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Critical Issues for Administrators of Specialized Schools

Amanda Thomas Kirk
Dominican University of California

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Critical Issues for Administrators of Specialized Schools

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

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School of Education and Counseling Psychology

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Signature Sheet

This thesis, written under the direction of the candidate's thesis advisor and approved by the coordinator of the master's program, has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of Education in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science. The content and research methodologies presented in this work represent the work of the candidate alone.

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Abstract

The current call for accountability in education increases the need for an understanding of best practices for administrators of specialized schools that serve students with special needs, including residential and day treatment programs. The literature revealed issues in curriculum planning and resource allocation to meet the complex and interrelated needs of students in specialized schools, and in effective program design for students with specific low incidence disabilities. No literature could be identified that addressed the challenges of administering specialized schools that integrate educational, therapeutic, and transitional and vocational programs in one setting.

A survey of administrators of specialized schools in one Northern California county was conducted to identify best practices for decision making and resource allocation in a time of dwindling local, state and national resources. Four administrators working in specialized programs in Northern California were interviewed using a questionnaire.

Findings indicated that administrators of specialized schools make decisions about staffing, training and curriculum based on their students' needs for integrated services in order to support development across three domains: 1) academic, 2) therapeutic, and 3) vocational, transitional and independent living skill training. Administrator responses emphasized communication and collaboration between all domains as essential for student success. Findings further indicated that administrators agreed that students do best when teachers receive support for their emotional and social needs as well as their curriculum and instructional planning needs.

Chapter 1 Introduction

In 2009, I accepted my first full time teaching position: teaching at a non-public school for at-risk teens. While I had worked with a few students with emotional disturbance during my student teaching, I had no special training in how to serve the needs of the school's population, and no real understanding of the complexity of my new job.

After my first year, I was promoted to Lead Teacher, in charge of guiding not only students but teachers, instructional aides, therapeutic staff, and foster parents, as they supported our students' academic progress. After my second year, I was offered a leadership position that bridged both the boys and girls campuses, and included many administrative responsibilities normally assigned to a school's principal or director.

Moving from the classroom to a leadership position involved supervising and supporting a team of teachers and instructional aides, designing curriculum and interventions, developing IEPs, communicating with therapeutic program staff, and making recommendations about how to discuss the school's program with district personnel state-wide in non-therapeutic language. This shift was an opportunity to create new solutions, to look deeply at what was and was not working in addressing the academic, social-emotional, and behavioral needs of students in specialized settings, and to learn from the past, to reinvent alternative schools to better serve students for whom traditional models of education clearly do not work, without giving up on high expectations for their ability to learn and grow and realize their own potentials as full citizens of the world.

I sought out existing research how to improve instruction without compromising the important therapeutic services that students in specialized settings require, from the perspective not of a classroom teacher, but of an administrator. Administrators are distanced from daily

instructional practice. Instead, they must focus on hiring, training and supporting teachers, designing curriculum strategies, communicating with and educating non-education staff on the therapeutic team, informing decisions across both educational and therapeutic teams based on assessment data and understanding each student's academic strengths and needs, and looking ahead to research-based approaches that come from experts and institutions that specialize in the needs of our populations and evaluating which choices are most relevant and implementable for our unique situation.

Statement of Problem

There is little relevant information in the current literature for administrators of schools that specialize in serving students with special needs. With little research available to inform administrative practice, it is important to survey current practices in order to learn from the successes and struggles that have already been worked through.

Purpose Statement

The primary purpose of this study was to collect information about what administrators have done to support student success in specialized schools. Decision-making concerning hiring practices, staff development and resource allocation was examined to inform future decision-making as the funding landscape shifts in a time of increasing accountability.

Research Question

How do administrators support positive outcomes for students served in specialized schools in Northern California? For the purpose of this study, the term administrators refers to those heads of specialized schools who function as principals, making decisions about staffing, curriculum and resource allocation. Specialized schools refers to educational setting, public or private, that serves students with special needs that cannot be met in a less-restrictive

environment. Students' placement occurs through designation by an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), through other social service agencies, such as Aid to Adoption or Juvenile Justice, or through private placement by custodial family members, usually one or both parents.

Assumptions

It was assumed that interviewees would report conflicting priorities when allocating school resources arising from a bias on the part of the administrator in favor of mental health needs vs. educational needs. That bias was expected to marginalize or minimize academic programs in favor of therapeutic priorities. That bias was expected to reduce allocation of resources to transitional or vocational programs in favor of academic priorities.

It was further assumed that administrators would express significant differences between how resources are allocated in their current situation and their ideal resource allocation plan. Additional assumptions included the idea that administrators were struggling to accommodate recent changes in funding for students with educationally related mental health needs, and that administrators were concerned about teacher attrition and retention.

Theoretical Rationale

“We must let go of the life we have planned, so as to accept the one that is waiting for us” (Moyers & Company, 2013). According to Joseph Campbell, American scholar of comparative religion and mythology, it is only by releasing our preconceptions that we can achieve an objective vision. It is only by letting go of hopes and expectations that we can have a clear understanding of things as they are, the necessary first step for effective action.

Responsive leadership requires that one come into a leadership position willing to let go of what one thinks needs to be done, open to what the setting requires. In practice, school administrators inevitably have biases and predispositions about their work, because it is their

passion that brings them to the work. For them to be effective administrators, they must have the ego strength to relinquish their preconceptions and take on the challenges that are inherent in the setting. They must avoid imposing their own framework, which may be inappropriate for the setting in which they find themselves, in order to effectively meet the real challenges that arise.

Background and Need

The education of students with special needs continues to evolve over time, as new mandates are developed at the federal level. Funding these programs has a more troubled history, and finding the money to support programs that fulfill the federal mandates continues to be a significant challenge to their implementation. Decisions about resource allocation made by administrators of specialized schools are a significant factor in supporting the educational progress of students in specialized schools.

The Education of All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (EHA, 1975) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1990 (IDEA, 1990) have evolved over time to provide a mandate--but not funding--for free, appropriate public education (FAPE) for all students in a setting that is least restrictive. In 2004, IDEA was revised to include a requirement that all students with disabilities should be prepared for further education, employment and independent living in addition to academics (IDEA, 2004). President Bush's No Child Left Behind legislation mandated "highly qualified" teachers for students with special needs (No Child Left Behind Act, 2001).

Specialized schools serve students with needs that cannot be met in normative schools. There is a great deal of research into different classroom teaching techniques and strategies for the range of students served in specialized schools (Algozzine & Ysseldyke, 2006), but little available for administrators to learn from in order to better support student progress.

Most research and literature about administering special education programs is written for administrators of large schools with subpopulations who are served by programs within the school, or for administrators serving programs distributed across multiple schools within a district. By examining strategies already in place in specialized schools in one county, administrators can learn from existing programs how to make effective decisions about hiring and supporting staff, selecting curriculum materials, planning staff development, and designing behavioral interventions.

Chapter 2 Review of the Literature

Introduction

Many students in specialized schools have been diagnosed with multiple challenges; specialized schools may specialize in students on the Autism spectrum, students with emotional disturbance, students with developmental or intellectual disabilities, or students with multiple challenges. Students in specialized schools may be placed privately by family members, or through public school offers of FAPE that specify the type of specialized school that is appropriate for the student's needs. While many are non-public non-profits, some public schools offer "school-within-a-school" programs on or near the campuses of mainstream schools, which provide opportunities for mainstreaming students into general education classes (California School Boards Association, 2011; Sparks, 2005).

One type of specialized school serves students with social-emotional and behavioral disorders. Students with social-emotional and behavioral disorders (SEBD) make up a small but diverse subgroup within the population of students with special needs, only 443 of 9,479 students (<0.05%) enrolled in special education in one representative county (Lucille Packard Foundation for Children's Health, 2013). Many experience multiple challenges in addition to the mental health and behavioral challenges that characterize them as a group (Newcomer, 2008). Their academic needs range from fundamental skills for students with developmental and cognitive impairment through college preparatory training for students co-identified as intellectually gifted (Gagnon & McLaughlin, 2004).

A great deal of research on therapeutic models for students with SEBD exists; there is less research available on academic models. Research indicates that individualized instruction

with differentiation is key (Edwards & Chard, 2000). Some specialized schools provide day treatment; students live at home or with foster families or in group homes. Other schools include residential services, with an integrated therapeutic program that includes mental health services, counseling, and other programs, like wilderness education and vocational training.

Another type of specialized school serves students who are intellectually or developmentally disabled. The emphasis of curriculum in these schools is primarily functional and adaptive living skills. These students may or may not be on the Autism spectrum. Research shows that these students require functional curriculum that is highly individualized, tailored to student needs through the collaboration of the many service providers that best know the student's needs and abilities (Bouck, 2008).

Research is available on the role of administrators in public schools, but much of it is not relevant for the needs of administrators of specialized schools. Administrative practices at specialized schools must account for the unique individual needs of the students they serve (Frick, Faircloth & Little, 2013). Examining recent research on what administrators can realistically do to improve student outcomes shows that they can hire, train, support and retain highly qualified teachers, guide curriculum, and stay at the forefront of research that can guide practice (Frost & Kersten, 2011). These findings need to be adapted for the unique needs of students in specialized schools.

Historical Context

The history of specialized schools is difficult to generalize, because of the great diversity of programs. An overview of the specialized schools described in the research is outlined as follows. Residential treatment for emotional disturbance has a long history, going back to the forced institutionalization of the mentally ill. The current movement based in therapeutic

treatment and integrated education started in the 1970s, and has been primarily therapy-driven. One paradigm with a long history of successful outcomes for students with severe emotional and behavioral disorders is the Re-ED approach (Shepard & Freado, 2012; Walker & Fecser, 2002), which incorporates a re-parenting model that establishes consistent routines while placing the child's social and emotional needs first. (Doroshov, 2012).

Specialized schools for students on the Autism spectrum must include individualized supports and services for students and their families, systematic instruction designed to meet their learning needs, structured and predictable learning environments that accommodate their needs, specialized curriculum content appropriate to their needs, a functional approach to problem behavior with highly trained teachers and staff, and family involvement in decision-making (Iovannone, Dunlap, Huber, & Kincaid, 2003).

Review of the Previous Literature

In this survey, small specialized schools serving students with developmental delays, SEBD, and Autism spectrum disorders were reviewed. Academic databases were searched for peer-reviewed journal articles and recent books that address administrative decision making in specialized school settings.

Historically, students who qualify for disability under the categories of Emotional Disturbance and Autism are underserved and misunderstood. Mental health challenges are very stigmatizing, and at the same time mental health issues are increasingly medicalized. Students in these categories have complex and interrelated needs (Simpson, Peterson & Smith, 2011), often multiple co-morbidities, such as personality disorder, auditory processing disorder, and executive dysfunction. Many are the children of mothers who used drugs during pregnancy, are in foster care or are wards of court, have experience multiple failed educational and/or therapeutic

placements, and without intervention, face tragic outcomes—institutionalization, criminal involvement, exploitation, prison, homelessness and early death.

Research shows that students who have experienced repeated school failure need non-traditional opportunities to learn—integrated curriculum, systematic instruction, and PBL (Edwards & Chard, 2000)—to begin to approach outcomes in line with students in normative school settings. Students who require placement in specialized schools are afforded the best outcomes when they are provided with an integrated three part school program that addresses all of their mental health, academic, and vocational/transitional needs in equal measures.

Given that students with SEBD, severe developmental disabilities, or on the Autism spectrum are difficult to reach and difficult to teach, teaching in a specialized school serving those students is inherently different from teaching in any other school setting (Milligan, Neal, & Singleton, 2012). Questions such as what constitutes good teaching in an RTC for SEBD setting, and how to attract, support, train and retain good teachers in a very demanding and difficult setting need to be asked, in the context of effective administration of specialized schools (Smith, Robb, West & Tyler, 2010). Salaries are not the only reason teachers choose to work in RTC schools, so it is not just the money—there must be something else (Stempian & Loeb, 2002). Identifying what that something else is, and how to provide it effectively, is the task of the conscientious administrator (McHatton, Glenn, & Gordon, 2012; Thompson, 2011).

Chapter 3 Method

Introduction

To learn more about the way administrators working in specialized schools make decisions about program design, teacher development, and resource allocation, interviews were conducted with four administrators who work in different specialized schools in a mixed urban/suburban/rural county in Northern California.

Ethical Standards

This paper adheres to ethical standards in the treatment of human subjects in research as articulated by the American Psychological Association (2010). Additionally, the research proposal was reviewed by the Dominican University of California Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRBPHS), approved, and assigned number 10070.

Access and Permissions

The researcher selected a sample of convenience. The administrators were all peers who consented to participate in an interview following email correspondence explaining the nature of the study. Administrators were free to decline to participate after reviewing the questionnaire.

Data Gathering Strategies

A questionnaire was provided via email to administrators and former administrators of specialized schools who agreed to participate in an interview. Interviewees were able to preview the content of the interview and prepare responses in advance if they desired. Interviews were conducted in person, either at the school or off-site, depending on interviewee preference. Interviews took between 30 and 60 minutes, and were transcribed or recorded, depending on interviewee preference.

Data Analysis Approach

Following the interviews, the researcher reviewed the administrator responses looking for common threads. Commonalities were summarized in a narrative form. The researcher followed the strategies described in *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences* (Seidman, 2006).

Chapter 4 Findings

Description of Participants

Four different respondents were interviewed, representing three schools and one countywide program in one Northern California county. Each works or worked in a different type of specialized school. Responses to the questionnaire are listed below; first the question, then each respondents answer.

Respondent A was a classroom teacher and credentialed Education Specialist before serving in an administrative role.

Respondent B was the founder and current director of a private, family-run co-ed day treatment program for students with significant intellectual impairment, many of whom are on the Autism spectrum. Respondent B's background included teaching special education and serving as the Special Education Director for the county Office of Education.

Respondent C was a retired public school administrator for a co-ed public school-within-a-school program located on a 1900-student comprehensive public high school campus. Respondent C had previously served in several roles, including Special Education teacher, Behavior Specialist, Principal and Program Specialist in public schools.

Respondent D was the former Principal and Administrator for Non-Public Schools and Agency Programs for the county Office of Education (COE) and Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA). Her background included working as a Special Education Teacher, Behavior Specialist, Assistant Principal and Principal in non-public schools.

Interview Responses

Question 1: Describe the student population demographic.

Probe Questions: What is the Level of Care provided? What is the student:teacher ratio?
Is the school WASC accredited? Why or why not?

Respondent A worked for a non-public school on the grounds of a therapeutic residential treatment center for at-risk teens with emotional and behavioral disorders between ages 13-18 in on 2 separate-sex campuses. Three classrooms on each campus serve students in grades 7-12.

There are twelve students per credentialed teacher with one instructional aide in each of two core curriculum classrooms, and six students per credentialed teacher in the transition classroom. The school is WASC accredited, to support students interested in a higher level of education.

Students are placed in the school in coordination with their residential placement; funding for educational services is provided separately from residential services. All students in the school are residents in the therapeutic program, either on campus or in satellite homes staffed by house parents who are part of the treatment program. Students are placed from all over the state of California; placing agencies include Aid to Adoption Services, the Juvenile Justice System, Foster Care and private families. Students stay as long as 3 years, but most stay an average of 18 months.

Respondent B worked at a private school serving children ages 5 through 22, primarily with developmental disabilities; about 75-80% of students have an additional diagnosis of Autism. Approximately 95% of the school's students were described as having behavioral challenges. The school does not provide diploma-track instruction; students receive a certificate of completion. Many students stay until they turn 22, when they move to Regional Center

Services adult programs. The school serves 44 students, who are accepted into the program through referral from a school district, COE, or other agency. Classrooms serve 10 to 12 students and are staffed by a credentialed special education teacher and 6 to 8 instructional assistants. Students tend to stay in the school their entire academic program. Currently, there are four classrooms: an elementary level classroom, with students ages 7 to 13, a secondary level classroom, with students ages 14-17, and two secondary/post secondary classes with students between the ages of 15-22 years. Instruction is very structured, with sessions typically ranging from 20 to 25 minutes in length, alternated with “break” periods of 5 to 10 minutes. All academic instruction is focused on functional life skills. The highest achieving students can read and can do basic academics, can go out and earn a paycheck, develop budgets and grocery lists, while others are working on how to open a door, toileting, and things like that. Two speech therapists are on staff who are involved with communication training, communication and social skills.

Respondent C worked at a counseling-enriched public school Special Day Class program for students who qualify under the designation of emotional disturbance, located in a school-within-a-school setting on a comprehensive public high school. Students are placed primarily from within the school’s district, with occasional inter-district transfers from within the local area. Twelve boys and girls in grades 9-12 are served by one credentialed teacher and two aides. There is on-site administrative support on a part time (20%) basis. Psychological services are provided by an on-site school psychologist who is available 3 days per week. Students are supported in mainstreaming to general education settings on an individualized basis. Because it is a program within a larger school, it is WASC accredited under the umbrella of the larger comprehensive school.

Respondent D was not working at an individual school at the time of the interview, but rather oversaw services provided by multiple non-public specialized schools, agencies, and programs throughout the county. She was responsible for supervising the placement of 120-160 students at any one time county-wide. She had previously administered a local non-public school serving students with severe emotional and behavioral disorders in residential treatment requiring a very high level of care. She discussed the issue of WASC accreditation broadly, pointing out that WASC accreditation is a fee-based process, and requires internal resources to implement the self-reviews and Action Plan items involved in getting and remaining accredited; that schools who can afford it are able to make it happen, but for many small specialized schools, it is not necessary or affordable.

Question 2: What is your school's educational model or philosophy of education?

Respondent A: We address the needs of the whole child, and emphasize effort and self-actualization, more than following a set model or philosophy of education. Much of our work is informed by Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs; if a student doesn't feel safe and taken care of, he or she will have a tough time focusing on fractions or the Mesopotamians. The closest model is probably "holistic education", but we don't follow any one tradition. Our mission statement is "to awaken and inspire the wondering and the joy of learning inherent in all." If we can teach a student how to learn about something that interests her, or him, then hopefully the student will be able to use those learning skills in other contexts.

Respondent B: Our educational program focuses on a student's most practical skills, skills that are necessary for independent living—as independent as a particular individual can hope to achieve. Some of our students will always need support; others might achieve higher

levels of independence. That is what we strive for, to give our students the best chance for the highest level of independence as adults.

Respondent C: We don't have an explicit model or philosophy. We worked hard to find ways to make the content relate to the students lives. We want all our students to get out of our programs and into the real world as much as they can handle; we want to help them be successful in whatever they choose to do after they graduate, whether it is going into mainstream classes, or to the junior college or into a job.

Respondent D: We don't have an explicit model of education, but there is a clear commitment on the part of the county to educate county students locally as much as possible. Some counties seem to prefer to send students out of state, but here we are fortunate that the decision-makers follow through on keeping our students in the county as much as possible, so that their relationships stay intact and they can maintain family connections as much as possible.

Question 3: What qualities and qualifications do you look for in a teacher when you are hiring?

Respondent A: Flexibility and compassion are key; teachers need a special education credential at minimum, and ideally another area of credentialing as well, since we are a secondary school and need content area specialists. Ideally, they have worked with students with emotional challenges before in some capacity. The behaviors of this population can be shocking to people who don't have the background.

Respondent B: We "grow our own" teachers here. We don't have a very high turnover; we look within. Many of our assistants are in the credential program or getting other degrees, because we want people who are clear that this is the population that they want. All our current teachers started out as instructional assistants in our classrooms, and that works well because

they know this population and what to make of it when students hit or bite or spit or strip. They already recognize the communicative intent of behaviors, and aren't put off or scared away. They know how we teach the child to get their needs met in a more acceptable way than those behaviors.

Respondent C: We look for teachers who are knowledgeable about the nuances of students with emotional disturbance, who have a strong curriculum background in multiple subjects since they will have to teach all the subjects. They must also have a heart for the students, and see students with emotional challenges and issues as worthy and capable human beings deserving of the same education as any other student.

Respondent D: As a starting point, teachers must have a Special Education credential. They need to know how to work with difficult behaviors, and have references and letters of recommendation that speak to their previous experience. We have multiple interviews, and have them teach a lesson, observed by a peer, and ask both the peer and the students what they think. They need to know how to teach. Small schools have to choose wisely to balance the staff; if you only have one math teacher, that math teacher has to be pretty skillful and know a lot of math.

Question 4: How do you plan and/or design curriculum to make it accessible to the range of students you serve?

Respondent A: We do what we can to keep students aligned with the curriculum they would be in if they were still attending their schools of origin. That said, teachers have a great deal of latitude to modify and tailor curriculum to meet their students' needs and create opportunities for success rather than frustration and failure. We offer as many different modes of learning as we can; more traditional lecture with textbook, but also activities and hands-on projects when we can, and more and more technology. We have computers for each student, and

they can access things like brainpop.com if they're on the lower end, or khanacademy.org if they are working at a higher level. Because we serve students from all over the state, it is challenging to keep students working at the same pace or level as their peers in public school, or even in public school special education programs. If they were capable of that level of work, they wouldn't be at our school. But we do our best to keep them challenged and growing, no matter where they are when they get to us.

Respondent B: We do a variety of things; we have our own curriculum that somebody helped us develop. Basic assembly and washing your hands and things like that... We have a great deal of curriculum material that we have developed ourselves or purchased over the years, and our teachers are encouraged to make it their own. We're all pretty much on the same page, but sometimes we get together and look at new things together and take pieces that work for one student or another. Since we're not teaching math or science, they might focus on nutrition. We do very little whole group (instruction), with some of the more independent, academic kids, since we need to address a variety of cognitive abilities, but most instruction is individualized.

Respondent C: The lead teacher in the ED class is a Language Arts specialist, but she teaches all the subjects and is very creative. We are very flexible with the schedule, so that students can fit into the comprehensive high school's classes if possible. We also individualize as much as possible. For example, we had one student who really didn't like history, but he liked being on the computer. So we were able to put together a special curriculum for him that took advantage of his motivation to use the computer. We also use portfolio assessment more often than tests, and (students do) a lot of projects to demonstrate learning and how it relates to the students' lives.

Respondent D: Our schools align with the county curricula as much as possible, with functional skills curriculum drawn from the county Special Education classrooms. Teachers can come and observe and learn from the county classrooms, if they choose, and can participate in the county's Workability program, which pairs students with jobs in the community. That said, teachers need to understand that different people learn in different ways; styles and modalities differ, and variety is important.

Question 5: What would your school look like if the teaching staff were being successful?

Respondent A: Students would be prepared for a successful life, and know how to care for themselves and how to communicate well with others. Rather than a lecture-and-note-taking process, students and teachers would be working together to pursue ideas of interest to the student, so that the learning is as student-driven as possible.

Respondent B: Students would be focused, on task, working hard. Behaviors would be minimized, everyone would be calm and participating in whatever they were supposed to be doing. Typically if things are going well, it is pretty quiet, they are engaged in structured activities. They learn how to start tasks and stay on task for short periods. If the classroom is successful it's organized, I can go in and tell what's supposed to be going on--a well-oiled machine. Staff members know who they are responsible for, kids know what they are responsible for. We had 5 students graduate last year, and went on to adult service programs. One student is working, all day long, earning \$10 an hour, 7 hours a day; others are in a day program, which is activity oriented, not work oriented.

Respondent C: Students would be working on their assignments. Not necessarily quietly, there would be discussion—it would be engaged learning, with students talking about their ideas. Ideally truancy would be significantly reduced or eliminated. Students would be able to

mainstream successfully, managing their behaviors, being responsible and accountable to their teachers and peers, meeting their counseling goals, earning credits and mastering curriculum.

Respondent D: Students would know about and be able to use occupational and social skills. The top five skills: show up to life's requirements, be on time, look and act "right", get along with others, and follow directions. If you can do that, you can learn the rest. A boss will be willing to help you learn the job, and help you recover from mistakes, if you can do those top 5 things.

Question 6: What kind of transition planning and independent living skills services do you provide beyond core curriculum?

Respondent A: We have all students complete a Senior Transition Portfolio that includes a lot of research and planning for life after graduation. Students have to identify resources in their home community like bus schedules and work options and therapists. They do at least one budget or spending plan, and some register for junior college classes before graduating so they can move right into that program from ours. Some students take junior college classes before graduating; some get volunteer jobs or even paid jobs in the local community before transitioning back to their home community. Some students choose to stay in the area after graduating; we help them find transitional housing and ideally a job before they leave us.

Respondent B: The majority of our curriculum is vocational and transitional; our students, if they can, learn to read and write and do math that will help them in daily living tasks and in work. Many of our students will graduate from us into day programs for adults that are run by Regional Centers, so we spend a lot of time on behavioral work so that they can be successful in those programs. School psychologist does social skills with them as part of Speech and Language, but we don't offer mental health type therapy—our students can't benefit from that

kind of therapy—we do appropriate behavior in the work environment, how do you dress, how do you get along with others.

Respondent C: We offer Workability through the comprehensive high school we are part of; students are encouraged to mainstream as much as possible, with the goal of getting back into the regular population as soon as they can. We role-play job interviews in the classroom, and we work on resumes and applications. Some of our students have on-campus jobs, while others have off-campus jobs. Some of our students go on to the junior college, but not all of them do. Career readiness is a big push right now school-wide, and we want the students to be independent.

Respondent D: For some of our students, all of their instructional time is spent on functional curriculum. Many of our students will move from our program to a Regional Center; they will require support all of their lives. Other students participate in programs like Workability. All students with IEPs are entitled to transitional and vocational services, and we have programs through the Junior College like Social Advocates for Youth and Voices, our foster youth program, that provide peer mentoring and community connections. As much as possible, I try to get our students connected to what they will need to be successful BEFORE they leave school; their chances of success are much greater. We have former foster youth in the leadership positions in our outreach programs, so the students can trust them and they have credibility.

Question 7: Given the challenges and demands of teaching students in specialized schools, how do you support your teachers' emotional needs?

Probe Question: How do you help with stress reduction, morale building, etc.?

Respondent A: We have weekly meetings where teachers can talk through their feelings with an on-staff clinical psychologist and peers, a kind of group therapy for the adults. Teachers

and instructional aides form partnerships that are mutually supporting. Several of our long-term teachers here started as instructional aides who went through credentialing programs. There is a lot of turnover for new teachers, but teachers who stay past the first 2-3 years tend to stay a long time. There are a lot of married couples on the staff, around the school.

Teachers are encouraged to find trainings that interest them; new teachers are supported in BTSA. I am available as much as I can be to talk things through with teachers, both curriculum and classroom management issues. I am also available to work through conflicts that arise with other adults in the education or therapeutic parts of the school. We emphasize conflict management and communication skills with the students, so we model that by addressing conflict directly ourselves and recognizing that conflict is just a natural part of life.

Respondent B: We are very much a family type of business; we support each other. You've always got somebody you can turn to, there is a lot of help just next door. We have 11 students in one class and 7 staff; if there is trouble, we can get people into a room right away; if you were in a county program like ours, you'd have no principal at the site, there isn't that "I need help right now" and three people show up, especially as students get older and bigger.

Each class is staffed with a team of adults; we offer a lot of support for every IEP, lots of problem solving and collaboration. I have been the BTSA provider for all the teachers. We have potlucks, we do once a month birthdays and have meals together. I think that our community model is very supportive. And teachers have the resources they need to do their jobs. That's one of the biggest stressors we have, not having the resources we need when we need them. One of our teachers just moved to a different city, and it's her first time in the public school system, and she tells us that they have no curriculum, no materials, it's very different. She's very stressed.

We “grow our own” teachers here; all of our teachers have started here as instructional aides, and get their credentials and wait for another teacher to leave. Because our students are very challenging, behaviorally, we need to hire teachers who are already aware of what they are getting into. It’s important for teachers to get what they need; money for buying supplies, for example. We have a great deal of curriculum, so that teachers don’t have to make their own. Salaries aren’t that high, but teachers get cash to buy what they need. If something is broken, we fix it; if you need batteries, we have them... which is so different. We have a nurse, we have an Occupational Therapist, we have 2 Speech Therapists, we have a school psychologist, we’ve got all these people that teachers can turn to for support.

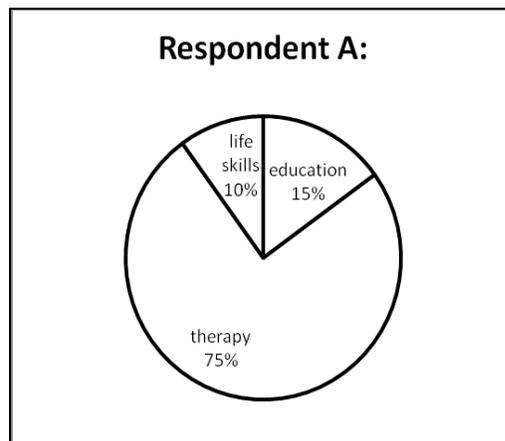
Respondent C: We have a monthly staff meeting, where the teacher and aides bring the students needs, and their own needs as well. It includes the behaviorist, school psychologist, myself as the administrator and the teacher. The aides have an additional meeting themselves, once a month or more often if needed, for feedback, consulting, problem-solving. I send the teacher to offsite training offered at the county Office of Education; recently she attended training in a nearby county on Autism. I am personally available for the teacher in the program; she has my home phone, my cell phone, my email... I support the classroom as a whole, and make myself available night and day for the teacher. I have learned that it works best when I have a personal relationship with the students, and I drop in for short periods every day, rather than structured “office hours”.

Respondent D: When I worked at (non-public school), we provided grants for professional development, and programs like BTSA. We provided onsite trainings for the paperwork part of the job, and paid the same as a county teacher would get paid, to prevent attrition. We built substitute teacher time into the budget, so that there was time for teachers to

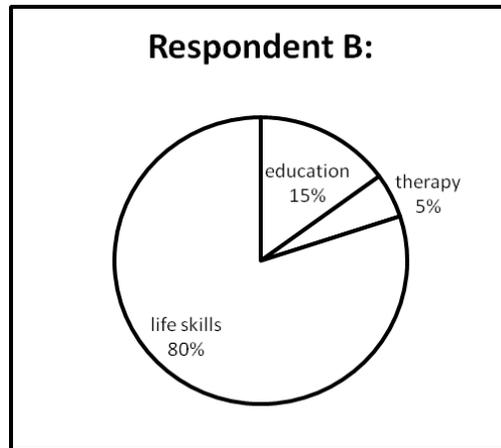
get the training that they needed, to stay connected to other teachers in the county and up to date on what was happening in the field. Teachers could also request time to observe other schools or classes, to learn new ideas and strategies for working with their students.

Question 8: Make a pie chart that shows the relative value AT YOUR SCHOOL NOW of 1) education, 2) therapy 3) life skills/work experience/transition.

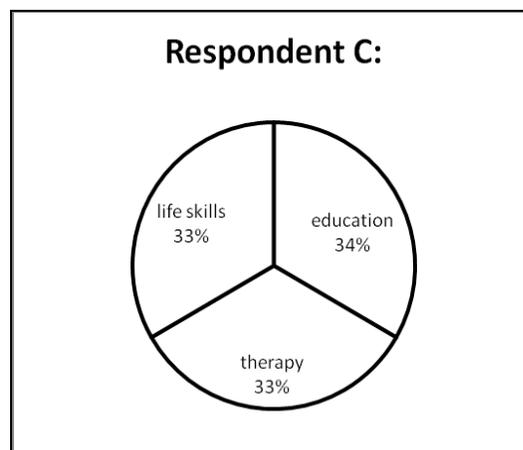
Respondent A described a school at which mental health therapy is the primary priority. Academics and life skills education share a quarter of the school's resources, in her estimation.



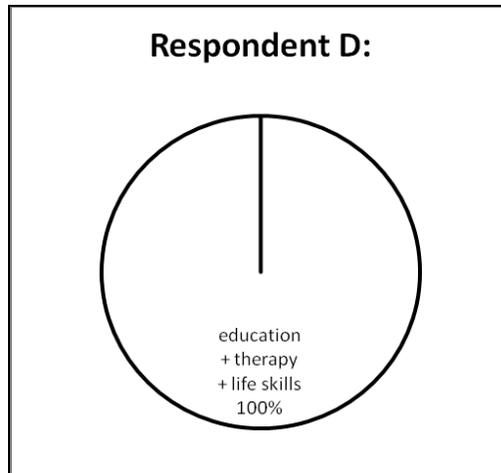
Respondent B described a school at which life skills and vocational and transitional preparation are primary priorities. Academics and life skills education share less than a quarter of the school's resources, in her estimation. Therapeutic services are limited to occupational and speech and language therapy. No students receive mental health services. Some students receive no therapeutic services.



Respondent C described a school at which no one area is the primary priority. School resources are divided equally across the different domains, with no competition between the domains.

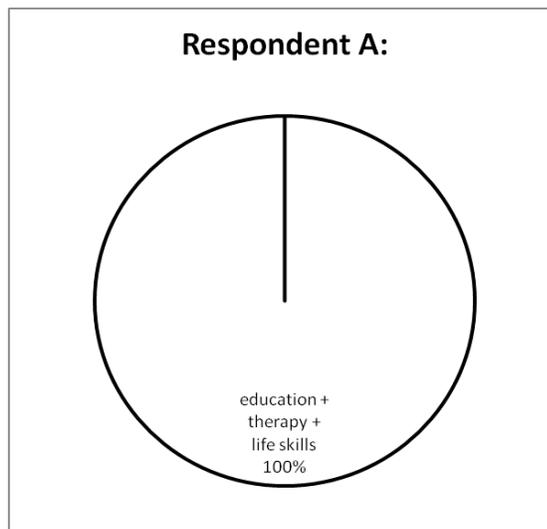


Respondent D described a school at which the domains are fully integrated. Academics, therapeutic services, and life skills education share all the school's resources equally, in her estimation, and cannot operate independently of one another.

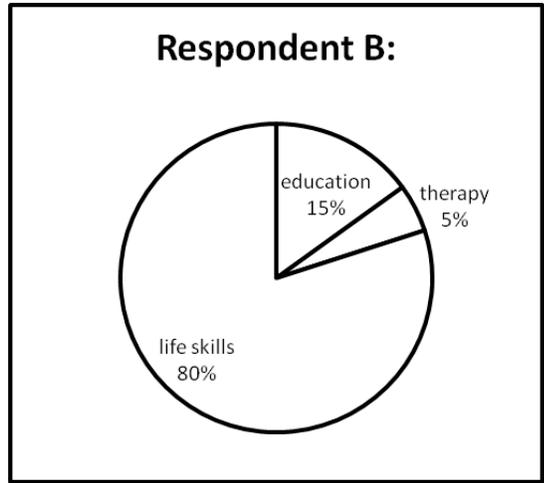


Question 9: Make a pie chart that shows the relative value IDEALLY of 1) education, 2) therapy 3) life skills/work experience/transition.

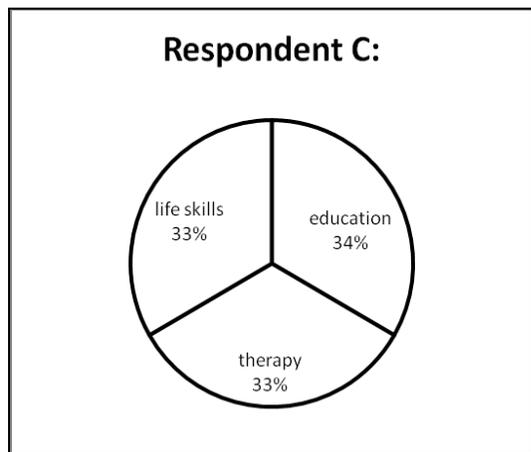
Respondent A described a school at which the domains are fully integrated. Academics, therapeutic services, and life skills education share all the school's resources equally, and cannot operate independently of one another.



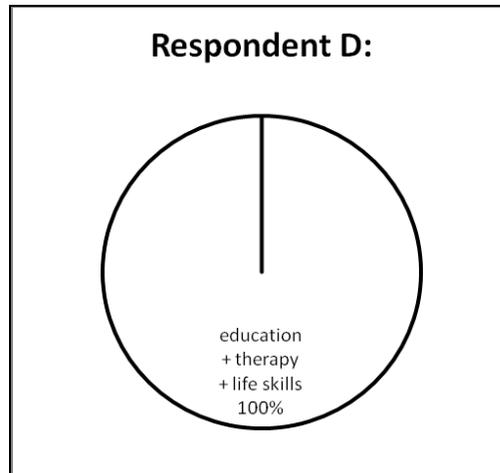
Respondent B indicated that the diagram she had constructed for her current school also represented her ideal school. She reported that she felt her school's allocation of resources is currently ideal for her students' needs.



Respondent C indicated that the diagram she had constructed for her current school also represented her ideal school. She reported that she felt her school's allocation of resources is currently ideal for her students' needs.



Respondent D indicated that the diagram she had constructed for her current school also represented her ideal school. She reported that she felt her school's allocation of resources is currently ideal for her students' needs.



Question 10: Are there any issues that I haven't asked about that you feel are important to discuss in this context?

Respondent A: The biggest challenge we are facing right now is increasing pressure from school districts to move students back out of residential placement, because funding is so tight. The students we are getting in placement are more disturbed, and less able to make academic progress, and IEPs are getting more contentious. Districts tend to bring students back from placement prematurely, to save money, but it doesn't serve the student.

It is more and more difficult for our classroom teachers, who are not necessarily therapists, to deal with students who are more disturbed, while the school districts are asking for higher levels of academic achievement. When students were placed by mental health services, there was more of an understanding of the students' limitations and needs; schools are not geared to understanding emotional disorders, and there is a lot of educating that needs to happen. It is a good idea to be as available and helpful to districts as possible, so that they see your school as an ally in the process. Some districts see non-public schools as allies, others see them as allied with the parents in opposition to the district. Sometimes the student's needs get lost along the way.

Respondent B: We're seeing an increase in our population as the Autism bubble is hitting; we grew this last year and added a classroom. We have more space that we can move into, though we don't want to get too big.

We also have a separate group program in the afternoons every day, funded by the Regional Center and by Kaiser Health, which is starting to pay for that service. That program has a different staff, with different funding. Some students come from other schools, if they have behavioral needs that we can meet.

We are lucky in that we are so kid-focused. In public schools there are politics that doesn't impact us. Decisions are made based on what the kids' need that comes first here. I started the school from a tremendous passion for the kids; that's my number one priority, not be well-known or on the radio... if I've made a difference in the life of a family, that's the reinforce and that has filtered down to everyone here. If I see a kid needs help in the toilet, I help him. We are all equal in addressing the needs of the kids.

The challenge is just the paperwork and the forms and I don't get out to the classrooms and see the kids, but I am still close enough that I can get out if I make the time. I had been Director of Special Education for the county Office of Education 18-20 years ago, I never got out to the classrooms, I never saw the kids... now, if I'm having a hard time, I can go out and see the kids and that keeps me going. I started this school in 1995. I wanted to do things the way I thought would be right; the quality I wanted, so I would not have to meet everybody's needs. In the public system, you have to say we can meet every need, because of the pressure to be all things to all people. Here, if our program isn't right for a family, it's OK. I only want parents here who want to be here. I'm not obligated to meet every family's needs. We all have our own

ideas of what our kids need. In the public school I felt pressure to be everything to everyone, but here I don't have to say that. I have more control; I can make my school the best I can make it.

Respondent C: Ours is a new program; we started it two years ago, when we recognized that we were spending a lot of money sending students to placements that might be avoidable if we could meet the student's needs in town. We decided to do our own program, with wraparound services provided by foster care and social workers. We could be very specific for each student's needs because we were so small. We have a lot of support from the Juvenile Justice system, and we think that provides continuity for kids who want to try to turn things around. At our school, they are able to access a rich selection of electives at the comprehensive high school, and that is a huge incentive for students to earn their levels.

These programs depend on the quality of personnel more than any program I've ever seen. Flexibility, compassion, range, and the desire and love for learning to impart that in a lot of subject areas. It is vital for districts to see the value of these programs; they are expensive, but there is huge value in preventing shipping kids off, in keeping them in town if we possibly can, so that they continue to feel connected to their home community, which gives them a sense of identify and purpose they lose if they go away or out of state.

What I learned from the first year is that as an administrator, you must have a personal relationship with every student. I have never let students call me by my first name, but in that class, I do, because I want to be real with them. I was able to get to know their families, what was going on, what was impacting the students, in a way that I had never done before. The first year, I had regular office hours, but over time I saw that it worked better if I made lots of small visits more often, I would eat lunch with the kids so that they knew me as a person.

Respondent D: In my experience, the schools that are successful are led by someone with business experience; they are businesses and it is easier to learn about special education than it is to learn about making good business decisions. Small programs don't offer as many options, so bigger programs do better when times are tough, because they have more than one revenue stream. Diversifying the overall business strategy is a good idea. From the district's perspective, and for many kids as well, the best outcome is a short stay in a specialized school, because you want kids learning in the least restrictive, most normative environment that they can handle. But most (non-public or private) specialized schools have a tough time budgeting that way. So you need to know about business to effectively administer a specialized school for the long term.

When programs are small, they can't individualize as much; if you only have one group therapy session, and it needs to happen at the same time as a class that is only offered at one time during the school day, the county Office of Education will require the student attend the class, not the therapy session. Administrators have to be careful about planning for a student's academic needs when they conflict with therapeutic programming. But it's important not to see the two (academics and therapy) as being conflicting agendas; students are in placement for a reason, they need the therapy in order to access the academics.

In an ideal world, kids would not have to travel far from home to get what they need—it is disruptive of kids' learning when they can't stay in the same system. More continuity of resources, including staying connected with who you are educated with—having a peer group, having support, fewer transitions, all contribute to students feeling connected and cared for. If they have those connections, they are more likely to be successful.

Overall Findings, Themes

Decision-making seemed to be tied to balancing the wide range of different needs of students in placement. Administrators all reported a desire to serve children across all domains of life, not just academics. For administrators of specialized schools, education is perceived as inclusive of academic, therapeutic, and transitional and vocational services, not exclusive.

School leaders perceive integration with non-academic parts of the students' lives as essential to student success. For them, the ideal school situation would integrate seamlessly with other aspects of student life; curriculum would be designed to make learning relevant to real life, and using real life contexts would make curriculum more engaging and appealing. Family and community involvement, and collaboration with other services, are also endorsed. Collaboration with therapeutic staff is also essential; students need integrated support throughout their days and nights to be successful.

Teachers must be compassionate and flexible first, then content experts. Without being able to manage the students within the parameters of the alternative setting of a specialized school, no amount of content knowledge will make learning happen. Teachers' emotional needs must also be addressed, to reduce attrition and prevent burnout. The most successful programs are those which are staffed by committed, well-trained and supported teachers who get the materials and assistance they need to perform well in extremely stressful situations. The ideal teacher is one who was trained within the specialized school setting. Professional development was primarily provided in-house. Little district-wide or county-wise networking was reported at any level of the educational program.

Accountability for academic outcomes has not significantly impacted daily practice in the specialized schools surveyed. One administrator reported that placement by school districts,

where previously it had been mental health services agencies, had impacted the tone of IEPs and the longevity of placement for some students.

Other issues that were raised include the prospect of the forecasted Autism “bubble” on enrollment in specialized programs; the strategy of providing multiple services to diversify risk; the invention of new programs to keep students in their communities of origin within a public school setting; the role of the school psychologist in different settings; and the importance of personal relationships between administrators and the students, both to connect students to the school but also to reconnect administrators with the reason that they started in the field.

Chapter 5 Discussion /Analysis

Summary of Major Findings

Administrators of specialized schools struggle with some similar challenges, but each faces unique problems inherent in each setting. All share the perspective that the key to academic success for their students lies in integrating the various support systems that serve the students needs; there were no reports of competition for resources between the educational, therapeutic, and life skills training programs within the school. Instead, administrators reported working to ensure each component of the student’s program is appropriate and effective.

Comparison of Findings to Previous Research

There is little research on this topic. Research on related topics shows administrators of special education programs within public school settings face different decisions about resource allocation than administrators of specialized schools, because of the context of the larger community served. Research also shows that students with low incidence disabilities served in specialized schools are best served by educational programs that are designed to accommodate

their needs for responsive teaching practices and to address social-emotional and other issues through direct instruction.

Limitations of the Research

Interviews are inherently subjective; respondents' self-reports may have been consciously or unconsciously biased. Only one public school-based program was interviewed. The results of this study cannot be generalized beyond the settings where the administrators were interviewed.

Implications for Future Research

Opportunities for more research include interviewing administrators in other specialized schools in counties in Northern California. Additional research is needed regarding the leadership practices of administrators at facilities that provide multiple services, for example, adoption support services and medical care for students with health-related disabilities. Further research is needed into what training is provided for administrators of specialized schools.

Overall Significance of the Study

Administrators working in specialized schools can become isolated. Within a school, it seems that the main role of the administrator is to facilitate communication not just within the education staff, but between the educational staff and the other teams that support students in all areas of their lives. Networking opportunities that teachers in public schools are offered are not available for non-public or private school teachers; the systems and structures that support the evolution and sharing of best practices are not available to leaders outside the public system. For counties with multiple small specialized schools, it might be suggested that establishing a consistent support group or networking event for teachers and administrators of those schools might provide a way for sharing ideas and solving problems.

Effective administration of specialized schools is not just an important issue for schools struggling with IDEA compliance, but a fundamental human rights issue. Undereducated students with special needs often end up incarcerated or otherwise institutionalized. The population of students who do not receive appropriate education is likely to increase as local, national and global economic pressures continue, and services for the prevention and treatment of mental health for children are cut. With resources tightly managed, placement in specialized schools will be reserved for the most extreme cases and most litigious parents. No matter how challenging their behaviors, or how complex their needs, all students have the right to free and appropriate education, and future generations deserve a world in which every student receives the full benefit of educational services appropriate to their needs.

About the Author

Lousy at poker, great at charades; the author is a former classroom teacher and special education program administrator interested in the overlap between hands-on project-based learning, special education, and alternative and informal learning environments. She is currently working as an educational consultant. Her recent projects include consulting with Carol Dweck's Mindset Works software project, authoring accommodations for students with learning differences for Pearson Publishing, developing school-age programs for the Children's Museum of Sonoma County, and advocating for families and students with special needs.

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