


Chapter 7

Special Education Teacher Leadership: A Vital Component in Enhancing Inclusionary Practices in Schools


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ABSTRACT

The implementation of effective inclusive school practices requires strong leadership and understanding of procedures, services, and programming for students with disabilities. While school administrators often provide instructional leadership, many do not have preparation in special education, undermining their ability to enact a schoolwide vision for inclusive practices. This chapter provides an overview and summarizes the findings of four special education teacher leadership studies conducted over a three-year period to learn how school leaders can effectively support special educators in teacher leadership and promote inclusive practices that support the success of all students. The authors highlight four major themes (school culture, collaboration, process, and aspiration) that emerged from this series of studies. The chapter describes each theme and how they relate to supporting special education teacher leadership to enhance inclusionary practices in schools.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-7998-6500-1.ch007

INTRODUCTION

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) requires that students with disabilities receive a free and appropriate education alongside students without disabilities to the greatest extent possible. Proponents view the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education classrooms as an educational imperative noting benefits associated with more diverse student bodies and the need to ensure that all students access equal educational opportunities regardless of their social, emotional, or developmental status (McKenna et al., 2019). The legal mandates and moral arguments have led to increased number of students with disabilities in inclusive settings in today's schools and classrooms (Brock, 2018; Westling, 2018). For instance, the United States Department of Education reports that the proportion of students with disabilities spending a portion of their school day in general education classrooms has dramatically increased with about two-thirds receiving most of their education in the least restrictive environment (U.S. Department of Education, 2019). While some research suggests that inclusion leads to academic and social benefits for students with disabilities, and their peers without disabilities (Dessementet et al., 2012; Szumski et al., 2017), there is competing data indicating that students with disabilities are not receiving the necessary supports and curricular adaptations to ensure their academic and social success in general education settings. For instance, McLeskey et al. (2014) found that school personnel, including school administrators, struggle to adequately support students with disabilities in general education classrooms and that research-based academic and behavioral practice are rarely used to support the individual needs of students with disabilities in inclusive settings (McLeskey & Waldron, 2011). Indeed, there is a preponderance of evidence suggesting that effective, scientifically grounded practices and strategies remain unimplemented in general education classrooms (e.g., Burns & Ysseldyke, 2009). These findings are particularly troubling given the presence of many evidence-based strategies that – when implemented in inclusive settings – lead to substantial academic and behavioral progress for students with disabilities (Lee et al., 2010). In addition, as more students with disabilities are provided for in inclusive settings, it is critical that special and general education teachers have opportunities to collaborate whether it be as co-teachers in the classroom or working together in collaborative teams (Ryndak et al., 2015). Research has shown that collaboration between special and general education teachers provides much needed support to students with disabilities to assist them succeed in inclusive classes and that the benefits of collaboration extends to all students in the class (Ronfeldt et al., 2015). Collaboration is not only advantageous for students, but teachers report increased job satisfaction and performance when collaborating with colleagues to support inclusion (Vangrieken et al., 2015)

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