

## **Issues in Exceptional Student Education: The Challenges for Principals**

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**Abstract:** *This paper covers a wide array of issues related to exceptional student education. Some of the issues covered include: culture, leadership style, funding, behavioural problems, and empowerment. Solutions are offered for some of the most common problems faced by Principals and the possible difficulties that can be encountered when implementing the proposed solutions are also identified and explained. The case study of Lynn Middle School in Boca Raton, Florida is used throughout the paper. Lynn Middle School is a hypothetical school representing the average characteristics of educational institutions in Broward and Palm Beach Counties.*

### **1 Introduction**

Since the beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century, special education programs have gained more attention in our society (Sorrel, Reith, & Sindelar, 2004). The IDEA policy standardizes exceptional education system throughout the country. It is quite a challenge for principals to remain as effective leaders of exceptional schools. Several issues other than educational progress have been involved such as cultural diversity, inclusion of general education, effective transition training, etc. Principals have to handle many sensitive issues related to exceptional education that involve both behavioral and emotional aspects. This paper presents ten issues related to challenges in exceptional education that principals need to be aware of. It also includes the importance of the issues, possible solutions, and possible limitations.

Lynn Middle School was built in 1985 located in Broward County, South Florida with a good reputation. There are 500 students in grade 5-8 enrolled in this school and taught by 60 full time special education teachers. The diversity ratio among students is very balanced. Blacks made up 37.5 percent, whites 30.4 percent, Hispanics 25.8 percent, and Asians 3.3 percent. In terms of the school year,

there are 180 days of class. The average age of citizens in Broward community is 65 with wide range of socioeconomic levels. Most students in Lynn Middle School are considered upper middle class level.

The campus consists of four classroom buildings, one indoor gymnasium, and two cafeterias. There are 3 media centers with assessment software on the campus. The teachers' offices are located on the first floor of the classroom buildings. The campus was built to fully accommodate disabled students according to the IDEA policy. The main staff members are; 20 security guards, 10 custodians, 5 psychologists, 10 behavioral therapists, and 15 program coordinators.

Most students of Lynn Middle School also attend exceptional school in the elementary level. There are several cases that Lynn Middle School receives admission from students who transfer from general education. The classroom period at Lynn Middle School is designed to accommodate students with learning disabilities. One period lasts for 50 minutes with 5 minutes break after each 25 minutes of study. Students with various disabilities are usually grouped together in one classroom. There are 20 students per one teacher and one teaching assistant in each period. Teaching assistants are usually volunteer students who have to complete their field experience.

Lynn Middle School is famous for providing effective programs for exceptional students. However, there are several recurring themes that the principal has to handle on a daily basis. The issues usually involve dealing with students' progress, implementations of new policies, parents' expectations, negative emotions from parents, etc. The following questions presented in this paper are those that principals have to handle on a daily basis.

## **2 How to handle the case of parents who are offended by the fact that their children were transferred from general education to special education?**

Studies show that the definitions of learning disability vary from culture to culture (Sorrel, et al., 2004). In some cultures, the character of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) is viewed as the lack of discipline rather

than as a disorder. The lenient perceptions on the definitions of learning disability make some parents deny that their children have a learning disability and prefer to blame the school system. Parents of children with clear signs of developmental disorder since infancy (such as Autism) usually have more insight about their developmental process (Papalia, Olds, & Feldman, 2007). They are able to access the children's specific needs and also willing to cooperate with the school. On the other hand, parents of children; whose disability appears later in their middle to late childhood, are usually unprepared and refuse to believe that their children have a learning disability (Papalia et al., 2007).

It is important for principals of exceptional schools to handle the negative emotions of parents whose children just have been transferred to exceptional schools. Successful solutions for this problem can increase positive relationships between parents and students and also increase the level of parent involvement in the students' academic performance.

Exceptional schools should provide parents, whose children have been transferred from general education, the information about the characteristics of their children's learning disability. This approach will help parents become more open and have more insight about their children's needs. The goal for this approach is to increase the level of parent involvement with the school.

Another approach to increase the level of acceptance among parents is that the school should emphasize the idea of having inclusive classrooms with general education students. The idea of inclusion will help parents feel that the transition from general education to exceptional education is not such a shift for their children. Moreover, the idea of inclusion will help parents perceive that their children are not inferior to other children but rather need alternative approaches to their learning.

The challenge of solving the issue of parents' acceptance is that it depends almost completely on principals' way of approaching parents. In this case, the principals have to take the role of emotional and academic counselors for parents. The double roles of principals in exceptional schools lead to the idea of whether principals should be trained in basic mental counseling as well.

### **3 How to assure parents that our program is effective for their children?**

Parents of exceptional students usually find it frustrating to find the right schools that can help their children improve their level of achievement. They usually have a lot of hope and expectation toward the institute. Some parents who have transferred their children to several exceptional schools before might develop cynical ideas toward the program of the newly transferred institute. It is essential for the school to assure parents that the offered programs are effective for their children.

This process has an impact not only on the positive attitude of parents but also on the cycle of the school function as well. The positive feedback from parents leads to the positive reputation of the school. The reputation of the school leads to the effect on financial support from the government. The financial support from the government in the following year will increase or decrease the quality of the school facility which will affect the level of students' achievement. In order to fulfill this challenge, the principal has to develop a plan to establish trust with parents as well as to design the program that is effective for the students.

The school should give personal attention to parents since the admission period to establish a good first impression with parents. This approach will help establish positive perceptions and at the same time eliminate the level of anxiety and cynical ideas toward the institute. The positive attitudes from parents will help increase the level of openness to suggestions and involvement required by the school.

The school should also provide information about the program and assure parents that it conforms to the IDEA standard. During the semester, monthly evaluation and the progress of both the students' behavior and academic achievement compare to the annual goal should be informed to parents to assure that the school provides personal attention to each student.

The provision of personal attention toward parents and the monthly report of students' achievement highly require the commitment from the staff to help fulfill the goal. This

approach might be beneficial to parents and the reputation of the institute but it does not change the fact that there is an increase in the workloads of the staff. To sustain the program, the school might need extra budget to compensate the increased workload of the staff.

#### **4 How to assess the level of achievement among students whose English is their second language? How to overcome the issue that multicultural students have an overrepresented number in exceptional schools?**

There is an overrepresented number of multicultural exceptional students compared to the number of exceptional students of Anglo American culture (Obiakor, 2007). One of the reasons is because the assessment is not offered in all foreign languages and most of the tests are culturally biased (Aiken & Groth-Marnat, 2006). Another reason is because some minority students are recent migrants with a low socioeconomic level. Parents of students in such cases usually have no time to participate in school events or follow up with the children's academic achievement. Moreover, parents of some cultures such as Asia, hold views regarding interfering in school, as questioning the educators' quality of teaching (Nisbett, 2003).

Principals of exceptional schools should find alternative options of assessing multicultural students' aptitude level while they are trying to improve their English. According to Aiken et al., (2006), there are several aptitude tests that are designed to assess students without requiring the use of language. Series of three dimensional figures will be presented to test students' critical thinking, spatial ability, etc. together with basic mathematics questions.

At the same time the school should offer programs that train students to become familiar with the U.S. academic curriculum and the teaching method. Some foreign students might come from countries that teach them to learn by memorizing the textbooks rather than develop critical thinking. The difference in studying methods among multicultural students is one of the factors that have an impact on low academic achievement (Nisbett, 2003). The

special program for multicultural students should inform the students about the learning objectives and the teaching methods according to the U.S. standard.

The challenge that arises from solving this problem is that the school needs an extra budget to offer special programs for multicultural students. Moreover, it is costly and difficult to recruit staff members to use three dimensional figures as an aptitude test to assess exceptional students while they are trying to improve their English.

## **5 How to convince parents that their involvement with the school is important? How to include parent involvement among multicultural students?**

Previous studies show that parent involvement has a positive impact on the development of exceptional students (Kim & Morningstar, 2005). Moreover, it also leads to having positive relationships with the educators as the needs from both parents and educators are communicated and solved. However, there are many obstacles for the school to retain parent involvement. Some parents cannot participate in meetings because of their work schedule while others have limitations in English comprehension. It is important for principals to find an alternative way of communicating with parents without having to spend time in schools.

Principals can present ideas of communicating with parents through emails, phone, and letters. Teachers are responsible for communicating with parents of assigned students. Parents should be required to inform the school of what is the best way of communication for them. This way, the school can be more connected with parents considering the limitation of the parents' availability.

Moreover, principals should provide monthly communication with parents of minority students in their native language. This approach can be done by sending a monthly letter or email written in their native language informing parents about their children. The translation can be done through software program that can convert the text from English to foreign language and vice versa.

The issue arising from solving this problem is that the individual communication can be time consuming for

teachers. Instead of having parents together in one room to deliver the message in one day, teachers have to spend some time on several days in communicating with parents of each student one by one. Moreover, some foreign parents might not be able to use the computer or might not have an access to the program that translates the message from English to their native language.

## **6 How to assure parents that their children are not being neglected in school?**

Parents usually expect the school to provide all the needs for their children in order to reach the maximum level of academic performance. However, previous studies show that the commitment of the students is also a factor that helps them reach the maximum level of academic performance (Judson, 2007). Based on the findings of the research, the impact of students' low achievement can be the ignorance of the students toward the subject or being neglected by the teachers. Parents usually support the idea that their children have low academic achievement because of being neglected by the teachers. Principals should assure parents that their children are not neglected in school. In order to do this, principals should provide monthly individual reports to parents. Moreover, principals should provide an academic environment conducive to establishing relationships with students.

The monthly report should include not only student's academic performance but also the report on observed emotions and behavior in the school area. The report will assure parents that each student is being monitored closely in the school. Moreover, the report should have a section that offers parents to write suggestions that they need the school to focus on. Each month, the report should also respond to the parents' suggestions on what type of service they expect from the school.

In addition to sending the monthly report, the school should also provide curriculum that make connections among students from different backgrounds. This approach not only prevents negligence of some students but also to gain attention from students toward the study as well. Previous study shows that educators should present

information that offers multiple truths and perspectives to gain attention from students of various ethnicities (Judson, 2007).

The issue that arises from solving this problem is that it requires teachers to pay attention to small details in the classroom at the same time dealing with disturbing behaviors. In some cases, teachers overlook some students because they appear to be passive and quiet among students who are hyperactive and disturbing. It will be quite a challenge for teachers to focus more on passive student in the middle of disturbing classroom environment.

## **7 What are effective ways to conduct successful transition training?**

The success of an exceptional education institute depends greatly on the success of exceptional students' post school achievement (Sorrel, et al., 2004). Previous research shows, that post school achievement among exceptional students remains below the expected levels (Kim & Morningstar, 2005). According to the IDEA policy, the goal of transition training is to train exceptional students to be independent in society. It is important for exceptional schools to provide effective transition training. Studies show that the obstacles for transition training are; the differences in cultural values on being independent, the quality of transition training in the institute, and the support from parents and the community (Kohler, & Fields, 2003).

The school should start by informing parents about the importance of transition training since students start attending the school. The school should also express the need to support their children in participating in real life situations. At the same time, the school should provide transition training to exceptional students earlier than the expected age, if possible, to give more time for students to have trials and errors during the training.

The school should also provide a career office where exceptional students can have an internship with possibility of employment. If possible, the school should provide paid internships for exceptional students as a way of providing rewards for their effort. The wage from the internship will function as an incentive for exceptional students to give

more effort and to be willing to improve their skills (Kohler et al., 2003).

The challenge of having successful transition training is that the school will need extra budget to include the training earlier than the expected age. Moreover, it is quite a challenge for the school to find places that offer paid internships for exceptional students. It is also beyond the authority of the school to control some external variables that discourage the students such as the lack of empathy in some colleagues.

## **8 How to assure parents of general education students that the inclusion of exceptional education students will not lower the quality of the school?**

One of the IDEA policies supports the idea that exceptional students should be included in the general education environment. The purpose of this policy is to decrease the stigma among exceptional students. The inclusion of exceptional students also gives the students the opportunity to improve their social interaction between exceptional and non exceptional students (Yssel, Engelbrecht, Oswald, Eloff, & Swart, 2007). Although the inclusion policy is carefully designed to accommodate exceptional students, it does not guarantee that society will also conform to the policy.

The challenge of this policy involves the acceptance from parents of general education students. Parents of general education students might find that the challenging behaviors can be disturbing for their children's academic environment and therefore lead to the idea of decreasing in teaching quality. The biased perceptions from general education parents will decrease the level of effectiveness in the IDEA policy on inclusion.

It is essential for principals in both exceptional schools and general schools to eliminate biased values of general education parents toward exceptional students. In order to solve this problem, principals in both schools should organize meetings with general education parents prior to the start of the inclusion program. Moreover, it is essential that the school should respond immediately to the complaints from general education parents.

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During the meeting prior to the beginning of the inclusion program, principals from both general and exceptional schools should inform parents about the plans of making collaboration work in inclusive classrooms (Hines, 2008). The school should provide parents and students from general education the characteristics of inclusive classroom environment and teaching method in the coming semester. According to the research, it is effective if the inclusive classroom has one teacher who functions as the instructor and another teacher who monitors the students' behavior in one period (Hines, 2008). This approach will help parents and students of general education become more open minded and accept the idea of having inclusive classrooms. Moreover, the presentation of the school plan will assure parents and students of general education that the academic quality will not be decreased due to the inclusion (Lynch & Warner, 2008).

Moreover, the principal of general education schools should train general education teachers to operate inclusive programs effectively (Hines, 2008). During the training session, the principal has to make sure that teachers develop positive attitudes toward collaborative planning and instruction. One of the factors that determine the success of this approach is the leadership role of the school principals (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2004).

One of the challenges that might arise as the inclusion project is running is that the general education teachers might not be satisfied with the teaching environment. General education teachers might feel that their career path has been forced to change and therefore it lowers the level of job satisfaction. It is quite a challenge for principals to change the values and perceptions of people involved in general education. The inclusion program might raise the issue that general education students are not being treated fairly compared to exceptional students whose parents pay the same tax for public education. Principals should also focus on retaining the quality of general education as well as creating friendly environment for exceptional students.

## **9 How to assure parents of exceptional students that the negative consequences from the inclusion of general education students will not occur?**

Although the inclusion program according to IDEA policy is meant to be beneficial to the progress of exceptional students, parents of exceptional students might also find this policy somewhat problematic for their children. One of the negative consequences that might occur to exceptional students is the possibility of being bullied by general education students.

School bullying has occurred as part of the U.S. culture before the inclusion program was introduced (Anonymous, 2008). General education students with low academic achievement and submissive personalities are usually bullied by peers. There are cases in the past when school bullying led to depressive episodes and therefore several victims committed suicide. It is almost impossible to avoid bullying because nowadays bullying can occur through verbal violence in the cyber world without any physical violence and therefore it is beyond the school authority.

Parents of exceptional students find that exceptional schools are the safe shelter for their children. They can learn the subjects and develop their social skills without any discrimination that will lower their level of self esteem. The history of bullying in general education schools that occurs for many generations and still unable to solve is definitely a crucial issue for parents of exceptional students.

It is essential for principals to prevent school bullying that might occur when the inclusion program starts. This process can be done by having various approaches that prevent school bullying.

One of the approaches is to have behavioral intervention for both the bullies and the victims. Both bullies and victims are considered having behavioral disorders on the different sides of the coin and therefore both of them need help from behavioral therapists (Halgin & Whitbourne, 2007). This process can be done by conducting behavioral observation in both general and exceptional education students. Students whose profile matches the characteristics of being the bullies and the victims will be reported to

parents. Parents will be asked to sign a consent form to allow their children to be sent to therapy.

Another approach is to make sure that the security system in the school area is effective enough to detect students' behaviors. The school should have security guards checking the school area during school time. Moreover, parents should be asked to get involved in preventing school bullying. The school should inform parents about how the trait of bully and victim can impair their children. The school should ask parents to communicate with their children and to observe whether there are any signs of behavioral problems.

The challenge of solving this problem is that there are many external variables that are beyond the authority of the principal. For example, the school cannot take any actions against cyber bullying since some of the bullies are not the students from the institute. Moreover, most bullies have poor family relationship which makes it difficult for the school to ask for parent involvement.

## **10 How to handle behavioral problems among exceptional students?**

Some exceptional students might not only have problems with low aptitude but also with their behavior (Halgin et al., 2007). This issue raises a question among parents of exceptional students of whether the disturbing behavior of the classmates will decrease the quality of education. Previous research showed that disturbing behaviors of some exceptional student classmates impairs the level of concentration in the classroom and therefore leads the classroom to function in a slower pace (Halgin et al., 2007). Another research showed that the characteristics of behavioral and emotional disorders in exceptional students might be worse than just disturbing their classmates (Gumpel, 2008). Students with emotional and behavioral disorders might have traits of being physical, sexual, and relational aggressors and therefore victimize the classmates.

It is important for principals to find solutions on managing behavioral problems of exceptional students. The successful solutions will improve the students'

developmental process and also lead to a positive classroom environment.

To solve the problem, the school should train the staff members to evaluate students' behavior by using assessment materials (Aiken et al., 2006). There are several validated systematic screenings such as the Systematic Screening for Behavior disorder (SSBD), The Student Risk Screening Scale (SRSS), and the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaires (SDQ) (Lane, Kalberg, Parks, & Carter, 2008). The screening assessment will help detecting the early onset of emotional and behavioral disorders or a disorder that already exists in the students. The outcome of the test will help the school find the right approach to improve the students' emotional and behavioral problems. Another approach of solving this problem is to train teachers about the characteristics of emotional and behavioral disorders. That way, teachers can detect the likelihood of the students' disorder since the assessment usually occurs very few times per year.

Another approach to solve this problem is to increase knowledge regarding psychotropic interventions for students with emotional and behavioral disorders among special educators (Ryan, Reid, & Ellis, 2008). This approach only applies to students whose emotional or behavioral condition is controlled by psychotropic medications. Since children spend most of the time in the school area, it is essential for exceptional educators to be able to cooperate with clinicians who prescribed psychotropic medicines to students. Exceptional educators should be able to identify whether their problematic emotions and behaviors are from the side effect of the medication.

The issue that arises from this approach is that it is costly to train staff members to perform complicated tasks such as evaluating the assessment test and diagnosing the students' behavior. Moreover, the training session not only requires budget but is also time consuming and requires the skills of the staff members.

## **11 How to retain staff members in an exceptional school?**

The disturbing behavior of exceptional students and the struggling level of academic achievement might affect the

level of job fulfillment among staff members (Schafer, 2006). They might feel that they are in a vicious cycle of work environment that barely gives them any reward. The staff members have a great impact on the success of the institute and therefore it is important for principals to establish a positive work environment. The positive work environment will increase the level of commitment among the staff members and therefore leads to the effectiveness of the school (Lunenburg et al., 2004).

Principals should provide a positive work environment by establishing bonds among the staff members. This approach can be done by organizing events such as having small lunch parties during lunch break or offering pantries with supplies such as coffee and tea. The organizational structure should be in a casual manner where the staff members feel comfortable to interact with people in higher positions. Moreover, principals should respond immediately to the needs of the staff members or express sympathy toward the staff's complaints over the pressure from parents of students.

The key to solve this challenge depends greatly on the leadership style of the principals. Principals should create a positive work environment to increase the staff members' commitment. At the same time, principals should also keep in mind that the informality of the organization might lead to the absence of discipline.

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