

Framing issues of leadership for special education: introduction to the special issue

Welcome to *Framing Issues of Leadership for Special Education*, a special issue of the *Journal of Educational Administration (JEA)*. The idea to create an issue devoted to contemporary topics in leadership for leaders responsible for students receiving special education services began with a number of conversations with colleagues regarding the changing nature of schools and students, definitions of “general” and “special” education, and the challenge to articulate and reframe our approaches to leadership in today’s ever shifting context. The literature has long asserted the crucial role leaders play is ensuring that the needs of all students are addressed appropriately and in keeping with the special education policies and regulations that apply to local, state, national and international contexts.

With respect to students with disabilities, there is fundamental agreement that leaders and administrators of special education are responsible for all students by providing evidence-based instructional practices, access to achieving in the general education curriculum, and adequate resources to support teaching and learning (Boscardin, 2004; DiPaola and Walther-Thomas, 2003). Moreover, transformative leaders effectively communicate underlying principles and values associated with the provision of special education and ensure that these are reflected in the systemic approaches employed in their districts and regions.

The success of creating responsive educational systems relies on leaders who continuously review student and district level outcomes to ensure compliance with the law and equity and access in accordance with broader programmatic and systemic goals. These expectations are well-established through research and policy; that said, leaders are often challenged to move beyond approaches that emphasize effective management to those that hone deeper and more advanced elements of leadership, including approaches that take into account the complex nature of today’s educational environments.

The global policy contexts related to students with disabilities have changed in recent years, and these changes have brought about new challenges and opportunities for leaders. In most countries, early special education policies assumed a civil rights orientation designed to promote *access* for students with disabilities. Later, policies evolved with the advent of an emphasis on evidenced-based practices that challenged leaders to promote *accountability* for student success, while more recently, leaders have been asked to take on the broader goal of promoting socially just practices that support *equity and opportunity*, in addition to access, for students with disabilities and their families, as well as, students from historically under-represented backgrounds and individual identities (Boscardin and Lashley, 2019).

This special issue of *JEA* undertakes to bring this more complex vision of leadership into focus by identifying contemporary issues and giving guidance to leaders as they align priority demands and values within their organizations. As guest editors, we framed this special issue as an opportunity to invite authors with diverse and global perspectives and experiences to share their current thinking and research on leadership in ways that highlight the challenges of our time and foreground collaborative, participatory and democratic approaches to leadership that emphasize inclusion and recognize the need to move beyond binary points of view that organize students according to the extent to which they are (or are not) recognized as having a disability.

Our intent has been to surface approaches to leadership that take into account principles of access, equity and inclusion that apply to students with disabilities as well as those from other



marginalized backgrounds (e.g. students from various racial, cultural, linguistic and socioeconomic backgrounds and those whose sexual and gender orientations fall outside of normative models). We underscore the universality of these principles, noting their importance regardless of the policies and practices in place within and across individual countries.

The articles accepted for publication cover a range of topics that together, provide a holistic view of inclusive leadership. The special issue begins with a provocative article by Kozleski and colleagues, who position an approach known as DisCrit as an entry point into the need to disrupt current practices in special education for the purposes of questioning the degree to which the current system may be reifying – rather than dismantling – a system that tends to result in discriminatory practices for students of color with disabilities. The second piece by Knackstedt and Cornett challenges the basic assumptions of the special education system established in the United States, with a particular focus on the tendency of the current model to promote a deficit-based and medically oriented model for identifying students with disabilities, rather than creating a system that supports civil rights. The following two articles (i.e. Oskarsdottir *et al.*, and deMatthews *et al.*) propose two frameworks, one theoretical and the other more pragmatic, for thinking about how the leadership conversation for special education might shift to a futures-orientation. Oskarsdottir and colleagues challenge us to think more broadly and deeply about the possibility of moving beyond a dichotomous view of education to one that provides equal access to students experiencing *all* forms of discrimination and exclusion, while deMatthews and colleagues provide a framework for considering new approaches to inclusive school-based approaches to leadership. The fifth article (our own) on evaluation synthesizes various approaches to evaluation and their relationship to specific leadership styles previously identified in the literature. In particular, we note the potential for innovative leaders to engage responsive contemporary and participatory approaches to evaluation that give primacy to consumers' experiences, opinions and multiple perspectives of those who might have otherwise been disenfranchised. Finally, Gumpel and colleagues provide a thoughtful critique and reinforce several key points made across each of the articles, including the need to abandon ableist movements and associated power structures to fully implement inclusion through careful alignment of philosophy, policy and practices.

Taken together, these articles provide a great deal of “food for thought” and direction for school leaders. Individually and collectively, they challenge our assumptions about special education and leadership and our geocentric tendencies, while providing frameworks and directions for leaders as they strive to implement and evaluate principles of access, equity and inclusion on a global scale.

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Further reading

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