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Special Issue: In the Smelter: Leading Special Education in an Era of Systems Redesign

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The Editorial Mission

The primary goal of the *Journal of Special Education Leadership* is to provide both practicing administrators and researchers of special education administration and policy with relevant tools and sources of information based on recent advances in administrative theory, research, and practice. The *Journal of Special Education Leadership* is a journal dedicated to issues in special education administration, leadership, and policy. It is referred journal that directly supports CASE’s main objectives, which are to foster research, learning, teaching, and practice in the field of special education administration and to encourage the extension of special education administration knowledge to other fields. Articles for the *Journal of Special Education Leadership* should enhance knowledge about the process of managing special education service delivery systems, as well as reflect on significant techniques, trends, and issues growing out of research on special education. Preference will be given to articles that have a broad appeal, wide applicability, and immediate usefulness to administrators, other practitioners, and researchers.
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This issue of JSEL, 25(1), is a special issue titled *In the Smelter: Leading Special Education in an Era of Systems Redesign*, guest edited by Drs. Elizabeth Kosleski and Alfredo Artiles. These articles are intended to inform and guide system redesigns that are supportive, empowering, and inspirational for students with disabilities from diverse backgrounds. The authors intend to challenge our thinking about equity, access, and social justice as it relates to the delivery of special education services to disparate populations. Oyler and Fuentes investigate the challenges facing special education leadership in high-poverty schools in urban settings. Shealy, Thomas, and Sparks examine the special case of charter schools and whether special education and social justice are actually intertwined when formulating educational programs. Connor provides a rich in-depth case study of system change to special education in the New York Public School System. McHatton, Glenn, Sue, and Gordon explore the intersections of personal social histories, historical legacies, and situated contexts as they relate to local special education leadership practices. Harper discusses the role of inequitable practices on the development of systems that are socially just. Lastly, Schribner reflects on the messages leaders send and their inevitable impact on students with disabilities and their families.

CASE is very appreciative of the time, effort, and excellent contributions made to this issue of JSEL by Drs. Kosleski and Artiles and the cadre of authors. The collection of articles in this issue of JSEL highlights the attention and work required to promote, support, and develop leadership that results in responsive systems that improve the educational outcomes of students with disabilities. On behalf of the CASE Executive Committee, we hope you enjoy this issue of JSEL.

Mary Lynn Boscardin, Ph.D., Editor
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Special education is contested practice. What it is intended to be, who it is intended to serve, and the conditions under which it benefits some or all students and families continue to be debated among practitioners, policy makers, scholars, and school leaders. The wide variability in student experiences from state to state and district to district speaks to special education’s connections to historical structures and social systems. For instance, although about 60% of all special education students are served in general education more than 80% of each day, this ranges by state and territory from 20% to 93% of the special education student body (Gibson & Kozleski, 2011). Furthermore, the proportion of students in special education also ranges widely by disability category, region of the country, and student ethnicity, suggesting that disproportionate representation of students in special education is also connected to local contexts (e.g., financial, political, and sociological), histories, and practices (Artiles, 2011; Kozleski & Artiles, in press).

At a time when the U.S. education system is being redesigned through assessment, core content standards, and a renewed focus on defining and assessing teacher quality/effectiveness, the role of special education seems tangential to the reform zeitgeist. These changes are shaping a new identity for the special education field, although it is still unclear what its new character will become. This special issue is designed to explore fracture lines between idealized notions of what special education is supposed to be and the meanings and roles that special education plays in schools and districts as they deal with financial crises and overwhelming external pressures to improve outcomes. We pay particular attention to the ways in which inequities associated with multiple forms of difference (e.g., race, social class) mediate the emerging roles and meanings of special education in these times of crisis and transition.

How can special education leaders make sense of this variability, use their positions to respond to these issues, and build a coherent set of practices within their communities while dealing with the substantive issues of social justice embedded in special education law? In this issue, authors address these questions by drawing from specific situations and contexts to trouble the ways in which leaders mediate, teach, and sustain opportunities to learn for students with disabilities. We were fortunate to be able to draw on the expertise of researchers and practitioners from a variety of contexts across the United States: Kansas City, Missouri; Madison, Wisconsin; New York City, New York; Phoenix, Arizona; and Tampa, Florida.

Nothing about the work reported here offers straight answers; the contributions to this special issue remind us that professional practices and reform movements are fraught with tensions and complexity, embody deep intersections between biographical trajectories and historical legacies, and shed light on the unintended casualties of equity-inspired systemic change initiatives. In addition, the work reported in this special issue makes visible practitioners’ capacity to use their agency in strategic ways in the midst of complicated institutional restructuring processes and illustrates educators’ ability to transcend personal needs for the sake of deepening professional practice and make what is being learned transparent so that others can leverage change processes. We thank our authors and you, the readers, for engaging in this work and making it matter each and every day.

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Defining Leadership in Charter Schools: Examining the Intersection of Social Justice and Special Education

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In this paper the authors examine research on special education and charter schools to:

- Document trends in service delivery, quality of instruction, and family engagement.
- Interrogate the intersection of social justice and special education situated within the context of an urban charter school.
- Make recommendations for leading charter schools with an emphasis on social justice particularly for students with disabilities.

Education is the key to unlock the golden door of freedom.—George Washington Carver

Much of the research on social justice and equity in special education has centered on examining the persistent problem of disproportionate representation in special education and the implications of this problem for the educational experiences of learners from diverse backgrounds, particularly African Americans. The discourse on the overrepresentation of learners from certain ethnic groups, including African Americans and Latinos, in specific special education programs and the underrepresentation of those groups in programs for the gifted and talented has primarily addressed the following areas: the construction of disability; (Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2011; Rice, 2006); identification and placement concerns (O’Connor & Fernandez, 2006; Ferri & Connor, 2005; Parrish, 2002; Skiba, Simmons, & Ritter, 2006); ineffective teaching in general education (Blanchett, 2006; Townsend, 2002); the cultural disconnect between White teachers and their learners from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds (Gay, 2000, 2002; Green, 2007; Hollins, 2008; Howard, 2003), and program quality in special education (Blanchett, 2005, 2006; Dunn, 1968; Harry & Klingner, 2006). Ferguson, Kozleski, and Smith (2003) noted that, historically, the beliefs of special education have resulted in separate experiences and programs and promulgate disproportionate representation. Yet, outside this ongoing dialogue in special education directed primarily toward disproportionate representation and early advocacy efforts in advancing inclusive practices (Gerrard, 1994), the discourse on the intersection of social justice and special education is a fairly new phenomenon (Blanchett, Klingner, & Harry, 2009; Connor & Ferri, 2007).

Traditionally, charter schools have unique foci and missions that drive the experiences of learners and the ways in which the schools engage with learners and their families (DePedro, 2011; Estes, 2009; Rhim, Ahearn, & Lange, 2007).

In discussing and interrogating the intersection of social justice and special education, the authors...
rely upon Novak’s (2000) definition of social justice. “Social justice rightly understood is a specific habit of justice that is “social” in two senses. First, the skills it requires are those of inspiring, working with, and organizing others to accomplish together a work of justice.” Further, a recognition model of social justice addresses the mobilization of movements that value the contributions of diverse groups, and the use of the power of experience to advocate for equitable societal policies (North, 2006). The emphasis of social justice in the field of special education beyond advocacy of inclusive practices has contributed to a growing body of work aimed at critically examining the role of race, gender, and socioeconomic status on schooling and the role of education professionals in transforming systems (Blanchett, 2006; Blanchett, Klingner, & Harry, 2009; Ferguson et al., 2003; Fierros & Conroy, 2002; Harry & Kline, 2006; Parrish, 2002).

As calls for accountability in education have increased, the growth of charter schools as an antidote to well-intentioned but often misguided efforts at school reform has resulted in a convergence of interests for many families of learners with disabilities and special educators (Lange & Lehr, 2000). Traditionally, charter schools have unique foci and missions that drive the experiences of learners and the ways in which the schools engage with learners and their families (DePedro, 2011; Estes, 2009; Rhim, Ahearn, & Lange, 2007). The promise of innovation and the need for freedom and choice have led families of learners with disabilities to seek charter schools as an alternative to public schools, which have often failed to meet the unique needs of learners with disabilities, specifically those from diverse backgrounds (Estes, 2004). Embedded in counter stories about personalization and individualized educational experiences generated by charter schools is the expectation that charter schools have a special commitment to social justice and equity. While there is limited research that documents the extent to which public charter schools are better equipped to address social justice and equity than their public counterparts (Frankenburg, 2011; Ritter, Jensen, Kisida, & McGee, 2010), there remains the belief among consumers and leaders of charter schools that freedom from bureaucracy and limited regulation coupled with a specific mission will lead to positive learner outcomes (Lange & Lehr, 2005).

After decades of segregation and desegregation that resulted in persistent trends of underachievement, the educational climate was ripe for charter schools...

It is important to understand the historical context that provided the foundation for the rise of charter schools in the urban core. The Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (1954) decision transformed the landscape of schooling in the United States. Segregated schools were deemed unconstitutional and the educational, emotional, and social success of Black students was inextricably linked to the extent to which they had access to integrated schooling experiences. Although charter schools were virtually nonexistent prior to 1990, the rapid growth of charter schools in urban and metropolitan areas across the country provided the perception of refuge to learners from ethnically diverse backgrounds in “failing urban schools,” a perception that provides an interesting dichotomy of equity and choice. After decades of segregation and desegregation that resulted in persistent trends of underachievement, the educational climate was ripe for charter schools to leverage private resources to fund public options for families and learners from ethnically diverse backgrounds in search of equity and social justice.

The reality is that recent research has documented the following: the promise of charter schools that can attend to the cultural and ethnic identities of learners through culturally responsive curriculum (Herman et al., 2011); the resegregation of learners from ethnically diverse backgrounds, particularly African Americans in charter schools (Fierros & Blomberg, 2005; Frankenburg, 2011); and the policies and practices in charter schools that contribute to the exclusion of learners with disabilities and those who speak English as a second language (Carr, 2010; Hehir, 2010). The authors contend that there are charter schools that have demonstrated that they can successfully serve learners from ethnically diverse families and those with disabilities. By implementing a rich, culturally responsive curriculum guided by a theoretical framework that embraces the sociocultural identities of their learners and leveraging the resources of families and communities to build educational bridges, charter schools can result in positive learner outcomes.
In this paper, the authors examine the recent and relevant research on special education and charter schools to document trends in service delivery, quality of instruction, and family engagement. Additionally, the authors interrogate the intersection of social justice and special education through a vignette from an urban charter school. Finally, we make recommendations for leading charter schools with an emphasis on social justice, which will ensure equitable services for all learners, particularly those with disabilities. In addition, future avenues for research are discussed.

What are Charter Schools?

The first charter school law was passed in Minnesota in 1991. Since then, charter schools have grown in prominence and are currently represented in 40 states and the District of Columbia (Estes, 2009; Rhim & McLaughlin, 2001). Charter schools are established according to state law. However, in order to receive funds from the federal Charter School Program, charter schools must meet the definition established by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act which addresses the authorization of charters, operating procedures, and compliance with federal civil rights legislation (NCLB, 2004). The current discourse on charter schools has predominately addressed the rise of charter schools in response to free market education, the role of charter schools in advancing innovations that promote academic achievement, and concerns regarding the limitations of state laws in ensuring equal access, and the provision of appropriate resources and supports for all learners (Rhim & McLaughlin, 2001). Autonomy seems to be a critical element in defining charter schools, in that it influences the ability of charter school leadership to make decisions about fiscal and human resources that directly impact learner performance. Yet, longitudinal research has not borne out the lasting positive impact of free market influences on student achievement in traditional and charter schools (Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Wang, 2010). The second theme gleaned from the discussion on charter schools is the limited evidence suggesting that charter schools are outperforming their traditional counterparts in the area of academic achievement (Carnoy, Jacobsen, Mishel, & Rothstein, 2000; NCES, 2003). Despite the lack of evidence underscoring the effectiveness of charter schools in addressing social justice and equity and high academic outcomes for learners, many from traditionally underserved populations (Frankenberg, 2011; NCES, 2003), the rise of charter schools persists particularly in high-need areas such as New Orleans, Louisiana.

...charter schools continue to grapple with the growing rhetoric of inclusion and equity.

In the wake of Hurricane Katrina, New Orleans was faced with an opportunity to reconceptualize the schooling experiences of urban learners through a school reform effort that resulted in two separate school systems, New Orleans Public Schools (NOPS) and the Recovery School District (RSD). Recent research has documented the transformation efforts in New Orleans, particularly the role of charter schools (Morse, 2010; NOLA Public Schools, 2007; Wolf, 2010). The story in New Orleans is still unfolding, but with an emphasis on academic achievement, it is clear that policymakers, families, and educators are following developments closely. In light of growing evidence of the ability of “turnaround” schools and some charter schools across the country to positively impact learner outcomes, charter schools continue to grapple with the growing rhetoric of inclusion and equity. This rhetoric, juxtaposed with exclusionary practices as it relates to learners with disabilities, contributes to greater levels of underachievement for students from ethnically diverse backgrounds and limited access to educational opportunities for many learners with disabilities. Leadership grounded in social justice and equity utilizes the unique nature of charter schools to develop laboratories of practice where teachers and learners use a rich context such as New Orleans as a springboard to build cultural awareness and understanding, critically examine the sociopolitical influences on schooling, and emphasize the role of advocacy.

The Intersection of Special Education and Charter Schools

As previously discussed in this paper, the disproportionate representation of African Americans in certain special education programs has been the legacy of special education in the
African American community. The Larry P. v. Riles decision (1979), which challenged the legitimacy of relying upon intelligence tests in identifying African Americans for special education services left a lasting imprint on the field of special education and continues to serve as a deafening call for equitable educational experiences for all learners, particularly those who have been traditionally marginalized. In response to what many perceive as failing educational systems, charter schools such as Westside African Diaspora Preparatory Academy offer an alternative and place students’ cultural identity at the center of learning. The mission of Westside African Diaspora Preparatory Academy includes the following: (a) promote and secure the connection of Mother Africa within our children; (b) prepare students to break the chains of psychological conditioning that attempt to keep them powerless in all phases of society; (c) provide students with a strong African-centered learning environment and guide students toward academic excellence, (d) promote exemplary character and social responsibility; and (e) encourage success leading to self-reliance, economic, social, and political contributions to society. Central to the mission of Westside is the belief that all learners can be successful and as a result expectations should not be lowered for learners with disabilities.

While charter schools are characterized by principles of autonomy and choice (Rhim & McLaughlin, 2007), there are other characteristics that guide the public’s understanding of charter schools. Charter schools are heterogeneous, which reflects the differences in state laws and the intention to promote innovation (Heubert, 2002). Further, the emphasis on innovation has, over time, come to reflect increased and broader learning opportunities rather than instructional practices that may be grounded in research (Lubienski, 2004). Also, charter schools have a specific mission that underscores the schools’ philosophy of teaching and exemplifies the culture and climate of the school (Rhim & McLaughlin, 2007). Consequently, an analysis of the ways special education policy is enacted in charter schools reveals a tension between core principles of charter schools, which embrace freedom, autonomy, and deregulation, and the highly regulated field of special education (Fiore, Harwell, Blackorby, & Finnegan, 2000; Rhim & McLaughlin, 2007).

Who’s Responsible for Students with Disabilities?

The charter school sector is primarily directed by school reform efforts at the state level. Thus, individual states pass laws that define the legal status of charter schools and the parameters in which charter schools will operate (U.S. Department of Education, 2004). Charter school authorizers—which may include state departments of education, school districts, and higher education institutions (HEIs)—and the charter schools interpret and implement the
state charter school laws, which results in unique practices for each school (Rhim et al., 2007).

In contrast, the field of special education is guided by federal legislation, which guides states in providing services to learners with disabilities (Ahearn, 2008). The federal role in special education has led to highly prescribed policies and procedures that result in specific school practices (Rhim et al., 2007). Charter schools are required to adhere to all federal laws including the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990), the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (1974), and the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) also known as No Child Left Behind (2001) (Mead, 2008; Rhim et al., 2007).

IDEIA requires that states accepting IDEIA funds must ensure that all learners with disabilities are provided with a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment. Compliance is inherent in the legislation as it relates to the identification and placement process as well as the development of goals, objectives, assessment measures, and supports and resources documented on the learner’s Individualized Education Program (IEP). Learners with disabilities and their families maintain all of their rights when attending public charter schools and the LEA is accountable to the federal government in ensuring federal mandates in special education are met (Lange & Lehr, 2000). Thus, the legal status of charter schools is an important factor in accountability and better understanding of variance in the implementation of special education across charter schools.

Charter schools have been accused of turning away parents of children with special needs due to inadequate staffing, inefficient facilities, and depleted budgets. Students with special needs often require additional financial support in order to provide a free and appropriate education that is compliant with the IEP. A report from the New Orleans state board of education showed a gap in the numbers of special education students served between charter schools and the regular public school system (Carr, 2010). It appears that the numbers of special educational students in certain charter schools are not representative of the district or the communities those charter schools serve. Many advocates for children with special needs speak of situations in which families were discouraged from applying at individual charter schools, or were “counseled out” once there. Some schools have even been accused of establishing admission requirements to make it difficult for special needs students to gain admittance. The Florida Department of Education released information that stated that 86% of charter schools in Florida have no severely disabled students in their population (O’Connor & Gonzalez, 2011). Similar patterns are found in California, Louisiana, and Texas according to the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. Finally, a complaint was filed against the public charter schools in Washington D.C. in May 2011, stating the discrimination and exclusion of special needs students (Turque, 2011). The complaint states that some charter schools include questions on admission applications asking whether a child has received special education services. It also highlights the fact that public schools are serving three times more students with special needs than charter schools in Washington D.C. (Turque, 2011). Cases such as these continue to bring attention to the topic of discrimination against learners with disabilities in charter schools.

Families of Learners with Disabilities and Charter Schools

At the Westside African Preparatory Academy, the School Principal, Mrs. Mann, has met several times with Ms. Watson and her son Ahmad regarding school enrollment. Ahmad is in the sixth grade and has a hearing impairment. He has attended two other traditional public schools in the past three years and has struggled academically and socially. Ms. Watson believes the school’s focus on the personal, social, and emotional development of learners will positively influence Ahmad’s academic performance. Westside administrators have shared with Ms. Watson the school’s belief in inclusion and the limited expertise of their current staff to work effectively with a learner with a hearing impairment. Ms. Watson remains adamant that Westside is the most appropriate setting for her son.
parents of learners with disabilities at 16 charter schools in Minnesota (Lange & Lehr, 2000) sought answers to queries in the following areas: (a) identification of the primary categories of special education represented in charter schools, (b) the most important reasons parents decided to enroll their learners in charter schools, (c) the extent to which parents perceive changes in their learner as a result of attending a charter school, (d) the satisfaction of parents with charter schools, and (e) parents' perceptions of services provided at their learner’s charter school as compared to their previous school, and compared to the charter school director’s report of actual services. Results were reported for parents of learners with and without disabilities. Findings were categorized by demographic information, reasons for enrollment, parental satisfaction, changes in the learner(s), special education services, and additional comments. It is important to note that while the majority of parents were reportedly satisfied with their learner’s charter school and the changes occurring with their learner as a result of attendance at the charter school, self-reported data should be analyzed in conjunction with data on learner outcomes and data collected from other sources. The implementation of special education policy and quality of programming must be measured from multiple vantage points.

Efficacy of Charter Schools in Serving Learners with Disabilities

Recent research (Estes, 2009) conducted in Texas responded to the question, To what extent are charter schools meeting mandates of law and effectively serving learners with disabilities? Results reveal that there was an increase in the percentage of learners with disabilities from all of the categories except emotional or behavior disorders. Most of the learners were served in programs for mild disabilities, which is consistent with national data on the enrollment of learners with disabilities. The study also sought to examine the extent to which charter schools accept and effectively serve learners with disabilities. Findings reveal an overall lack of in-depth understanding of special education laws by administrators (and, consequently, instructional staff) and a growing concern with meeting the “highly qualified” mandate of No Child Left Behind. Data also highlighted an increase in reports of learners with disabilities served in charter schools from 2000–2005, and a change from providing services in more inclusive settings to the reliance on resource support, which takes place outside of general education classrooms. Further, the author reported an increase in awareness of special education laws among administrators and instructional staff. However, concerns remain about learners with disabilities being rejected from charter schools and the implementation of special education in charter schools.

Findings seem to indicate that few charter school laws and regulations effectively address the plethora of issues that arise in the education of learners with disabilities in charter schools.

Rhim and colleagues (2007) conducted a review of literature on the intersection of special education and charter schools, which served as an extension of previous research, which highlighted the tensions and challenges inherent in charter schools serving learners with disabilities. The authors reviewed state charter school laws to document the evolution of policy and implementation as individual states addressed special education in charter schools. Findings seem to indicate that few charter school laws and regulations effectively address the plethora of issues that arise in the education of learners with disabilities in charter schools. Recommendations posed by the authors addressed policy ambiguity related to the charter schools’ legal status (determines the scope of responsibility), fiscal equity (influenced by the size of charter schools and the lack of knowledge of federal, state, and local funding policies and procedures), accountability for learner outcomes (currently lacks specificity in charter school laws), and the potential value of regulations that provide guidance to charter schools in effectively serving students with disabilities.

Research on learners with disabilities and charter schools reveal a number of key tensions or areas of concern: access, limited funding, and lack of expertise in special education (Estes, 2004, 2006; Fierros & Blomberg, 2005; Lange & Lehr, 2000; Rhim et al., 2007; Rhim & McLaughlin, 2006, 2007). It is clear from the research that learners with disabilities are being served in charter schools (Lange & Lehr, 2000; NAEP, 2003; Rhim & McLaughlin, 2001). Most of these learners have mild disabilities, such as a learning disability or speech and language disorders. The limited participation of learners with moderate to severe disabilities in charter schools
begs the question, Is there a potential for discrimination of learners with moderate to severe disabilities by charter schools? In eight states the antidiscrimination clause is the only mention of learners with disabilities in the state charter law (Rhim et al., 2007). Another problematic area in the intersection of special education and charter schools is the quality of services provided to learners with disabilities. Quality of services can be influenced by a number of variables including the expertise of the administrators and instructional staff in special education, the extent to which the school has the funding to support the needs of learners with disabilities, and the ability of charter schools to reconcile its mission and emphasis on freedom and autonomy with the unique needs of learners with disabilities. The lack of in-depth understanding of charter school personnel about the nature of special education is frequently reported in the literature on charter schools and special education, particularly federal laws that guide the policies and practices enacted in public schools serving learners with disabilities (i.e., IDEA). While it is critical that charter school personnel have an understanding of the cultural nuances of special education in order to effectively navigate the system and share this knowledge with families, it is equally important that personnel have opportunities to examine contextual variables, which contribute to the perpetuation of inequitable policies and practices.

In eight states the antidiscrimination clause is the only mention of learners with disabilities in the state charter law (Rhim et al., 2007).

The administrators at Westside African Preparatory Academy have facilitated a series of professional development seminars over the past year anchored by the text, Courageous Conversations About Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in School (Singleton & Linton, 2005). Participants in the Westside Equity Professional Development Series include all administrators, instructional personnel, and staff working in the building. Although the majority of learners and educators at Westside are African American, administrators believe it is still important to discuss issues of social justice and equity with faculty and staff to address the intersections of race, gender, and socioeconomic status. Within these discussions, the administrators have recently decided to include texts such as Why Are So Many Minority Students in Special Education? Understanding Race and Disability in Schools (Harry & Klingner, 2006) and guiding questions to surface the beliefs and attitudes of faculty and staff about disability and the role of the variables highlighted in this article in the construction of disability. Additionally, the series addresses the need to develop systems of support for learners with disabilities from diverse backgrounds and their families. Administrators and teacher leaders at Westside meet biweekly to examine learner data and discuss curriculum and climate issues. The school’s curriculum committee has also been engaged in ongoing dialogue about curriculum, and most recent efforts include developing a process for including the voices of teachers and learners prior to making decisions about curriculum adoption, and collaborating with faculty from the teacher education program at the local university in providing professional development. Additionally, a family leadership program has been established with support from a local grassroots organization to assist families in developing their advocacy and leadership skills, as well as promoting literacy at home and in the community. Through the expansion of the community advisory board, Westside administrators are also committed to ensuring that the voices of special educators, learners with disabilities, and their families are represented in the school’s policies and procedures by including representatives from community agencies and organizations that provide services to learners with disabilities and their families. The school continues to struggle with limited financial resources and the limited expertise of faculty in the area of special education. However, by working with the local university to serve as a site for teacher candidates to conduct field and engage in clinical experiences, administrators believe they are influencing the preparation of potential teachers for their school as well as providing support to the current instructional staff. The school has committed to structured dialogue as the vehicle to transform the culture and climate of the school, which will consequently impact the overall performance of the school as well as the lives of all their learners and their families.

Conclusion

The field of special education has evolved over time in response to calls for greater access to educational
opportunities and school reform movements that emphasize accountability and learner achievement. The promises inherent in this evolution address longstanding problems, such as disproportionate representation and the achievement gap. However, gains have been made in recent years as a result of knowledge production, which examined these issues and other educational “problems” from a number of vantage points. Charter schools, a fairly new and growing phenomenon in public education, offer the promise of an alternative to the status quo. Like other general education reform movements, the implications for learners with disabilities and their families is addressed after policies and procedures have been developed that fail to take into account the complexities of special education. The charter school movement with its promise of free market competition and adherence to mission-driven education has presented opportunities and challenges in advocating for equitable educational experiences for learners, particularly those from traditionally underrepresented groups.

Advocacy is one of the areas of convergence between special education and charter schools.

An examination of social justice in special education must include a critique of philosophies, policies, and practices that perpetuate traditional and mainstream paradigms in special education. Framing the work of special education through a critical lens aimed at reversing decades of benign neglect of learners from traditionally underrepresented groups presents opportunities for advocacy that move the field beyond rhetoric to transforming systems. Advocacy is one of the areas of convergence between special education and charter schools. It is critical that charter schools leverage their resources to advance a social justice and equity agenda, which includes systems of support for developing instructional expertise and building meaningful relationships with families of learners with disabilities. Structured dialogues in which issues of social justice and equity are examined through struggles with curriculum and assessment offer some promise in addressing some of the most vexing educational problems plaguing many underperforming schools.

Future directions in research and practice include the need for collaborative research in general, and special education and educational leadership in particular to address issues of social justice and equity and to underscore the need for state charter laws, which reflect the complexities of special education. To this end, greater clarity in implementing federal laws in varying charter school contexts and supporting charter schools in building the infrastructure to meet federal mandates is critical to the success of charter schools. Research documenting the extent to which charter schools effectively address challenges, such as lack of instructional expertise and fiscal limitations, will fill current gaps in the literature.

Although the data on enrollment and performance of learners with disabilities is improving, questions remain regarding why families of learners with disabilities enroll their children in charter schools in light of the apparent tensions between charter schools and special education. Do these learners experience greater educational opportunities as a result of attending charter schools? And if so, what elements of charter schools ensure greater levels of access to educational opportunities and positive outcomes? Through a shared understanding of social justice and equity and the capacity to develop leadership to sustain these efforts, the time is ripe for charter schools and the field of special education to deepen the dialogue.

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Highly politicized educational reforms in New York City have seen special education become marginalized as a casualty of the accountability movement.

There is a liminal space between “old” and “new” ways where special education administrators find themselves as they consider their roles and responsibilities in continuing to press for opportunities to learn for students with disabilities.

This liminal space requires existing special education administrators to opt between three broad possibilities that often take time to evolve: (1) to adjust to new values and ways; (2) to wait and see; or (3) to exit the system, taking the old values and ways with them.

For new special education administrators, the new system is simply the “normal” way of doing business.

The need for comprehensive reform of the special education system in our public schools is manifest—for too long, the system has failed shamefully to help our children learn and raise their levels of expectation and achievement both in the classroom and life. We will no longer tolerate a largely segregated and largely failing system that unmercifully ravages the lives and future of our children.”—Michael Bloomberg (2003), Mayor of New York City. (Bloomberg & Klein 2003)

“We are focusing our energy and resources on significantly improving classroom instruction by providing proven professional development for our teachers so that they can most effectively meet a wide range of learning needs in each classroom…. At the same time, we will still hold schools and principals accountable for ensuring that as many students as possible are able to be educated in general education classrooms.”—Joel Klein (2003), New York City Schools Chancellor. (Bloomberg & Klein)

In 2003 an initiative called Children First was launched New York City’s Department of Education (DOE). It was the city’s response to pressure from the federal government to increase academic standards demanded within the legislation of No Child Left Behind. The primary goal of Children First lay in shifting a poorly performing school system to institutionalize evidenced-based practices that would increase more equitable outcomes for all students. Once rooted it evolved over time from an initial focus upon establishing coherence, stability, and rigor in the system to one of building on three pillars for system change and improvement: (1) empowerment—empowering and supporting local schools; (2) leadership—developing instructional leadership capacity of school principals and others in order to more effectively promote student success; and (3) accountability—instituting a comprehensive system of school and system accountability based on improved assessment, data use, incentives, and reporting mechanisms. (O’Day, Bitter, & Talbert, 2011, p. 1)

In the midst of these massive reforms roughly spanning the last decade, special education administrators were positioned in a “liminal space” (Van Gennep, 1960) between what had been, what is now, and what will be. This space was charged with ambivalence, as it simultaneously contained the dismantling of certain institutional practices and the enactment of new ones undergirded by a different ideology. In the process of such change, the role and responsibilities of established special education administrators shifted from certitude to incertitude,
the known to the unknown. This destabilizing experience forced special education administrators to reflect upon the newly dominant priorities and values of the culture, along with attendant rules that enacted these values and priorities from classrooms to boardrooms. In a nebulous space between what had passed and what was to come, special educators were forced to reconsider their professional identity. In this article, I contemplate ways in which both (un)intentional strategies and (un)foreseen side effects of educational reform have served to change how special education is administrated. The special education administrators caught in a liminal space vacillate between three broad possibilities that evolve over time: (1) adjust to new values and ways, (2) wait and see, or (3) exit the system, taking old values and ways with them.

Considering How to Tell the Story

As I looked at how special education leadership has fared in New York City (NYC) over the past decade of what has been described as a “fundamental transformation of the largest school system in the land,” (O’Day & Bitter, 2011b, p. 293), I realized that a vignette about a school, or even a district, would be inadequate to convey the complexities faced by administrators of special education. The changes to the public school system—viewed by many as “aggressive”—have been led by NYC’s longtime mayor Michael Bloomberg, and his appointed schools chancellor, Joel Klein. The vast undertaking of reshaping the school system and its corresponding political significance was recently documented in a book by O’Day, Bitter, and Gomez, (2011). Notably, special education was featured on only 10 of its 335 pages. The paucity of attention to special education in the book symbolized its initial status as the postscript to educational reform, and reflected continuing ambiguities in special education administration and leadership.

Sources of Data

The data are culled from a variety of sources that include: (1) recent scholarship on NYC educational reform (O’Day, Bitter, & Gomez, 2011); (2) articles and reports from *The New York Times* and *The Daily News*; (3) artifacts from NYC’s DOE, such as announcements, memos, letters, web page contents, inservice PowerPoint presentations, and the external evaluation known as *The Hehir Report*; (4) literature from community organizations such as ARISE and Advocates for Children; and (5) postings to YouTube. I also informally interviewed nine special education administrators who had worked within the NYC school system over the past decade. All professionals interviewed were active employees within the school system at the start of the Bloomberg–Klein partnership. Five have retired since 2003, and four remain employed serving roles of principal, assistant principal of special education, and regional special...
education administrators. Four of the five retirees now work in universities where they lead special educator programs. While all interviewees were former colleagues and therefore influence my interpretation of their comments, I believe their comments enrich this article since all participants have “insider status” as NYC special education administrators. Their special education stances range from traditionalists to reconceptualists (Andrews et al., 2000). They represent a snapshot of special education administrators across the five boroughs. Their voices provide important perspectives that convey the daily concerns of administrators, and thus are crucial in conveying the picture of life in NYC schools.

**Before the Bloomberg–Klein Years**

The NYC school system has long been criticized for its lack of efficiency, poor organization, Byzantine bureaucracies, special education expenditures, unacceptably low numbers of graduates, and high drop-out rates (Fertig, 2009). Former Mayor Giuliani said, “The whole system should be blown up, and a new one should be put in its place” (Siskin, 2011, p. 184). Over its history the system was indeed a mixed bag but not without pockets of success. For example, it gave rise to innovation through the small schools movement in which principal Deborah Meier’s work at Central Park East High School was replicated throughout NYC. The Harlem Zone also emerged in response to the need for equal educational opportunities for children of color. During my eighteen year tenure in the NYC system, I witnessed the efforts of hundreds of educators, and came to hold a deep respect for the overwhelming majority of them who practiced daily, often in adversarial conditions.

With 1.1 million children in 1,500 schools, and approximately 135,000 students designated as disabled (Hehir et al., 2005), the enormity of the education system and within it, special education, is formidable. During the late 1990s, the NYC Department of Education had responded to the reauthorization of IDEA (1997), and greater pressure from the inclusive schools movement in general, by developing a new Continuum of Services for Students With Disabilities, which expanded the range of general education placement options. As with most DOE directives, the launch of the new Continuum was met with a fair amount of opposition by both general educators (who were already overwhelmed) and special educators (who feared negative consequences of integration). However, in general, there was a push by the DOE to stem the swelling numbers of special education students and rethink where SWD belong. As a result, I believed that the change I had hoped to see was on its way.

**The Bloomberg–Klein Years, 2001–2011**

Mayor Giuliani’s words about blowing up the school system in order to reinvent a new one proved prophetic as—metaphorically speaking—that is exactly what his successor Mayor Bloomberg attempted to do. The mayor’s reforms have been pronounced as “among the most ambitious of any large urban system in the country” (O’Day, Bitter, & Talbert, 2011, p. 1). In this section I describe how the Bloomberg–Klein alliance (O’Day & Bitter, 2011b) enacted government and management, teaching and learning, human capital, and high school reconfiguration. In Phase I, I trace how operations were radically restructured, causing great disequilibrium. In Phase II, I describe a new kind of accountability system for all stakeholders. In describing these phases, I simultaneously raise issues pertaining to the roles and responsibilities of special education administrators as they navigate their liminal space.

**Phase I: Consolidation**

Elected in 2001, Mayor Bloomberg entered the fray when some important changes in education were already fermenting. For example, New Visions for Public Schools, a reform organization dedicated to improving the quality of education in NYC launched the New Century High Schools Initiative. This collaboration between the Board of Education and the United Federation of Teachers (UFT), was funded in part by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Carnegie Corporation, and Open Society Institute. Within five years, 83 of the 184 new small schools that had opened were New Visions, symbolizing the influence of philanthropic organizations on public education.

With 1.1 million children in 1,500 schools, and approximately 135,000 students designated as disabled (Hehir et al., 2005), the enormity of the education system and within it, special education, is formidable.
Bloomberg maneuvered the Board of Education to come under direct mayoral control headed by his own appointee, Chancellor Joel Klein. Renaming it the Department of Education, he moved its Brooklyn-based headquarters to Manhattan, adjacent to City Hall. In addition, governance by elected representatives to the Board of Education was replaced by a Public Education Panel appointed by the mayor. Chancellor Klein was a lawyer, not an educator, and along with the mayor, he deemed the education system in need of a massive overhaul. Klein sought to gain control of what he termed a “chaotic and dysfunctional structure” (Childress, Higgins, Ishimaru, & Takahashi, 2011, p. 89).

When the major turning point occurred in 2003 with the initiative Children First, an associate of Klein noted,

The [pre-2002] school system does what it was built to do: make stable jobs, accommodate the demands of special interest groups, and comply with state laws. It can do all of those things without providing effective schools for all kids. We intend to rebuild the system around a new mission, one that puts children and their learning first. (Hill, 2011, p. 19)

Thirty-two community school districts were restructured into 10 new regions. These regions were required to implement common approaches to math and literacy. A renewed emphasis on reading was reflected in the DOE purchasing libraries for classrooms, along with widespread training in Wilson Reading Program and Mel Levine’s All Kinds of Minds program, a deliberate strategy to view children in more flexible ways and provide specialized instruction accordingly. At the same time, a Leadership Academy for new principals was launched, along with DOE’s Office of New Schools.

The number of special education administrative and service positions was reduced. This was touted officially as trimming fat from a bloated workforce supporting (or supported by, depending upon one’s perspective) special education. For example, the position of educational evaluator was eliminated, and the role was given to school psychologists. The itinerant special education supervisors were also eliminated, leaving small schools without on-site support (larger schools were still served by assistant principals of special education). One former special education supervisor noted,

This was a disaster … It was especially unfair to smaller schools that relied on special education supervisors for guidance and support [and] … ironic as the current DOE favors small schools and supports the charter school concept. It seems that the special needs students were not part of the equation … [supervisors] were also advocates for the needs of children with IEPs (individualized educational plans) … Abolishing the special education supervisor position really showed a disinterest and disregard of special education by the Joel Klein administration.

Another former regional supervisor also called this move “a disaster,” while a current assistant principal of special education noted, “Many smaller schools do not have a qualified administrator and fail miserably on compliance issues.” A former district level special education supervisor who currently leads a special education teacher programs claimed, “Now there is no one whose main role is to protect the rights and needs of special education.” Likewise, a former special education supervisor whose position was eliminated concluded that the decimation of supervisors “definitely affected the quality of the programs. Remove all advocates and the only things being looked at are Regents scores.” Finally, although a former special education supervisor thought the change “a bad idea,” she reflected upon the possibility that “principals and other administrative staff [traditionally] used the supervisors as an excuse for not getting more involved with the rights and needs of their special education students, and the possibilities of a less restrictive environment.”

The ten new regions became the hub of many special education administrative operations, including hosting the Committees on Special Education (CSE), also reduced in number from 32 to 10. Traditionally viewed as inefficient and out of compliance, perhaps due to the volume of cases and plethora of associated paperwork (in excess of 100 forms), the CSEs were supervised by Regional Administrators for Special Education (RASE), a new position created for five people per regional office who reported directly to the superintendent. In addition, the position of Instructional Support Specialist (ISS) was created to provide some support to schools but, according to a former ISS, they were “… given many more schools than [special education] supervisors had been responsible for.” Subsequently, “Staff, i.e., related service providers were held accountable less and less, and IEPs were not always adhered to.” The same former ISS noted

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that, from 2003, “It did appear that the support became more data oriented than teacher and student oriented, and that this was potentially harmful to students in the long run.” In the absence of supervisors, principals became responsible for special education issues. While more connection to students with IEPs was progress, principals often lacked sufficient background knowledge and hired retired special education supervisors to assist on a part-time basis using funds from their school budgets. As one retired special education supervisor commented, “Even when schools were faced with audits and parent lawsuits, it was not really clear who was in charge in terms of the special education hierarchy.”

During 2004–2005, the DOE created the Autonomy Zone in which 29 schools participated—a pilot program to provide schools with more control running their schools while also expecting greater accountability. This model assumes that autonomy is a precondition for reform. The Autonomy Zone grew exponentially, and by 2006–2007 most schools were involved. As Hill (2011) noted, this model of organization is similar to the ideas of political scientist Charles Sabel in which governments press for both more innovation and increased use of data for continuous improvement. In other words, “Kline and his intimates agreed on the goal of a diverse, innovative system of schools but were constantly learning from experience and adjusting the reform accordingly” (p. 25).

In 2005 the DOE released the 116 page Comprehensive Management Review and Evaluation of Special Education, a publication best known as The Hehir Report named after its first author Tom Hehir, former director of the federal government’s Office of Special Education Programs. This study compared NYC to Los Angeles and Chicago, delving into the layered operations of special education. Hehir et al. noted that, while half of all SWD were educated in general education buildings and spent less than 20% of their school day outside of the general education classroom (2005, p. 9), they spent 60% or more of their school day outside of the general education classroom. The report described New York’s special education system as bureaucratically driven, unnecessarily segregated, highly expensive, and a separate entity. In one region, the superintendent told the investigative team that “he/she knew nothing about special education” (Hehir et al., 2005, p. 28).

This comment exemplified the knowledge gaps being experienced by administrators only recently designated as responsible for SWD. The Hehir Report recommended shifting to more inclusive settings for SWD using the Collaborative Team Teaching model.¹

“Sometimes you have to tear [organizations] apart and create chaos. That chaos creates a sense of urgency and that sense of urgency will ultimately bring improvement” (Siskin, 2011, p. 190).

At the same time, Hehir et al. commented on recent data that showed an increase in achievement levels of SWD on NYC English Language Arts and Math Testing (p. 20). The “record highs” for all students in third, fifth, sixth, and seventh grades classes were trumpeted across the media (NYC DOE Press Release, June 1, 2005). Black and Latino students achieved their greatest one-year gains in both tests since records began. Overall, the number of all students meeting or exceeding required standards in English language arts increased 40% to 55%, and in math from 42.5% to 50%, prompting the Chancellor to credit the Children First reforms. Comparisons later made between city and state results, including the point that “the percentage of students throughout the State of New York who reached proficiency in these grades improved as well” (Brennan, 2009, p. 1), deflated Bloomberg–Klein claims. In fact, between 2003 and 2008, NYC would move from of 644th out of 668 school districts in the state to 545th (4th to 18th percentile) in fourth grade math performance. In fourth grade ELA, NYC moved from 629th to 619th (6th to 7th percentile). Movement in math at all grades assessed was seen by Brennan as “significant” and ELA as “moderate” in relation to other high needs urban/suburban districts, suggesting that statewide reforms may have been the primary reason for progress.

During the midst of this period, in 2005 an “open market” system was introduced, replacing archaic and restrictive rules about which teachers principals could hire. In addition, the DOE opened the Office of Multiple Pathways to Graduation that fostered transfer schools and Learning to Work Programs for high school students with few credits. These developments, along with the major structural changes, reflected a sense of swift decisions and a fast

¹ Collaborative Team Teaching (CTT) was a placement option on the DOE’s Continuum of Services for SWD. It is a classroom in which a general and a special educator collaborate to provide instructional services. No more than 40% of students can have IEPs. The designation is the equivalent of Integrated Co-Teaching (ICT), used throughout New York State and recently adopted by the DOE.
pace—maximizing changes within a minimum amount of time. The modus operandi of the Bloomberg–Klein reforms was perceived by many to be “act now and make corrections later” (Henig, Gold, Orr, Silander, & Simon, 2011). Shifting a system from a sedentary Byzantine bureaucracy to one of rapid and constant change appeared to be a calculated strategy. As one DOE official observed, “Sometimes you have to tear [organizations] apart and create chaos. That chaos creates a sense of urgency and that sense of urgency will ultimately bring improvement” (Siskin, 2011, p. 190).

**Phase II: Autonomy and Accountability**

The first phase of Children First from 2003–2006 had focused on new structures that “were designed to support schools’ operational and instructional needs, enforce standards, and implement reforms,” (Childress et al., 2011, p. 88). After 2006, the performative management system became enforced system-wide through new accountability measures and another citywide restructuring of resources. The DOE piloted School Progress Reports (shared publicly), began Quality Reviews, and implemented Children First Intensive inquiry teams, composed of teachers, to analyze site-based evidence of student learning and implications for teaching. In addition, a performance review and reward system for principals began to take shape. The Autonomy Zone was renamed Empowerment Schools, and each school was required to choose their support from of 11 School Support Organizations (SSOs), and sustained by five Integrated Service Centers (ISCs).

All of these multiple, interlocking changes ostensibly served one end: to improve the academic results of students. Such results-driven reform was largely about seeing evidence of positive growth in numbers and grades. Instruction under this model was viewed, therefore, “not so much about what teachers teach (the presentation of content) as it is about what students learn—or perhaps more accurately, the learning that teachers and students produce together” (O’Day & Bitter, 2011a, p. 121). The purpose of inquiry teams at each school were to shift the focus from: (1) teaching to student learning, (2) summative to formative and interim assessments of student learning, (3) external attributions of student failure to instructional efficacy, and (4) teacher inaction to on-demand professional development in content instruction (Talbert, 2011). In this relentlessly data-driven system, the role of Data Specialist was created to support inquiry teams and other data-focused work within each school. By 2007, the Children First initiative had at least one team per school.

Despite these massive system-wide changes, parents, teachers, and administrators of students receiving special education services continued to feel marginalized, even diminished, within the reforms. For example, parent groups were quick to discover that their children were not as welcome in new high schools or charter schools as their nondisabled counterparts (Sweet, 2006). One special education administrator verified this perception when he described the practice of charter schools that are “rejecting students with special needs, by telling parents that they do not have the ability to serve the student, even after they have earned a place through the lottery.”

Based upon the recommendations of Hehir et al., the Chancellor’s mission was, in part, to include more SWD in team-taught classes. However, one special education administrator reveals that longstanding notions of separate classrooms where children and youth with disabilities would be taught were still pervasive:

Most of the principals (at the HS level) were responding to structural change. I don’t believe that many of them at the HS level (if any) believed that the special ed. students would benefit from being in a general ed. classroom. In fact, they felt that the general ed. students would lose out from this change.

Another administrator shared that principals “reluctantly went along with the program,” while a former district special education supervisor observed that, “Because the implementation [of team teaching classes] was not accompanied by sufficient professional development for administration, general and special ed. staff, the positive effects have been limited.”

In 2007, amidst the exponential growth of collaborative team teaching classes, administrative responsibility for special education moved from CSEs to five Deputy Executive Directors of Special Education within the Integrated Service Centers found in each borough, eliminating the positions of 50 regional special education administrators. Unlike CSEs, the new positions were given no authority to guarantee special education services. At the same time, the Office of Enrollment, Planning, and Operations assumed responsibility for the (re)placement of SWD whose needs could not be met.
in their current setting. In addition, although school progress reports were now mandated, the segregated District 75 schools and programs only for SWD were not required to demonstrate progress.2

Despite public statements by both Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein, special education continued to seem tangential in their early years of reform. However, by 2008 some interesting statistics began to emerge. Steifel and Schwartz (2011) found that the growth of students receiving special education services grew from 82,066 to 98,432 (20%) between 2002 and 2008, and

The proportion of full-time special education students educated (labeled citywide by the DOE) rose between 2002 and 2008, from around 1.9 to 2.2% of the total student population, outpaced by the growth in students educated in integrated settings, which rose from 5.6 to 7.3% of all students (p. 63–64).

The number of students rose in both inclusive and segregated settings. As Steifel and Schwartz noted, some classification changes were controllable and "districts have some power to determine the exact nature of the integration of special education and general education students and the management of these systems" (p. 64).

Spending in special education grew considerably during the same time period, with direct expenditures per SWD by 34.7%; up 18.2% for segregated settings and 17.8% for integrated settings. Along with a significant growth in teacher salaries during 2002–2008, special education costs "accounted for much of the spending by the [DOE] administration since 2002" (Steifel & Schwartz, 2011. p. 81). Another troubling trend revealed was the amount of money spent by charter schools to contract outside sources for special education services they did not provide. Given that spending on charter schools by the DOE rose by 505% between 2001 and 2008, the authors noted that "spending on contracted services for special education increased over 80% from $687.5 million to $1.2 billion" (p. 66). These figures reveal the perhaps unanticipated strain of special education funding on NYC’s reforms.

Meanwhile, in 2007 new teacher mentoring of both general and special educators became an additional responsibility of principals. One such principal described his personal struggle to support a staff of collaborative team teachers observed, “It is difficult to differentiate such specialized professional development to a small group of teachers. Ironic, considering I expect teachers to differentiate their teaching.” Aside from providing leadership in instruction, the principal reflects upon the amount of special education related issues for which he is now responsible. He noted,

As a teacher, I did well in teaching students with IEPs. Yet, I never really read an IEP before becoming an administrator. I was never trained to do so. Now, I am expected to be an expert and know not only how to write a high quality IEP, but read one and give feedback.

This responsibility is defined within is his role in the autonomy–accountability paradigm championed by Bloomberg–Klein. The principal further revealed,

When my school was audited, the expectation was that I would have such a person [a special education supervisor] on board. We lack someone with such experience and we could use one. The State mandates are too specialized for any department chair or principal to know.

In brief, this principal is typical of the small schools by being administrator of all educational issues, but struggles in earnest to uphold requirements placed upon him by special education mandates.

One of the five guiding principles stated that “All schools should have the curricular, instructional, and scheduling flexibility needed to meet the diverse needs of SWD with accountability outcomes” (Klein, 2010, p. 1).

By 2008, NYC graduation rate had increased 33% from 2002. Mayor Bloomberg then won his third election on the wave of his education reforms, an unprecedented event in NYC’s history.3 Then, schools were divided into six enormous “clusters,”

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2 District 75 is a citywide district for students who are considered to have severe and multiple disabilities. It is one of the few segregated districts throughout the country that is only for SWD. (For more information, see Connor, 2010)

3 Mayor Bloomberg was able to garner political support that allowed him to run (and win) a third term by changing the law one time only to allow his candidacy to continue with “unfinished business.”
constellations that spanned the entire city, requiring principals to choose from one of 10 Children First Networks (CFNs) to receive support. Also in 2009, indicative of being the postscript of educational reforms, special education issues were finally officially acknowledged and foregrounded through the establishment of the Division of SWD and ELLs, headed by a newly appointed Deputy Chancellor. Unlike most high-ranking officials in central administrative positions, the Deputy Chancellor was a longtime educator who rose “through the ranks.” The purpose of this new Division soon became apparent.

In 2010, the DOE launched an implementation plan for the reform of special education within a projected two-year phase in the timeline. One of the five guiding principles stated that “All schools should have the curricular, instructional, and scheduling flexibility needed to meet the diverse needs of SWD with accountability outcomes” (Klein, 2010, p. 1). Once again, this reflected the emphasis of autonomy–accountability throughout all aspects of Bloomberg–Klein reform. The 106 Phase One schools who participated in the initial year were provided with support on many levels including a funding model to “maximize stability and flexibility” (Rodriguez, 2010, p. 1), a designated special education attorney to support each network, and an online toolkit of resources and guidance.4 A partnership was developed between the DOE and Teachers College, Columbia University to provide professional development in the implementation of Phase One. One of the mission statements on Inclusive Classrooms: A Blog for Teachers College’s Inclusive Classrooms Project is to “Bring schools in NYC into compliance with IDEA 1997,” as “New York State is ranked 49th in the United States when it comes to providing SWD access to general education classrooms” (Oyler, 2010). Professional development was provided across a wide range of issues, from including students with behavioral challenges to transitioning from high school to college for SWD (see Oyler, this issue).

As I write this article in late 2011, the Phase Two of special education reform scheduled to involve all NYC schools has recently been unveiled, focusing on changes in policy for enrollment, funding, and programming. DOE policy reveals one of the major goals is “to ensure that students with IEPs have access to the same schools they would attend if they did not have IEPs” (Hollander, 2011, p. 8). Within this guideline the DOE asserted, There is an expectation that schools will “own their own” SWD. This means that of a school’s current population of both SWD and students being referred and evaluated for special education services, the school will maintain responsibility for implementing any changes to a student’s IEP unless the student requires a specialized program or accessible site. (p. 8)

It is clear that the DOE is expecting schools to provide a maximum of services on its continuum, yet tensions are apparent among the spirit of the law, central administration, and the actual context of school sites, evident in the following comment made by an assistant principal:

It is difficult to offer all services to an array of disabilities as the Chancellor’s directive states. For example, we only offer coteaching and Push In resource room. We have no physical space to offer self-contained classes. Enrollment sends us Alternate Assessment, District 75, and self-contained students and tells us we must provide for them.

In many ways, this dilemma of being between current regulations and school reality symbolizes the position of special education administrators expected to implement reforms.

A Selection of Responses from Stakeholders and Commentators

The results of Children First are being highly scrutinized by both proponents and opponents. A January 2010 report claims a reduction in 16 points and 14 points for African American and Latino students respectively, in terms of high school completion gap. In addition, Regents passing rates rose, and admissions to four-year colleges increased (Ferguson, 2011). The impact of the Bloomberg–Klein alliance has provoked commentaries from all quarters. An experienced principal stated:

The system as it existed simply did not work, and the best approach was to start anew. The years in between appear to be rigorous attempt to define what “new” should look like…. The habitual upheaval associated with Children First has been difficult for schools in very predictable ways, as it would be for any

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4 Phase One and Phase Two of Special Education reforms in 2009, not to be confused with Phase I and II of general reforms in 2003 and 2006 respectively.
organization in which institutional memory was lost and governance structures were concurrently reshuffled (O’Day & Bitter, 2011b, p. 296).

However, many think this ongoing destabilization has created undesirable effects. Warren Simmons, Executive Director of the Annenberg Institute, noted:

The DOE has shifted its theory of action at least two times over the past eight years without adequately communicating and clarifying the significant shifts in roles and responsibilities these changes entail. The resulting confusion undermines parents’ and educators’ ability to use the levers of data, accountability, and choice to promote equity and excellence within and across schools (O’Day & Bitter, 2011b, p. 299).

Pedro Noguera, eminent sociologist of education, reveals mixed feeling about the reforms. On the positive side, he observes an intense focus on student learning, fewer big schools, less chaotic schools, the use of transfer schools, and partnerships with outside organizations. On the negative side, he notes that high need students (many of them with special education services) are channeled into schools that become targeted for closure. He believes that such schools need additional resources, and students need more experienced teachers (O’Day & Bitter, 2011b).

The Children First reforms have been persistently critiqued as exemplifying the corporatization of public schools. Leo Casey, a spokesperson for the UFT claimed

Through their many structural incantations, the Children First reforms have been driven by one article of faith: the idea that public education needs to be remade in the image and likeness of a private sector business.... The autocratic character of the corporate model has undermined the democratic oversight and direction of education, eviscerating the role of the public in public education. (O’Day & Bitter, 2011b, p. 298)

These sentiments are echoed by Diane Ravitch (2010), one of America’s most prominent education historians. Once a powerful advocate of the charter school movement, Ravitch changed her mind, cautioning against the seepage of privatization into public education, and an overreliance of testing.

Given the speed and scope of changes, parents constantly mobilized to call attention to the oversight of special education issues. A statement from The ARISE Coalition of parents revealed that “throughout the Children First education reforms of Mayor Bloomberg and Chancellor Klein, children with disabilities have rarely been more than an afterthought. Stories abound of isolation, segregation, and degradation of SWD and their families” (ARISE, 2009, p. 6). In an open letter to the current chancellor, ARISE shares numerous concerns that include parent alienation, lack of special education issues featured in broader education reforms, the need to use technology to support more inclusive placements, principal accountability for special education issues, the overuse of alternative assessments, and recent budget constraints (Moroff, 2011). In general, parents of all students have felt the reconfiguration of the DOE away from democratic, community-based representation to mayoral controlled autocracy. A recent meeting of Chancellor Walcott attests to the unease. The entire audience protested, causing the leader of the DOE and

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5 Chancellor Klein resigned in November 2010. The Mayor’s next choice was Cathleen Black, head of Hearst Publishing Corporation but with no educational experience. Members of the public believed Black to be an inappropriate choice, and after unrelenting pressure from them, she resigned. She was replaced in April 2011 by Dennis Walcott, a career educator, and longtime advisor to the mayor.
his advisory panel to abandon their agenda and walk out (Meerkat media, October 2011).

Making Choices within the Liminal Space

Educational change has required administrators of special education to make hard choices. Positioned within the liminal space between what was, what is, and what will be, they contemplate their values and beliefs in relation to special education. In brief, their professional identity is at stake. There is a definite divide between “old school” and “new school” administrators in that the former self-defined as committed, child-centered, career-long educators who managed a locus of control that brought them professional satisfaction. The latter, on the other hand, are viewed by “old schoolers” as businesslike technicians rather than knowledge-holders situated within a school or a small group of sites. One former regional special education administrator shared,

In the past we placed our neck on the block for our teachers and pupils by advocating for them and providing them with the training or materials that were necessary to attain successful outcomes. We conducted observations and worked along with teachers and their students to ensure and to foster a safe and productive environment for students to learn. Conducted meetings with principals, DASE, CSE Chairperson, SBSTs, [and] parents to discuss the needs of the students and how well together we could assist teachers with their instruction in the classrooms.

There is a sense of nostalgia about what has been lost, and the subsequent shift in priorities that change has brought. A sizable exodus of professionals left the system because of the changes, taking their institutional knowledge with them, and with that, a certain disposition toward special education. The subsequent vacuum in special education leadership gave rise to an atmosphere fraught with irony, paradox, and contradiction.

The previous system was undoubtedly discriminatory toward children and youth with disabilities who largely remained segregated and stigmatized. That said, I wonder if omitting (or at least significantly downplaying) special education within the general reforms for so long was a deliberate tactic to maximize future change in terms of centralized power? To many administrators, the diminishment of special education leadership by central authority was perceived as neglect of all they cared for. One special education administrator commented that it seemed like “No one was minding the [special education] store.” However, Bloomberg–Klein had already used a similar tactic after an exodus of longstanding principals by forging new administrators (80% of all school leaders) into their own ideological mode and expanding power and influence of the mayor–chancellor nexus. New principals were thus prepared for changes 

required of them and subject to removal if they failed to deliver. Indeed, part of their new responsibilities was to have ownership of students with IEPs. Might this now be the case for incoming special education administrators who must support principals? Will they also looked upon as “a new breed” compatible with centralized authority?

It is likely that changes have been both beneficial and harmful to SWD. On one hand, the DOE assert that four-year high school graduation rates among SWD rose from 17.1% in 2005 to 30.7% in 2010, while dropout rates fell during the same period from 34.3 to 20.9% (Hollander, 2011). There is a possibility that, at least in the short term, some students may flourish in general education settings while others flounder. Several administrators shared that the reforms moved too fast, catapulting children and youth wholesale into less restrictive environments, such as team taught classes, without preparation or support. In order to work well, inclusive classrooms need to prepare and support students and teachers. Personal observations have verified both school systems and teacher education programs have been remiss in this respect. Sadly, in many cases, conditions persist, as described by Hehir et al. (2005), in which team teaching classes become, in effect, larger special education classes or new “dumping grounds.” These conditions highlight schools’ disregard for thoughtful, responsible inclusive practices, and raise the loaded question of Included into what?

The DOE has been accused of overestimating its successes, generating misleading numbers, and masking its failures. Recently, the New York State Board of Regents published damning statistics that preempted NYC’s claim of successfully preparing high school students for college. Head Regent Merryl Tisch publicly challenged Bloomberg, “When you have 75% of the youngsters graduating high schools who are
going to two-year colleges needing to be remediated … are you kidding me?’’ (Santos, 2011, p. 8). She also critiqued the mayor’s failure to fix failing schools that she described as ‘‘warehouses’’ for struggling students (p. 1). Reports released in late 2011 show ‘‘eighth grade reading scores have stagnated since 2003, and [there is] no significant improvement in the percentage of eighth-graders who tested ‘proficient’ or above in math’’ (Monahan, 2011, p. 2), thereby causing what some perceive to be a ‘‘stunning blow to Mayor Bloomberg’s legacy on education’’ (p. 1).

It is clear that these examples of ironies, paradoxes, and contradictions are only a few of the issues raised within the highly political, highly contested, and highly complex arena of educational reform in a massive public school system—and the place of students and youth with disabilities. Significant changes have occurred, yet in many ways, it could be argued that special education itself has been placed in a liminal space. Regardless of theorizing possibilities involving benign neglect, laissez faire practices, or deliberate delays, it is difficult, if not impossible, to second-guess Bloomberg–Klein’s motives as to why special education, and its administrators, have been dealt the hand they have been dealt.

All this said, the longstanding vacuum created by the omission of explicit leadership in special education reform has now been filled. This holds the promise of special education’s status as a postscript becoming metamorphosed into being a well-planned, productive ‘‘Afterword’’ of system-wide reforms. Indeed, I am curious as to what form the envisioned, long-anticipated, and much needed reforms will actually take in this shifting, politicized climate. I also wonder how current administrators of special education will choose to see projected reforms in terms of the proverbial glass being half empty or half full? And, to what degree do they believe their role is integral or marginal in moving the system toward changing how special education is understood and operationalized?

(Im)Possibilities of Change

In analyzing and reflecting upon the experiences and comments of administrators featured in this article, whether currently in service at the DOE or employed as a consultant or administrator, I bore in mind the broad theme of special edition leadership in an era of multiple reforms: I found no quick or magic answers. Instead, I gravitated to their common characteristics, and will list a selection of them. They include being:

• **Survivors.** Administrators have either stayed and adapted to a shifting system, or exited and reinvented themselves as educators of new special education teachers. More changes only mean they have to figure out new ways to work with those changes.

• **Child-centered.** Administrators are concerned about how the quick changes propel students who have not been sufficiently prepared beforehand, or supported while within, collaborative team teaching classes.

• **Supportive of faculty.** Administrators know that careful planning, shared time, and problem-solving are key indicators of collaborative teaching arrangements.

• **Aware and wary.** Administrators understand the need for change, and are hopeful toward that end. At the same time, they are wary of what is being asked of them by whom (especially noneducators in powerful positions).

• **Resourceful.** Special education administrators have traditionally been asked to work with insufficient resources. In times of reform, this is no different.

• **Realistic.** They know some of the proposed changes may not work, and so watch and wait without explicitly challenging ‘‘the party line.’’

In many ways, the characteristics listed overlap regardless of where special educators think of themselves in the liminal space ‘‘betwixt and between’’ the old ways and the new. Perhaps an unanticipated phenomenon worthy of further explanation is the fact that special education supervisors whose positions were liquidated and assistant principals who retired (to escape a system that was changing too rapidly for them) have not left altogether, and still exert a significant influence in NYC schools. They are, in fact, the mainstay of university programs designed to support new special educators in schools, becoming supervisors of fledgling teachers who benefit enormously from their knowledge and skills. In this capacity, they stress the loyalty of teachers to their children over what they believe to be an increasingly uncaring system with an overemphasis on data.

Conclusion

During the past decade of reforms in NYC, the Bloomberg–Klein nexus created major changes within
the nation’s largest school system. Among those changes, longstanding special education structures were actively diminished, along with the role of special educator administrators. After years without any significant leadership in special education issues, the implementation of Phases One and Two can be seen as an attempt to provide a much-needed, reshaped system in which more children with IEPs are taught in general education classrooms within local schools. However, the reforms also reveal how special education is not immune to market driven theories of change in a neoliberal society, and in some ways, can be seen as a casualty through its marginalization as postscript or “Afterword” status. Furthermore, structural issues, such as the continuation of a segregated organization in NYC (District 75) for students with severe and multiple disabilities, cause a growing number of children to be held back prior to entering test-taking grades. Poor access to charter schools, inadequate preparation for collaborative teaching, and the emphasis on compliance are also still among ongoing causes for concern.

In closing, it is difficult to generalize the role of special education leader who operates within a highly complicated, seemingly perpetually changing system, full of contradictions, paradoxes, and ironies, with openly competing but often hidden, longstanding agendas. The Bloomberg–Klein reforms will benefit from a proactive model of special education administrators who can negotiate this challenging system. In my experience with reform matters, special education administrators are more inclined to be reactive than proactive. This does not negate their desire for change, nor their willingness to be part of it. It does, however, denote their conservative stance in relation to the demands of ongoing change, along with their fortitude and commitment to supporting SWD and other people related to this mission. One special education administrator shared an approach that has kept her grounded throughout years of change: “One child, one parent, one teacher, one principal at a time.” This approach appears to be indicative of many more administrators in their daily work.

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Author’s Note

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The role of critically conscious special education leaders is both complex and diverse.

The expectations placed on these individuals are continuously evolving as the need for improving schools and student outcomes becomes increasingly critical.

The intersections of personal social histories, historical legacies, and situated contexts result in local contentious practice.

We can individually and collectively transform systems based on our ability to imagine and ultimately create such worlds.

The four of us sit around the conference table: Patty, a tenured faculty member in special education at a university; Tristan, a doctoral candidate in special education at the same university; Sue, a special education district-level administrator; and Kevin, a high school principal. As colleagues and friends, our relationships span more than 5 years. We have worked together, taught together, taken classes together, and anguished over the education and outcomes of diverse students with disabilities. The purpose of our informal meetings is to engage in what Gutiérrez (2008) refers to as social dreaming, a metaphor that allows for “redefining both the ‘world as it is today’ and the ‘world as it could be’” (p. 158). Our goal is to critically examine the experiences of special education leaders and the context in which their practice is situated. We focus specifically on Sue’s and Kevin’s experiences in the educational system.

"In my most recent post as the principal of a high school identified as low performing, I can recall being called to the superintendent’s office for a meeting. The first thing that I was told after congratulations was, ‘You know I did not want you as the principal.’ My first thought to myself was, ‘Ain’t that a bitch!’ As a Black man with more than 6 years as a principal, my career has progressed quite differently than some of my White counterparts. Needless to say, I would start my journey as the principal of the most out-of-control school in the district with many doubters and naysayers about my abilities. But this was familiar territory for me. It was no different than any of the other situations in which someone doubted my ability. As a Black man, in a field that has been traditionally dominated by others who do not look like me, I have always felt compelled to do my best. I was determined to prove them wrong.” —Kevin

Throughout our conversations, there is evidence of how the historical structures of privilege, class, race, ethnicity, gender, and other social divisions in which education is so heavily situated impact the daily practice of critically conscious (Freire, 1970) special education leaders. The discussions provide a glimpse of attempts to reconcile the tensions experienced between personal orientations as critically conscious special education leaders and the systems in which we work. Our discussion exemplified the struggles that...
dominate the field of special education and ultimately our practices and the practices of many educators as we are faced with the reality of adhering to and implementing a myriad of federal, state, and district mandates. Such struggles typify the collision of “historical personal struggles” with the “historically institutionalized struggles” (Holland et al., 2001, p. 7) that have defined the field of special education and are further complicated based on an individual’s position within an organization.

Holland and colleagues (2001) describe the spaces in which these struggles take place as figured worlds or cultural spaces in which we enter and develop through our interactions with other participants and through which issues of power and privilege are enacted and reinforced. Within these figured worlds our activities take meaning as a result of social encounters and the roles we assume, reject, or negotiate (Holland et al.; Urrieta, 2007). We are drawn to the use of figured worlds when examining our practice because they concede “the simultaneity of the historic and the dynamic” (Rush & Fecho, 2008, p. 126). Although rooted in personal history and institutionalized historical legacies of oppression, interactions within figured worlds are reciprocal—each entity impacting the other—allowing for reconfigured worlds of possibility. The use of figured worlds as a framework facilitates critical examination of what is, while recognizing and fostering our ability to imagine what could be, and through that realization make our imagined world a reality.

Applying Holland and Lave’s (2001) history-in-person framework, we conceptualize practice, or our local enduring struggle, as comprising three interrelated components: 1) historical struggles in person; 2) historically institutionalized struggles; and 3) local contentious practice (Figure 1). Historical struggles in person take into account our sociocultural biographies, the manner in which we self-identify, and our contextual positionality. It encompasses characteristics and proxies of culture such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and ability, many of which are socially constructed. Historically institutionalized struggles consist of the legacies associated with or having a direct effect on education in general, and special education specifically, that have framed the manner in which difference is constructed and students are defined and sorted.

In special education that history consists of segregation, exclusion, and marginalization, often supported by legislation (Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher, & Ortiz, 2010; Fierros & Conroy, 2002). It is a history that is intertwined with the civil rights movement and reflects continued concerns regarding the “racialization of ability” (Artiles, 2011, p. 431). Local contentious practice is the focal point or the space in which education is delivered and through which historical, institutional, and personal histories are sustained, perpetuated, or disrupted. It is here, that placement decisions are made, discipline is enforced, and teacher assignments are determined, that
mindless habits (e.g., action without reflection) rather than habits of mind (e.g., critically thoughtful action) (Granger, 2010; Katz & Raths, 1985) result in disparate outcomes for diverse students with disabilities.

An essential component of this process is their ability to improvise and imagine new worlds—worlds in which those things that they envision as conduits of change are possible.

The discussion presented in this paper centers on the challenges, both historically and currently, facing special education leaders in their efforts to improve the academic and social outcomes of students through the implementation of federal, state, and district mandates. Of particular interest in this discourse is the manner by which these leaders (Sue and Kevin) have been able to negotiate the nuances of their defined roles in an effort to achieve sustenance in their figured worlds. An essential component of this process is their ability to improvise and imagine new worlds—which those things that they envision as conduits of change are possible. Through their work in contested spaces, these leaders aim to create new figured worlds for themselves and those they have been charged with serving.

We begin by providing a brief overview of history in person and figured worlds situated within Sue’s and Kevin’s historical context, followed by an exploration of special education and the challenges that have plagued our field throughout its history. We end with a discussion on the need for sustenance as school leaders committed to ensuring positive outcomes for all students. Interspersed throughout are excerpts from our multiple conversations.

**Historical Struggles in Person**

Most, if not all of us, arrive in a position of educational leadership, and particularly special education leadership, being socialized both within and through the system. We are, and have been, a captive audience to the enactment of schooling as students and teachers (Arnstine, 1990; Lortie, 1975). Our notion of self as educational leader is often formed in comparison with and situated beside the models we have observed and the context in which they have been enacted, as well as by our own personal experiences. Having been identified and ultimately accepted by the system, which is socially and culturally constructed, to assume a role as special education leader, we become a product of the system evidenced by our common language and understandings. Socialization does not preclude our sense of agency; however, the intersection of our historical struggles in person and the expectations of the system may result in private and public tensions in our attempt to reconcile both as we strive to ensure an equitable education for all students. Sue describes the conflict between her personal beliefs and institutional responsibilities and how she attempts to find a way forward:

“My daily responsibilities cause me to constantly confront my personal beliefs about equitable schooling for all students. In this role I often question my discomfort with conversations that take place around particular students and their ‘value’ to the system. At times I would share with others the feelings that I had as I left these meetings, the pit in the bottom of my stomach and even at times how they made me feel as if I needed to go home and shower to wash the ‘yuck’ off of myself. I shared these stories so that I could get them out of my head and so that others would have to feel them with me. I did not want to be alone in my shame … it needed audience. I wanted others to share my outrage. Maybe if I couldn’t change things … we could. There had to be others who felt equally enraged by all of ‘it.’” —Sue

Historical struggles in person comprise several distinct characteristics. These struggles are a composite of our orientations, experiences, and positionality. They influence the manner in which we view our figured worlds and our very existence within them. These struggles characterize us as leaders and significantly impact our practice because they are those beliefs that accompany us as we enter an organization. Our work as special education leaders is not separated from them, rather they define how we execute our roles. Sue’s historical struggles in person encompass the reality that she is a district-level administrator who has worked in the same system for more than 20 years. She is also a mother of a son identified as being gifted and learning disabled and as having attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, so she is intimately aware of the challenges that exist in schools for those who do not seem to quite fit the expectations of a model student. Sue describes the dual positions of being a leader within a system at the same time that she also needed its support:

“I was a parent of a student who went through manifestation, and even though I was an educator in the system my own child was removed for the most
Kevin’s struggles are reflective of the fact that he is a Black man who has spent much of his educational career working in schools with high populations of diverse students and has a desire to improve outcomes of students of color. He faced many challenges as a youth, having to overcome seemingly insurmountable odds growing up in a crime-riddled community. His most recent challenge was working to transform a failing urban high school. Although Kevin’s and Sue’s experiences are similar in some ways, there are distinct differences in their responses to the demands placed on them based on their positions within the educational system and their personal biographies.

The demands on Kevin, as a school principal, require serving as an instructional leader within the confines of pacing guides and scripted curriculum that often inhibit student learning. He is expected to mete out disciplinary consequences and maintain order, always focused on the need to demonstrate Adequate Yearly Progress to ensure a passing school grade. As a district-level leader, Sue’s responsibility is to certify compliance with the rules mandated by federal, state, and local policies often far removed from the day-to-day struggles and that fail to take into account the individual student and his or her needs. Sue describes herself as the person responsible for addressing the “unintended consequences” (Artiles et al., 2010) of well-intentioned policies, and with this belief, she often struggles with the demands of her role as she describes her attempts to find a suitable placement for a returning student.

“I have a third-time eighth-grader, a 16-year-old student with learning disabilities who is returning from a juvenile detention facility. No middle school wants him. No high school will take him because he will count in the incoming cohort that must graduate in 4 years or it will count against the school grade. Further confounding placement is his need for ESE [exceptional student education] services. So where does he go?”—Sue

**Historically Institutionalized Struggles**

Both Sue’s and Kevin’s figured worlds are framed by the history of special education. Indeed, the need to consider special education through a sociocultural and historical perspective has been established by multiple researchers. In a recent special issue of *Exceptional Children* (2010), the importance of historical institutionalized struggles within and beyond special education is discussed. Using a historical lens, issues of equity, disproportionality, service delivery, assessment, intervention policies, and teacher quality are examined, revealing continued “confluence and incongruities of educational policies and practices” (Ferretti & Eisenman, 2010, p. 264) whose goals are to improve educational access and outcomes for all learners.

In Chamberlain (2006), Artiles asserted that if we are to understand the education of culturally diverse students, we must first understand the role of history in their educational experiences.

The Education for All Handicapped Children Act (1975) was enacted to address some of the inequities evident throughout our history, such as the exclusion and segregation of students with disabilities (McCarthy, Cambron-McCabe, & Thomas, 1998; Skiba, 2002). Through the implementation of this act and subsequent reauthorizations, students with disabilities have been afforded educational opportunities that had once been denied them on the basis of disability. For example, students with disabilities were afforded the opportunity to receive a free appropriate public education with their nondisabled peers. As a result, students with disabilities attended their neighborhood schools and gained access to the general education curriculum. Under the protection of this law, students with disabilities have experienced social and educational opportunities that were once denied to them. However, as some students encountered success in their educational experiences, others—predominately students of color—have been forced to reconcile with poor outcomes including disproportionality (Artiles et al., 2010), segregation from the general education population (Fierros & Conroy, 2002), disparate disciplinary consequences (Skiba), and continued lack of educational opportunities (Dorn, 2002).

The historical narrative of special education reveals a number of rationalizations for the current approaches to serving students with disabilities. In an
effort to improve student outcomes, a systematic review of the field’s history in relation to future approaches must be considered. The importance of this examination rests on the belief that in order to improve systems, an awareness of previous efforts must be present. In Chamberlain (2006), Artiles asserted that if we are to understand the education of culturally diverse students, we must first understand the role of history in their educational experiences. An awareness of the context in which issues in our society occur is critical to our understanding of the problem and ultimately our ability to create change for those impacted by the particular issue. Often times, response efforts fall short of their intended goals due to a lack of awareness of how educational issues have been situated in a specific sociocultural context. Artiles and Trent (1994) and others (McLaughlin, 2010; O’Connor & Fernandez, 2006; Skiba et al., 2008) have expanded on this notion, asserting that the failure to examine problems from sociohistorical and political contexts has resulted in an inability to identify improved policies and practices. With that said, we believe that special education leaders must have an awareness of the sociohistorical context in which their practice is situated. It is this awareness that could possibly enable them to successfully negotiate the nuances of leading teachers, students, and communities in a challenging educational context. Furthermore, critical awareness allows for what Rush and Fecho (2008) describe as improvisation or the imagining of a new configuration of our figured worlds.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB) contained multiple provisions targeting the education of students of color and students with disabilities. One of the provisions addressed the promise of highly qualified teachers for all students (U.S. Department of Education, 2007). Highly qualified teachers is defined as teachers possessing content knowledge and certification in any content area in which they are teaching. Although commendable in its intent, the emphasis on content knowledge diminished the importance of pedagogical knowledge in delivering instruction to all students and specifically to those students with specific learning needs (Voltz & Fore, 2006). These and other mandates have emphasized inclusion as a response to access to the general education curriculum. Indeed, the push toward inclusion has been sure and swift, often without attention or thought to the record of poor outcomes for diverse students with disabilities in general education settings, additional training for general educators, or specific instruction on collaboration between general educators and special educators (Artiles, 2003; Kozleski & Smith, 2009). Access alone is insufficient in enhancing opportunity (Artiles, Harris-Murri, & Rostenberg, 2006).

The increased emphasis on testing and test scores has led to a narrowing of the curriculum, especially in schools identified as low performing (Center on Education Policy, 2004; Levitt, 2008).

NCLB, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and other legislative efforts frame policy toward equal distribution of services and are drafted based on rhetorical notions of “others” (Stein, 2004). Rather than creating the equity legislators intend, such policy often serves to create cultures of compliance that ultimately have little impact on making the system more equitable. States, districts, and schools are organized around “being right” (compliance) rather than “doing right” (notions of equity and justice). Our enactment of policy or local contentious practice occurs at the point where historical struggles in person and historically institutionalized struggles converge. It is at this juncture that special education leaders assume a critically conscious and reflexive stance as they attempt to maneuver the educational system. Without such self-reflective behavior we risk falling into a pattern of compliance that is based on enactment without critical questioning of the benefits or consequence of policies and our own personal complacency with and complicity in maintaining the status quo.

For example, although NCLB called for increased accountability in the education of diverse learners and students with disabilities, the results of this legislation have not been without consequences. The increased emphasis on testing and test scores has led to a narrowing of the curriculum, especially in schools identified as low performing (Center on Education Policy, 2004; Levitt, 2008). There are concerns about the possibility of increased negative views regarding students with disabilities based on their performance on state assessments and subsequent impact on school grades, which may have implications for special education teacher retention.
(Allbritten, Mainzer, & Zeigler, 2004). Furthermore, revised policies for grade promotion based on performance on high-stakes tests have resulted in increased retention rates for students with disabilities, which may ultimately result in increased dropout rates (Cole, 2006). Thus, blind adherence to policies may perpetuate or intensify the issues the policies are designed to address.

Policies (federal, state, or district) that equate standardized instruction and curriculum with equity further exacerbate tensions, especially as they conflict with personal values and notions of fairness. At the federal level, policies are developed to address social problems based on “provocative rhetorical portraits of policy beneficiaries” (Stein, 2004, p. 136). Policies are further reinterpreted based on state, district, and local contextual factors and institutionalized historical factors. We are challenged to recognize how notions of “sameness” serve to conflict with our individual notions of “right,” especially as viewed up close when concerning individual students. Addressing conflicting notions of equity for diverse students has been a historical struggle for educational leaders who work toward socially just schooling for all children. Finally, as special education leaders we further reinterpret policies based on our own historical biographies and the figured world in which our practice is situated. Kevin outlines the tensions in his own practice:

“As a principal of a state-identified low-performing school I am expected to implement programs that I know aren’t in the best interest of the students, yet I am evaluated based on the outcomes of these very programs. On a daily basis, I would go to work with my very existence as an educator on the line. I was told repeatedly that if I did not succeed, I would be fired or if the school did not succeed I would no longer be the principal of the school. My personal philosophy would weigh heavy in my daily work. I realized that in order to do the right thing you must be willing to go over, through, and around practices and procedures that do not have the students’ best interest. Ultimately, I determined to make my own rules.”—Kevin

Cranston, Ehrich, and Kimber (2006) described the lives of educational leaders as laden with ethical dilemmas, instances in which we must choose how we will respond to particular situations. Ethical dilemmas are revealed most significantly when the choice consists of two possibilities that cannot be clearly denoted as right and wrong, or when two wrongs emerge as the only viable solution (Kidder, 1995). Courageous leadership requires we not only live within these tensions but make difficult decisions that may challenge the core beliefs of others and especially of institutional norms.

Critically Conscious Special Education Leaders in Contested Sites

Conflicting notions of just schooling (equal or equitable schooling practices) have only served to highlight and contribute to the discourse surrounding difference and how these differences of capital, race, ethnicity, gender, and disability are addressed both in policy and practice. As critically conscious special education leaders we have a crucial role to play in this discourse within our local practice as well as within the broader sociopolitical context (Burrello, Lashley, & Beatty, 2001). It is when faced with competing or conflicting notions of equity that the identity of the individual educational leader emerges (Simmonds, 2007). Their identities are formed in response to both historical enactments and situational contexts. Our personal narratives, as leaders, provide the landscape for our interpretations and performances within our local practices and against competing or conflicting demands (Clandinin, Murphy, Huber, & Orr, 2010). As critically conscious educational leaders we seek to resist structures or policies that produce or reinforce inequalities, and we struggle to utilize the power of our position to be agents of change. Sue notes that shifting professional positions within the hierarchy also presents tensions:

“As I left the class and moved up in the career ladder, I realize the loss of connection to the daily struggle. It scares me to death because I question if I have become the person I was looking at when I was sitting in the building saying, ‘What do you know about what goes on here? We live it day in and day out.’ I have become the outsider, albeit with insider knowledge.”—Sue

Ethical dilemmas are revealed most significantly when the choice consists of two possibilities that cannot be clearly denoted as right and wrong, or when two wrongs emerge as the only viable solution (Kidder, 1995).
Simmonds (2007) identified a willingness to take a critically vulnerable stance in leadership as the only route toward social change in the educational system. Such a stance of resistance requires strategic risk taking and willingness to fearlessly challenge institutional norms that perpetuate rather than contest unjust practices. Opposition to educational leaders who have spoken out against those practices and policies that have historically created unequal and unjust outcomes for students labeled as different comes from both within and beyond the educational system. Theoharis (2007) contended that challenging hegemonic norms by educational leaders is often done at the expense of the self, both personally and professionally. Indeed, both Sue and Kevin have been demoted as a result of their advocacy; nevertheless, both remain committed to their advocacy role. In taking such risks, they were questioned as to their values, beliefs, or commitment to the system that “allowed” them to lead. Yet, they continue to confront those practices and in so doing are able to strategically improvise their figured worlds. Kevin relates:

“Students were sitting in classes waiting to be taught. The challenge now was to get teachers to raise expectations, engage students, and TEACH! From the beginning, I advocated for the students, many of whom were very similar to me as an adolescent and teenager growing up: single parent home, very modest means. Before teachers jumped right into teaching students, I wanted them to spend time building relationships with them, so each get to know the other. It was my belief that if the students knew and felt that teachers cared about them as a person, then you could teach them anything. So for the first 10 days that’s what teachers did. The following year we spent 10 days on the curriculum sooner, but they were not in the school. They didn’t know how beneficial this was for students and teachers alike. I held my ground—for the next 2 years we continued to use the first 10 days to build relationships with students while also gathering data regarding academic needs.”—Kevin

For special education leaders, enacting a critically vulnerable stance is particularly challenging due to the institutional historical struggles that continue to be evidenced in addressing the needs of students with disabilities (Crockett, 2007). As a result, we must remain attentive to and challenge exclusion, isolation, and marginalization of others within the educational system. It is incumbent upon us, as leaders for social justice, to be active agents, challenging systems of power and privilege that result in disparate outcomes and perpetuate existing social and structural stratification. Likewise, we must recognize and confront our own complicity with such inequitable practices and engage in discourse that addresses alternative possibilities. Simmonds (2007) calls this process of self-reflection and reflexivity, “soulwork” (p. 89). Through this process, our agency is also revealed and we can address inequities that can ultimately transform the system (Brown, 2010).

**Improvised or Imagined Figured Worlds**

We purposefully selected figured worlds as the lens with which to examine our local contested practices. We support the use of figured worlds specifically due to its confirmation of worlds of possibilities—worlds that we can individually and collectively transform based on our ability to imagine and ultimately create such worlds. It is with this belief that we call for an enactment of improvised figured worlds possible only through collective action that reaffirms our sense of agency and our responsibility to secure an equitable educational system committed to ensuring positive outcomes for all students. Sue relates the importance of surfacing the worlds that we inhabit and finding the space to explore them with others:

“When I entered doctoral studies, I was looking to find others like me. I came looking for ammunition to help me with the battle that was happening in my head and my heart as I struggled to find a space in which I could make change within the system but also armor to help me survive any counterattacks. Instead, I often found myself in another fight. I would read about injustices or inequality toward the same students I was meeting every day. I would critique articles that found numeric solutions to historic concerns. I was required to respond to the structures of being a doctoral student. In this space I often felt like the marginalized student. My experiences of working within the system were often dismissed as ‘otherness’ so I was an outsider here, too. But more than that, I was changing and questioning everything I did both as I performed my duties during the day in my role as district administrator and at night as doctoral student. In each of the figured worlds there was disequilibrium. I wobbled and the more I wobbled the more I questioned my beliefs and my actions. I am still wobbling and I have not found a comfortable center at this point, but I am still looking. I have found some ‘others’ like me. We have found each other and we continue to push each other so
that we never stop striving for a system in which we all thrive.”—Sue

Gutierrez, Rymes, and Larson (1995) and Kozleski (2011) refer to this space of dialogic interaction as a third space, able to produce generative dialogue among individuals who may hold conflicting understandings. It is imperative that we arrive at these spaces because they hold the potential for the renewal of the spirit of special education leaders who may become discouraged by the disparate conditions confronting their work and thwarting their efforts to create change. In these spaces, special education leaders can engage in more authentic interaction and discourse.

...we must recognize and confront our own complicity with such inequitable practices and engage in discourse that addresses alternative possibilities.

This work is rooted in critical pedagogy and practice, and requires conscientização (Freire, 1970), or critical consciousness that enables us to examine our local contentious practices at the epicenter of history in person and historical institutionalized struggles. Critical consciousness supports the need, posited by Giroux (1988), for both a language of critique and a language of possibility resulting in action. It responds to what Weiner (2007) calls a “crisis of imagination” (p. 57) and the need to “challenge the hegemony of realism…. described as the process by which we come, as a matter of common sense, to believe (with serious risk to our own freedom) in a future that looks and feels quite similar to the present” (p. 69).

Change does not happen in an all-at-once moment; rather, change happens as each of us encounters a situation, a child, or a story. Each of these encounters forces us to take a stand and confirm or confront that which we believe we are or have professed to be. The closer we are to these stories, the more they tend to call for our attention and “bump” (Clandinin et al., 2010) against our notions of self. We have found that tensions between our personal and professional selves are not relieved without complications and risk. As critically conscious educational leaders, we are challenged to both embrace and honor the risks that are involved in any attempt to educate for social transformation.

Social change will only emerge when we are willing to assume a vulnerable stance of resistance.

Epilogue

We met each Tuesday evening for 3 months. During that time, we came to know one another anew. Personal experiences were shared that shed light on our own biographies and how they intertwined and in many cases drove us in the work we do. We each, for our own reasons, looked forward to our meetings. It was a place to talk about the world that is, but more important, to consider the world that could be and to recognize that each, in our own way, has contributed to improving the outcomes of the children to whom we are committed. Our small group was reflective of a professional learning community that allowed for courageous conversations on the critical issues confronting special education leaders and the field as a whole. It provided us a venue to examine our efforts and reignite our passion as critically conscious special education leaders traversing multiple worlds.

As our graphic (Figure 1) illustrates, the practice of special educational leaders is situated at the intersection of three interrelated components: 1) historical struggles in person; 2) historically institutionalized struggles; and 3) local contentious practice. The collision of these three elements and subsequent effect on key stakeholders cannot be understated. It is at this hub where action without critical reflection perpetuates practices that are ineffective and often times detrimental to Pre-K–12 learners, specifically diverse learners and students with disabilities. However, it is imperative that we all be reminded of the potential we each possess to disrupt the status quo and not just envision, but enact, new possibilities—education as it could be. The dialogic process that we have engaged in and shared through our discussion in this paper has reawakened each of us to our potential as individuals to accomplish this task. It is our wish that other special education leaders would engage in such an ongoing introspective process in hopes of gaining deeper understandings of the complex interaction of self and context when viewed through a sociohistorical perspective.

References


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CASE IN POINT:

- In the Smelter

Leading Special Education in an Era of Systems Redesign:
A Commentary

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- The “system” has been undoubtedly discriminatory toward children and youth with disabilities who largely remained segregated, stigmatized, and marginalized.

- When people look to authorities for easy answers to adaptive challenges, they end up with dysfunction.

- There’s a proportionate relationship between risk and adaptive change: The deeper the change and the greater the amount of new learning required, the more resistance there will be and thus the greater the danger to those who lead.

- Leaders often try to avoid danger, either consciously or subconsciously, by treating an adaptive challenge as if it were a technical one.

- Leaders for social justice must be active agents, challenging systems of power and privilege that result in disparate outcomes and perpetuate existing social and structural stratification.

- Leadership requires disturbing people—but at a rate they can absorb.

- We must recognize and confront our own complicity with inequitable practices and engage in discourse that addresses alternative possibilities.

"In the Smelter" is such an interesting title for those leading special education in this unprecedented era of accountability and systems reform. Consider the process of smelting. Smelting uses intense heat and typically a chemical reducing agent to change the state of amalgam compounds (e.g., metal ore) into a valued pure product or substance. During this separation process, various byproducts such as slag are produced. Slag, once considered waste, is now recycled and incorporated into concrete, where it significantly improves the durability (and safety) of road surfaces. Thus, “in the smelter” offers an optimistic view of special education leadership in an era of systems redesign because the smelter removes and recycles impurities, leaving valuable pure products. Each of the articles in this issue describes the agonizing choices and constant struggles in the evolving educational landscape. Two major themes emerged: (a) the conflicting intersection of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA 2004), No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), local policies/procedures, and diminishing resources and (b) leadership implications regarding social justice advocacy.

Unintended Consequences of the IDEA and NCLB

The role of the special education administrator as an instructional leader has had a long history. We have the unique responsibility of ensuring the rights of students with disabilities while at the same time improving curriculum and instructional strategies to increase postschool outcomes. Today, this role is more important than ever, as high-stakes testing has increased the level of accountability for all educators. Yet we are consumed by trying to reconcile the polarities that undergird two powerful legislative acts: NCLB and IDEA 2004.

Polarities (Garmston & Wellman, 2009) are chronic, ongoing tensions that are inherent in
individual and organizational systems. They are unavoidable and unsolvable, they have two or more right answers that are interdependent, and they must be managed with both-and thinking. Leaders therefore must recognize that schools or districts are living paradoxes. Polarities are sets of opposites that cannot function well independently. Because the two sides of a polarity are interdependent, you can not choose one as a solution and neglect the other. The object of polarity management is to draw the best from opposites while avoiding the limits or downside of each. The articles in this issue chronicle the difficulties in both navigating and managing the polarities that emerge when complying with federal/state laws while focusing on improving instruction/student outcomes.

Increased federal government influence over the educational system has undeniably shifted attention and effort from the complex issues of equity to narrow views of outcomes as measured by standardized testing.

In different ways, the authors underscored the irony that although NCLB and IDEA 2004 may have been intended to protect the rights of students with disabilities and improve the outcomes of all students, they may, in fact, limit school leaders' abilities to provide the highest possible quality education. As an individual who has devoted my professional career to improving the lives of individuals with disabilities, this critique produces significant cognitive dissonance and discomfort that is caused by holding conflicting cognitions (e.g., ideas, beliefs, values, emotional reactions) simultaneously.

Many educators agree that both IDEA and NCLB have influenced positive educational reforms. For example, the laws have resulted in (a) the publication and use of data by disaggregated subgroups, (b) an intense focus on measurable student learning outcomes, and (c) increased accountability for results. However, as the authors of the articles in this issue have so eloquently written, there have been severe consequences for both students and staff. Increased federal government influence over the educational system has undeniably shifted attention and effort from the complex issues of equity to narrow views of outcomes as measured by standardized testing. In many cases, the focus on narrow outcome measures has also resulted in high-stakes decisions about students, teachers, administrators, and schools being made based on single measures. Has this intense focus on accountability perpetuated a special education legacy consisting of segregation, exclusion, and marginalization, supported by legislation? Has legislation promoted policies and procedures that are incongruent with their stated purpose? The authors in this issue present an exceptionally compelling case for answering in these questions in the affirmative. The incongruences are substantially similar to the growing body of disabilities studies scholarship.

Disability studies is a relatively new, multidisciplinary, humanities-based field that has grown from an obscure subdiscipline into a recognized, educational field. In broad terms, disability studies is a site of both academic inquiry and political activity (Davis, 2006). Danforth (2006) points out that since the inception of disability studies during the first decades of the 20th century, special education practice and research have served mainly as obstacles to the pursuit of democratic goals within public schools. Danforth opines that there have been two unfortunate turns in special education history. The first is building the individual deficit disability construct as the cornerstone of special education ideology, research, legislation, and practice. Doing so has evaded issues of cultural difference and social inequality, effectively repoliticizing American public schooling behind an ostensibly apolitical ideology of positivistic science (Brantlinger, 1997; Danforth & Rhodes, 1997; Skrtic, 1991). The second turn was limiting professional language, thought, and practice to a discourse of positivistic social science. The results of these two anchors of special education research, policy, and practice reduce human social and political problems such as issues about how diverse peoples can cooperatively live together under democratic values of equality and freedom to technical problems to be resolved through measurement and techniques of professional precision.

David Connor’s commentary captures the struggles of special education administrators during a period of great transition. He uses the term *liminal space* (Van Gennep, 1960) between what had been, what is now, and what will be to describe the unique situation special education administrators occupy during large-scale systems reform. This liminal space is charged with
ambivalence, as it simultaneously contains the dismantling of certain institutional practices while enacting new ones undergirded by a different ideology. Connor cites the work of Thomas Skrtic (1991), whose critique of Public Law 94-142 asserted that the law established a separate system “uncoupled” from general education, in order to allow the latter to function without interruption. As the IDEA and NCLB become ever more conflated, I wonder, are we now paying the price for these largely uncoupled systems? Connor supports this notion as

special education is still seen as a separate set of complicated issues by all who come into contact with it—policy makers, researchers, principals, teachers and other professionals in education, parents, and so on—that it usually becomes separated and marginalized within efforts of universal school reform.

McHatton, Glenn, and Gordon use figured worlds (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 2001) as the conceptual framework for examining the polarities or contested spaces and multiple contexts in which critically conscious special education leaders exist. The use of figured worlds as a framework facilitates critical examination of what is, while recognizing and fostering our ability to imagine what could be, and through that realization make our imagined world a reality.

I appreciate the authors of this special edition in proposing thought-provoking approaches to navigating the liminal space of special education leaders. Perhaps through the use of figured worlds, disabilities studies, and other critical theories, we are better prepared to understand the dynamic nature of polarities and our obligation to manage both poles simultaneously. In doing so, we strive to create systems of support that facilitate equitable and socially just institutional practices. McHatton, Glenn, and Gordon suggest that “as critically conscious educational leaders, we seek to resist structures or policies that produce or reinforce inequalities and struggle to use the power of our position to be agents of change.” I very much agree with Alvarez McHatton et al. describe how exposure to different figured worlds (e.g., diverse urban school, predominately white, affluent school) created dissonance or “wobble,” a space of uncertainty that lies between and among figured worlds. As one develops an appreciation of this unsettling state of vertigo, opportunities for examining practice in ways that might not otherwise occur are created. This wobble happens when we consider another possibility or perspective thus destabilizing our understandings of our figured world. It is that moment in which we become aware of unexamined practices and their implications that we become critically conscious leaders. As critically conscious educational leaders committed to social justice within our schools, we seek to resist structures or policies that produce or reinforce inequalities and struggle to use the power of our position to be agents of change. The reality of courageous leadership requires that we not only live within these tensions but also make difficult decisions that inevitably challenge the core beliefs of others as well as institutional norms. As was pointed out, states, districts, and schools are largely organized around “being right” (compliance) rather than “doing right.”

I appreciated the way Alvarez McHatton et al. analyze how exposure to different figured worlds (e.g., diverse urban school, predominately white, affluent school) created dissonance or “wobble,” a space of uncertainty that lies between and among figured worlds. As one develops an appreciation of this unsettling state of vertigo, opportunities for examining practice in ways that might not otherwise occur are created. This wobble happens when we consider another possibility or perspective thus destabilizing our understandings of our figured world. It is that moment in which we become aware of unexamined practices and their implications that we become critically conscious leaders. As critically conscious educational leaders committed to social justice within our schools, we seek to resist structures or policies that produce or reinforce inequalities and struggle to use the power of our position to be agents of change. The reality of courageous leadership requires that we not only live within these tensions but also make difficult decisions that inevitably challenge the core beliefs of others as well as institutional norms. As was pointed out, states, districts, and schools are largely organized around “being right” (compliance) rather than “doing right.”

George Theoharis (2007) contends that challenging hegemonic norms by educational leaders has its consequences and often comes at the expense of the self, both personally and professionally. Connor also captured one of the more distressing consequences of systems reform during an economic crisis. During such times, we see an exodus of special education administrators leaving the system because of the ideological changes as well as financial conditions. Consequently, they take their institutional knowledge with them and, with that, the critical advocacy of students with disabilities. Their absence creates a vacuum in special education leadership,
giving rise to an atmosphere fraught with irony, paradox, and contradiction. Shealey, Thomas, and Washington examine the intersection of social justice and special education in charter schools. The emphasis of social justice in the field of special education beyond advocacy of inclusive practices has contributed to a growing body of work aimed at critically examining the role of race, gender, and socioeconomic status on schooling and the role of education professionals in transforming systems. They suggest that framing the work of special education with a critical lens aimed at reversing decades of benign neglect of learners from traditionally underrepresented groups presents opportunities for advocacy that move the field beyond rhetoric to transforming systems. Advocacy is one of the areas of convergence between special education and charter schools.

It is incumbent upon us, as leaders for social justice, to be active agents, challenging systems of power and privilege that result in disparate outcomes and perpetuate existing social and structural stratification.

As special education leaders, we share a goal in moving away from dysfunctional practices and Byzantine structures toward greater inclusivity, high-quality curriculum/instruction, and practices that result in greater student outcomes. For many of us, we realize the “system” has been undoubtedly discriminatory toward children and youth with disabilities who largely remained segregated, stigmatized, and marginalized. As Heifitz and Linsky (2002) propose, when people look to authorities for easy answers to adaptive challenges, they end up with dysfunction. They expect the person in charge to know what to do, and under the weight of that responsibility, those in authority frequently end up faking it or disappointing people, or they get spit out of the system in the belief that a new “leader” will solve the problem. In fact, there’s a proportionate relationship between risk and adaptive change: The deeper the change and the greater the amount of new learning required, the more resistance there will be and thus the greater the danger to those who lead. For this reason, people often try to avoid the dangers, either consciously or subconsciously, by treating an adaptive challenge as if it were a technical one. This is why we see so much more routine management than leadership in our society. It is incumbent upon us, as leaders for social justice, to be active agents, challenging systems of power and privilege that result in disparate outcomes and perpetuate existing social and structural stratification. Thus, leadership requires disturbing people, but at a rate they can absorb. Furthermore, we must recognize and confront our own complicity with such inequitable practices and engage in discourse that addresses alternative possibilities. Simonds (2007) refers to this process of self-reflection and reflexivity as “soulwork.” As Harvard Professor Richard Elmore once told me, “John, if you can’t draw a direct line from your position and what you do to student achievement, you’re overhead.” This challenge has and continues to resonate within me as I try managing the two polarities of ensuring procedural rights for students while simultaneously improving curriculum/instruction to increase student outcomes. This is the paradox of being In the Smelter: Leading Special Education in an Era of Systems Redesign.

References


No Child Left Behind Act, Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. 20 USC § 6301 et seq.


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Comments on Leading Special Education in an Era of Systems Redesign: A Practitioner’s Perspective

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• At risk sends the wrong message.
• Use contextual learning, rather than teaching discreet skills in isolation of students’ families and communities.
• Question the business model of leadership in education because the idea of turning around schools and uprooting school personnel (i.e., leaving special education administrators in liminal space) is the latest educational fad.
• The notions of social justice and critical leadership are inextricably intertwined.

Let me begin my commentary by stating the obvious. Not all special needs students are getting the education they deserve. For example, the least restrictive environment for some can be the most restrictive for others. A child who has a disability, is learning English as a second language, and who comes from an impoverished background with little or no prior school experience needs the resources that only a specialized classroom can give. Thus, I begin with the premise that none of our students start the education race at the same starting line. Our mandate, as educators, is to create the conditions of learning, whether it is in the traditional classroom or otherwise, that will ensure all our students will succeed to their fullest potential. With this in mind, let me comment on the four articles.

Note that two of the articles focused on special education in New York City; one on P.S. 24, a school in Brooklyn, and the other, on the school system itself. Leadership at the P.S. 24 school as portrayed in Oyer and Fuente’s article was refreshing. School leaders view their Latino, Palestinian and Chinese children and those of other ethnicities as “at promise,” rather than “at risk.” Their approach looked at the needs of the children first—their individual differences, as well as their social-emotional and educational needs. The idea of rejecting the practice of teaching “discreet skills outside of the contexts in which they are used,” clearly reflects my bias that educators should tap into the students’ funds of knowledge, should capitalize on their communities’ and parents’ resources, and should do it in ways that facilitate a culture of respect and collaboration. Looking at instruction as building on student learning around “authentic genres, long-term project-based inquiries, and integrated curriculum” is a big step in the right direction.

At the school district level, Conner’s article describing the impact of New York City Mayor Bloomberg and New York City Schools Chancellor Klein on the school district at large, and special education in particular, calls attention to many of the issues we face in implementing change within Arizona’s largest urban high school district. It appears that the underlying premise of the Bloomberg-Klein reforms was clearly an attempt to bring about a cultural change by providing autonomy of decision making along with accountability measures at the local level. Conner argues that the unintended consequence of these reforms situates special education administrators in what he calls the “liminal space.” As I understand it, this is the place at which someone is trapped in a situation and unable to make sound decisions because his or her administrative world has changed. The structures on which he or she based day-to-day operations have disappeared; and this causes one to be stressful,
emotional, and resistant to change. Having experienced many changes in my professional life and having been engaged in change-agent activities, I completely understand these phenomena. But my question is—how can a cultural change take place unless we all reach this threshold of anxiety or dissatisfaction with the current circumstance? I believe compassionate leadership is the key element in making sure these transitions (across the liminal space) are constructive. It appears, in the case of special education administrators in New York City, this notion was ignored.

A school climate has been established where the voices of teachers, students, and parents are heard, and collaboration with the local university’s teacher/special education program provides professional development in areas of need.

I believe the other two articles speak clearly to my notion of compassionate leadership. Shealey argues for building a social justice bridge between special education and the urban charter school. She states unequivocally that although there is limited evidence that the market approach to education results in higher academic achievement and that charter schools perform better than public schools, the key ingredient to any success a charter school can hope to achieve is embodied in the special education and school/district leadership. She calls for leaders who advocate for social justice and equity, as demonstrated by their nondiscriminatory actions, their inclusion of a full range of mildly to severely disabled students, and their advocacy for high-quality services, including highly trained staff, adequate funding, and in-service training focused on the nature of special education.

To quote Shealey, “Administrators and teacher leaders at Westside meet biweekly to examine learner data and discuss curriculum and climate issues.” Westside African Preparatory School appears to be a model for successfully intersecting social justice, equity, and charter schools. A school climate has been established where the voices of teachers, students, and parents are heard, and collaboration with the local university’s teacher/special education program provides professional development in areas of need.

Indeed, measures such as these are necessary if we are going to mend the “fracture” between what special education is and what it ought to be in an era where federal and state mandates are enacted to improve outcomes.

In “Troubling Special Education Leadership: Finding Purpose, Potential, and Possibility in Challenging Contexts,” the authors refer to critical leadership as courageous leadership. I have always believed that culturally responsive leadership supports collaborative governance and ultimately success for all students, but this notion of critical leadership, or critically conscious leaders, calls our attention to a dimension of leadership that many in our profession easily overlook. Clearly, it is this dimension that can make real differences! The authors call for leaders who think in innovative ways, who challenge existing norms and have the courage to speak out against “policies and practices that have historically created unequal and unjust outcomes for students labeled as different.” I would advocate that we encourage, prepare, and place leaders who display these characteristics throughout our school districts.

As critically conscious educational leaders, we are challenged to both embrace and honor the risks that are involved in any attempt to educate for social transformation.

Two of the authors whose experiences represent the core of the article are practitioners. Like Sue and Kevin, I am a practitioner and remember playing several roles from teacher to my present position as superintendent of a large urban school district. In all these positions, which also included stints in the principal’s and central offices, I could have used the knowledge base from which Sue and Kevin operate, especially their history in person in education framework. Sue’s role at the district level is particularly disturbing. Her idea of “wobbling” is different from the notion of transitioning through “liminal space” mentioned earlier. The latter is about moving from one place to another. Wobbling is about dealing with cognitive dissonance over an issue one is facing at the moment. The conflict experienced while addressing the unintended consequences of the day-to-day policies affecting students with
disabilities and students of color at the school level can be overwhelming for some. Clearly, Kevin, my other role model, does not wobble. He is very close to where the rubber hits the road. Kevin is a key example of a change agent. He resists and he takes risks. So does Sue, but she is operating in a much different environment where the stakes are a far cry from those at the school level, but no less political or intense. They both are willing to take “a vulnerable stance” to bring about change in their different arenas. The upshot of this article is summarized in a concluding statement: As critically conscious educational leaders, we are challenged to both embrace and honor the risks that are involved in any attempt to educate for social transformation.

When Professors Kozleski and Artiles, the editors of this special issue, asked me to provide commentary on these articles I had no idea how much I would enjoy it. I truly recognize the “smelter” they refer to in the title of this special issue. Sometimes it feels like we all find ourselves in a “hot seat” during this “era of system redesign,” “centralized mandates, local decision making, and accountability.” And I do believe we are obligated to put the children we serve first. Thus, the reason I enjoyed this assignment was that these authors went beyond what we so often do, which is merely to define the problem without offering any solutions. So let me see what I can glean from what I think the authors are telling us about solutions. I think they are saying this:

Moreover, the extent to which we can create school climates based on principles of equality that value human rights and recognize the dignity of every child, we will have taken a major step toward achieving social justice within our schools.

First, that we must consider all our students and especially our special needs students as at promise. At risk sends the wrong message. Within the Phoenix Union High School District we refuse to operate from a deficit model. We believe every student should be prepared for success in life, career, and college. Second, that we should use contextual learning, rather than teaching discreet skills in isolation of students’ families and communities. This is especially relevant to special needs students, but it is equally important to all students in this era of federal and state accountability. I believe the best way to connect with all our students in our quest to improve their basic skills is to link student learning to their families and communities. This is particularly appropriate in our increasingly multicultural society. Third, that we should question the business model of leadership in education because the idea of turning around schools, and uprooting school personnel (i.e., leaving special education administrators in liminal space) is the latest educational fad. I believe simplistic panaceas are set forth on both sides of this debate. What we need to do is learn from each other. Both institutions deliver value but with vastly different goals and, thus, how value might be delivered is open for discussion within the profit/nonprofit sectors. In our school district we continue to strive to transform the culture of urban education to one of high expectations, rigor, and maximization of the success of all students through partnerships with business, foundations, nonprofits, colleges, and universities.

And last, that the notions of social justice and critical leadership are inextricably intertwined. Again, I think we have and need more of the kind of leaders referred to in these articles. Leaders who penetrate beyond the obvious, see the forest as well as the trees, and who are flexible and questioning, look at issues as many sided and understand that either/or is nonexistent. Moreover, the extent to which we can create school climates based on principles of equality that value human rights and recognize the dignity of every child, we will have taken a major step toward achieving social justice within our schools.

I have one final comment. For those who find themselves entering INTO THE SMELTER: LEADING SPECIAL EDUCATION LEADERSHIP, remember what Harry Truman once said, “If you can’t stand the heat, get out of the kitchen!” I applaud the editors and authors for discounting the heat and for their courageous leadership, their insights, suggestions, and admonitions and especially for championing those students who are most exposed to today’s emphasis on the audit accountability culture.

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