LEADERSHIP OPPORTUNITIES IN EDUCATION FOR INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES

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Abstract

This study examines the perceptions of individuals with disabilities concerning employment opportunities as administrative leaders in public school contexts. A discussion of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, as well as the definition of what is considered a legal disability, as provided in Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Additionally, this piece explains Critical Disability Theory as a theoretical lens that provides perspective and highlights the methods used in the data collection process. It reports preliminary findings and concludes with a discussion of why this educational issue is of significance.

Keywords: disability, employment, policy, education, perception, discrimination

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) "prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities in employment, transportation, public accommodation, communications, and governmental activities. The ADA also establishes requirements for telecommunications relay services" (United States Department of Labor, 2015). This legislation provided important groundwork for increasing access to employment for individuals with disabilities. The legislation has been valuable and necessary; however, twenty-five years after its passage, the disabled still experience unequal treatment in employment opportunities. According to the Southeast ADA Center (2015): "In February 2015, the percentage of people with disabilities in the labor force was 19.8. By comparison, the percentage of persons with no disability in the labor force was 68.2. In February 2015, the unemployment rate for those with disabilities was 11.2 percent, compared with 5.6 percent for persons with no disability, not seasonally adjusted."

Purpose/Problem

A fact that remains obvious is that, while the ADA has encouraged improvement in workplace accessibility for individuals with disabilities, evidence suggests that few individuals with disabilities actually enter the workforce (U.S. Department of Labor Statistics, 2015), and even fewer hold leadership positions. Directly after the passage of the ADA, Fortune 500 businesses immediately took steps to address and prevent discriminations by integrating the disabled into company work environments (McFarlin, D. B., Song, J., & Sonntag, M., 199). What is not known is why so few individuals with disabilities enter the field of education, and, for those that do, why so few are promoted to leadership positions. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to gain a better understanding of opportunities that exist for individuals with disabilities in educational leadership positions by gaining the perspective of individuals with disabilities about opportunities that exist and barriers to advancement

that they have experienced. Interviews were conducted with currently practicing administrators to gain a better understanding of their perspectives concerning challenges involved in hiring an individual with a disability to fulfill a leadership position.

Theoretical Framework

Critical Disability Theory (CDT) offers a counter definition of disability as a phenomenon that is viewed as a social disadvantage. The social aspects are comprised of the "physical, institutional and attitudinal" settings that fail individuals with disabilities due to the implied sense of the "social expectation of normalcy (Hosking, 2008, p. 7). Hosking (2008) further elaborates that CDT describes: "a theory which centres disability and proceeds from the perspective of disabled people needs to have a conception of disability which is sufficiently inclusive to encompass the population with which it is concerned" (p. 6). CTD analyzes the said social aspects occurring within the social institutions in which individuals function. Establishing an understanding of an individual's "process, action, or interaction" (Creswell, 2014, p. 189) within their environments will help construct a perspective that illustrates how the disabled fail to meet the "social expectation of normalcy" (Hosking, 2008, p. 7).

Research Questions

1. What aspirations do these individuals with disabilities have regarding leadership positions in education?

2 What opportunities have been available for individuals with disabilities to enter into the educational profession?

3. What opportunities have these individuals experienced for advancement in their educational careers?

4. What hindrances have these individuals experienced concerning advancement into leadership positions?

5. What challenges do current administrative leaders perceive in hiring an individual with a disability for a leadership position?

Methods

This study utilized a qualitative grounded theory design to establish an understanding of the experiences of individuals with disabilities in public school settings. Creswell (2014) explains grounded theory research as, "inquiry … in which the researcher derives a general, abstract theory of a process, action, or interaction grounded in the views of the participants " (p. 14). The collection of data was gathered from purposefully selected participants (Creswell, 2014) working as educators and administrators in public schools in the Midwest. For the purposes of this study, an individual with a disability was identified as an individual who qualifies under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. Section 504 defines disability as: "a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities … major life activities include walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, learning, working, caring for oneself, and performing manual tasks" (Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, 1973). Three teachers with disabilities and two current and retired administrators were interviewed for approximately an hour each. Data collection also included observations and document analyses. Observations included classroom observations, conversations between individuals and administrators and participant involvement in committee and department meetings. Document analysis included participant emails, minutes from meetings in which the individual participated or led, and descriptions of responsibilities assigned to each individual that extended beyond his/her classroom teaching assignment.

Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and were systematically coded, according to "steps of open, axial, and selective coding …" (Creswell 2012, p. 424) procedures to develop categories of themes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998) that emerged from the data. Recordings were carefully transcribed into computer files, and transcripts were sent to participants for member checking (Creswell, 2014). A triangulated data approach was used to minimize the weakness and preserve the strengths of the observations and documents analyzed (Patton, 2002).

Findings

Structural and textural descriptions are provided that describe the "process, action, or interaction" (Creswell, 2014) of the experience of these individuals as they have aspired to educational leadership positions. Preliminary findings indicate that there may be a lack of interest of people with disabilities to pursue leadership positions in public school education. However, discrimination was an emergent theme.

Significance/Conclusion

These findings are significant because they suggest that despite legislation to encourage equal access to employment for individuals with disabilities, barriers to advancement still exist. However, individuals with disabilities and administrators who have the authority to promote them have different understandings about the barriers that exist. Understanding the perspective of individuals with disabilities can inform educational leaders and policy makers about the barriers to advancement these individuals may have experienced despite legislation enacted to protect them from discrimination. Although policy has been enacted, implementation measures will remain insufficient unless important understandings are established between educational leaders and the individuals with disability that they employ.

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