

## CONCEPTUAL STUDY

# Preparing Educational Leaders for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Inclusive School Communities: Transforming University Preparation Programs

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### Abstract

University educational leadership preparation programs whose mission is to prepare Transitional Kindergarten through 12th grade (TK-12) school administrators need to transform their curriculum so that all leaders (not just special education leaders) have the knowledge and skills to create inclusive school communities that truly include all students. Evidence suggests that even though there are policies, laws, recommendations and an empirical base that supports inclusive education for students with disabilities, equity, achievement and opportunity gaps remain in our nation's public schools. The purpose of this conceptual study is to provide a look at redesigned preparation programs built on professional standards changes, evidence-based practices, and practice-based evidence correlated with inclusive school communities. Transformed preparation programs prepare educational leaders who lead inclusive school communities in closing the gaps for students with disabilities, considering that 100% of the students spend 80% or more of their day in general education classrooms. The impact for students with disabilities is that they experience equity, social justice and their civil rights for education in inclusive school communities where *all* benefit.

**Key Words:** Principal preparation, inclusive schools, special education, social justice, civil rights

### Introduction

Educational leaders are responsible for leading schools that are inclusive and high-achieving for all students. Effective inclusive schools are “places where students with disabilities are valued and active participants and where they are provided supports needed to succeed in the academic, social, and extra-curricular activities of the school” (McLeskey, Waldron, Spooner, & Algozzine, 2014, p. 4). It is true that substantial changes in the education of students with disabilities have occurred over the last twenty-five years. For example, the proportion of students with disabilities receiving special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004) who spend 80% or more of the school day in general education classrooms increased from 33% in 1990 to 62% in 2014 (Digest of Education Statistics, 2016). Students with disabilities who are most likely to be included are those with speech or language impairments, specific learning disabilities, physical disabilities, visual impairments, other health impairments and developmental delays (Digest of Education Statistics, 2016). Those students with disabilities who spent the least amount of time in inclusive school settings were students with emotional and behavior disorders, intellectual disabilities, or multiple disabilities (Digest of Education Statistics, 2016). Although the trend is increasing to include students with disabilities in general education classrooms, there are still many students excluded from their civil right to inclusive education.

Given that educational leaders are a significant influence on effective inclusion practices, the purpose of this reflective essay on preparing educational leaders for 21<sup>st</sup> century inclusive school communities is to share how educational leadership

preparation programs can be redesigned. Redesigned leadership preparation programs built on professional standards changes, evidenced-based practices (EBPs), and practice-based evidence (PBE) correlated with students with disabilities and special education are predicted to benefit all. This prediction is based on the work of Billingsley, McLeskey and Crockett (2014). They found that university leadership preparation programs better prepared leaders for inclusive and high achieving schools for students with disabilities when they implemented EBPs and PBE (Billingsley et al., 2014). The EBPs and PBE that Billingsley et al. suggested included program evaluation and integration of explicit information about students with disabilities in preparation programs.

The foundation for inclusive education settings stems from a history of decisions by influential groups across the world and landmark legislation in the United States of America. According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, children have a fundamental human right to quality education and to be treated with dignity (United Nations, 1948). Ninety-two governments and twenty-five international organizations developed the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action that described the policy shifts required to promote inclusive education for students with disabilities (UNESCO, 1994). Furthermore, according to this dominant policy for educating students with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), it is a right of all students to be educated in the mainstream or general education setting (Lindsay as cited in Hattie & Anderman, 2013). The passage of the Education of all Handicapped Act of 1975 (EHA, 1975) and the reauthorizations of that act in the form of the IDEA (1990, 1997, 2004) guarantees the right to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE) for children with disabilities. The California Task Force on Special Education recommended a coherent education system. The task force envisions general and special education working seamlessly together

as one system designed to meet the needs of all students (One System: Reforming Education to Serve All Students [One System], 2015).

Additionally, researchers found that students with moderate and mild disabilities were more likely to achieve academically, behaviorally and socially in inclusive learning environments (e.g., Hattie & Anderman, 2013; Lane, Oakes, & Menzies, 2014). Despite this strong foundation that supports inclusive school communities for students with and without disabilities, many students experience marginalization. Marginalization becomes a social justice issue for the students because of denied access, opportunity, and their rights to equitable, inclusive education.

Evidence suggests that even though there are policies, laws, recommendations and an empirical base that supports inclusive education for students with disabilities, equity and opportunity gaps remain in our nation's public schools (Hattie & Alderman, 2013; IDEA, 2004; Lane et al., 2014; United Nations, 1948; UNESCO, 1994). The Civil Rights Data Collection (2016) reported data for 99.2% school districts in the U.S. on 1) school discipline, 2) restraint and seclusion, 3) early learning, 4) college and career readiness, 5) chronic student absenteeism, and 6) teacher and staffing equity. Students with disabilities served by IDEA represent only 12% of all students in K-12 school settings (CRDC, 2016; IDEA, 2004). The CRDC report (2016) revealed that in all but two areas (i.e., early learning, teacher and staffing equity) students with disabilities were reported to experience significant equity and opportunity gaps compared to their peers without disabilities.

In the area of school discipline, the CRDC (2016) reported that students with disabilities are more than twice as likely to receive one or more out-of-school suspensions as students without disabilities. Students of color who have a disability are more likely to receive one or more out-of-school suspensions than white students. Students of color

are even more likely to be identified as having a disability and then face harsher discipline than their white peers.

Students with disabilities are more likely to be secluded or physically restrained than their peers without disabilities as a consequence for behavior problems. Of the more than 100,000 students who were placed in seclusion or physically restrained at school, 69,000 (67%) of those were students with disabilities (CRDC, 2016). As a result of these exclusionary practices, students with disabilities are denied access to: a FAPE (IDEA, 2004; Peterson, Ryan & Rozalski, 2013); the general education curriculum and enhancement of their IEP goals as defined by Endrew (Turnbull, Turnbull & Cooper, 2018; Yell & Bateman, 2017); and, their civil right to an inclusive education (Reece et al., 2013; UNESCO, 1994).

College and career readiness is an opportunity that is accessible for some but not all (CRDC, 2016). Students with disabilities represent only 6% of students enrolled in Algebra II; 1% of students enrolled in calculus; and 6% of students enrolled in physics. Similarly, students with disabilities represent fewer than 3% of gifted and talented education (GATE) students nationwide. Fewer than 2% of them enrolled in at least one advanced placement (AP) course. Students with disabilities are more likely to be retained or held back in high school than students without disabilities.

Chronic student absenteeism (i.e., absent 15 or more school days during the school year) presents another equity and opportunity gap issue for students with disabilities (CRDC, 2016). High school students with disabilities are 1.4 times as likely to be chronically absent as high school students without disabilities. Elementary school students with disabilities are 1.5 times as likely to be chronically absent as their peers without disabilities.

The CRDC data are not new, shocking or unique to any one state in the U.S. For example, California reported similar information about students with disabilities (One System, 2015). It is disturbing,

though, that it is still an issue forty-three years after the passage of landmark legislation designed to promote an equitable opportunity and re-guarantee the civil right to an education for students with disabilities. Even more disturbing is the fact that most preparation programs do not provide educational leaders with the opportunities to develop the necessary special education knowledge and expertise they need to be socially just leaders of inclusive schools (Pazey & Cole as cited in Grogan, 2013). Billingsley et al. also reported that “the majority of evidence suggests that principals are not well prepared to address the needs of students with disabilities and others who struggle in school” (2014, p. 7). The experience of the author of this essay is that many of the candidates in the educational leadership program where she was a professor have little knowledge about students with disabilities and special education even though they have teaching credentials and experience in general education.

## **Professional Standards Changes**

### **CEC’s Standards for Professional Preparation**

The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) is an international organization comprising over 27,000 members. This organization sets the professional standards for high-quality education for children and youth with exceptionalities, including children who have disabilities and those who are gifted and talented. Boscardin, Schulze, Rude, and Tudryn (2018) included CEC standards in their research and suggested that “professional standards if used appropriately, guide preparation, induction, and professional development” (p. 6). CEC is the leading professional organization for special educators and has advocated for well-prepared and high-quality professionals for over 85 years (CEC, 2018). CEC’s Standards for the Preparation of Advanced Special Education Professionals “are designed for candidates who are already special educators and seeking training in a new role – such as... special education administration - who may be at the master’s, specialist or doctoral level” (CEC, 2015, p.

2). The standards include an advanced specialty set for “Special Education Administration Specialist” (CEC, 2015, p. 100). This set of seven standards describes knowledge and skills items in assessment, school improvement, instruction, ethical principles, collaboration, and programs and services (Tudryn, Boscardin, & Wells, 2016). These standards apply to the preparation of candidates seeking special education administration credentials and licenses. Interestingly, the CEC standards describe many of the areas of responsibilities that mirror preparation of candidates for other educational leader credentials and licenses (e.g., Kearney, 2015; National Policy Board for Educational Administration [NPBEA], 2015). The difference is that the CEC standards are specific to preparing candidates regarding special education and students with disabilities whereas the other standards merely allude to preparing candidates to work with students with these needs. For example, the Kearney (2015) and NPBEA (2015) standards use implicit terms (e.g., all students, inclusive settings) whereas the CEC standards (2015) use explicit terms (e.g., students with disabilities).

#### **NPBEA and California Standards**

The NPBEA provided Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (2015). This set of standards is student-centered and implicitly addresses inclusive education. The standards do not use explicit language that refers to students with disabilities. However, an earlier version of NPBEA approved standards (2011), “implicitly stressed a call to incorporate and mandate curriculum content related to special education and special education law” (Pazey & Cole as cited in Grogan, 2013, p. 175). Likewise, the California Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (CPSEL), the California Administrator Performance Expectations (CAPE) and the California Administrator Content Expectations (CACE) implicitly identify what a school administrator must know and be able to do in order to demonstrate effective leadership related to students with disabilities and special education

(Commission on Teacher Credentialing [CTC], 2016). The CPSEL, CAPE, and CACE are standards set by the CTC for candidates pursuing credentials to become educational leaders. The most recent changes to these standards reflect “an increased emphasis on equity, access, opportunity, and empowerment for all members of the school community” (Kearney, 2015, p. 2).

Both the CTC (2016) and NPBEA (2015) standards emphasize interdependent domains of leadership knowledge and skills that are linked to student achievement and imply inclusiveness. These domains include 1) mission, vision, and core values; 2) ethics, professional norms, equity and integrity, and cultural responsiveness; 3) community of care and support for students; 4) curriculum, instruction, and assessment; 5) meaningful engagement of families and community; 6) operations and management; and 7) professional capacity of school personnel and professional community for teachers and staff (CTC, 2016; NPBEA, 2015).

The CEC, CTC, and NPBEA provide examples of professional standards changes that were designed to assist educational leadership preparation programs in designing programs that address the needs of students with disabilities in inclusive school communities. These needs include access to equitable, inclusive education in a socially just school environment. Students with disabilities in inclusive school communities may rest assured that their well-prepared principal and other educational leaders know about and are skillful in all aspects of education, including special education.

#### **Evidenced-Based Practices**

##### **Preparation of Educational Leaders**

In addition to professional standards changes there is overwhelming support in the literature for the need for educational leaders to be prepared to educate students with disabilities in inclusive settings (Bateman & Bateman, 2014; Billingsley et al., 2014; McLeskey et al., 2014; One System, 2015; Pazey & Cole as cited in Grogan, 2013). These

same authors indicated, however, that educational leaders, except those in programs specific to the preparation of special education administrators, receive little or no preparation in university programs about students with disabilities and special education (CEC, 2015; McLeskey et al., 2014). In the next section two examples of evidenced-based practices (EBPs) for preparing principals and other educational leaders are provided (Bateman & Bateman, 2014; Billingsley et al., 2014). The examples offered here are guides for transforming university educational leader preparation programs that promote the preparation of 21<sup>st</sup> century leaders for inclusive school communities.

### **Examples of EBPs for Preparing Principals and Other Educational Leaders**

Significant changes have occurred in inclusive settings. In order to provide all students in their care with access to an equitable, socially just and quality education principals face challenges to be knowledgeable and skillful in sharing responsibilities and school-wide collaboration (Riehl, 2009). "Principals set the tone for the school community and are the chief advocate for special education" (Bateman & Bateman, 2014, p. 9). It is vital that university faculty pay attention to the program design for their preparation of educational leaders so that leaders are ready to take on the responsibilities described by Bateman and Bateman (2014) and Billingsley et al. (2014). The guide for principals (Bateman & Bateman, 2014) and innovation configuration (Billingsley, 2014) examples are described in the following paragraphs.

### **Guide for Principals Example**

Bateman and Bateman (2014) offered a practical guide for principals based on nine themes related to the principal's primary responsibilities. The themes include that the principal is responsible for:

1. the education of all students in the school,
2. being familiar with the concept and practice of special education,
3. ensuring that staff members know what is necessary for providing special education services,
4. verifying that staff members are appropriately implementing services for students with disabilities,
5. leading efforts for data collection,
6. ensuring that all staff members are aware of the process for identifying students with disabilities,
7. being prepared to lead meetings related to services for students with disabilities,
8. needing to know all students in the building and be ready to talk about them, and
9. needing to know how to prevent discipline problems (Bateman & Bateman, 2014, p. 4).

### **Innovation Configuration Example**

Billingsley et al. (2014) described an EBP called "innovation configuration matrix" (IC) for consideration by university preparation programs to guide educational leaders toward inclusive and high-achieving schools for students with disabilities. The IC is a tool that can be used to evaluate course syllabi in educational leadership preparation programs. The IC is based on the Billingsley et al. (2014) review of the literature on the use of EBPs in inclusive school settings related to principal leadership. Their review revealed that principals are crucial in creating a vision and providing leadership for inclusive school communities. Unfortunately, many principals are inadequately prepared to carry out such leadership roles and responsibilities due to the lack of emphasis on the topic of inclusive

schools in university preparation programs. Billingsley et al. (2014) also found that professional leadership standards call for implicit rather than explicit coverage of topics related to students with disabilities and inclusive education. They suggested that “it is necessary to be more explicit regarding the knowledge and skills that should be included in leadership programs to prepare principals to address the needs of students with disabilities in inclusive settings” (Billingsley et al., 2014, p. 10). According to Billingsley et al. (2014), four topics must be explicitly included in preparation programs to prepare effective leaders for inclusive schools. These topics include 1) instructional leadership for all students, 2) principal leadership for inclusive schools, 3) parent leadership and support, and 4) the importance of district and state leadership. These topics are reflected in the Billingsley et al. (2014) IC tool. The following paragraphs briefly describe the topics.

**Topic #1: Instructional leadership for all students** is related to the work of the principal toward students’ instructional improvement. Billingsley et al. (2014) reported on their review of EBPs of principals who shared leadership to improve student learning through six core leadership dimensions:

1. ensures “academic press” described as maintaining high expectations for achievement for all students,
2. develops a positive disciplinary climate,
3. ensures high-quality instruction,
4. develops a system for progress monitoring,
5. organizes working conditions for instructional effectiveness, and
6. provides opportunities for professional learning and teacher evaluation.

Principals and other leaders whose focus is on their responsibilities of instructional leadership for all students will realize improved student academic, behavioral and social outcomes (Boscardin et al., 2018; Lane et al., 2014).

**Topic #2: Principal leadership for inclusive schools** involves setting the direction for the school and motivating teachers and staff to support the vision and value the work (Billingsley et al., 2014). According to the authors addressing these components is critical: 1) building a shared vision and commitment, 2) developing a professional community that shares the responsibility for the learning of all students, 3) redesigning the school for inclusive education, and 4) sharing responsibility for leadership.

**Topic #3: Parent leadership and support** is closely linked to improved student outcomes and therefore related to principal leadership preparation (Billingsley et al., 2014). Parent engagement and involvement was identified as an essential factor in developing effective inclusive schools. EBPs identified as critical components of leadership for parent engagement included 1) engaging parents to enhance students’ opportunities for learning, and 2) engaging parents in shared decision-making as inclusive schools are developed and sustained.

**Topic #4: The importance of district and state leadership** has become apparent given the “emerging evidence which suggests that students’ academic achievement improves when district and state policies align with school-wide commitments to high-quality instruction for all learners” (Billingsley et al., 2014, p. 38). Further, Kozleski and Huber posited that “[i]n a well-aligned system, the delivery of special education is conceptualized as a seamless system of supports and services delivered within the context of an equitable and culturally responsive general education system” (as cited in Billingsley et al., 2014, p. 38). Principals who have been prepared to collaborate with state and district leaders will be in the best position to:

1. strengthen the alignment of systems at the state, district, and local levels that are in the best interest of all students;
2. strengthen decision-making that is ethically sound and legally correct regarding the administration of special education;

3. work with district special education administrators to strengthen instruction for all learners; and
4. work with district special education administrators who can provide support for strengthening relationships with families and agencies to improve outcomes for students with disabilities (Billingsley et al., 2014).

Principals and others leaders who are prepared to work with district level administrators, state department of education personnel and local education agencies will find they are in the best position to positively affect the education of all students in inclusive school communities (Melloy, Cieminski & Sundeen, 2018; Miller, 2018).

Bateman and Bateman (2014) and Billingsley et al. (2014) offer examples of transformational educational leadership preparation programs for preparing educational leaders for inclusive schools based on EBPs. There are some similarities between the two examples. The similarities include the principal being prepared to be an instructional leader who leads faculty, parents and community members in a shared vision that values high-quality inclusive education for all students. The EBPs briefly reviewed in this essay are reflective of the professional standards that are meant to guide educational leadership preparation programs – also reviewed in this essay (CEC, 2015; Kearney, 2015; NPBEA, 2015). The next section of this reflective essay presents information on practice-based evidence (PBE) of preliminary results of an educational leadership program that was redesigned to meet the needs of 21<sup>st</sup> century educational leaders.

## Practice-Based Evidence

### Preparation Program Redesign Based on CTC Standards

The CTC in collaboration with the California Department of Education (CDE) regularly updates the professional standards that guide the practice of teachers and educational leaders. The most recent updates to the CTC professional standards for educational leadership programs (CPSEL, CAPE, CACE) were adopted in 2013 with updates in June 2016 (CTC, 2016). Based on these updates, the Educational Leadership Program at a California university was redesigned and implemented over a three-year period. The focus of the redesigned program is on graduate level coursework. Completing the program results in either a Master's Degree in Educational Leadership with a credential in Administrative Services, or an Administrative Services credential without a Master's Degree in Educational Leadership.

During the redesign process, there was much discussion among faculty and key stakeholders about preparing educational leaders for inclusive school communities that would provide equitable, socially just and culturally responsive opportunities for all TK-12 students. Discussions included mention of students with disabilities, special education, and making sure that these topics were part of the curriculum. Although these topics are addressed implicitly in coursework as required by CTC standards, no course was added to the Educational Leadership program that would address these topics explicitly. The redesign included aligning the Educational Leadership Program curriculum (e.g., coursework, field experiences) with the CTC professional standards (CTC, 2016; Kearney, 2015). Two courses in particular focus on the CTC professional standards related to students with special needs. The titles of these courses are "Program Interventions" and "Organizational Culture and Change." The course on program interventions is designed to enhance educational leaders' knowledge and skills in multi-tiered systems of support (McIntosh & Goodman, 2016). The focus of the course on organizational culture and change

is on developing educational leaders’ professional knowledge and skills related to building inclusive school culture and environment (Chance, 2013; Lencioni, 2012).

The CTC professional standards for the preparation of educational leaders for inclusive schools are implicit but not explicit (CTC, 2016). To have included a course specific to special education and students with disabilities in the curriculum would have deviated from the CTC professional standards. For example, the language of CPSEL 1 is “Development and Implementation of a Shared Vision – Education leaders facilitate the development and implementation of a shared vision of learning and growth of all students” (Kearney, 2015, p. 6). Although there is some language within the description of practice (DOP) statement for CPSEL 1 (e.g., special needs), there is no explicit language about students with disabilities or special education in this or the other five CPSEL. The CAPE and CACE aligned with the CPSEL include implicit but not explicit language about students with disabilities.

To determine the effect that the redesigned program had on leadership program students’ acquisition of knowledge and skills about students with disabilities and special education, students were asked to complete an informal survey related to this topic. The following section describes the students’ responses to the survey.

**Students’ Responses to the Survey About the Redesigned Program**

In an informal survey of graduate students enrolled in the redesigned Educational Leadership program, the students were asked to answer questions about their preparation for inclusive schools as principals. The survey’s ten questions were based on Bateman and Bateman’s (2014) nine themes and the primary responsibilities of principals (see Table 1). The majority of the students’ responses indicated that they are not prepared to lead inclusive school communities based on their preparation (see Figure 1). Students responded that they know little to nothing about TK-12 students with disabilities and special education. The students who responded that they are prepared and have knowledge about TK-12

**Inclusive School Communities**

**Table 1. Student Survey About Their Preparation for Leading Inclusive Schools as Principals**

**Themes and Questions**

Theme	Survey Question
Special Education Law	I know about the main laws related to special education.
Staffing	I have the knowledge and skills needed to hire special education faculty and staff.
Eligibility	I am knowledgeable about the educational leader’s role in special education eligibility process.
Individualized Education Program (IEP)	I understand the IEP and the educational leader’s role in the IEP.
Placement	I am knowledgeable about placement options, how to make decisions and the role educational leaders play in making those decisions.
Instructional Leadership	I have the knowledge and skills to be an instructional leader as it relates to special education.
Discipline	I am knowledgeable and can apply the skills needed by an educational leader in disciplining students with disabilities.
Accountability	I have the knowledge and skills needed by an educational leader to supervise, monitor and evaluate special education teachers.
School Counselors	I know as an educational leader how to support special education teachers.



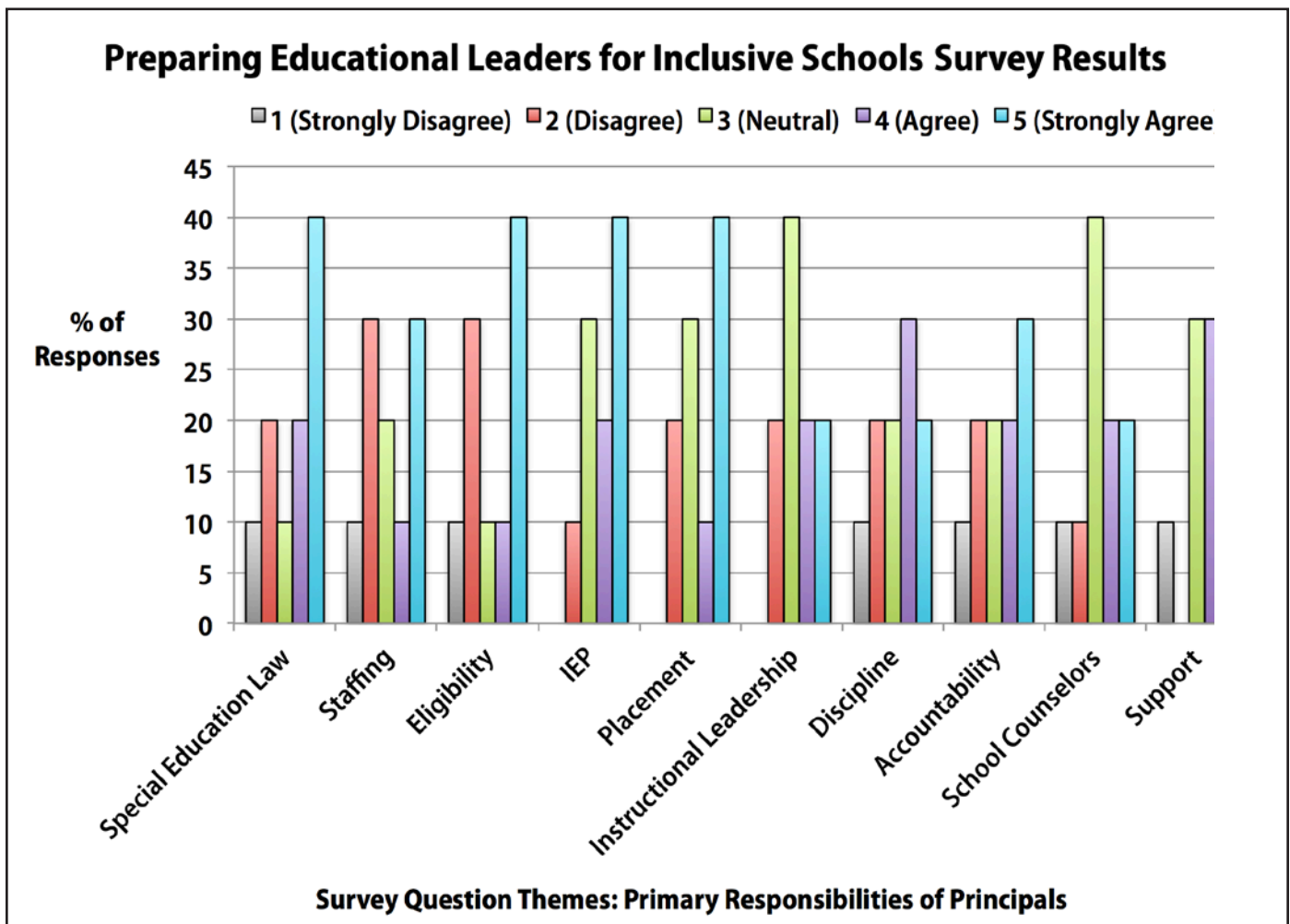


Figure 1.

students with disabilities and special education gained that knowledge elsewhere but not in the redesigned Educational Leadership program. These data are similar to that reported in the literature (Billingsley & McLeskey as cited in McLeskey et al., 2014; Pazez & Cole as cited in Grogan, 2013). Given that TK-12 students with disabilities and special education was not an explicitly targeted topic, but rather an implicit topic for the redesigned Educational Leadership program redesign, these limited data provide some food for thought as the faculty continues to design a preparation program for 21<sup>st</sup> century educational leaders for inclusive school communities.

### Conclusion

At this juncture, given the findings from this conceptual study related to professional standards changes, EBPs and PBE, it is time for faculty to take a look at Educational Leadership preparation programs and seriously consider changes that are needed if we indeed are interested and invested in preparing 21<sup>st</sup> century educational leaders for inclusive school communities.

The following are recommendations for transforming educational leadership preparation programs for creating inclusive school communities.

- Institutions of higher education schools of education collaborate with state departments of education administrator licensing commissions to develop standards that explicitly state knowledge and skills that principals and other educational leaders must know in topics regarding students with specific disabilities as a result of completing a licensing program.
- Faculty in educational leadership programs review their curricula to determine whether or not principal and other educational leader candidates are being adequately prepared to lead in inclusive school settings:
  - Evaluate course syllabi using innovation configuration (Billingsley et al., 2014).
  - Collect data from alumni of educational leadership programs to get information about preparation and get suggestions for improvement.
  - Collect data from key stakeholders in the field (e.g., school district personnel who hire educational leadership program alumni) as principals, assistant principals.
  - Based on these data, make needed changes to the curricula to strengthen educational leadership programs in order to prepare principals and other educational leaders who lead inclusive and high-achieving schools (e.g., add a course that explicitly teaches about students with disabilities).

These transformed university preparation programs will prepare educational leaders who lead inclusive school communities in closing the gaps for students with disabilities because 100% of the students spend 80% or more of their day in general education classrooms. The effects for students with disabilities are that they experience equity, social justice and their civil rights for education in inclusive school communities where *all* benefit.

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