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THE IMPACT OF FEDERAL LEVEL SPECIAL EDUCATION POLICY INTERNSHIPS IN PREPARING SPECIAL EDUCATION FACULTY: A PRELIMINARY INVESTIGATION

Faculty Article by Katie Miller, Lisa A. Finnegan, Wilfred Wienke, and Angel Lopez

Abstract

In this manuscript, the authors examine the reaction of special education doctoral scholars and their response to a federal policy internship. Six doctoral scholar participants participated in a summer federal policy internship opportunity and partook in the study. Doctoral scholars responded to a survey about their knowledge of federal legislation and their perceptions of the federal policy internship. Data were collected and analyzed both qualitatively and quantitatively. Three themes emerged after completing their doctoral internship which include: importance of advocacy and its impact on policy, importance of evidence based practices and their role in policy making, and increased knowledge of national organizations and their impact on federal policy. Overall, the doctoral internship experience had a positive impact on the six special education doctoral interns in terms of knowledge and skills regarding policy and legislation.

Introduction

An effective training tool elicits knowledge and promotes learning. Internships are a proven tool that allow for guided progressive exposure to a profession; and are commonly used in professional academic and clinical preparation programs to provide real-life experiences to incoming practitioners. Internships allow training programs to produce professionals with an increased breadth and more expansive familiarity of the practical skills they will need to perform their jobs within their chosen area of expertise. These experiences also allow for the cultivation and development of mentorships with established professionals within an interns field of study. Arellano and Martinez (2009) asserted that within any profession there is a mutual need to bridge practical know-how between those who are currently in the field and those entering it; thereby promoting a smooth continuous transition into the profession. This assertion further supports what

Siegel and Donnelly (1978) shared when they declared that the internship bridges the growth and skill acquisition of the student into a professional. If asked to identify degree programs that have internships as a part of their curriculum, many individuals would immediately think of medicine (e.g. medical doctors, nurses, and x-ray technicians) or some other professional training program like engineering or even becoming a classroom teacher and they would be correct because all incorporate internships into their programs of study. What does not immediately come to people's minds are internships within federal policy for special education doctoral level scholars preparing to become faculty members at institutes of higher education. This is the focus of this preliminary investigation.

The critical role of a special education leader and advocate requires knowledge and skills to be effective. Understanding the legislative process is the most rudimentary knowledge block on the road to becoming an effective advocate. One must be aware of the procedure to identify where and how to have an impact on policy development. An effective way to understand the process is to gain first-hand knowledge and experience through collaboration with an expert in the field. Professionals whose major role it is to impact policy development have mastered the important steps involved in preparing for and gaining access to those who are responsible for policy development. Learning from professionals employed to impact on the process is one of the most efficient approaches to gain successful advocacy skills.

A major part of the responsibility of special education faculty members in higher education is to use the advocating abilities they have gained to train their students not only to be effective special educators but to become effective advocates on behalf of individuals with disabilities. For it is the teachers who have first-hand, daily experience with students with disabilities, who can communicate what they have learned to legislators and their staff members who are the key personnel responsible for the development of legislation impacting special education. The reason it is critical to be involved as an advocate focusing on legislation and policy is that the outcome may determine the level of resources supporting special education in the classroom. Hence, it is critical to prepare special education faculty who can be successful in training their students to become both effective teachers and impactful advocates. This article describes an effective approach to preparing future special education faculty members and describes data gathered which demonstrates the effectiveness of internships.

Literature Review

An exhaustive review of the literature by the researchers produced zero data-based research articles related to federal policy internships coupled with special education doctoral programs. This dearth in the research was the foundation for this preliminary investigation. There is a small but established literature base that discusses the benefits of understanding policy prior to entering professional practice and beyond. Rock et al. (2016) conceptualized a need to engage in educational policy as one of the 21st century driving forces to transform models of special education teacher development. Furthermore, connecting to key special education agency and

association stakeholders (AACTE, CEC, NASDSE, CEEDAR Center, etc.) are vital for advocating and addressing the need for special education teachers to receive the most transformative opportunities in their preparation to teach students with special needs (Rock et al., 2016), likewise so too should the faculty that prepares them. Institutes of higher education that prepare special education teachers need to provide their students with faculty, experiences, and an environment that is both culturally diverse and reflects the culture of higher education (deBettencourt, Hoover, Rude, & Taylor, 2016). DeBettencourt et al. (2106) stated “doctoral-level preparation in special education is predicated on the critical context of leadership training experiences that are specifically embedded within the culture of higher education (i.e., the roles, responsibilities, and expectations of the professoriate)” (p. 127). This further suggests that leaders in special education will need to work through the professional organizations and stakeholders to broaden the capacity and extent of the voices of the individuals they represent, as well as, support future leaders understanding and engagement in the policy process (McLaughlin, West, & Anderson, 2016). Typically, special education pre-service and master’s degree teacher trainees experience teaching internships; likewise, so too should doctoral scholars. Special education faculty will be a portion of those leaders in special education that move the field of special education into the 21st century. As doctoral students move from scholar to faculty, their work in teaching to prepare effective 21st century special education teachers require their service within and aligning with previously mentioned stakeholders and a research agenda on 21st century innovative and evidence-based practices as the framework from which they work to build the bridge toward policy-making. Internships in the agencies and organizations that are stakeholders and policy makers help to make the bridge more structurally sound.

Over time the Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession (Carnegie Forum on Education and the Economy, 1986), the Holmes Group (1986), and the National Commission for Excellence in Teacher Education (1985) have all advocated for internship experiences as a part of the preparation of both pre-service and masters level educators; and as a requisite prior to being classified as a professional teacher. It is common knowledge that all medical professionals complete various levels of internships based on standards of practice. Other professions also require practical or on the job exposures prior to asking students to become practitioners and perform the job on their own. The benefits associated with the skills procured as a result of learned experiences cannot be ignored; they are a vital piece within the precarious link between the excellence of preparation experiences, and the consequential capacity displayed by those within leadership roles (Barnett, Copland, & Shoho, 2009; Holdaway, Johnson, Ratsoy, & Friesen, 1994; Huang et al., 2012).

Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP) developed an initiative to determine high-impact educational practices that have forged a framework for excellence at all educational levels (Kuh, 2008). The LEAP framework fosters deep learning and practical skills through focusing on a 21st century research initiative that is designed to provide evidence of essential learning; a nationwide Campus Action Network that supports the connection of educational practices and assessments to essential learning

outcomes; and a national public advocacy campaign supported and lead through business, educational, community, and policy leaders (Kuh, 2008). Kuh (2008) stated “retention and graduation are best described as partial indicators of students success”, however a college degree becomes meaningful when it “represents forms of learning that are both valued by society and empowering to the individual” (p. 2). Students today must be prepared for the 21st century challenges that the nation’s future employers will face by mastering essential learning outcomes such as gaining knowledge of human culture and the physical and natural world; intellectual and practical skills; personal and social responsibility; and integrative and applied learning opportunities (Kuh, 2008). Key essential learning outcomes must connect with the high-impact practice experienced to truly be effective and to take students to the highest level of outcome (Kuh, 2008). The practices defined by Kuh (2008) that are identified as ‘unusually effective’ or considered to have high-impact are designed to provide experiences that “deepen learning and bring one’s values and beliefs into awareness” (p. 17). These well-planned experiences provide students with an opportunity” to understand themselves in relation to others and the larger world so that they develop the tools and confidence for the betterment of the human condition” (p. 17). Graduate programs can be enhanced with the infusion of the high-impact practices defined by Kuh (2008), such as student-faculty research, collaborating and supporting learning communities, service learning opportunities, studying abroad, and internships.

The value of internships is quite poignant; however, the dearth in research related to policy internships within special education doctoral programs is disheartening. Policy internships are a proven vehicle used within public policy degree programs; and although programs differ and vary based on degree level or university, policy internships solidify knowledge and allow for true exposure to the legislative process (Reingold, 2008). McNair and Albertine (2012) stated that high-impact practices such as internships, need to be done well in order to have the greatest impact. Furthermore, internships and other high-impact practice opportunities need to be provided to all students including underserved populations and should be implemented with intent to align with the uniqueness of each placement (McNair & Albertine, 2012). As the needs of the learner become known and individual learning needs recognized, advocacy is essential and a requisite activity. Additionally, teacher preparation programs need to have a clear and common vision of good teaching, well-defined standards of professional practice and performance, and a curriculum core founded in understanding child and adolescent development, all within social and cultural context; and extraordinary teacher graduates must be a voice in policy-making (Ben-Peretz, 2009). For students with disabilities, special education teachers are the primary avenue from which advocacy begins. Special education teachers are entrusted to ensure students with exceptional academic and behavioral needs have the support required, and this process requires advocacy. Teacher preparation programs should not only meet the needs of content pedagogy but also learner pedagogy and advocacy. Glickman, Butters, and Maxey (2003) contended

Universities have a clear, moral responsibility to prepare school leaders, both teachers and principals, who can create and sustain a truly American education. Part of their

charge is to help future leaders understand the connection between democracy and education, that the very purpose of the education they deliver is intended to create an informed and engaged citizenry. (p. 67)

Furthermore, Odell (1997) stated

Colleges have a responsibility to prepare instructional leaders on all levels who will be able to collaborate with their peers and will carry out the charge of the great American school by making data-based decisions for the collective good of their schools. Going beyond traditional areas of studying teacher and leadership programs means “preparing teachers of teacher leadership...to create participatory learning communities that are not private, not autocratic and not role equated. (p 123)

Therefore, it is becoming progressively more essential that the very programs that prepare teacher leaders extend beyond the university classroom walls and expand themselves to the actual places where real-world advocacy, governing agencies, and legislation preside. Every voice has the potential to be heard, however, if it is not spoken at any of the tables where ears are listening then it becomes mute. Additionally, higher education faculty need to be familiar with organizations that advocate within the policy and adoption stages of the legislative process. The connections that teacher educators make with professional organizations and other agencies is critical. With the high impact educational practice of internships, future teacher leaders can make connections through work with professional organizations and other agencies to develop strategies for a more intentional design in creating a voice that is heard and has impact (McLaughlin, West, & Anderson, 2016). Furthermore, the working relationship that we have with our professional organizations and agencies can lay the foundation for understanding the need to “prepare the new generation of leaders in special education for effective engagement in the policy process through providing practical skills for engaging in the policy making process’ and truly becoming effective advocates on behalf of their students and their families” (McLaughlin, West, & Anderson, 2016, p. 145). Relationships with professional organizations have typically been one-sided where knowledge is disseminated to members through professional journals and conferences, however this relationship has the potential to be a dynamic, multi-tiered, mutually benefiting association. Teachers in the classroom often do not realize that they have a voice and they are the voice for their students and their families unless it is addressed within the very programs where they were trained.

It is well known that faculty shortages continue to remain an area of concern for institutions of higher education with special education programs. As this fact remains a constant, what is changing, is the pre K-12 classroom dynamics and the ever far reaching goal to prepare students for the 21st century world in which they will live. DeBettencourt et al. (2016) shared five challenges that institutions of higher education must reposition themselves to prepare special education teachers to meet those needs: changing roles; evolving diversity; increasing funding; situating PhDs; and delivering training. To address these challenges, deBettencort et al. (2016) contended that doctoral programs in special education should be “predicated on the critical context

of leadership training experiences that are embedded within the culture of higher education (i.e. the roles, responsibilities, and expectations of the professoriate)” (p. 127), which can provide preservice teachers and others in teacher preparation programs opportunities to delve into the research that drives practices and internships with professional organizations and agencies that impact education through their decision-making.

The future leaders and professors that will be preparing professional special educators and school leaders, and by this we mean promoting further creativity and sustainability of 21st century learning, are the current doctoral scholars and those recently completing special education doctoral preparation programs. As a part of this preparation, understanding the intricacies and outcomes of legislative practices and policy making procedures are both compulsory and judicious. For example, Oliff, Mai, & Leachman (2012)state:

States have made steep cuts to education funding since the start of the recession and, in many states, those cuts deepened over the last year. As reported in 2012, in 26 states elementary and high schools received less state funding in 2012-2013 compared to the prior school year, and in 35 states school funding now stands below 2008 levels – often far below”. (p. 1)

Schaefer-Whitby and Wienke (2011) indicated that budget crunches are a place for special educators to focus, analyze, and understand where they can impact policy through the stories they share about the children they serve and the critical teaching needs that occur in their classrooms.

As stated by West and Schaefer-Whitby (2008) “federal policy has had a significant effect on the education of students with disabilities in the United States (U.S.)” (p. 1). Students with disabilities and the teachers who work with them including the educational practices used within the classroom have all been shaped by the legislative working of Supreme Court rulings and legislative decisions made by Congress (West & Schaefer Whitby, 2008). Preparing doctoral scholars through field placed policy internships can help shape the process that guides individual classroom teachers to understanding their potential to influence the process of policy development. High-impact practices, such as internships, can be implemented in graduate programs when faculty within a university or college are open to innovation and willing to provide educational experiences that “inspire creativity, problem solving, and encourages a level of engagement that transcends the classroom and fosters lifelong learning” (McNair & Albertine, 2012, p. 5). Internships are often utilized as auditions for future employment (Aldas, Crispo, Johnson, & Price, 2010), however an internship under the standards of high-impact is designed to innovatively impact the field as the internship takes place or as Kuh (2008) indicates impact the field globally. In the field of public administration, universities universally provide internship programs and mentoring opportunities through field experiences with professionals in the field (Milam, 2003). Robinson and West (2012) asserted that “we must work together to advocate for appropriate legislative, regulatory, judicial, and fiscal supports to align our efforts” (p. 291) in support

of students with special needs. But to do so requires true understanding of the legislative process that policy internships can provide. Special education policy victories and losses can be determined by how special education interest groups, grass roots advocacy organizations, philanthropists, etc., frame their interests, define their problems, share their story, and portray students with disabilities in conversations at the table where legislative decisions are made (Itkonen, 2004). "If you are not at the table, you are probably on the menu" is a phrase that has been said and heard by many in the policy-making world and most recently proclaimed by Jane E. West (2012) as the keynote speaker at the Council for Exceptional Children Teacher Education Division conference. The importance of being at the table and being one of the voices heard is an unquestionable necessity within the realm of special education policy-making and legislative action.

Background and Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this preliminary investigation is to examine the benefits of policy internship within select special education doctoral scholars enrolled in advanced degree programs at large universities along the eastern coastline. As an optional assignment in their PhD program, the respondents completed summer policy internships in Washington, DC at one of three sites: 1) the Office of Special Education and Programs (OSEP), 2) the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), or 3) the National Association for State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE).

Responses from the doctoral students who engaged in their internship were solicited to gain insights into the value of the doctoral leadership internship. Specifically, the following research questions were addressed:

Research Question 1: To what extent do the doctoral interns feel familiar with the legislative process while completing an internship in Washington, DC with a government association or agency in special education?

Research Question 2: To what extent do doctoral interns feel that they have a mentor or contact within their educational legislative network while completing an internship in Washington, DC with a government association or agency in special education?

Research Question 3: What are the doctoral interns' feelings or perceptions towards educational policy?

Method

The authors used both quantitative and qualitative analysis to capture the effects of the doctoral policy internship on participants which included the administration of a survey to all doctoral student interns.

Participants

Selection of participants was purposive as those sampled were completing a summer doctoral internship in Washington, DC at three major organizations including OSEP, CEC, and NASDSE. A total of seven eligible participants were identified. All but one of the eligible participants had classroom teaching experience. Most of the participants in this study had previously obtained a Master's Degree in Education prior to being admitted into their doctoral program of studies. All eligible participants had completed one year of doctoral study and one participant had completed and defended their dissertation but had not yet graduated. Two of the eligible participants had previously participated in an internship the previous year after their first year of study. All participants were full time students and were supported by federal grants and/or a research assistantship. Six of the seven eligible participants completed the survey.

Participants were assigned to a variety of tasks within their agencies including participation in program meetings, attending educational hearings or meetings in congress, working with a variety of partners across educational institutions, and agency specific tasks. The Department of Education's (DOE) Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) is dedicated to improving results for individuals with disabilities from birth through 21 by providing leadership and financial support to assist states and local districts. Funding under the Individuals with Disabilities Act of 2004 enables OSEP to disperse formula grants and discretionary grants to be given to institutions of higher education and non-profit organizations to improve the lives of individuals with disabilities, ages birth -21, through research, demonstrations, technical assistance, technology, personal development, and parent-training. Doctoral scholar participants completing their internship at OSEP supported staff that managed the grant funded projects. Interns also attended meetings related to the funded projects and assisted in the collection of data and reports. They also attended meetings that shared and discussed issues and trends from various agencies and organizations that support individuals with disabilities. Finally, they attended an annual symposium OSEP holds for grant recipients to disseminate their findings and further develop their outreach.

The Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) works on advocating on behalf of children with exceptionalities and their families. CEC continuously evaluates policy issues, program regulations, and funding and develops appropriate responses and recommendations based on stakeholders' needs. CEC advocates for their stakeholders through sharing stories and influencing local, state, provincial, and federal legislation. Doctoral scholar participants at CEC attended meetings with stakeholders to gain insight and perspective on identified needs and preferred outcomes for individuals with specific disabilities. Interns at CEC assisted in drafting language to support stakeholders in their visits to the Capitol to meet with constituents or their staff or with other agencies such as the Department of Education. Participants from CEC attended legislative meetings and updated the community of individuals with disabilities and the support agencies on decisions being made in real-time.

The National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) provides leadership in the work of providing a quality education to every child. The focus of NASDSE is improving educational services and outcomes for children and youth with

disabilities throughout the United States, Department of Defense, and the federated territories and the Freely Associated States of Palau, Micronesia and the Marshall Islands. Doctoral scholar participants at NASDSE participated in advocacy opportunities including visits to Congress with the needs of NASDSE's constituents in mind. Coalition meetings, legislative hearings, and writing letters to legislators were common activities that a participant experienced at NASDSE. NASDSE also provided an opportunity to work on grant supported projects, some of which were funded by the USDOE and others funded by NASDSE. Participants had the opportunity to learn more about funded projects and collaborate with key partners on these opportunities.

Instrumentation

The survey was designed to address the internship experiences by special education doctoral students. It was originally developed by previous interning doctoral scholars from both national and international agencies. It was piloted and feedback was given to further revise and develop the survey instrument used for this study. After the initial development of the revised survey instrument, a panel of reviewers with expertise in special education and policy reviewed the instrument for clarity. These reviewers included professors in special education who have had leadership roles in special education agencies and/or have previously worked for the department of education. Feedback, minor edits and revisions were made based on their recommendations. The revised instrument was uploaded to Google Forms and was disseminated to the doctoral students engaged in their policy internship. The revised survey included demographic questions as well as both Likert scale items for the pretest and post-test, and short answer type questions for the post-test only. The Likert scale items featured a 5 point scale measuring responses with 1 as "strongly disagree" and 5 as "strongly agree." The 14 Likert scale items and three demographic questions were identical for both the pretest and the post-test. The identical pretest and post-test items of the survey instrument were comprised of three parts: (1) statements indicating familiarity with legislative activity, organizations, and issues (8 questions); (2) questions regarding mentors and contacts within special education policy (5 questions); and (3) demographic information. The post-test added a fourth component containing two open ended questions regarding individual perceptions and feelings towards policy and future roles as a result of their internship and their perceptions of policy development and one question or section was added to provide additional comments. A copy of the instrument is included in Appendix A.

Procedures

IRB permission was obtained and completed to conduct the study. One week after internship began, an email link was sent by one of the authors, asking for informed consent and participation in the *Doctoral Internship Experience Survey*. The pre-test survey was delivered via a link to Google Forms to all eligible participants to their school or personal email address. At the end of both the second and third week of the internship, emails were sent to the doctoral special education student participants across the various internship sites asking for participation agreement. All

agreed. Surveys remained confidential and participant names and specific organization information were not associated with their responses. Responses were downloaded from Google Forms into Microsoft Excel.

At the end of the internship, another email was sent out with a link to the posttest survey. A link to Google Forms was contained in the email and data were collected and downloaded into an Excel document. Responses were then entered into SPSS (version 22) from both the pre and post-test surveys.

Data Analyses

The mixed-method research design incorporated both quantitative and qualitative analyses. Demographic data and Likert-type item responses were analyzed quantitatively. Descriptive statistics including both frequency and average responses were derived. Additionally, a paired samples t-test using SPSS was used to demonstrate the changes in the mean between pre and post internship experiences. Data were collected via Google Forms and were input into SPSS and analyzed. To address the first research question (familiarity with the legislative process) and the second research question (mentor or contact within the educational legislative network), differences between the pre and post test scores were compared and to determine whether these change score differences were statistically significant. The analysis was conducted separately for pre and posttest survey items. To analyze differences, a paired sample t-test was conducted.

To address the third research question (doctoral feelings or perceptions toward policy), a thematic analysis was conducted. The post-test results open ended items were analyzed for themes, based on content analysis by Brantlinger et al. (2005). Results were grouped into three primary themes for each question by one researcher. The themes were further examined by the second researcher to ensure the accuracy of the themes and to identify emerging subthemes. Verification strategies for reliability and validity of findings were utilized during data analyses processes as established prior to beginning this research. For each open ended question, responses were reviewed for ideas and themes that were in common (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). An initial list of categories was developed and further delineated across each question. The second researcher reviewed the themes for consistency providing a measure of credibility to the qualitative analysis.

Results

An 86% response rate was obtained for the pre-test survey from all eligible participants and a 100% response rate was obtained across the six participants whom completed both the pre and post-test survey. Although small, this data provides authentic input regarding doctoral internship experiences. Results were analyzed according to each category area. Comment sections were analyzed and categorized by themes.

A paired samples t-test was conducted to compare pre and post-test internship experiences across three categorical areas. The results for the first and second research questions are found in Table 1. There were significant differences between pre and post-test responses on several of the items. The table indicates significant differences with the indication of an asterisk after such items (*). The majority of items reflecting the first research question (familiarity with legislative process with a government association or agency in special education) yielded a significant difference in pre- and post-test scores. For example, regarding question familiarity with current federal politicians with an interested in special education (see Table 1) ($M = -2.500$, $SD = 1.048$); $t(5) = -5.839$, $p = 0.002$, which indicates a strong effect. Additionally, there was a significant change regarding familiarity with proceedings in the house (see Table 1) issues ($M = -2.333$, $SD = 0.5164$); $t(5) = -11.068$, $p = 0.000$. There are eight items reported in the table that indicate a significant change between the pre and post-test measure. Differences on the following numbered items were significant (1,2) special education legislation and policy at the federal level, (3) resources for legislative activity, (4) national lobbying organizations with a special education focus, (5) federal politicians with an interest in special education, (6,7) proceedings in the House and Senate, (8) mentor with professional development in special education policy, (9) personal contacts at federal organizations, and (10) personal contacts at federally funded centers. Ten of the 13 items demonstrated a significant difference between the pre and post test questions. These items indicate an overall increase with familiarity of the legislative process (research question 1) as well as increasing their educational legislative network (research question 2).

Table 1
T-Test Results: Familiarity with Special Education Policy

Question	M	SD	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	Sig [*]
Familiarity with <u>SpEd</u> policy at federal level	-1.667	1.505	-2.712	5	.042*
Familiarity with legislation in <u>SpEd</u> at federal level	-2.00	1.264	-2.198	5	.012*
Familiarity with resources for legislative activity	-1.166	.983	-2.907	5	.034*
Familiarity with national lobbying organizations; special education focus	-2.000	1.897	-2.582	5	.049*
Familiarity with national lobbying organizations; general education focus	-1.667	1.861	-2.193	5	.080
Familiarity with current federal politicians with an interest in special education.	-2.500	1.048	-5.839	5	0.002*
Familiarity with proceedings in House	-2.333	.5164	-11.068	5	0.000*
Familiarity with proceedings Senate	-1.667	1.366	-2.988	5	0.031*
Mentor with Professional Development in <u>SpEd</u> policy	-1.333	0.8165	-4.000	5	0.10*
Personal Contacts at Federal Organizations	-1.333	.81650	-4.000	5	.010*
Personal Contacts at Federally Funded Centers	-1.000	.6324	-3.873	5	.012*
Personal Contacts with <u>SpEd</u> lobbying organizations	-1.833	2.316	-1.938	5	.110
Ability to use personal stories and data to discuss critical issues in <u>SpEd</u>	-.8333	1.169	-1.746	5	.141

Cohen's (1988) measure of sample effect size for comparing two sample means, using a paired samples *t*-test. **p* < .05, two-tailed.

The results for the third research question are presented in Table 2. A thematic analysis was conducted to examine the perceptions regarding policy and perceived impact of those perceptions on each doctoral students' future career.

Table 2
Themes Based on Survey Questions

Themes	Theme 1	Theme 2	Theme 3
Have your perceptions or feelings towards policy changed since the beginning of your internship? If yes, please share how they have changed?	Overall Awareness of Policy and Implications have increased	Understanding Power of Advocacy	Clarification of influence and importance of national organizations and impact on policy
What role will federal policy play in your professional career in the future?	Advocacy Efforts	Understand benefit of EBPs and Federal Support of Research	Possible career change into national organizations or a federal role.

Thematic Analysis Results

Student responses to two open-ended questions were analyzed qualitatively. To address the first open ended question regarding perceptions or feelings toward policy and the change they have experienced, three themes emerged. The first theme highlighted the overall awareness of federal policy and the implications policy has in the classroom (see Table 2). Participants felt that it was crucial to be aware of policy at both the federal and state levels to ensure that one can ensure appropriate practice is occurring in the classroom. Additionally, participants felt it was important to be able to communicate current classroom conditions to policy makers. Additionally, participants expressed the importance of evidence based practices and to ensure that proper research is being conducted in special education to inform policy (see Table 2). The next theme (see Table 2) addressed the overall increase of understanding of the importance of advocacy. Overall, participants felt that they must become more aware of the needs of individuals with disabilities and their families to better advocate on their behalf. Participants also felt that an active physical presence was necessary to personally share the stories of the individuals they support and ensure they were heard

directly by those potentially making decisions. Individuals who advocate and make their interests known are more likely to get the political results needed based on political advocacy and participation. Lastly, participants increased their knowledge on overall national organizations and the important role they play in governmental policy.

To address the second open ended question regarding the role of federal policy in the future, three themes also emerged. To begin with, participants stressed that in whatever role they may have in the future, advocacy would be a part of their career. Participants described the importance that advocacy has in education and the importance that leaders need to be fluent in advocacy skills to ensure this knowledge is being transferred within the field. Next, participants described the role of evidence based practices and policy. They described the importance of how quality research of evidence based practices for dissemination would further support policy initiatives in special education. Lastly, participants also considered a changing personal role within education. Participants expressed interest in working in the federal realm, whether for the federal government or a national organization.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to provide preliminary information and addition to the literature regarding special education doctoral programs and the value of policy internships. Although the number of participants was small, it provided preliminary information regarding the impact of internships on doctoral students' knowledge of special education policy and legislation. The findings of this preliminary investigation into the benefits of policy internships within special education doctoral preparation programs as shared by current scholars supports what the literature shares on the benefits of internships and further appends to the literature by providing the voice of six scholars as they experienced it firsthand.

To assess the knowledge of doctoral scholar participants, we examined pre and post test scores on a questionnaire. Results indicated all the doctoral scholar participants demonstrated an increase of policy related knowledge from pretest to post internship test administrations. This demonstration of knowledge gained is also reflected in the responses and comments from the open-ended survey questions. In both instances, these results demonstrate and support the importance of special education policy internships as a means of enhancing the knowledge and skills of doctoral scholar participants.

The results from this study support the benefits of internships prior to entering professional practice. As doctoral students pursue various roles, including the professoriate, an internship in special education policy and leadership will support the capacity displayed by those within leadership roles. These results further support internships as a high-impact practice in having an impact on the educator (McNair & Albertine, 2012).

Limitations

Although these findings are encouraging in terms of providing support for a special education policy internship, this study has limitations that should be considered. To begin with, the sample size was small. This is because the overall population of doctoral students pursuing a degree in special education and completing a doctoral internship in and of itself is limited and specialized. However, it does provide a beginning to this research area. Additionally, the participants were only at three different sites. It would be a benefit to survey various doctoral scholar participants across a larger number of special education policy sites. Interviews may have provided more information for our study by identifying which exact component of the internship was perceived to be of the most value to the participants including the potential impact on their future career.

Conclusion

This research supports the benefits of completing an internship prior to entering professional practice. Additionally, these preliminary findings support the idea that policy internships assist in synthesizing and applying new knowledge across the legislative process and assist in application into one's specialty field (Reingold, 2008). The results of this study also provide support of the internship as a high-impact practice (Kuh, 2008). Doctoral scholar participants' knowledge regarding policy and advocacy increased significantly. One can infer that this was a result of a quality internship, which lead to greater impact (McNair & Albertine, 2012). Colleges of Education need to consider the impact that policy internships may have on the field as well as within their university. The impact on the field could be quite significant as doctoral program graduates take positions in higher education and prepare the teachers in their classes with the basics of advocacy. Such an outcome is critical for the field to better meet the needs of children and families.

Suggestions for Improvement

Federal and state policy implications in the classroom are felt by every educator and educational leader. Through the internship process, teacher leaders became highly aware of the significant impact of advocacy in the realm of policy-making, teacher leadership and education preparation programs must infuse elements of the importance of involvement through various organizations and agencies to the level of active participation through service and community based learning involvement and internship opportunities. Additionally, working in an authentic internship solidified the importance for the need of continuous quality research including the dissemination of results related to the implementation of evidence-based instructional practices and their impact on students with disabilities. Along with research, advocacy plays a critically important and comparable role, as teacher leaders and educators advocate for continuous funding and policy-making that aligns with research findings to ensure students are educated in the most effective learning environments. Teacher leaders and education preparation programs would do well to implement quality small-scale research on evidence-based practices within their curriculum and course design to support the understanding of the associated relationship between research, policy-making, and advocacy. Advocacy

permeates through policy-making and research, yet in and of itself, was identified as a significant element learned from participating in an internship. Teacher leaders and teacher preparation programs should ensure there are opportunities for scholars to advocate as pre-service teachers, so that teachers working in their school or district are prepared to advocate for their students. This may include advocating at both state and federal levels. Finally, connecting our future teachers to the organizations and agencies that impact their lives and the lives of their students should be a part of their knowledge acquisition within their own internships.

Appendix A: Survey Instrument

[Click for PDF Version of Appendix A: Survey Instrument](#)

The following items were answered using the following Likert scale (1-5, where 1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree).

1. I am familiar with special education policy at the federal level

2. I am familiar with current legislative activity in special education at the federal level.

3. I am familiar with resources to stay abreast of current legislative activity (e.g., websites, blogs, webinars, email blasts).

4. I am familiar with national lobbying organizations that focus on SPECIAL education policy issues.

5. I am familiar with national lobbying organizations that focus on GENERAL education policy issues.

6. I am familiar with the current federal politicians who have special interests with special education issues.

7. I am familiar with current proceedings for federal legislation in the US House of Representatives.

8. I am familiar with current proceedings for federal legislation in the US Senate.

9. I have a mentor who has enhanced my professional development in the area of special education policy.

10. I have personal contacts at federal organizations who will be valuable resources in the future.

11. I have personal contacts at federally-funded centers who will be valuable resources in the future.

12. I have personal contacts at special education lobbying organizations who will be valuable resources in the future.

13. I am able to use personal stories and national or state level data to discuss current critical issues in special education policy.

14. My gender is:

15. I am currently or have been a special educator (yes or no).

16. This summer is my first internship experience in special education policy (yes or no).

17. (Post only) Have your perceptions or feelings towards policy changed since the beginning of your internship? If yes, please share how they have changed?

18. (Post only) What role will federal policy play in your professional career in the future.

19. Comments:

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