Who's the Boss?
The Leadership/Followership Dynamic in Providing Special Education Services

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Followership itself is not a new concept. Every individual spends more time in the follower role than the leader. The perception of being a follower is often tied to negative associations. Little thought is given to developing competent followers through training in effective followership skills. Leading and following roles often co-occur and can influence professional collaboration. The case study focuses on the impact and implications of the leadership/followership dynamic between various stakeholders in providing special education services to a high school student, as well as examines the definition of competent followership.

INTRODUCTION

Much research on special education leadership has focused on the experiences of special education directors and school administrators without addressing the individuals responsible for implementing interventions such as teachers and paraprofessionals (Bagley & Tang, 2018; Billingsley, 2007; Zaretsky et al., 2008; Bays & Crockett, 2007; Christensen et al., 2013; Boscardin et al., 2018). However, few researchers have explored the concept of "followership" in educational settings.

Uhl-Bien et al. (2014) describe "followership theory" as the follower's perspective of leadership. Followership, as defined by Northouse (2018), is a process where individuals accept the influence of others to accomplish a joint goal/mission. Given that many school dilemmas may, in part, involve the leadership/followership dynamic, it is important to understand this dynamic to better support students with disabilities, their families, and school personnel.

Personnel in special education school settings often assume multiple roles in the leader/follower dynamic at different times. For example, the teacher may be the leader in the classroom, with an aide or paraprofessional as the follower. However, if an aide or paraprofessional is assigned to a specific student, the staff member may become the expert on that student (i.e., the leader), and the teacher is in a supporting role (i.e., the follower). In schools (and school districts), the administrators (e.g., principals and special education coordinators) would be considered the formal leaders, thus making teachers followers. However, teachers may be the leaders in meetings with parents or guardians, with administrators as support personnel (i.e., followers). Subsequently, as with any school setting, there are always more followers than leaders. Therefore, understanding the leadership/followership dynamic is necessary to improve collaboration between special education professionals and students/families.

Effective followership is critical to developing exemplary leaders, and training should be conducted in both areas. McCallum (2013) notes that the stigma of followership, the negative belief of subordination, is a paradoxical exercise; most people in any organization are followers, even those in leadership (i.e., managerial) positions. Followers may encounter micromanagement, poor communication, and questionable ethics, which can be signs of weak leadership. Poor followership can be a result of weak leadership. Inadequate leadership can result in an absence of effective models for followers and a decline in work ethic, morale, and goal completion, which leads to job dissatisfaction and unsuccessful organizations. Developing effective leadership, followership, and collaboration skills are essential to healthy school climates in 21st-century schools (Riggio et al., 2008; Taylor & Hill, 2017; Willink & Babin, 2018)

The lack of research and empirical definitions of followership makes the term synonymous with "subordinate" (Anderson, 2019). Followers sometimes experience marginalization because of their work status and social hierarchies (Brooker et al., 2021), which often results in lower pay, higher turnover, fewer qualifications, and being perceived as "babysitters" (Brooker et al., 2021; Kellerman, 2008; Kelley, 1992). Followership is important since followers account for 80% of an organization's success (Chaleff, 2009).

Kelley (2008) compares types of followers on a continuum. For example, he discusses followership using a range of terms from "sheep" (highly passive followers)

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