each of the journal article's reference list, the authors generated a list of journals cited in each article, then each journal was manually searched for additional articles. In total, 44 journals were manually searched, including *American Secondary Education*, *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy*, and *Teaching Exceptional Children*. To maintain the focus of this literature review, only journal articles that discussed the inclusion of students with disabilities were selected. Journal articles that discussed specific inclusion techniques (i.e., co-teaching), other streams of inclusion challenges (i.e., gender identification, race, and socio-economic status), and studies that focussed exclusively on perspectives other than administrators and educators were considered beyond the scope of this literature review. Upon completion of the manual search, a total of 34 high school inclusion articles were located, with only five specific to high school administrators. Because educational systems differ from continent to continent, only the four situated in North America served as the basis of this literature review examining high school administrators.

Cooper and Levin (2010)

This Canadian-based study was conducted in conjunction with the Canadian Education Association's efforts to improve secondary education. The purpose was to investigate how high school leaders in 11 school districts, and approximately 100

schools, encountered and used research to inform their administrative duties. From their 188 participants, Cooper and Levin (2010) noted that over 80% of participants either agreed (51%), or strongly agreed (34%), that "the important role of research was evident in the ways their district related research to practice" (p. 59). However, only 37% of participants responded that research was included on their district's website, while 33% were unsure. The respondents also indicated that while research is most frequently used and discussed during professional development (PD) events, they considered PD a "less important source of information in influencing their knowledge about education issues than personal experience and colleagues or professional networks" (p. 60). The authors also highlighted how a "growing dimension of evidence use in education involves the use of students achievement data of various kinds to guide policy and practice" (p. 60). In their conclusion, Cooper and Levin asserted that "while districts have support for research-related activities available" (p. 61), many are not involved, and as such, activity "still depends heavily on a few interested people rather than being deeply embedded in daily practices" (p. 61).

Nierengarten (2013)

Nierengarten (2013) asserted that there is a need for a "systemic approach to improve student achievement" (p. 74), and discussed how special and general educators are frequently members of a collaborative team. Based on Cook and Friend's (1995) definition of co-teaching as "two or more professionals delivering substantive instruction to a diverse, or blended, group of students in a single physical space" (p. 2), Nierengarten asserted that co-teaching "is not just a service delivery option for students with special needs" (p. 74), but can provide "all students with instructional advantages" (p. 74). From her own case study

research conducted in 2008 and from a synthesis of the literature, Nierengarten posited how administrators can "do a great deal to pave the way for successful co-teaching experiences" (p. 74), and presented twenty ways high school administrators can support successful co-teaching teams.

The first section entitled *Before Co-Teaching* outlines seven recommendations, including allowing teachers to select their co-teaching partner and ensuring appropriate teacher-to-student ratios. In the section entitled *During Co-Teaching*, nine support strategies are suggested, including the provision of common planning time and encouraging co-teaching observation. Finally, in the *After Co-Teaching* section, administrator responsibilities such as providing ongoing PD and maintaining co-teaching teams are summarized. Nierengarten concluded her synthesis by asserting how co-teaching "requires careful planning and attention, and to neglect these strong recommendations would diminish the effectiveness of a promising practice" (p. 82). It is important to note that while the intended audience of this article is high school administrators, the author does not specify that only high school administrators were included in her synthesis. Therefore, we need to assume that the suggestions are based on an assimilation of data gathered from all educational levels (elementary, intermediate, and secondary).

Nierengarten and Hughes (2010)

According to Nierengarten and Hughes (2010), administrators "often assume that co-teaching is simply placing two teachers in the same classroom while hoping this new relationship works well for themselves and the students" (p. 1). They also stated how the "complexity of relationships, curriculum, and high school structure, among other factors, can be barriers to a successful co-teaching experience" (p.1). Based upon the responses of their high

school co-teaching teams, the authors recommended eight successful co-teaching practices administrators are encouraged to incorporate into their skill set. This study was conducted at a high school with approximately 1190 students in Minnesota, United States. Each teacher participated in two 60-minute individual interviews and three 90-minute focus group interviews. Most notably, in the article's discussion section, the authors highlighted how the "administration's role in the success of co-teaching is significant and essential" (p. 10), and how administrative support "remained the strongest concern stated by all of the teams throughout the entire co-teaching experience" (p. 10). The remainder of the article outlined practical ways administrators could support co-teaching teams, such as observing co-teaching teams and providing them with feedback.

Zimmerman (2011)

Zimmerman (2011) asserted how it is critical for administrators to "determine their own readiness for change before undertaking the complex process of changing schools" (p. 107), and suggested that "principals who expect teachers to take risks in learning and practicing new behaviors should demonstrate their openness to change" (p. 107). The author asserted how it is critical for administrators to "determine their own readiness for change before undertaking the complex process of changing schools" (p. 107), and discussed a variety of strategies that administrators can implement in order to demonstrate their willingness to change. For example, by using acronyms such as "COACH" (Blanchard & Shula, 2001), or "LEADERS" (Chopra, 2010), administrators can determine their current level of effective qualities and behaviours, as well as identify unproductive behaviours that can have a negative impact on their own personal beliefs, values, and preferences (Jones, 2004). In order to overcome these pitfalls, the author

encouraged administrators to reflect on the presented strategies and to complete some free and low-cost assessment tools that are available on the Internet.

Implications for Further Research

In reviewing the literature, and selecting these articles, it quickly becomes apparent that there are several gaps that need to be addressed by further research. First, with only four articles meeting the criteria for this literature review, research focussing on high school administrators is lacking. The literature is replete with articles demonstrating how administrators are central figures in establishing the expectations and tone of a school's approach to equity, curriculum, and inclusion (Bays, 2004; Boscardin, 2004; Crockett, 2004; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Harpell & Andrews, 2010; Praisner, 2003; Price, 2012; Ross & Berger, 2009; Valeo, 2008; Wong & Nicotera, 2007). However, while some of the issues and challenges overlap between elementary, intermediate, and secondary administrators, we cannot generalize the research from one setting to another because the secondary level has its own unique set of challenges (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2001).

Second, we can conclude that high school administrators have a limited voice in the literature, resulting in high school administrators frequently being presented with strategies and recommendations based on *all* levels of administrators, or on the perspectives of participants who are *not* high school administrators. According to Crockett (2002), what schools "really require are responsive leaders - knowledgeable persons in positions of influence who are committed to ensuring context that supports learning for each and every student" (p. 157). Administrators need to interpret education policy (Furney, Aiken, Hasazi, & Clark/Keefe, 2005), identify effective strategies (Albus, Thurlow, &

Clapper, 2006), and interpret research as they oversee inclusive learning environments (Cobb, 2015). This is difficult to achieve when most of the inclusion research has been conducted at the elementary level (Thurlow, 2001; Cole, Waldron, & Madj, 2004).

Finally, there is a notable absence of research literature surrounding the beliefs and attitudes of high school administrators regarding inclusion. This research is important because administrators who "genuinely believe that the school's mission is achieving academic success for all communicate this value" to everyone involved (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003, p. 6), and administrators' "thoughts and actions shape the culture of their organizations" (Sparks, 2007). Significant change in an organization begins with significant change in what leaders think, say, and do" (p. 3). As high schools have different barriers to inclusion, it is imperative to include the beliefs and perspectives of high school administrators in order to make the research relevant and meaningful to this population. While previous research can offer some insight and possible knowledge that may be beneficial for secondary level administrators, because of the unique challenges high school administrators face, research at this level is not only required but necessary.

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 high school 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.

References

Aspen, D. N. (1982). Towards a concept of human being as a basis for a philosophy of special education. *Educational Review*, *34*, 113-123.

Albus, D., Thurlow, M., & Clapper, A. (2006). State-level standards-based instructional strategies for ELLs with disabilities. *Journal of Special Education Leadership*, *19*, 11-18.

Bays, D. A. (2004). Science in the schoolhouse: The critical roles of the school leader. Journal of Learning Disabilities, 37, 256-261.

Blanchard, K., & Shula, D. (2001). *The little book of coaching: Motivating people to be winners*. New York, NY: Harper.

Boscardin, M. L. (2004). Transforming administration to support science in the schoolhouse for students with disabilities. Journal of Learning Disabilities 37, 263-269.

Byrnes, M. A. (2008). Educators' interpretations of ambiguous accommodations. Remedial and Special Education 29, 306-315.

Carpenter, L. B., & Dyal, A. (2007). Secondary inclusion: Strategies for implementing the consultative teacher model. Education 127, 344-350.

Casale-Giannola, D. (2012). Comparing inclusion in the secondary vocational and academic classrooms: Strengths, needs, and recommendations. American Secondary Education, 40:2, 26-42.

Chopra, D. (2010). *The soul of leadership: Unlocking your potential for greatness.* New York, NY: Harmony Books.

Cobb, C. (2015). Principals play many parts: A review of the research on school principals as special education leaders 2001-2011. International Journal of Inclusive Education 19, 213-234. DOI: 10.1080/13603116.2014.916354

Cole, C.M., N. Waldron, & M. Majd. (2004) Academic progress of students across inclusive and traditional settings. Mental Retardation 42:2, pp. 136-144.

Cook, L., & Friend, M. (1995). Co-teaching: Guidelines for creating effective practices. Focus on Exceptional Children 28:3, 1-16.

Cooper, A., & Levin, B. (2010). Using research in secondary schools: Education leaders respond. Education Canada 50:4, 58-62.

Crockett, J. (2002). Special education's role in preparing responsive leaders for inclusive schools. Remedial and Special Education 23, 157-168.

Crockett, J. (2004). Taking stock of science in the schoolhouse: Four ideas to foster effective instruction. Journal of Learning Disabilities 37, 189-199.

Dieker, L. (2007). *Demystifying secondary inclusion: Powerful school-wide & classroom strategies.* Port Chester, NY: Dude Publishing.

DiPaola, M., & Walther-Thomas, C. (2003). *Principals and special education: The critical role of school leaders* (COPPSE Document No. IB-7). Gainesville, FL: University of Florida, Center on Personnel Studies in Special Education.

Furney, K. S., Aiken, J., Hasazi, S., & Clark/Keefe, K. (2005). Meeting the needs of all students: Contributions of effective school leaders. Journal of School Leadership 15, 546-570.

Harpell, J. V., & Andrews, J. J. W. (2010). Administrative leadership in the age of inclusion: Promoting best practices and teacher empowerment. The Journal of Education Thought 44, 189-210.

Jones, G. R. (2004). *Organizational theory, design, and change* (4th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Mastropieri, M. A., & Scruggs, T. E. (2001). Promoting inclusion in secondary classrooms. Learning Disabilities Quarterly 24, 265-274.

McKenna, J. W., Muething, C., Flower, A., Pedrotty, B., & Bryant, B. (2015). Use and relationships among effective practices in co-taught inclusive high school classrooms. International Journal of Inclusive Education 19:1, 53-70. DOI: 10.1080/13603116.2014.906665

Nierengarten, G. (2013). Supporting co-teaching teams in high schools: Twenty research-based practices. American Secondary Education 42:1, 73-83.

Nierengarten, G., & Hughes, T. (2010). What teachers wish administrators knew about co-teaching in high schools. Electronic Journal for Inclusive Education 2:6, Art. 9, 1-20.

Praisner, C. L. (2003). Attitudes of elementary school principals toward the inclusion of students with disabilities. Exceptional Children 69, 135-145.

Prather-Jones, B. (2011). How school administrators influence the retention of teachers of students with emotional and behavioural disorders. The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues, and Ideas, 84:1, 1-8.

Price, H. E. (2015). Principals' social interactions with teachers. *Journal of Educational Administration, 53*(1), 116-139. DOI: 10.1108/JEA-02-2014-0023

Ross, J. A., & Berger, M. (2009). Equity and leadership: Research-based strategies for school leaders. *School Leadership and Management, 29,* 463-476.

Sabornie, E. J., & deBettencourt, L. U. (2009). *Teaching students with mild and high incidence disabilities at the secondary level* (3rd ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.

Scanlon, D., & Baker, D. (2012). An accommodations model for the secondary inclusive classroom. *Learning Disability Quarterly, 35,* 212-224. DOI: 10.1177/0731948712451261

Schlosser, R. W., Wendt, O., Bhavnani, S., & Naila, C. B. (2006). Use of information seeking strategies for developing systematic reviews and engaging in evidence based practice: The application of traditional and comprehensive pearl growing. A review. *International Journal of Language and Communication Disorders, 41,* 567-82.

Sparks, D. (2007). Changing organizations begins with changing ourselves. *Edge, 3*(1), 1-18.

Thurlow, M. (2001). Use of accommodations in state assessments: What databases tell us about differential levels of use and how to document the use of accommodations (Technical Report 30). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, National Center on Educational Outcomes.

Valeo, A. (2008). Inclusive education support systems: Teacher and administrative views. *International Journal of Special Education, 23*(2), 8-16.

White, H. D. (1994). Scientific communication and literature retrieval. In H. Cooper, & L. V. Hedges (Eds.), *The handbook of research synthesis* (pp. 41-55). New York, NY: Russell Sage Foundation.

Wong, K. K., & Nicotera, A. (2007). *Successful schools and educational accountability.* New York, NY: Pearson Education.

Zimmerman, J. A. (2011). Principals preparing for change: The importance of reflection and professional learning. *American Secondary Education, 39*(2), 107-114.

Lisa Weber is a Ph.D. student in Education at Memorial University of Newfoundland and Labrador. Her research interests include administrative leadership, inclusion, special education, and issues in educational philosophy. She can be reached at lisa.weber@mun.ca.

Gabrielle Young, Ph.D., is an Assistant Professor at Memorial University of Newfoundland, where she teaches courses in the area of Special Education. Her research interests surround the use of assistive and instructional technology in inclusive classrooms, applying the principles of universal design and differentiated

instruction to support students with exceptionalities in the general education classroom, and pre-service teachers' efficacy to support students in inclusive classrooms and facilitate positive mental health. She can be reached at gabrielle.young@mun.ca