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# University-based Principal Preparation Programs in Texas in 2019: Where is Special Education?

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## Cover Page Footnote

Dr. Ann H. Lê is a published author in a variety of educational journals and textbook chapters, as well as a guest speaker at statewide conferences, university forums, and educational radio shows. She currently serves as the Behavioral & Mental Health Program Specialist at Tomball ISD, an External Evaluator for teacher candidates in Texas, and a consultant to Texas-wide school districts in the special education assessment of Vietnamese students. Julie Peterson Combs is a professor in the Educational Leadership department at Sam Houston State University. She currently serves as the director of the doctoral program in educational leadership where she teaches Academic Writing and Research Methods. In addition to maintaining an active research agenda, she has co-authored The Trust Factor (Routledge) and Foundations of Academic Writing (ICPEL Publications).

## University-based Principal Preparation Programs in Texas in 2019: Where is Special Education?

The school principal serves a vital role in leading and instituting change in education. Besides the classroom teacher, the principal has an essential role in influencing student achievement (The Wallace Foundation, 2013). In a recent synthesis of 20 years of literature, Grissom et al. (2021) concluded that replacing an ineffective principal with an effective one would result in students gaining an additional two to three months of learning in one school year. Furthermore, these effects "would be larger than more than two-thirds of educational interventions" used in schools (Grissom et al., 2021, p. xiii). Principal quality matters for all students, and "it is rare to find an exemplary school with a poor leader" (McCarthy, 2015, p. 416). As such, the principal's responsibility to effectively provide instructional leadership to students in special education (SPED) programs has become progressively critical (Frost & Kersten, 2011).

Public schools are held accountable in educating students with disabilities and safeguarding those students in access to the general education curriculum (Brandes et al., 2012). School principals are charged in leading collaborative and instructional decisions for all educators and students including students with disabilities. For these students, most decisions are determined through the Individual Education Program (IEP) meetings, which are conducted at least once a year. Principals who lack foundational knowledge in SPED programming and instructional practices are situated in a problematic position of decision-making in these meetings, and these leaders may not be equipped to handle these situations (Sumbera et al., 2014).

Some researchers have addressed the problem of principals' lack of knowledge concerning SPED programming. Christensen et al. (2013) concluded that most principal training programs in the United States focus very little on preparing aspiring instructional leaders to lead programs for students with disabilities. Several researchers have noted that principals who are not provided with adequate preparation or training in SPED programming and law struggle in ensuring quality programming and instructional practices for students with disabilities (e.g., Davidson & Algozzine, 2002; Lasky & Karge, 2006; Militello et al., 2009). Angelle and Bilton (2009) studied SPED and principal preparation and noted that even with internships, principal candidates reported they were ill-prepared to take on a leadership role in SPED. This discovery is "troubling given the emphasis administrator preparation programs place on the internship to provide real-world, hands-on experience" to prepare these leaders for their future roles (Angelle & Bilton, 2009, p. 7). Therefore, these instructional leaders may begin their new leadership roles with gaps in knowledge and preparation for serving students with disabilities.

Although principals' lack of knowledge can impact SPED programming, other researchers have highlighted the positive impact a principal can make with students with disabilities. Researchers have noted highly effective principals can improve the accomplishments of all students in a single school year by at least two to seven months of learning (Branch et al., 2013; Grissom et al., 2021). Principals impact student achievement through their supervision of teachers and retention of teachers, which have been linked with both the enhancement and decline in the quality of instruction (Branch et al., 2013). Teacher turnover has been reported to be higher in classes where the teachers are least successful, indicating that improving teacher effectiveness is an essential avenue by which principals can increase educational quality (Branch et al., 2013). Given that students with disabilities need to overcome the barriers related to their identified disabilities, the leadership of school principals becomes even more crucial.

Researchers documented principals who showed administrative support for SPED (e.g., provided high-quality professional development for teachers, concentrated on instructional difficulties) had improved outcomes for students with disabilities (Benz et al., 2000; Gersten et al., 2001).

A few researchers have examined principal preparation programs to understand the development of aspiring leaders regarding inclusive practices and SPED programming (Acker-Hocevar et al., 2009; Lyons, 2016). In one recent study in south Texas, researchers examined the responses of 84 principals of Hispanic-majority schools to determine the leaders' perceptions of their preparation in SPED (Roberts & Guerra, 2017). These practicing principals wanted more instruction in SPED laws; strategies to help students with disorderly behaviors; and assistance with facilitation of Individual Education Program (IEP) meetings. Roberts and Guerra (2017) concluded that "the perfect response to this dilemma [lack of SPED preparation] would be a course specifically designed as a Special Education Leadership course" (p. 13).

Though literature on principal leadership is available, fewer studies were found that focused on the level of preparedness these educational leaders have specifically with SPED services and support (e.g., Christensen et al., 2013; Roberts & Guerra, 2017). Consequently, an examination of principal preparation programs and their SPED components is necessary at a time when standards have been revised and new certification exams have been constructed in Texas. Professors of educational leadership and dean in colleges of education need updated information about principal programs as these individuals can change preparation programs and influence state policy. As such, we reasoned that a review of the coursework required for a principal certification can aid in the understanding of the foundational knowledge and training for SPED provided to aspiring school principals. The purpose of this study was to explore the presence of SPED topics provided by principal preparation programs in the state of Texas in 2019.

## Conceptual Framework of the Study

The framework used for this study was the state policy for the preparation and certification of school leaders in Texas. To obtain a principal certificate in Texas, candidates must (a) hold a master's degree, (b) have a teaching certificate, (c) have two years of teaching experience, (d) successfully complete an *approved principal educator preparation program*, and (e) successfully complete the required exams (Texas Education Agency, 2020). Regarding the approved principal educator preparation program, the Texas Education Agency and the State Board for Educator Certification approves and accredits providers to offer programs for credentialing. In Texas, approved education preparation providers (EPPs), such as regional service centers, four-year universities, school districts, and private/for-profit organizations, can offer programs to earn principal certificates. According to the Texas Administrative Code, each approved provider must offer a minimum of 160 clock-hours of practicum and an additional 200 clock-hours of training directly aligned to the educator standards (Preparation Program Coursework and/or Training, 2020).

The agency redesigned Texas' principal certification standards in 2014 and corresponding certification examinations in 2019, changing the name of the former certificate to Principal as an Instructional Leader and requiring preparation programs to pass through another accreditation process (Texas Education Agency, 2020). The redesigned certificate focuses on a principal's role as an instructional leader and reflects some of the skills necessary to impact student achievement. According to these standards, principal programs in Texas must adhere to the five principal standards, as shown in Table 1 (Texas Education Agency, 2021).

**Table 1**

*Texas Principal Standards and Alignment to SPED*

| Standards | Definition | SPED Implications |
|---|---|---|
| 1: Instructional leadership | "Ensure every student receives high-quality instruction" (ESC 20, n.d., para 4). | Provide "rigorous and aligned curriculum and assessment, effective instructional practices, data-driven instruction" and interventions, and maximize learning for *all* students, including students with disabilities (ESC 20, n.d., para 4). |
| 2: Human capital | "Ensure high-quality teachers and staff [are] in every classroom throughout the school" (ESC 20, n.d., para 5). | Equal focus on the growth, promotion, and guidance of general education and special education staff members. |
| 3: Executive leadership | Model "a consistent focus and personal responsibility for improving student outcomes" (Texas Education Agency, 2021, para. 4) | Lead to improve the outcomes of *all* students by analyzing data and reflecting on the implementation of instructional practices that may need changes |
| 4: School culture | Establish and implement "a shared vision and culture of high expectations for all staff and students" (Texas Education Agency, 2021, para. 5) | Students with disabilities, along with their general education peers, build social-emotional skills and academic skills through leader's consistency in expectations and constructive feedback for a positive learning environment |
| 5: Strategic operations | "Outline and track clear goals, targets, and strategies aligned to a school vision that continuously improves teacher effectiveness and student outcomes" (Texas Education Agency, 2021, para. 6) | Leader evaluates the needs of the campus for continual improvement of the effectiveness of teachers and outcomes of *all* students, including those with disabilities, with purposeful allocating of resources and developing calendars for ensuring opportunities for teacher collaboration and data review to capitalize on instructional time |

Because training programs use these standards in planning and delivering coursework, we analyzed the standards for applications to SPED concepts, as shown in column 3 of Table 1. The redesigned standards lack specific mention of working with students who receive SPED services. Instead, terms like "all students" are used. One example of such a standard states that a principal should "analyze the curriculum to… meet the particular needs of their *diverse student populations*" (Principal as Instructional Leader Certificate and Endorsement, 2018). We

concluded that the revised standards capture services and supports related to all students without specific mention of special education.

A review of the coursework required for a principal certification in the state of Texas serves to aid in the understanding of the foundational knowledge and training that is provided to aspiring school principals. Being approved as appropriate principal education preparation programs, the coursework provided by these accredited sites were deemed to meet state agency guidelines. Considering recent studies about the lack of preparation of principals for SPED programming (e.g., Roberts & Guerra, 2017), we explored the extent to which SPED topics were present in the curricula for the certification-only principal preparation programs. The research question explored in this inquiry was as follows: To what extent are SPED topics present in course titles offered by the largest education preparation programs in the state of Texas for the certification-only principal preparation program?

## Method

To explore the presence of SPED topics in principal certification courses, we used a classical content analysis (Krippendorf, 2004) with a group of university-based principal preparation programs in Texas. In this section, we describe the decisions we made with the sample selection, data collection, and analysis.

### Sample

We requested publicly available data from the Texas Education Agency, specifically the number of principal certificates earned by provider for the past six years. We transferred the data to a spreadsheet and narrowed the focus to providers who were four-year universities ($n = 60$) because 80% of principal certificates were awarded from four-year universities and we wanted to examine and compare program differences (i.e., credit hours, course titles). Next, we selected the largest programs, which represented 60% of earned certificates in one specific academic year, 2018-2019. These 18 programs represented 3,292 number of principal certificates issued in 2018-2019. Each program issued a range of 50 to almost 1,400 certificates in the year. The remaining 42 four-year university programs issued about 15% of the principal certificates in Texas, as shown in Table 2. We selected 2018-2019 because in this year, the most certificates were earned of all the other six years examined.

**Table 2**
*Principal Certificates Awarded in Texas Principal Programs in 2018-2019*

| Principal provider programs | Certificates | % of Texas total |
|---|---|---|
| Largest 18 university programs ($n = 18$) | 3,292 | 64.82% |
| Other university programs ($n = 42$) | 795 | 15.65% |
| Alternative providers (service centers, $n = 16$) | 656 | 12.92% |
| Other (out of state transfers, etc.) | 336 | 6.62% |
| Total | 5,079 | 100.00% |

### Data Collection

After reviewing the degree plans of university-based principal programs, we decided to concentrate on certification-only programs for the validity reasons (e.g., clearer comparisons could be made). The certification-only program can be taken by students who already hold a master's degree and a teaching certificate. Although we did not focus on the master's degree programs in educational leadership, these two programs are often connected and have overlapping coursework.

We analyzed the curricula by analyzing course titles, assuming that course titles would contain important information about the content of the class. Other researchers have studied principal program content using similar assumptions (e.g., Bustamante & Combs, 2011). Using a standard data collection form, we gathered degree plan information such as principal certification course offerings, titles, and credit hours from the largest university programs by searching their websites and graduate school catalogs. In a few cases when data were unclear in the catalogs, we communicated with the contact person about their program. On the data form, we recorded the URL, required credit hours, course titles, course descriptions, and date. In most all cases, we were able to locate program information for the 2018-2019 catalog year.

**Data Analysis**

Techniques used to analyze data included Krippendorf's (2004) questions and coding procedures, Glaser and Strauss' (1967) concept of constant comparison, and Onwuegbuzie and Combs' (2010) concept of cross-over mixed analysis, which are appropriate techniques for content analyses. These techniques allowed us to make inferences by identifying patterns in text in a systematic and objective manner (Berelson, 1952; Krippendorf, 2004).

Data were analyzed in several phases. First, the number of actual courses required for the certificate were compared. Next, we read and reread course titles, unitizing data and creating descriptive codes. Third, we collapsed the course titles into three categories that could be related to SPED: Special Education, Law, and Diversity and used mixed coding to identify the presence of each attribute (i.e., "1" if the title related to the code, "0" if not). We summed the codes for each category and assigned a score to each program (i.e., 0-3) for comparison purposes (for more information, see cross-over mixed analysis; Onwuegbuzie & Combs, 2010). Finally, we used cross tabulations to compare programs, credit hours, and course titles.

## Findings

**Principal Preparation Program Credit Hours**

Regarding the required number of courses, measured in semester credit hours, programs ranged from 15 credit hours to 36 credit hours with a mean of 22.22 credit hours and a mode of 18 credit hours ($n = 7$). Because these are certification-only programs, these credit hours reflect coursework beyond a master's degree. These data are shown in Table 3.

**Principal Preparation Program Course Titles**

Specific courses related to administration of SPED programs included words such as *special populations* or *special education* and titles such as "Administration of Special Programs." Of the 18 university-based programs examined, six or 33% had courses where *special education* was mentioned in the title. As a result, about 11% of certificate earners in 2019 attended schools that offered a specific SPED leadership course.

To account for programs where SPED topics are taught in courses such as the school law class, we searched course titles for words such as *legal, ethical, policy*, and *law* in titles. Of the largest 18 programs, 15 of these had course titles such as *School Law* or similar. For the certificate earners in 2019, 35% attended schools where school law was offered as a course. Similarly, to allow for programs where SPED topics might be covered in a diversity-related course, we searched for words such as *diverse learners* and *diversity*. Of the 18 largest university-based programs offering principal certificates in 2019, five programs offered a diversity course, representing about 13% of certificate earners.

Programs offering both a SPED and a law course were five, as shown in Table 3. Those universities offering both the diversity course and SPED course were two. Only two principal programs offered all three courses with these titles and represented about 5% of certificate

earners. Only one program offered zero courses with titles related to SPED, school law, or diversity.

**Credit Hours and Course Titles**

Principal programs requiring more credit hours tended to have courses with SPED and school law titles. For example, universities requiring 15 to 18 credit hours represented the most ($n = 8$) of the programs and the most certificate earners in the state in 2019 (about 45%). None of these programs had course titles related specifically to SPED, whereas six programs had a school law course, and one program had a diversity course. Conversely, four programs requiring the most credit hours (27 to 36) all required a SPED course and a law course. University-based programs in the middle of this range totaled seven and required 19 to 24 credit hours. Of these seven, two required SPED courses and diversity courses, and six required law courses.

**Table 3**

*Largest 18 University Principal Providers in Texas 2019*

| Provider | Certificates awarded | % of Texas total | Credit Hrs | SPED | Law | Diversity |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| University 1 | 1,387 | 27.31% | 18 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| University 2 | 224 | 4.41% | 18 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| University 3 | 220 | 4.33% | 18 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| University 4 | 214 | 4.21% | 36 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| University 5 | 157 | 3.09% | 21 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| University 6 | 154 | 3.03% | 24 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| University 7 | 116 | 2.28% | 21 | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| University 8 | 109 | 2.15% | 22 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| University 9 | 100 | 1.97% | 18 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| University 10 | 95 | 1.87% | 18 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| University 11 | 91 | 1.79% | 15 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| University 12 | 81 | 1.59% | 18 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| University 13 | 65 | 1.28% | 18 | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| University 14 | 62 | 1.22% | 36 | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| University 15 | 60 | 1.18% | 27 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| University 16 | 53 | 1.04% | 24 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| University 17 | 52 | 1.02% | 24 | 1 | 1 | 0 |
| University 18 | 52 | 1.02% | 24 | 0 | 1 | 0 |

**Discussion**

Almost half of the universities in our study required 18 semester hours or fewer for principal certification in 2019. Compared to 30 years ago, Texas requires significantly fewer hours for certifications (45 semester credit hours vs. 200 clock hours). For example, a review of the Texas Education Code during the 1990s and early 2000s revealed that candidates were required to obtain 45 semester credit hours of graduate credit in courses specific to administrative theory, curriculum theory, instructional leadership, school law, and the administration of special education (Bravenec, 1998). Competencies related to administration of SPED were mentioned at least two times in the standards during the 1990s and 2000s, whereas no examples were found in our review of current standards. This sentiment expressed in the

literature 20 years ago still has merit today: State mandates related to educator certification represent the "most profound government influence on leadership preparation" (McCarthy, 1999, p. 119).

Based on our review of credit hours and course offerings, none of the current programs requiring 18 credit hours had course titles specific to SPED. Understandably, programs reducing coursework from 45 (about 15 courses) to 18 (about six courses) semester credit hours would have to restructure curricula. As such, it is possible that candidates have less exposure to SPED programming than before the state revised certification requirements.

In the 18 programs we reviewed, courses specific to school law are still considered of importance, as 15 of the 18 programs offered this course. Perhaps university programs are addressing SPED law in the school law course. Even so, there are many non-legal SPED concepts important to school leaders such as understanding the difference in accommodations and modifications and how they impact access, understanding roles and responsibilities of SPED staff, understanding the purpose of various SPED curricula such as developmental and adaptive behavior, understanding how each disability can impact student access to general education, and collaborating with families to a greater extent by recognizing their experiences and knowledge.

One limitation of this exploratory study is the focus on course titles. Although we worked with the assumption that course titles would contain important information about the content of the class, programs could be integrating content about special education administration in ways that are not captured in a course title, such as modules offered in a general school leadership course. Arguably, it could be difficult to offer course titles to capture all the skills and knowledge aspiring leaders need in only six courses or 18 credit hours. To understand how universities are preparing students in special education, additional study is needed to capture the actual content of specific courses, particular from those programs who do not offer a school law or SPED course.

Implications for those hiring new principals include an exploration of candidates' SPED knowledge or previous coursework during the interview process. When hired, SPED directors might need to provide additional training for these new principals, understanding the context of principal preparation and the focus on instructional leadership for all students. Pairing effective diagnosticians with new principals could be another remedy. Coaching from veteran principals or superintendents with strong knowledge and experiences in dealing with difficult situations in SPED might also guide new principals to understand their role and assist in decision-making in high stakes situations.

## Conclusion

Principals must provide the supports that will enable all learners to achieve success in the general curriculum whenever possible (Individuals with Disability Education Act, 2004). As such, school leaders need to remember that students who are served in SPED are general education students first. Given information from studies about principals' inadequacies with SPED leadership (Roberts & Guerra, 2017), more information is needed to understand how candidates are receiving SPED information in their coursework. We conclude from this inquiry that the focus on preparing candidates for SPED leadership remains unclear. More research is needed to explore potential gaps between the presence of SPED topics in principal certification course offerings and the needs and interests of principal candidates studying school leadership.

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