Preparing School Leaders to Effectively Support Special Education Programs: Using Modules in Educational Leadership

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THE IRIS CENTER
FOR TRAINING ENHANCEMENTS

The (IDEA and Research for Inclusive Settings) IRIS Center for Faculty Enhancement is supported by the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education Programs and housed at Vanderbilt University Center. Their experienced staff have created a variety of interactive modules that focus on special education and teaching exceptional students. As a result of a national search implementation sites were selected from a request for proposals and a site visit. The sites consist of a multi-disciplinary team within each College of Education. This includes representatives from Educational Leadership, Special Education, Teacher Preparation, Curriculum & Instruction, and School Counseling. The authors of this paper represent educational leadership faculty from three institutions selected as IRIS Implementation Sites.

Representatives from each of the educational leadership programs met to discuss ways to incorporate the IRIS modules into administrator preparation courses. Relevance to the ISLLC and individual state standards was also addressed. The courses in which the modules were used included: *Educational Leadership and Organizational Theory*, *Principalship*, and *Administration of Special Instructional Programs*. Some of the modules incorporated into these courses included: *Accountability: High Stakes Testing for Students with Disabilities*; *Supporting Beginning Special Education Teachers*, and *Addressing the Revolving Door: How to Retain Your Special Education Teachers*.

Literature Review

Traditional literature regarding the role of the principal in special education is often limited to legal issues (Osborne, 1998; Smith & Colon, 1998; Patterson, Marshall, & Bowling, 2000) and inclusive practices (Mayrowetz & Weinstein, 1999; Crockett, 2002; Salisbury & McGregor, 2002; Praisner, 2003). The importance of legal guidelines in special education cases and inclusion of exceptional students in general education classrooms is not being questioned. Rather, the authors seek to extend the research surrounding the principal's role in supporting and retaining special education teachers (Billingsley, 2004, Billingsley, 2005, Duffy & Forgan, 2005).

NCLB legislation has also impacted students receiving special educational services, including the pressure schools are under due to the one percent cap limiting the number of exceptional students required to complete state-developed alternative assessments (Sorrentino & Zirkel, 2004). In addition to the pressure to balance students' Individualized Education Plans and accountability measures, principals must also consider the supportive role they play in the practice of inclusion of exceptional students (Barnett & Monda-Amaya, 1998; Cook, Semmel, & Gerber, 1999;).

Issues of respect, tolerance, and inclusion reflect only the beginning of the discourse surrounding the preparation of school leaders within special education contexts (Crockett, 2002). School leaders who understand the legal and curricular requirements for exceptional learners (Patterson, Marshall, & Bowling, 2000) will be better prepared to provide the kind of support necessary for improved student achievement (Billingsley, 2005; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003).

Other leadership behaviors that demonstrate principal support for special education are the ability to provide professional and emotional support to special education teachers (Ax, Conderman, & Stephens, 2001; Billingsley, 2004; Billingsley & Cross, 1992; Littrell, Billingsley, & Cross, 1994). Yet, prospective school leaders are exposed to limited coursework focused specifically on special education in their preparation programs (Brownell & Pajares, 1999; Goor, Schwenn, & Boyer, 1997; Jacobs, Tonnsen, & Baker, 2004), with a high percentage of that focus being solely special education law (Hirth & Valesky, 1990; Valesky & Hirth, 1992).

It becomes increasingly clear that principals' knowledge base regarding special education (DiPaola, Tschannen-Moran, & Walther-Thomas, 2004; Wakeman, Browder, Flowers, & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2006) be established during administrator preparation programs. Incorporating a special education component within the preparation infrastructure (Quigney, 1997) will help aspiring principals gain the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively support exceptional students in their schools.

IRIS Star Legacy Modules

The IRIS Star Legacy Modules support issues of accommodations, behavior, collaboration, differentiated instruction, disability, and diversity (IRIS Center for Faculty Enhancement). The learning theory and inquiry cycle is based on the National Research Council report, *How People Learn* (Bransford, Brown & Cocking, 1999). The training materials are embedded in multimedia cases or challenges that also include relevant resources that are used as needed to help address the cases. A major goal of case-based instruction is to prevent inert knowledge and promote transfer of learning by integrating content learning with problem solving (Barrows, 1985; Bransford et. al., 1999; Hmelo,

1995; Williams, 1992). Case-based instruction provides learners with the chance to become familiar with the types of situations and problems that they are likely to encounter inside and outside of the classroom, and to learn important content as necessary to help solve these problems. The challenges or cases are deliberately designed to enable participants to learn how to assess a situation, determine what they already know and what they will need to know, and to learn how to identify and utilize sources of knowledge, skill, and values that will enable them to wrestle with challenges productively. The cycle begins with a <u>Challenge</u> that presents an issue or problem facing educators today. The issue is presented through video and audio. This is followed by <u>Thoughts</u> that pose questions based on the issue presented. Next, <u>Perspectives and Resources</u> provide information from the research literature that reflects the issue at hand. Research is usually presented through video-streaming and text. The <u>Assessment</u> section serves as a review of the strategies offered by the research literature that support the issue being addressed through the use of quizzes and assignments to complete. Finally, the <u>Wrap-Up</u> section summarizes the main points gleaned from the activity.

IRIS Implementation Sites: Educational Leadership Programs

The following sections of this paper will describe how faculty in three principal preparation programs used special education modules to enhance course content and delivery. Examples for class activities are presented.

University of Texas at San Antonio

The course *Administration and Function of Special Programs* is a required course for all teachers seeking a Master of Arts degree and/or certification in educational leadership. Course content incorporates issues in the field of special education.

Specifically, the course activities and assignments are intended to prepare future school leaders to have a working knowledge of special education curricula and law. This will then enable them to be proactive leaders and advocates for exceptional students.

Changing Minds, Changing Practice

Aspiring school leaders in the state of Texas are required to successfully pass an examination to earn principal certification. The questions on this exam are divided into three domains: School-Community Leadership, Instructional Leadership, and Administrative Leadership. There are several questions regarding the role of the school administrator within special education programs within the instructional leadership domain. Thus, the use of the IRIS modules within principal preparation courses serves to highlight this critical aspect of school leadership.

The importance of preparation for serving students with special needs is vital for any aspiring school administrator. Two courses within the principal preparation program that specifically address special education issues are Administration and Function of Special Programs and School Law. Between them, these courses cover several aspects about special education. These include discipline procedures, ARD responsibilities, student assessment, and program support. The crucial role of the principal as instructional leader for all school programs is a topic of discussion in almost all of the courses within the master's degree or certification program.

An IRIS Lesson at UTSA

The *Administration and Function of Special Programs* course informs aspiring school leaders about the curricula, assessment, and legal guidelines regarding special education. Before they complete the IRIS Star Legacy Module, students are required to

read the article "Teachers decisions to transfer from special to general education" (1991) by Bonnie Billingsley and Lawrence Cross. The authors discuss findings related to principal support and advocacy for special educators. Reading the article before being introduced to the module helps to set a foundation for the students.

The instructor introduces *Addressing the Revolving Door: How to Retain Your Special Education Teachers* IRIS Star Legacy Module to the class as a whole. The module opens with a "challenge" that a principal is facing in recruiting, hiring, and keeping special education teachers on her campus. Then students are prompted to answer key questions. It has been effective to allow students to reflect on responses to these questions in pairs. This gives students the opportunity to brainstorm ideas. Then they share their thoughts with the other students in the class.

Next, the instructor guides the students through the "Perspectives and Resources" section. Special attention is given to items that reflect the content from the required journal article by Billingsley & Cross (1991). This allows students to make connections between the reading and module content.

An "assessment" section follows, and students work in groups of three to answer selected questions from the prompt. The students then create a visual representation on chart paper incorporating the information from the journal articles, module, and course lecture. This serves as an evaluation tool for the instructor to determine the level of student learning.

The "Wrap-Up" section includes closing remarks from Professor Billingsley. At this time the students are asked to reflect on the information they have acquired. They are

asked to provide leadership strategies that they might implement on their campus to support special education teachers.

Lessons Learned

The module that was incorporated into the Administration and Function of Special Programs course was *Addressing the Revolving Door: How to Retain Your Special Education Teachers*. The module was presented to the students as a whole group. The instructor led the students through the components of the modules allowing for open discussion and referring to information previously covered in the course. The module enhanced course content by reiterating the important role of the school leader in supporting and keeping special education teachers on the campus and in the field of special education.

The instructor observed that the aspiring school leaders found the material presented in the IRIS module as both practical and applicable in their preparation and training. The video clips and audio bytes helped to reinforce course content in a visually stimulating manner. The instructor will continue to use this module to enhance the information presented in the courses.

California Polytechnic University, San Luis Obispo

The College of Education at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo (hereafter referred to as "Cal Poly") was selected by the IRIS Center for Faculty Enhancement in the Peabody College at Vanderbilt University as one of five national testing sites for its IRIS Star Legacy Modules. The faculty of the Educational Leadership and Administration Program (ELAP) at Cal Poly began using the IRIS module *Accountability: High Stakes Testing for Students with Disabilities* in the fall of 2005.

This module was selected because the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 presents immediate and difficult challenges for educational leaders, especially school administrators charged with the responsibility of raising test scores of students with special needs. Such challenges are complex, and how leaders conceptualize these challenges determines the types of responses their organizations will develop and attempt to implement.

Changing Minds, Changing Practice

Prior to implementing the IRIS modules, ELAP students were required to complete a single course addressing the legal and financial implications of special educational administration. Students exited the program with the requisite legal knowledge needed to administer special education programs (e.g., avoiding lawsuits), but feedback from program graduates who subsequently entered administrative positions indicated they felt unprepared to cope with the issue of testing special needs students.

After exposing students to the content of the IRIS module *Accountability: High Stakes Testing for Students with Disabilities* module, the faculty of the ELAP noticed a change in how these students perceived their role as instructional leaders. Classroom discussions began to shift from legal and policy issues to ideas about designing more effective learning environments for special needs students. Most important, students began exploring the benefits and challenges of including these students in mandated state testing programs. The module material from Dr. Margaret McLaughlin of the University of Maryland, College Park, which described how attention to these students' learning and the accountability for their outcomes is improving achievement for them, was particularly effective as a discussion starter.

An IRIS Lesson at Cal Poly

Education 515: *Educational Program Management and Evaluation* is the core "curriculum" course for students pursuing the master's degree in Educational Leadership and Administration at Cal Poly. A portion of this course is devoted to the role of assessment in improving student academic achievement. It is here that the IRIS module *Accountability: High Stakes Testing for Students with Disabilities* is implemented.

The title of the lesson that introduces the IRIS module is "How Can Principals Improve the Program of Study?", and the learning objectives for the lesson state that after completing the lesson students will be able to demonstrate the following competencies:

- Provide a rationale for improving schools' programs of study;

- Describe past attempts to reconceptualize schools' programs of study;

- Explain the common characteristics of low-performing schools;

- Describe the role of assessment in the improvement process;

- List and describe the five major assessment issues that must be considered when undertaking program improvement;

- Describe the types of data needed to improve teaching and learning;

- Explain the role of data analysis in the assessment process.

The first half of the four-hour class session introduces students to literature about recent school reform and improvement efforts, most notably the NCLB Act of 2001. Students participate in group activities designed to make explicit and challenge their implicit understandings of the legislation, and students explore examples of how schools have responded to the legislation vis-à-vis program improvement initiatives. Students

review common NCLB "language" (API, AYP, etc.), and discuss how the legislation has affected their schools and districts, especially in the areas of testing and accountability.

During the second half of the class, students gather in the computer lab and are given instructions about accessing the IRIS website. The instructor demonstrates this process using a computer projection system, and students are then directed to the *Accountability: High Stakes Testing for Students with Disabilities* module. Students progress through the module at their own pace with instructions to stop at the "assessment" section of the module.

Once all students have read the module material, the instructor places the following questions on the overhead projection system:

- What is meant by terms such as standards-based reform, high stakes, and accountability test?

- What are some of the benefits of high stakes testing for school systems? For teachers?

- What is problematic about school personnel not being held accountable for including students with disabilities in school wide assessments?

- How should standards-based reform change the education that students with disabilities receive?

Students are then divided into pairs and given instructions to answer the questions with their respective partners. Students write their answers on large-format poster paper.

Once this activity is complete, the instructor asks each pair of students "report out" to the whole class. Students place their posters on the walls and discuss their answers with the class. The instructor acts as moderator of this activity and asks for

11

periodic clarification from the "reporters". Classmates are given opportunity to comment about the answers and ask questions. This process continues until all students have shared their answers with the class.

The instructor then leads a summary discussion about the questions and student responses. Once this activity is complete, students are directed back to specific portions of the module to clarify their understanding of the material (as necessary). Students then proceed through the "Wrap Up" portion of the module and complete the final reflection exercise before exiting the IRIS website.

The class session concludes with a summary discussion about the role of accountability in improving learning programs. Students are assigned selected readings from their textbook as a follow-up to the classroom session. The final project for the Education 515 course includes an assessment of the knowledge students obtained from completing the IRIS module.

Lessons Learned

The options for integrating IRIS modules into extant curriculum are many and should accommodate a variety of teaching and learning modalities (e.g., direct instruction, group work, self-paced learning, or independent study). However, the experience of faculty at Cal Poly indicates that students benefit most when the entire class engages the IRIS material during class time under the facilitation of the instructor. Students are more likely to have their implicit knowledge challenged in this learning environment than they would if they worked independently away from class.

The "report-out" process and concomitant class discussion force students to reconceptualize their ideas about the role of accountability measures (i.e., high stakes

testing) in student achievement. Faculty no longer hear students simply echoing comments they have read in the popular press about the negative aspects of NCLB; rather, they now engage in thoughtful, evidence-based discussions about the strengths and weaknesses of various accountability efforts, including the use of high stakes testing to improve learning for all students.

Vanderbilt University

The Vanderbilt University implementation site has used the IRIS modules as a valuable tool in graduate level leadership courses and in its on-going professional development efforts with school principals and superintendents across the State of Tennessee.

Changing Minds, Changing Practice

Vanderbilt has been in an on going debate with others in the field about the efficacy of short-term professional development programs for the development of school leadership. The IRIS model of professional development may suggest that if powerful models of teaching and learning are implemented with rigorous, coherent content, short-term professional development can impact leadership knowledge and practice. One of the most salient features of the training in terms of what participants learned, how they learned it, and the changes they made as a result was the model of teaching and learning—*How People Learn*—that was used to present the information. Most school leaders and graduate students participating in the use of the IRIS materials (even those who reported themselves as being uncomfortable using computers) enjoyed the self-paced nature of working through modules on the computer and wished to use similar

types of training for their staff. Thus, one of our most significant things resulting from Vanderbilt's use of the IRIS modules is this: Presentation about special education to school leaders matters. The delivery of the information is equally as important as the information presented, indicating that for leadership development to be effective, we must model HOW we teach (Goldring, Rowley, and Sims, 2005).

Lessons Learned

The IRIS tools are used in a variety to ways. First, the IRIS modules are used to propel Vanderbilt's on-going experiment in the use of technology as an instructional medium. From the students in the graduate courses and the participants in the professional development forums (including those who reported themselves as being uncomfortable using computers), we are learning that they value engaging in formats other than traditional lecture-type professional development, the mode they usually experience. As a whole, the participants using the IRIS modules report that they prefer the IRIS modules to other forms of course work and other forms of professional development about special education in which they have participated. Secondly, we are learning that the content of the IRIS modules offer a great review to some school leaders about meeting the needs of all children and for others it is providing a "crash course" about special education. In general the participants report to us that they seem to learn from the modules and express a desire to learn more about the ideas presented within the modules.

Conclusion

Principal preparation programs must incorporate special education content within their required coursework (Lasky & Karge, 2006; Lowe & Brigham, 2000; Sirotnik & Kimball, 1994). The use of the IRIS Star Legacy Modules is one step in that direction. The staff at the IRIS Center for Faculty Enhancement have created excellent tools and resources. Educational leadership faculty are encouraged to work as teams to find the best ways to use these tools and resources so that aspiring school leaders will be more effectively prepared to support special education teachers and students.

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