

Causton, J., & Theoharis, G. (2014). *The Principal's Handbook for Leading Inclusive Schools*. Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co. Pages: 184. ISBN:978-1-59857-298-8 (paperback)

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Introduction

Recently, the role of administrators has undergone several changes, including increased responsibility for educating special education students within the general education environment. Research has demonstrated that administrators are essential in creating, establishing and maintaining an inclusive learning environment in which educators and students feel welcome, supported, and respected. However, while decades of research has demonstrated successful inclusion at the elementary level, research has also highlighted that the barriers to inclusion are significantly different at the high school level because of its unique and demanding challenges (Casale-Giannola, 2012). From the perspective of a certified K-12 special educator and Ph.D. student researching the impact of high school administrators' beliefs on inclusion, this book review will critically examine whether the strategies outlined in this book can be implemented at the secondary level.

Chapter 1: The Principal's Role in Inclusive Schools

According to the authors, "it is the principal who will ultimately make or break a school's ability to be inclusive" (p. 2), and "transcend from the rhetoric of inclusion to the reality of embracing the full range of students ... [within] the general education learning and social community" (p. 2). They consider inclusion as an "underlying philosophy or way of seeing the world" (p. 2), and view inclusion as "a way of leading schools that embraces each and every student" (p. 2) regardless of ability. However, the role of administrators continues to be "multifaceted [and] has grown increasingly complex and demanding" (p. 2), while shifting towards transformational leadership. The chapter concludes with the authors highlighting and discussing four criteria that successful inclusive administrators incorporate as identified from the research: (1) establishing a clear vision of inclusion, (2) promoting collaboration, (3) developing and supporting professional teams, and (4) reducing the fragmentation of initiatives (p. 4).

The focus of this chapter is on practices administrators are encouraged to incorporate within their school. While I am in agreement with the criteria outlined, I believe that a greater emphasis is needed on an administrator's role as a visionary when developing a vision of inclusion. Some researchers have asserted how an administrator's beliefs and attitudes towards heterogeneous classrooms influence a teacher's inclusive teaching practices, while others have articulated the importance for administrators to clearly convey the rationale behind inclusive teaching practices in order to ensure that educational staff not only understand how to implement, but why the strategy is important for inclusion. When staff understand the purpose and rationale of inclusive teaching practices, they are more willing to implement these strategies and develop a more positive view of inclusion. In order to achieve this, administrators must become aware of their own personal beliefs and values (Jones, 2004).

Chapter 2: Special Education

In the second chapter, the authors define special education as “individualized instruction designed to meet the unique needs of certain students” (p. 12), and encourage administrators to perceive special education as a service that enables students with disabilities to have access to the general curriculum. They then discuss labels – how they are socially constructed, transient, and while necessary at times, have the potential to stigmatize or isolate students. The remainder of the chapter identifies and describes thirteen categories of disability.

A poignant illustration of the shortcomings of overusing labels involves writing down five descriptors about yourself. After completing the list, the authors ask the reader about what is on the list, highlighting how it usually does not include deficits because we “do not think of ourselves through the lens of deficit” (p. 14). Sparks (2007) asserted how an administrator’s “thoughts and actions shape the culture of their organizations. Therefore, significant change in an organization begins with significant change in what leaders think, say, and do” (p. 3). Additionally, administrative support is critical because when teachers feel stressed, “they become defensive, relying on their most familiar habits” (Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee, 2002, p. 163). High school administrators have a more challenging role because inclusive opportunities for high school students with intellectual disabilities continue to be the exception, and general educators are more likely to be resistant to including students with disabilities into the regular classroom.

Chapter 3: Inclusive Education

This chapter briefly outlines the history of inclusive education, free appropriate public education, the least restrictive environment, and checklists for supplementary aids and services. After presenting a couple definitions of inclusion, the authors outline indicators of inclusive classrooms and Individual Education Programs (IEPs).

Researchers have identified significant challenges that impede inclusion at the secondary level, including the curriculum’s level and pace, the increase of content area classes, and the requirements of high-stakes testing (Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2001). Because of these unique challenges, indicators of inclusion may present differently within a high school context. Additionally, while it is important to have guidelines for inclusion, it is also equally important to consider the underlying beliefs and attitudes that affect these practices. For example, some high school general education teachers indicated that they were not responsible for accommodating or adapting material for students with disabilities, thereby cautioning how an increase of students with disabilities within the regular classroom should not mean that general educators are fully embracing the concept of inclusion (Casale-Giannola, 2012).

However, administrators can overcome the challenges of inclusive education by empowering the educators within their jurisdictions.

Chapter 4: Leading Inclusive School Reform

This chapter provides a practical step-by-step process that will help support administrators with implementing inclusion in their school. The steps outlined are: (1) Setting a Vision; (2) Creating Service Delivery Maps; (3) Aligning School Structures; (4) Rethinking Staffing; (5) Improving Classroom Practices; (6) Ongoing Monitoring, Adjusting, and Celebrating; and (7) Creating a Climate of Belonging. While current research demonstrates that an administrator’s attitude can have an impact on the implementation of inclusion, I believe it is also

important to encourage administrators to examine why these steps and strategies are important, especially at the high school level where there are increased pressures of high stakes testing and rigorous curricula.

Chapter 5: The Backbone of Inclusion: Leading Effective Collaboration

This chapter discusses various aspects of collaboration, including pitfalls, the role of administrators and other professionals, instructional team configurations, resolving conflict, and methods of communication. In particular, the pitfalls highlighted include resources being poorly utilized, special educators “assisting” general educators, general educators providing the majority of instruction, and special education teachers being linked to only students with disabilities.

These pitfalls are particularly salient at the high school level. For example, Deshler and Schumaker (2006) posited that all high school students should be taught by highly qualified teachers; however, with the transition towards inclusive teaching practices, the role of special educators needs to be redefined in order to provide support to academically diverse students who are learning a content-heavy curricula. Additionally, the authors provide several excellent and practical solutions, including alternatives to face-to-face interactions. This is especially important for high school administrators because co-teachers require planning time, but it is often more difficult at the secondary level.

Chapter 6: Rethinking Students: Presuming Competence

In this chapter, the authors challenge administrators to change their thinking about their students. They encourage administrators to consider the student’s strengths and multiple intelligences before presenting the concepts of presumption of competence, age-appropriate and person-first language.

For high school administrators, this chapter is particularly important for a variety of reasons. In Canada, a disproportionate number of students who fail high school have a disability and only 20% of special education graduates find paid employment (Chaban, 2010). However, when teachers perceive their students to be academically capable, those students will rise up to academic challenges. According to the authors, all educators “should treat and work with students in age-appropriate ways” (p. 92), and suggest that you ask yourself “how you would talk to or work with the student if she or he did not have a disability, and proceed in that manner” (p. 92). This reflects the assertions of earlier researchers who posited that adolescents do not want to be treated differently than their peers.

Chapter 7: Providing Academic Supports

This chapter outlines the differences between accommodations (differences in how the student accesses the curriculum and demonstrates learning), and modifications (differences in what the student needs to learn) while providing several examples of each adaptation.

High school administrators need to be aware of the fact that most research-validated accommodations have not been created and evaluated within high school classrooms. Additionally, Young and Luttenegger (2014) highlighted how high school teachers frequently plan their lessons first, then differentiate for the few “inclusion kids” in the class.

Other researchers have highlighted how the dichotomous relationship between regular and special education basically remains intact based on the misconception that two different

kinds of students (regular and special) are being taught, and have asserted that the differences among students are located along continuums of physical, psychological, and intellectual characteristics. As a possible solution, high school teachers could use differentiated curriculum enhancements where all the students in the class receive the same instructional procedures and materials, but the differentiation is incorporated into the instruction so that all students can learn based on their individual strength and abilities. In doing so, this method de-emphasizes the dichotomous relationship between special education and general education, a relationship more prevalent at the high school level.

Chapter 8: Providing Behavioral Supports

In this chapter the authors provide several insightful and practical strategies to assist administrators in supporting students with challenging behaviours. The importance of this chapter to high school administrators cannot be overstated because teachers are the least positive about including students with behaviour challenges within the regular classroom (de Boer, Pijl, Post, & Minnaert, 2012). Researchers have concluded that students with challenging behaviours are not only the most difficult to serve, but also cause the most stress in the mainstream classroom. At the high school level, students with behaviour challenges were frequently described as requiring more extreme and isolated interventions. Additionally, I believe it is important to note that the goal should not be a completely “quiet” classroom, but rather to provide students with behaviour challenges the support needed to interact in an effective and appropriate manner.

Chapter 9: Supporting You, Supporting Them: Caring for Yourself

In this chapter, the authors present several strategies that administrators can use to support their staff and themselves, and emphasize how “sometimes leaders forget that they do not need to have all the answers” (p. 137). The professional strategies include: creative problem solving, effective communication, creating networks with other administrators, professional development, and empowering staff. Several self-care strategies are also presented, including making your personal life a priority, physical activity, identifying an outlet, and assisting others.

Researchers have asserted that administrators perceived their professional lives as more complex when including students with disabilities because of more diverse responsibilities, an increase in demands from educational staff, and heightened accountability. This is especially true at the high school level, and as such, these strategies could be considered the most valuable for high school administrators who also encounter unique and unavoidable barriers to inclusion.

Conclusion

From the book’s description on the publisher’s website, novice and veteran administrators will develop strategies that will assist all students in achieving academic and social success. Because this book covers the basics of special education theory to practical inclusion strategies, I believe that it is a valuable and insightful resource that offers practical and strategies for a diverse range of administrators, students, and learning environments. It should also be noted that researchers have highlighted that achieving inclusion in high schools is faced with unique and pervasive challenges, and as a result, administrators should consider that inclusion cannot be achieved by following a series of steps, but rather by administrators selecting the strategies

that are most applicable to their own individual philosophy and learning environment.

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