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**AN INTERNATIONAL PEER-REVIEWED  
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- ◆ A Review of Critical Issues in Transition Team's Decision-Making and the Importance of Ethical Leadership
- ◆ An Examination of the Related Literature for Inclusive School Leadership
- ◆ Fostering Creativity for Students with Special Needs Through Innovative Learning Environments
- ◆ How an Impartial Education Liaison Service Helps Education Leaders Effectively Manage Special Education-Related Conflict
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- ◆ Book Review: IOU Life Leadership, By Dr. Joe Famularo

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### **Perspective of the Editor in Chief:**

#### **Dr. Robert J. Manley**

First, on behalf of the members of the JLI Editorial Board, our co-editors, associate editors and SCOPE JLI Production team, I want to extend congratulations to Dr. Rene Parmar on her recent

appointment to the position of Dean for the School of Education at Lehman College-CUNY. We hope to receive many submissions to our Journal for Leadership and Instruction from faculty and students at Lehman College in the future.

Second, I want to thank Dr. Parmar for the outstanding work she did to solicit articles for this special issue on leadership in special education services. I enjoyed working with her and our team of editors in the virtual process we have had to adopt in order to produce this fall 2021 issue.

Third, on the 20th Anniversary of the tragedy that all of us suffered in small or large ways on September 11, 2001, we have learned that if a people can rise from the ashes of hate, they must first love one another and then rebuild with the power of love. After September 11, 2001, Americans in every state and of every diversity came together to console, heal, rebuild and protect our cherished belief that all deserve equal rights to pursue happiness.

Now, in the face of a worldwide pandemic, we are called upon to work together in the development of safe protocols and environments to educate our children.

None of us has all the answers. We must work together to discern the best pathways forward. Listen to one another carefully. Speak with empathy. Discover what works. Ask not: what can I do to defeat my neighbor; ask: what can I do to help my neighbor, my colleague, our children?

In some small ways, all of us who work on the Journal for Leadership and Instruction seek to contribute to this mission of hope in the face of tragedy. Our mission to discern what works to promote learning is eternal.

*Robert J. Manley*  
Editor-in-Chief



### **Special Co-Editor:**

#### **Dr. Rene Parmar**

Special education encompasses many different aspects of the educational system. Implications range from students to school leaders, from instruction to career preparation, from birth through adulthood, and across the spectrum of disabilities. In this special issue, the researchers touch on some of the dimensions within the special education system, with a focus on the leadership necessary to improve the system of service delivery as well as serve the needs of individual students.

In the first article, authors explore the results of adverse childhood experiences that produce trauma, resulting in anxiety, absenteeism, depression and behavioral issues with students. A school-wide model for trauma-informed awareness is proposed, rather than current practice which often consists of only responding when a crisis situation occurs. Survey and focus group data gathered by Palios reveal possible barriers to school-wide implementation of the Trauma Skills School model, giving guidance for school leaders who may wish to move in that direction.

Students with special education needs are entitled to an appropriate transition plan, as mandated by IDEA. The second article in this special issue discusses the intersection of transition planning with ethical school leadership, based on the Shapiro and Stefkovitch (2016) model. Brady, Kucharczyk, Whitby, Terrell, and Merry provide insight on how ethical practices can be woven into transition plans from four perspectives of ethic - justice, critique, care, and professional standards.

A conceptual review of the literature on inclusive school leadership by McMillan and Hoppey describe characteristics of effective inclusive principals. The authors discuss the tensions between balancing equity and accountability, and how principals may respond to external pressures. They also review research on successful practices that can guide future school leaders.

The essay by Acharya and Rodriguez discusses the need to promote creativity and innovation in special education classrooms rather than continue with stifling standardized curricula and teaching practices. The authors

## Editors' Perspectives

list seven characteristics of creative classrooms and five crucial mindsets that promote innovative education. They go on to describe the benefits of such innovative environments from the perspective of social justice.

Settles and Sidime outline two case studies that illustrate how school leaders may work with an impartial liaison in cases where there is conflict between a school's programs and resources and the needs expressed by families of students with disabilities. Rather than escalating to conflict, recrimination, and litigation, often an impartial liaison with special education and legal expertise can bring about common understanding and practical solutions. This has the potential for saving a lot of money in litigation costs, as well as promoting collaborative relationships between families of special education students and the schools.

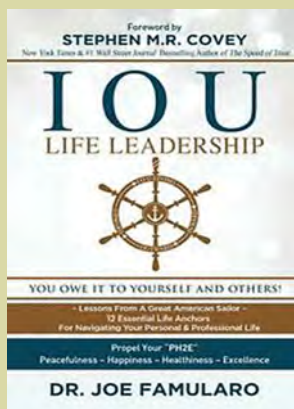
An important consideration for the success of all students at the secondary level is content area expertise. In recent years the Common Core standards have become accepted as a guideline for curriculum structure in many states, including New York. The research by Murphy and DiMartino reports on teacher perspectives of standards-based reform efforts. Their findings reveal that as teachers perceive reduced autonomy, their willingness to engage in differentiated instruction declines.

In a study of project-based learning, Huang and Shideler compare outcomes of general education students who are English Learners with English-speaking students during a science unit. Their findings indicate the potential of experiential learning in developing literacy skills along with critical thinking for the target population.

The final piece from the field is a discussion by Guard and Baker of ways in which teachers can develop positive collaborations with para-educators. This crucial aspect of special education service delivery is seldom addressed in formal teacher preparation and is vital to student learning as well as professional development of teaching assistants.

While it is not possible to cover all the complex aspects of special education service delivery in a single issue, we hope you find these articles beneficial as you lead your school system to excellence in this aspect. As school reform continues, new policies and practices are continuously being developed to provide students with special education needs the learning environments that will help them realize their full potential.

*Dr. Rene Parmar,*  
Co-Editor



### **IOU Life Leadership**

**-by Dr. Joe Famularo**

**Reviewed by Kevin N. McGuire, Ph.D.  
Retired Director of New York State  
Center for Leadership**



# **A Case Study of Trauma-Informed Practice and Implementation to Support Mental Health and Learning in Public Schools in Suffolk County, New York**

**By Mark L. Palios, Ed.D.**

## **Abstract**

The purpose of this study is to examine the readiness of school districts in Suffolk County, New York, to implement a trauma-informed system to address the growing needs of mental health interventions in student populations. A review of the literature showed a historical prevalence of mental health providers and individual student interventions within school buildings or in partnership with community agencies. Recent literature revealed an increase in school-related issues that have origins in student trauma or adverse childhood experiences. This study examined mental health issues in schools by conducting a mixed method analysis, using a survey instrument and focus group interviews, from members of the Suffolk Directors of Guidance. The study may help districts where leaders want to implement a systematic and districtwide approach to mitigating trauma-related student issues by examining current readiness and gaps to implement the National Dropout Prevention Center's Trauma-Skilled Schools Model.

## **Introduction**

School districts across Suffolk County in New York State are experiencing increased issues with student attendance in the form of school refusal, school avoidance, and student anxiety. School attendance is a topic of concern for many district leaders, from Superintendents to building Principals and Pupil Personnel Service providers who express difficulty in encouraging students to come to school. Research indicates that the dropout and school non-attendance of students today are related to unprecedented levels of stress and increased exposure to trauma (Addis, 2018; National Dropout Prevention Center, 2018). Historically, urban and poorer school communities tended to have a greater need for mental health services (Slade, 2003), but recent data showed that mental health issues with students in affluent communities were increasing as their students showed more signs of stress and trauma related to high expectations (Luthar, 2013). The anecdotal support of this from practitioners in the field along with the New York State's Office of Mental Health identifying Suffolk County's need to improve Single Point of Access (SPOA) services to streamline mental health services

for youth (OMH Statewide Comprehensive Plan, 2016), underscore the problem of increased mental health issues among youth and the impact it has on learning.

## **Purpose of the Study**

This study examined the readiness of school districts in Suffolk County to adopt the National Dropout Prevention Center's Trauma-Skills School Model. A review of the literature showed that most responses to mental health prevention and intervention occurred in the form of identifying and responding to individual students. A model called Trauma-Skills School Model (TSS Model) contributes to an environment in a school where all students are positively impacted on a Tier 1 Intervention (National Dropout Prevention Center, 2018). This study explored the extent to which schools already have trauma-informed awareness and what gaps existed to implement a TSS Model. The research on implementing a model of trauma-informed practice is lacking, so it is the objective of this study to examine the readiness of school districts in Suffolk County, New York to implement a Trauma-Skills School Model.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The given culture in a particular learning community is the determinant of behavior within the community. The collective behavior of the community creates the learning systems that reflect the values of the community. Both the systems and expectations then further strengthen and influence the culture. The theoretical framework of this study is based upon the Organizational Theory of Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal. Bolman and Deal (2003) describe organizations within four frames: the structural frame, the human resource frame, the political frame, and the symbolic frame. These frames help leaders and participants in organizations understand the structure, where the strengths and weaknesses are, and thereby understanding improvement and change.

Bolman and Deal provided a framework to examine the structural, human, political, and symbolic frames that would need to be considered to determine how ready a district would

be to implement a full-school trauma-informed model such as National Dropout Prevention Center's Trauma-skilled Schools Model.

## Review of the Literature

According to the CDC, ADHD, behavior problems, anxiety, and depression are the most prevalent mental disorders diagnosed in children in the United States. Most recent statistics reveal 9.4% of children ages 2-17 years old are diagnosed with ADHD. In children ages 3-17 years old, 7.4% have a diagnosed behavior problem, 7.1% have been diagnosed with anxiety, and 3.2% have been diagnosed with depression. This number totals about 17 million children nationwide. Additionally, several of these conditions frequently occur together. Approximately 3 in 4 children with depression also have a diagnosis of anxiety. For children diagnosed with anxiety, 1 in 3 also have behavior problems and 1 in 3 have been diagnosed with depression as well. Other mental health disorders that are prevalent in children and adolescents include Autism spectrum disorders, Tourette syndrome, alcohol use disorder, illicit drug use disorder, and cigarette dependence (CDC, 2019). In 2010, suicide was the second leading cause of death in children ages 12-17 years (CDC, 2019).

Furthermore, the rates of depression and anxiety diagnoses among children have increased over time. In children aged 6 to 17 years, the rates of children diagnosed with anxiety and depression increased from 5.4% in 2003 to 8% in 2007 and to 8.4% in 2012. In children ages 2-8 years old, boys were more likely than girls to have a developmental, behavioral, or mental disorder. Also, more than 1 in 5 children (22%) living below 100% of the federal poverty level were diagnosed with a mental, developmental, or behavioral disorder (CDC, 2019). Research conducted by the Institute of Medicine and the National Research Council revealed that an estimated 13-20% of all children living in the United States, up to 1 in 5, experience a mental disorder in any given year with, upwards of \$250 billion dollars spent each year toward the treatment of said mental disorders.

It is generally accepted that while schools are primarily responsible for educating children, they are also responsible for supporting the physical and mental health of students if those impairments impact their education. The collaboration between health professionals and school staff are vital in achieving this (Adelman & Taylor, 2006).

While it is impossible to predict the future, there is greater evidence that the school may become a "full-service school" (Adelman & Taylor, 2006), where mental health interventions are integrated into the school building. Several lawsuits involving school districts' response to student trauma contributes to the purpose of the study. Three recent lawsuits in California, Arizona, and New York have argued that chronic and pervasive trauma may qualify as a disability under IDEA or Section 504. The 2015 case

*P.P. et. al. v. Compton Unified School District* claimed that those students who were subject to ongoing trauma outside of school were not provided with a classification of a disability under the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504, thereby contributing to their academic failures. The Compton lawsuit resulted in a settlement between sides to implement trauma-informed practices districtwide, as the concern grew for classifying every student who may have experienced trauma. In 2016, a similar lawsuit was filed against the U.S. Bureau of Indian Education, *Stephen C. v. the Bureau of Indian Education*, that claimed students (9 plaintiffs) on the Havasupai reservation in Arizona where students who experienced chronic and pervasive trauma were not provided with the proper special education and mental health supports.

In New York, *Jane Doe et. al. v. New York City Department of Education*, argued that 4 plaintiffs were suffering from behavioral changes, emotional changes, physical impairments, and learning difficulties due to sexual harassment and assaults. The suit claimed that the Department of Education did not extend a response to trauma and protecting students from further contact with their assailants in school under their special education program. The lawsuit alleged that the Committee on Special Education refused to address the girls' concerns of academic and emotional difficulties outside of the context of their original diagnosis (learning disability), and dismissed the latter diagnosis of anxiety (edweek.org, Sparks, 2019). These three lawsuits presented new case law on trauma-informed systems and practice.

In looking at traumatic incidents, the number of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) that a person encountered affected all aspects of health and learning. The CDC-Kaiser ACE Study (1997) examined the likelihood of an adult experiencing negative outcomes, such as cognitive impairment, health problems, and early death, given their number of Adverse Childhood Experiences. ACEs were categorized into 3 groups: abuse, neglect, and household challenges (CDC, retrieved October 9, 2019). The study showed that the increase in a person's ACE score, the more likely they were to encounter health, mental health, and learning problems.

When risk factors are high, protective factors like positive relationships between teachers and traumatized children provide students with opportunities to "get to neutral" (Craig, 2016, Educational Leadership, retrieved September 29, 2019).

Trauma-informed practices have been encouraged by educators, policymakers, special education law, and even federal and state grants (Education Week, retrieved September 29, 2019) during the last decade to determine the number of students who would be identified as traumatized. Nearly half of all US children have been exposed to at least one traumatic event, and more

<b>Table 1.</b>			
<i>Findings From the Survey and Focus Group Responses of Directors of Guidance</i>			
<b>Research Question</b>	<b>Method</b>	<b>Data</b>	<b>Analysis</b>
1. What elements of trauma-informed practice do the Guidance Directors in Suffolk County already know, and what elements are currently being practiced?	Qualitative	Focus Group Questions	<p><i>Training and Professional Development</i> co-occurring with many codes, indicates varied degree of training and knowledge among providers</p> <p>1 of 3 participants was very familiar with and trained in trauma-informed practice (33%)</p>
	Quantitative	Survey Questions	<p>- <i>Knowledge of Trauma</i> - <i>Training and Professional Development</i></p> <p>10 of 15 (67%) of respondents were “somewhat aware” and had strategic district plans that “vaguely” considered trauma-informed practice</p>
2. What gaps exist between current levels of knowledge and practice need to be met to implement a Trauma-Skills School (TSS) Model?	Qualitative	Focus Group Questions	<p><i>Barriers to Implementation</i> co-occurring with teacher compliance, such as <i>Contractual Limitations</i> and <i>Teacher Resistance</i></p> <p><i>Scheduling and Building Structure</i> co-occurring with <i>Targeting Particular Students</i> and other various teacher compliance</p> <p>3 of 3 participants (100%) stated “Teacher Buy-in” constitutes greatest gap</p>
	Quantitative	Survey Questions	<p><i>Training and Professional Development</i> – 9 of 13 (69%) of respondents state 0%-20% relevant staff are trained</p> <p><i>Adult Connection</i> – 6 of 11 (55%) of respondents state that 60%-80% of students have a trusted adult</p> <p><i>Instructional Integration</i> – 4 of 11 (36%) of respondents state that 80%-100% of faculty incorporate into lessons</p> <p><i>Staff Assigned or Best/Worst Prepared to Implement</i> – Respondents chose coaches and social workers, 11 of 13 (85%) as best prepared, and respondents chose teachers and administrators, 11 of 13 (85%) as staff who can exacerbate issues</p>

than 1 in 5 have been exposed to several. Manmade and natural disasters exposure make this number potentially high, so rather than finding the individual students, practitioners suggested a school-wide systems approach to being trauma-sensitive, where “it is a process, not a program” (Education Week, retrieved September 29, 2019).

The concept of educators' secondary traumatic stress (STS) is important to realize as well. As educators are more trauma-sensitive and have interactions with traumatized students, educators may experience undesirable effects such as disengagement, personalizing, and profession burnout (Lawson, et. al., 2019). Leaders must build in supports for staff self-care as an element of a trauma-informed system.

## Method

The study examined the readiness of school districts in Suffolk County to adopt a trauma-informed school model. The study employed a mixed method collection of quantitative (survey) and qualitative (focus group) data, where the Suffolk Directors of Guidance were the sample.

## Participants

A survey was delivered to 50 members of the SDOG group, with a response rate of 15 participants. Of the 15 respondents, 3 selected districts participated in a focus group to explore the research questions in a qualitative approach.

## Research Questions and Data Analysis

**Table 1** summarizes the research questions and findings from the data sources.

In Research Question 1, respondents were asked what elements of trauma-informed practice do guidance directors know and what elements are being practiced. The results of the survey and focus group discussion showed that 33%-67% of guidance professionals were familiar with trauma-informed practice. The elements that were being practiced, as evidenced in both the survey and focus groups, were those that individual PPS providers, typically a school social worker, had been trained in and chose to utilize in his/her practice. Some Suffolk Directors of Guidance were very familiar with trauma-informed practice, and some had never heard of the elements of this model. There was no system-wide trauma-informed model of implementation in any school in Suffolk County, but there was evidence of "elements" being practiced.

In Research Question 2, the gaps between current knowledge and practice and what is needed to implement the TSS Model were explored. Issues that were explored were "Negative Perception," "Training and Professional Development," "Teacher Resistance," "Instructional Integration," and "Adult Connection," among others. The gaps that existed were the number and category of staff that needed to be trained, and the staff, particularly teachers who did not "buy-in" to the system.

Comments from participants focused on such viewpoints as "All students would need to be treated in a similar way and all policies would need to be looked at through a TSS Model lens, not just Target Particular Students." Respondents tended to report that "Current levels of training are very low, which is to be expected of a relatively new modality." The major gaps to imple-

mentation were reported to be found in "Barriers to Implementation," which encompassed particularly "Scheduling and Building Structure" and "Teacher Resistance."

## Recommendations and Conclusion

This study revealed a strong knowledge of and confidence in trauma-informed approaches among the social workers in schools, moderate levels of such in school guidance counseling departments, and weak levels of such in faculty and staff. Also, school-wide implementation of the TSS model is rare, as is an awareness of how to integrate relevant theory into model building. Lessons that administrators may take away from this study would be to implement systems of trauma-informed approaches the system should center around teacher professional development, contractual limitations and negotiations, and organizational/building structure. Moving from a system of compartmentalized counselors and teachers, each with their own distinct role and responsibility, within the confines of a contract, and the need for greater professional development and training in the implementation of a Trauma Skills School Model required planning, extensive coordination and staff development.

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# A Review of Critical Issues in Transition Team's Decision-Making and the Importance of Ethical Leadership

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## Abstract

This paper presents a review of legislation and court cases that have resulted in the present guidelines and criteria for transition services for students with special education needs. These include effective transition to post-secondary learning, career, and/or independent living. Transition planning is viewed from the lens of the Shapiro and Stefkovitch (2016) model of ethics in leadership.

## Introduction

Issues associated with secondary transition education and services for youth with disabilities are receiving increased attention given the importance of supporting high school students with disabilities as they transition to adulthood and consider multiple options after high school, including postsecondary education, employment, and independent living (Gothberg et al., 2018). Research findings from the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2) revealed that students with disabilities lagged behind their student peers without disabilities in many critical postschool outcomes (Newman et al., 2009; Wagner et al., 2014). Effective transition planning for students with disabilities is necessary to promote positive postschool outcomes (Test et al., 2009). This paper explores the need for school leaders to adopt more ethical leadership practices and apply them to the complex issues associated with transition team decision-making.

School leaders are largely held responsible for school-level compliance with special education policies and procedures (Lashley & Boscardin, 2003). School leaders prepared in special education leadership have detailed knowledge of special education laws and understanding of research-based special education best practices (Scheef & Mahfouz, 2020). While existing research revealed that special education is the most litigated area in education, it also showed that school leaders often lacked the legal literacy and leadership preparation necessary to ensure students with disabilities are prepared for life after high school (Katsiyannis et al., 2016; Decker & Brady, 2015). Lawsuits involving the transition of students with disabilities increased steadily since the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (Yell, 2018; Petcu, 2014). While school leaders can more readily ac-

quire special education legal knowledge, it is equally important that school leaders develop the ethical dispositions necessary to address and manage complex issues facing students with disabilities, including transition planning and services (Lashley & Boscardin, 2003).

Special education legal compliance may provide sufficient condition for addressing today's complex decision-making situations and ethical leadership is the necessary condition for best serving the interests of students with disabilities. Today's school leaders need to incorporate more ethical leadership styles that facilitate effective working relationships based on mutual trust, shared responsibility, collaboration, and teamwork (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Secondary transition team decision-making is a complex educational decision-making process that would benefit school leaders using ethical leadership practices. Several critical issues in transition team decision making for special education students should be examined to better serve the needs of these students.

## Transition Services and the Law

The most recent 2004 reauthorization of the IDEA (20 U.S.C. §1400 *et seq.*) addressed the importance of student transition planning and its critical role in preparing students with disabilities for life after high school. Specifically, the IDEA states:

the purpose of the IDEA is to ensure that all children with disabilities have available to them a free appropriate public education (FAPE) that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living (20 USC 1400, § 601 [d][1][A]).

Under the current IDEA, the individualized education plan (IEP) of each student with a disability must address transition planning no later than when the student turns 16, or younger, if deemed appropriate by the IEP team or required by the state. The student's IEP team must include the following components documenting transition services, including (a) appropriate measurable postsecondary goals



based on age-appropriate transition assessments related to training, education, employment, and where appropriate, independent living skills; and (b) the transition services (including courses of study) needed to assist the student with a disability in reaching those goals (Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services [OSERS], 2020, p. 1). Relatedly, a crucial part of the IEP for students with disabilities is the individualized transition plan (ITP), which uses assessment data and input from the student and family detailing potential options regarding future education, employment, and independent living beyond the student's high school years.

In addition to the IDEA, there are several notable federal laws school leaders need to be aware of when considering potential transition options for students with disabilities, especially trade, vocational, and technical-related jobs that can lead to future and steady employment.

### **The Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act (Perkins V)**

The Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act, or Perkins V is the most recent iteration of the federal Perkins Act authorizing federal funds to support new and existing Career Technical Education (CTE) programs in high schools and postsecondary schools nationwide. Currently, the federal law requires that states develop evaluations of local school systems to determine specific needs and employment gaps for special populations, including individuals with disabilities. While current research addressing the effectiveness of CTE programs for students with disabilities is limited, federal law does allow school districts to include a CTE as a transition service on a student's IEP (Harvey et al., 2019).

### **The Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act**

The 2014 Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) was developed to support education and training to address gaps in the key skills for the workforce, especially for underserved populations. WIOA covers any student with a disability under either the IDEA or Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and provides funding for pre-employment services for students with disabilities. Comparable to The Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act, the WIOA is based on an analysis of individual state-level employment gaps and coordinated training programs directed at addressing specific job skills. The most recent national study of 2017 performance data based on WIOA-funded programs revealed that of the 51,935 persons with disabilities that participated in the federal program, 52.1% found employment (WIOA, 2017).

### **Increasing Litigation Involving Transition of Students with Disabilities**

During the past five years, there have been a growing number of legal cases involving transition plans decided in the favor of students with disabilities and their families

(Prince et al., 2020). In many of these cases, the court awarded compensatory education or monetary awards to the student, including the reimbursement of significant attorney fees. In *Gibson v. Forest Hill School District* (2016), for example, a child with a cognitive disability and seizure disorder was not making adequate academic and functional progress in her non-vocational school program. The student's parents claimed that her IEP goals did not properly prepare her for postsecondary employment. Ultimately, the court in the *Gibson* case ruled in favor of the student's parents ordering the school district to pay 590 hours of transition-related services and \$300,000 in attorney's fees. In the court's ruling, they emphasized that the school district structured poor transition-related meetings and relationships with the family and made scheduling difficult for the student to attend the transition meetings. **Table 1** lists four federal-level cases decided during the years 2016-2018. Secondary transition was the central issue in these cases and the court ruled in favor of the student and family (Price et al., 2020).

### **Ethical Dilemmas in the Transition Process**

Research indicates that many school leaders are not appropriately prepared in the knowledge, skills, and especially ethical dispositions to effectively assist students with disabilities transition to life after high school (DiPaola et al., 2004; Lashley & Boscardin, 2003). Shapiro and Stefkovich (2016) developed a conceptual framework that actively promotes ethical decision-making for school leaders as they encounter complex decision-making situations. In this framework, four approaches to ethical decision-making are discussed, including the importance of school leaders considering issues related to individual rights and law (*ethic of justice*); sensitizing school leaders to inequities across socioeconomic class, race, gender, as well as other areas of difference (*ethic of critique*); challenging school leaders to address critical values of effective leadership, such as loyalty and trust (*ethic of care*), and considering "moral aspects unique to the profession" allowing school leaders to be more aware of their own personal and professional codes of ethics (*ethic of the profession*) (Shapiro & Stefkovich, 2016, p. 19). **Figure 1** illustrates Shapiro and Stefkovich's (2016) conceptual framework and its application of ethical decision-making to school leaders.

The transition process is a time of great potential for students with disabilities as well their families. The Taxonomy for Transition 2.0 (Kohler et al., 2016) is a tool to help support IEP teams, including school leaders, in ensuring that attention is paid to special education practices and policies which have been shown to predict positive outcomes in the areas of education, employment, and independent living for youth with disabilities. The Taxonomy for Transition 2.0 tool organizes these practices and predictors across five categories: a) student development, b) student-focused planning, c) family engagement, d) program structures, and e) interagency collaboration. Each of these five categories include ethical decision points for teams to consider in the student transition planning processes, which if mishandled,

**Table 1***Legal Cases (2016 to 2018) With Secondary Transition as Central Issue*

Legal case	Disability	Central transition issue	Decision/award(s)
<i>Gibson v. Forest Hills Local School District</i> (2016)	Multiple disabilities	Conducting timely transition assessment, considering student's preferences and needs, student invitation to IEP meeting	Parent(s)/student 425 hrs. of transition-related serves, \$327,641 in attorney fees
<i>Hill v. District of Columbia</i> (2016)	SLD	Including parent in IEP meeting, age-appropriate transition assessment, authorizing IEP in a timely manner, IEP implementation, providing transition services	Parent(s)/student 178 hrs. of compensatory education, placement in a private vocational school
<i>Somberg v. Utica Community Schools</i> (2017)	ASD	Establishing measurable goals and postsecondary preparation	Parent(s)/student 1,200 hrs. of private tutoring, 1 year of postsecondary transition services, costs associated with compensatory education
<i>S.G.W. v. Eugene School District</i> (2017)	ASD and ED	Inadequate individualized transition plan	Parent(s)/student 175 hrs. of compensatory Education

*Note:* SLD=specific learning disability; IEE=independent educational evaluation; ASD=autism spectrum disorder; ED=emotional disturbance; ADHD=attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

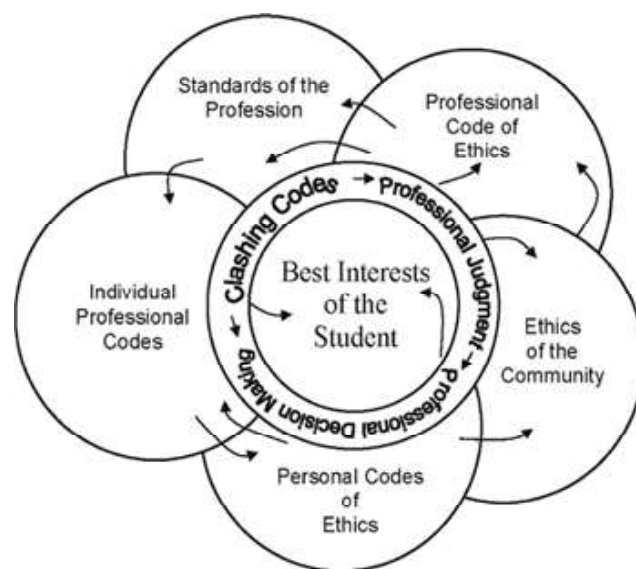
may undermine student outcomes, legal compliance, and professional ethics.

These five categories contain illustrations that explored opportunities for ethical decision-making embedded throughout the transition process. The *student development* component addresses the use of assessments, consideration of instructional contexts, individualization of student supports, and attention to skill development in the areas of a) academics, b) life, social and emotional skills, and c) employment and occupational skills. An example of ethical considerations specific to assessment include ensuring that assessments are available to all students across areas of interest, strength, and need (*ethic of justice*), that assessments are culturally and linguistically responsive (*ethic of critique*), and that assessments align with the future priorities of youth and their families (*ethic of care*).

The Taxonomy for Transition 2.0 highlights student-focused planning and meaningful student engagement in the transition process. Too often student involvement is cursory and does not result in goals aligned with the interests and future goals of the student and the family (Harrison et al., 2017).

**Figure 1**

*Shapiro and Stefkovitch's (2016) Model of Ethical Decision-Making for School Leaders*



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Ensuring a student-focused process to transition planning necessitates those goals are analyzed to ensure they are aligned with student and family priorities (*ethic of care*), aligned with resources (*ethic of justice*), and do not reflect the needs and power of stakeholders that are inconsistent with those of students and their families (*ethic of critique*).

Family engagement is an accurate predictor of student success beyond high school (Hirano et al., 2018). The Taxonomy for Transition 2.0 considers three areas of focus in relationships with families, including involvement, empowerment, and preparation. Family preparation includes ensuring that family members are aware of their rights related to the IDEA and specific to the transition planning process (*ethic of justice*). Family involvement requires that families have access to non-family member interpreters as needed and that their cultural backgrounds are considered valid and valuable (*ethic of critique*). Family empowerment considers the need for local community connections and access to support networks knowledgeable in effective transition (*ethic of care*).

While each of the components of the Taxonomy for Transition 2.0 requires buy-in and engagement by school leaders, the program structures are most directly linked with the day-to-day responsibilities of school leaders. These structures include a) program characteristics, b) program evaluation, c) strategic planning, d) policies and procedures, e) resource development and allocation, and f) school climate. School leaders concerned with these structures need to ensure that their school's policies and procedures promote the use of evidence-based practices for transition and align resources (e.g., staffing, and professional development) with these practices (*ethic of justice*). Further, school leaders evaluate programs and student outcomes to identify and address gaps in access to effective practices, especially for students and families who have been historically underserved and under-resourced (*ethic of critique*). Attention to school climate ensures school leaders promote an environment that is safe and nurturing, responsive to culturally diverse families and students, and communicates high expectations across teachers and other school professionals (*ethic of care*).

Finally, the *interagency collaboration* component highlights the importance of relationships beyond the school during transition planning by attention to a collaborative delivery of transition services. School leaders should minimize barriers to the access of adult-service providers (*ethic of justice*). Through collaborative service delivery, school leaders create opportunities for relationship building with other community resources and service providers and link these with families and youth with disabilities (*ethic of care*). School leaders need to reflect a collaborative, interdisciplinary approach with students and their families to share vital information and minimize power-dynamics (*ethic of critique*) which may negatively impact relationships necessary for the effective provision of student transition services.

The Taxonomy for Transition 2.0 planning tool can guide transition teams, including school leaders in using evidence-based practices and developing high quality transition plans. School leaders can increase the chances for successful transition programs by considering the facilitators as well as barriers for ethical decision-making when complex dilemmas arise.

### The Ethical Decision-Making Process in Transition

Professionals working in special education face ethical dilemmas daily and often these ethical and moral dilemmas go unresolved (Fiedler & Van Haren, 2009). The barriers with group ethical decision-making are related to a) the discrepancy between individual and group perspectives on what is best for students (Frick & Faircloth, 2007; Murry, 2005); b) lack of education on how to advocate and collaborate with others when ethical dilemmas arise, (Gartin & Murdick, 2000); c) a fear of reprisal or discomfort with others who may not agree (Murry 2005); and, d) time taken away from a focus on teaching (Murry, 2005).

For school leaders supporting special education services, the individual needs of each student with a disability should be at the core of all decisions (Frick & Fairchild, 2007). Some school leaders realize that the interest of the student and the collective interest of the school environment can pose an ethical conflict. To address this conflict, school leaders need to rely on special educators to advocate for students, listen to special educators and other service providers, problem solve with IEP transition teams, and trust that the planning for the individual interests of a student with disabilities will benefit the group as a whole (Stefkovich, 2006). Unfortunately, this type of discussion is often fueled by conflict rather than collaboration.

### Using Ethical Decision-Making to Support Transition Beyond Legal Compliance

Effective transition planning for students with disabilities continues to be a concern for school leaders as many of these students struggle to find suitable employment, accessible post-secondary educational opportunities, and find the level of independent living they had hoped for after high school (West, 2009). A better understanding of the predictors for effective transition to positive adult outcomes addressed by the Taxonomy of Transition prepare school leaders to recognize the four areas impacted by ethical decision-making (e.g., ethic of care, critique, justice, and the professionalism) across student development, planning, family engagement, program structures, systems, and interagency collaboration.

In order to be prepared to provide quality ethical leadership for transition teams, today's school leaders should: a) reflect on the internal and external pressures to use legal compliance as the beginning and end point of the issue; b) recognize the importance of effective transition planning on the individual outcomes of students and the wider

school community; c) use the Taxonomy for Transition 2.0 tool to guide support for transition teams; d) conduct a school-level self-assessment of the implementation of the components of the Taxonomy for Transition 2.0 tool; and e) use a consistent process for ethical decision-making as these dilemmas arise. School leaders who understand ethical leadership practices, the necessary components of effective secondary transition, and have strategies such as the Taxonomy for Transition 2.0 can better support secondary transition teams as well as the students and families that rely on them.

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# An Examination of the Related Literature for Inclusive School Leadership

By Megan McMillan, Ed.D., and David Hoppey, Ph.D.

## Abstract

The purpose of this article is to review current research about the struggles facing effective inclusive schooling and the role the principal plays in bringing about improved equity, access, and achievement in K-12 public schools. Also, we examine the leadership pipeline and how principal preparation and professional development should address leaders' knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to lead effective inclusive schools.

## Introduction

During the past several decades, schools in the United States have been required to provide an increasingly more equitable and relevant education to students with disabilities (Hoppey et al., 2018). Transitioning from education provided exclusively in segregated programs to providing access to education in the general education classroom, special education has evolved toward using more inclusive options (Billingsley et al., 2014). Much of this evolution toward inclusion stems from mandates set forth in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004). This law, reauthorized multiple times, strengthened the rights of students with disabilities as they are provided equitable access to education in their least restrictive environment. This directive translated into significantly larger numbers of students with disabilities being educated in general education spaces (Williamson et al., 2020). However, as access to the general education classroom and curriculum for students with disabilities increased, so too did accountability standards (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013). Nearly twenty years ago, No Child Left Behind (NCLB) (2001) pulled back the curtain on systemically low academic expectations and lack of accountability for students with disabilities (Esposito et al., 2019). With more students with disabilities gaining access to general education classrooms and being held to higher standards than ever before, public education faced an issue that they continue to address, how to successfully integrate the demands of inclusive education and accountability mandates simultaneously (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2014).

## The Controversy Over the Least Restrictive Environment Principle

Negotiating the expectations of IDEA, NCLB, and later Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), has proven difficult because, while these laws raised expectations for educational equity, teachers and leaders were not and are still not prepared to comingle inclusive education with high academic expectations for students with disabilities (Connally & Kimmel, 2020; Waldron et al., 2011). For example, a persistent dilemma facing school leaders is how they interpret the expectations of IDEA and enact the principle of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) (DeMatthews, 2015). The LRE provision mandates that students with disabilities be educated alongside students without disabilities "to the maximum extent appropriate" (34 CFR §300.114). Therefore, the LRE provision sets an expectation that students with disabilities have access to general education spaces; however, the degree to which that access is actually granted is open to interpretation (White et al., 2018).

Further, LRE is controversial because it has become synonymous with inclusion. This belief is a misinterpretation because LRE was the legal impetus to inclusive practice and did not demand that every student with a disability be placed in a general education classroom (DeMatthews, 2015). In sum, LRE "creates a presumption of access to general education placements" but does not "create a formal right to access to general education placements" (White et al., 2018, p. 1).

## The Leadership Challenge

Recent research and policy analysis highlight that LRE is interpreted and implemented inconsistently and varies widely across the United States (White et al., 2018; Williamson et al., 2020). This variability creates disparities in access to inclusive opportunities for students with disabilities because access to inclusive education is subject to the beliefs and practices of local stakeholders who serve as gatekeepers to inclusion (Esposito et al., 2019). Interpretations of the LRE mandate are often handed down from the state level, filtered through district leadership, and finally rest



with school level leadership teams (Billingsley et al., 2018). At the school level, principals are responsible for implementing LRE (O'Laughlin & Lindle, 2015); however, evidence suggests that school principals are often underprepared to lead inclusive schools, thus adding to the complexity of interpreting and implementing LRE appropriately (Frick et al., 2012; Lynch, 2012; Rinehart, 2017).

Moreover, interpretation of the LRE is often framed by principals' own set of beliefs and understandings of inclusive education (O'Laughlin & Lindle, 2015). When school leaders struggle to implement the LRE mandate, students with disabilities often do not gain access to general education classrooms and experience significant disparities in learning and social outcomes as compared to their peers who are provided an inclusive education (Causton-Theoharis et al., 2011; DeMatthews & Mawhinney, 2014; Hoppey et al., 2018; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; McLeskey & Waldron, 2014).

On the other hand, emerging research highlights that when leaders understand the nuance of LRE and interpret it in a manner that supports inclusive education, outcomes for students with disabilities can improve. Benefits include: (a) improved academic performance, including improved scores on standardized tests, (b) increased motivation to learn, and (c) improved emotional and social outcomes including a wider circle of friends with and without disabilities (DeMatthews, 2015; Hehir & Katzman, 2012; Hoppey et al., 2018; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; McLeskey et al., 2014; Salend & Duhaney, 1999; Almazan et al., 2009).

### **Competing Demands: Accountability and Inclusion**

In addition to interpreting the LRE mandate, negotiating the seemingly competing NCLB and ESSA with IDEA is a significant barrier to effective inclusive schooling (Frick et al., 2012). McLeskey et al., (2014) explained this dilemma, writing that "these mandates have put pressure on schools to be both equitable and excellent in addressing the needs of all students" (p. 59). The tensions between the two mandates create barriers that are difficult to navigate because many believe that the two directives are competing (Waldron et al., 2011). Often, school leaders are torn between moral imperatives of inclusive practice and professional expectations for accountability (Frick et al., 2012). Increased accountability demands have resulted in "significant pressure on teachers and principals to improve student outcomes or be subjected to punitive measures" (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013, p. 245). Because of the pressure achievement mandates place on principals they are often incentivized to prioritize accountability outcomes over inclusive leadership (Alvarez-McHatton, et al., 2012; Frick et al., 2012).

Principals who prioritize student outcomes over inclusive education often conceptualize their role in leadership for special education from a mindset of compliance (Billingsley et al., 2018). Their decision-making for special

education is framed by legal regulations and program requirements (Connally & Kimmel, 2020). Federally mandated accountability pressures have created a national culture of compliance that encourages "'being right' (compliance) rather than 'doing right' (notions of equity and justice)" (Alvarez-McHatton et al., 2012, p. 42).

One factor in this tension is the lack of principals' preparedness to lead schools that have high academic standards for students with disabilities and an expectation that they deserve access to an equitable education (Billingsley et al., 2018; O'Laughlin & Lindle, 2015). Principals often leave their preparation programs prepared to be instructional leaders for general education students but report feeling largely unprepared to lead effective inclusive schools or to adequately support special education programs (Billingsley et al., 2018; Connally & Kimmel, 2020; Esposito et al., 2019; O'Laughlin & Lindle, 2015; Pazey & Cole, 2012). For instance, Connally and Kimmel (2020) reported that only 12 percent of principals of a nationally representative sample reported feeling well prepared to serve and teach students with disabilities.

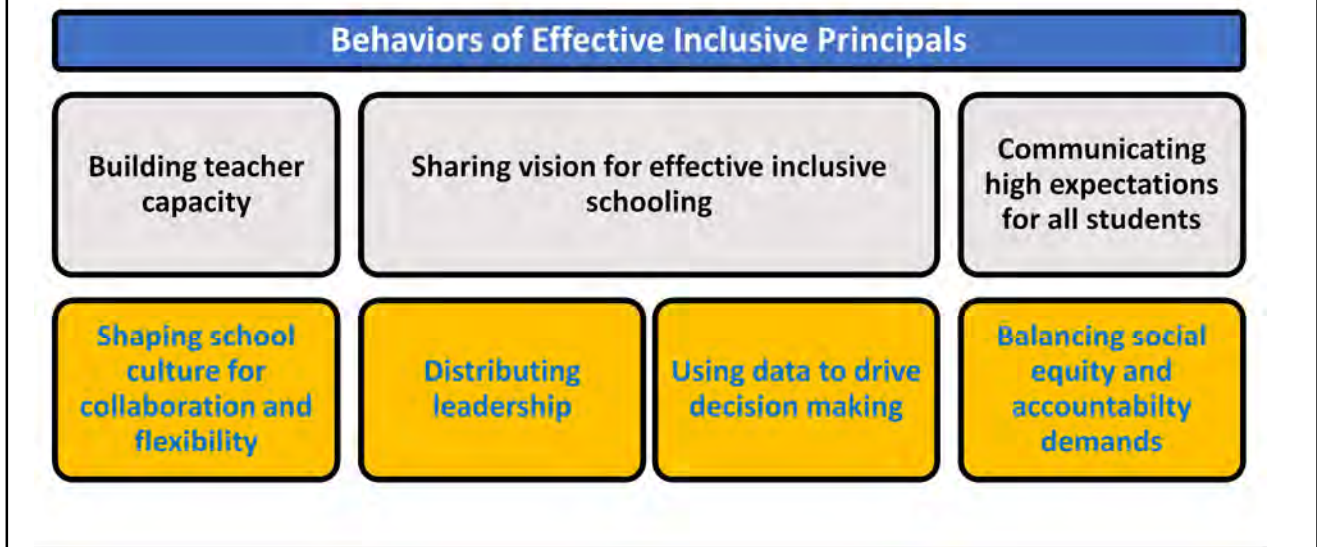
Accountability pressures and a lack of understanding of how to be an inclusive leader cause tensions to grow in schools as principals focus on producing increased achievement outcomes while simultaneously complying with IDEA directives (Frick et al., 2012). Without the skills necessary to address the instructional needs of students with disabilities, it is difficult for principals to understand and attend to the unmet academic potential of students with disabilities in their schools. This lack of understanding often leads to students being segregated from general education environments (Causton-Theoharis, et al., 2011).

Additionally, a lack of special education knowledge and preparedness of leading effective inclusive schools can lead to biases within leaders' own belief systems that favor prioritizing achievement demands over inclusion. For instance, Billingsley et al., (2017) noted that educators "may not believe that students with disabilities should be held to the same academic standards as other students, even though some students with disabilities clearly achieve these high standards" (p. 13). Believing that students with disabilities are inherently incapable is a dangerous assumption for principals to make, as it significantly limits student potential (Biklen, 1990; Donnellan, 1984).

### **Characteristics of Effective Inclusive Principals**

Although leaders in most schools are not successfully negotiating achievement and inclusive education demands, there is evidence that comingling both sets of expectations is possible and effective for students with and without disabilities (Connally & Kimmel, 2020; DeMatthews, 2015; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2014; McLeskey et al., 2014; McMillan, 2020). **Figure 1** provides an overview of the behaviors successful effective inclusive principals portray in the research.

**Figure 1. Behaviors of Effective Inclusive Principals**



Overwhelmingly, these characteristics identify the school principal as the key element of change and reform in an effective inclusive school (Billingsley et al., 2018; Connally & Kimmel, 2020; DeMatthews, 2015; Esposito et al., 2019; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2014). In an effective inclusive school, the leader's role is significant because principals are the difference makers in whether a school will be inclusive (DeMatthews, 2015; DeMatthews et al., 2020; Waldron et al., 2011). Effective principals begin by setting a vision that is centered on high expectations for achievement and a sense of belonging for all students (Esposito et al., 2019; Stark et al., 2021). Further, effective inclusive school leaders develop data systems to gather and monitor progress and make informed decisions, build teacher capacity toward the inclusive vision, restructure the school organization by distributing leadership to support quality inclusive teaching and learning, and subsequently manage the instructional program. (DeMatthews, 2015; Esposito et al., 2019; Hoppey et al., 2018; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2014; Stark et al., 2021; Waldron et al., 2011).

When leaders believe in effective inclusive education, they engage in behaviors that support academic achievement and inclusion in the school community (McMillan, 2020). While these behaviors are essential practices attributed to successful effective inclusive leaders, it is important to note that there is no "lock-step process" (DeMatthews et al., 2020, p. 5) to effective inclusive leadership. Instead, successful principals of effective inclusive schools listen to the needs of stakeholders, are flexible in meeting the needs of diverse learners, including students with disabilities, and have a desire to lead schools toward more inclusive practice (Connally & Kimmel, 2020; Hoppey et al., 2018;

McMillan, 2020; Stark et al., 2021). Thus, principals of effective inclusive schools communicate their beliefs through their actions while remaining flexible on how these beliefs are translated into practice (DeMatthews et al., 2020; McMillan, 2020).

Emerging research suggests that successful principals of effective inclusive schools, also demonstrate an inclusive consciousness (McMillan, 2020). Inclusive consciousness is defined by a leaders' dogged determination to successfully negotiate the intersection of effective leadership for academic achievement and the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education settings while simultaneously fostering belonging and a sense of community for all students (McKenzie et al., 2006; McMillan, 2020). While some effective inclusive principals believe that their inclusive consciousness is innate, there is evidence to suggest that a disposition supportive of students with disabilities is also developmental (McMillan, 2020). Regarding how principals come to value effective inclusive leadership, principals who have had experiences with and exposure to people with disabilities are more apt to believe that equity and inclusive opportunity for students with disabilities should be a priority in their leadership practice (Billingsley et al., 2018). These principals' values drive their leadership and create an interrelatedness between behaviors and beliefs that engender a culture of effective and inclusive leadership practice (McMillan, 2020). Further, leaders with a strong inclusive consciousness are undeterred by district or policy constraints and engage in effective inclusive leadership by any means necessary (Billingsley et al., 2018; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2014; McMillan, 2020). In all, principals with an inclusive consciousness have a mindset that is underpinned by a

robust value system that holds sacred the leader's responsibility for supporting all students (McLeskey et al., 2014; McMillan, 2020).

### Recommendations: A Call to Action

While research into effective inclusive schooling is still emerging, what is clear is that for schools to excel at yielding improved student outcomes while simultaneously including students with disabilities, the principal plays an indispensable role. Evidence suggests that, in order to make the most significant impact on their schools, especially for marginalized populations of students, principals need to lead with equity and social justice in mind (Grissom et al., 2021). In order to build principals' own capacity to become effective inclusive leaders, there is a significant need to address the gaps in principals' preparedness to lead students with disabilities (Billingsley et al., 2018; Connally & Kimmel, 2020; Lynch, 2012).

School principals are the primary change agents responsible for negotiating inclusive education directives and academic achievement demands, however, the lack of principals' preparedness about special education programming including leading effective inclusive schools is troubling and problematic (Billingsley et al., 2018; Connally and Kimmel, 2020; Esposito et al., 2019; O'Laughlin & Lindle, 2015; Pazey & Cole, 2012). This disconnect between preparedness for leadership and actual needs of schools signals a need to build inclusive leadership capacity of principals who are already leading and to change the way principals are prepared so that they are ready to meet the needs of all students (Esposito et al., 2019; Stark et al., 2021).

**Figure 2** below showcases our recommendations.

For leaders already serving as principals, designing and implementing job-embedded professional development for effective inclusive leadership is critical (Billingsley & McLeskey, 2014; Billingsley et al., 2018; Lynch, 2012). For a sitting principal, professional development should be centered around the development of instructional leadership, specifically in the areas of: (a) Multi-Tiered System of Supports; (b) Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports; (c) High-Leverage Practices; (d) Universal Design for Learning (UDL); and (e) culturally responsive pedagogy (Connally & Kimmel, 2020). Principals also need opportunities for long-term, job-embedded coaching and feedback on inclusive leadership from effective inclusive principals for them to develop a deep capacity to be an inclusive leader (Thessin & Seashore Louis, 2020).

In addition to coaching, sitting principals need practice analyzing data to make decisions for effective inclusive leadership. Specifically, principals need to know how to interpret data to make decisions that support inclusive practice and build equity. Most of all, current principals must prioritize inclusive leadership and demonstrate an inclusive consciousness, such that inclusive practice is a non-negotiable goal and the means to the end are flexible (DeMatthews et al., 2020; McMillan, 2020).

Leaders of principal preparation programs should be aware that there is a need to "embed inclusive leadership training into the principal pipeline" (Connally & Kimmel, 2020, p. 2). For prospective principals, we need to redesign preparation programs to include practical experience with effective inclusive principals that allows future leaders to develop an expectation of inclusive leadership. School leaders also need to develop

**Figure 2.** *Recommendations for improving principals' capacity for leading effective inclusive schools*

**Strengthen instructional leadership capacity.**

**Provide sitting principals with coaching and feedback to ensure access to opportunities to discuss and develop their knowledge and skills.**

**Evaluate and revise principal preparation standards to include course work on special education and practical experiences working with effective inclusive leaders.**

**Engage in data-based decision making to gauge students' access to effective instruction.**

**Prioritize inclusive leadership.**

*Note:* These recommendations are adapted from the work of Connally and Kimmel (2020)

their own inclusive consciousness during their leadership preparation. This process can be facilitated by encouraging meaningful and positive experiences with students with disabilities.

Engineering opportunities for current and prospective principals to work with and understand people with disabilities can shift their mindset toward inclusive practice and engender transformational experiences that support effective inclusive leadership (Salend & Duhaney, 1999; McMillan, 2020). The responsibility to engage school leaders with people with disabilities and to build inclusive consciousness rests upon both the larger educational organization and on the individual. If opportunities to acquire and develop an inclusive consciousness are not embedded in principal preparation or on-the-job training, individual leaders have a professional responsibility to seek it out themselves as a part of their leadership for equity and justice.

Developing an understanding of the struggles facing effective inclusive schooling and the role the principal plays in bringing about improved equity, access, and achievement in K-12 public schools is the first step. Next, school leadership preparation programs must include in principal preparation and professional development the skills and dispositions that expand leaders' knowledge, skills, and commitments necessary to lead effective inclusive schools. Awareness often breeds action and both leaders and those who prepare leaders should grasp the critical need to develop principals with an inclusive consciousness who are able to meet the challenges inherent in teaching for students with disabilities during the current era of high stakes accountability.

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# Fostering Creativity for Students with Special Needs Through Innovative Learning Environments

By Nisha Acharya and Diane Rodriguez, Ph.D.

## Abstract

The purpose of this article is to address the urgency of creating an innovative learning environment in marginalized K-12 special education classrooms in the United States. This article considers the following topics: (a) the definition of creativity and innovation; (b) the importance of innovative learning environments, (c) key conditions and resources needed for innovation to occur; and (d) the impact of fostering creativity in learning environments.

## Introduction

Presently, two main global challenges educators must tackle are: skills inequality and skills uncertainty (Winthrop et al., 2018). The U.S. K-12 education system favors some groups, while penalizing others (Kubota, 2015). Sadly, K-12 schools marginalize people with special needs (Kubota, 2015). By prioritizing innovation in K-12 classrooms for students with special needs, skills inequality and skills uncertainty may be diminished. School districts that seek to remedy disparities in skill acquisition can empower marginalized students to take control of their future, to be on par with society, and thereby reduce oppression (Friere, 1972; Gonzalez et al., 2017). Skill acquisition can be distributed diversely and equally for the future (Kubota, 2015).

The purpose of this article is to address the urgent need to create an innovative learning environment in marginalized K-12 special education classrooms in the United States. This article seeks to meet the following goals: (1) Define creativity and innovation; (2) Describe the importance of innovative learning environments; (3) Describe conditions and resources needed for innovation to occur; and (4) Discuss the impact of fostering creativity in learning environments.

## Definition of Creativity and Innovation

To proceed with a shared view of creativity and innovation, we offer the following conceptions. Creativity is the ability to engage and test solutions to possible hypotheses when problem solving (Mikhailove, 2018). Applied creative design leads to innovations, which is defined as

the process of putting new things into practice (Robinson, 2017). Innovation involves conjuring creative ideas, articulating design solutions, prototyping, and implementation. In K-12 school systems, innovations usually result in increasing K-12 student achievement (Graziano & Navarrete, 2012). An essential and complementary theme is that educators must realize that all learners, especially those with special needs must also experience creative approaches to learning.

## Why Are Innovative Learning Environments Important?

Innovative learning environments in K-12 school-districts are important to diversify and distribute skill acquisition to the communities that schools serve (Kubota, 2015). Currently, the U.S. K-12 education system focuses on standardization, especially in marginalized communities. This focus can inhibit innovation (Robinson, 2017; Winthrop et al., 2018). Standard models may not allow student exploration. This may hold students back from developing the skills beyond academics that are required to succeed in a fast-changing world and especially for those who have been identified as having a disability (Gonzalez et al., 2017; Robinson, 2017; Winthrop et al., 2018). A systemic shift of K-12 educational classrooms to one that nurtures innovative spaces inspires both a brighter future and a platform for learners with special needs.

## What Are Key Conditions in an Innovative Learning Environment?

The goals are to foster an innovative K-12 environment and to encourage schools to develop the whole child: mind, body, and spirit (Robinson, 2017). A focus on developing the whole child in K-12 schools favors a future of economic growth for marginalized learners that includes those with special needs (Kubota, 2015, Robinson, 2017). This innovative environment is defined as a student-centered, flexible learning environment that fosters both seven essential characteristics and five crucial mindsets (Kariippanon et al., 2019). As students with special needs are centered in the environment, their ability to develop to their full potential is enhanced.



## Seven Characteristics of Creative Environments

Educators should be encouraged and supported to create learning spaces that nurture innovation. This requires risk taking, new methods and ways to act and think, enthusiastic people, and supportive environments (Keinänen, Ursin, & Nissinen, 2018). This also requires that we consider a framework for systemic adoption. This framework cultivates seven characteristics that provide educational experiences for mastery of the necessary skills for innovative practices. **Table 1** lists and describes each of those characteristics. This framework identifies characteristics students must possess for their future (The Innovative Educator, n.d.). Students with special needs are thus empowered when they practice and master these essential seven characteristics (Robinson, 2017).

These seven characteristics call for a flexible classroom environment for successful implementation. A classroom environment like this would be characterized as one where student-centered flexible learning and hands-on approaches that cater to multiple learning modalities are the rule rather than the exception (Ovbiagbonhia et al., 2019). Creative learning requires change from teacher-led to student oriented instructional emphases to assure the cultivation of these seven characteristics (Kariippanon et al., 2019; Ovbiagbonhia et al., 2019). These instructional shifts ensure students are active learners in hopes of their mastering skills for the ever-changing future (Kariippanon et al., 2019).

## Five Crucial Mindsets

School leaders' and teachers' emphases on the seven characteristics for creativity should lead to innovation that develops five crucial mindsets within all students with and without special needs. These mindsets encourage listening skills, student voice, and critical thinking through feedback (O'Grady, 2008). The five mindsets encouraged are: (a) the disciplined mind; (b) the synthesizing mind; (c) the creating mind; (d) the respectful mind; and (e) the ethical mind (Winthrop et al., 2018). **Table 2** summarizes these five crucial mindsets. As these crucial mindsets develop within students in the K-12 education system, students become better equipped to narrow the disparity in global skills inequality and skills uncertainty (Winthrop et al., 2018).

## Centering Students with Special Needs in The Learning Environment

Student-centered learning places students with special needs as the primary driver of learning in the classroom by creating a democratic environment. It empowers student voices to inform and drive re-formulation of educational practices in the classroom (Gonzalez et al., 2017). When student voice is centered in learning, O'Grady (2008) stated, "people focus on their own generative questions and responses instead of being passive receivers of officially sanctioned knowledge" (p. 364). As a result, teachers have students actively participate, and empower teacher and student creativity through

<b>Table 1</b>	
<b><i>Seven Characteristics to Foster Creativity in Students</i></b>	
<b>Characteristic</b>	<b>Description</b>
Creativity	Harness and nurture creativity in students, differentiation
Collaboration	Share a common vision, diverse expertise, new insights and perspectives
Courageous	Not afraid to take risks, view mistakes as opportunities for growth
Connected	Takes initiative, confident, motivating, develop themselves professionally
Compassionate	Students feel like their teacher cares about them
Committed	A life-long learner, value reflection to improve teaching
Curious	Inquisitive, wanting to explore new ideas
<i>Note: Not all characteristics need to be cultivated, though preferable, in the learning environment</i>	

which all participants can see student contributions to the classroom structures and lesson designs (Gonzalez et al., 2017; O'Grady, 2008). The contributions of the special education students are valued when they are placed in leadership positions in the classroom.

When creativity and student voice are nurtured in students with special needs, they perform better academically. For example, students can generate their own questions and suggestions for learning tasks (Sproton, 2007). This promotes student engagement in learning as well as critical thinking. Also, teachers can redraft lesson designs to include student voice into class structures and activities. This personalizes learning, which leads to enhanced student participation, self-management, retention of learning, and connections to the real world. When students with special needs gain some control over their learning, the power dynamics in the class shift to them in a shared experience which enhances their learning as a whole child (Sproton, 2007; Winthrop et al, 2018). This partnership between student and teacher is associated with students who have higher rates of intellectual thinking (Mikhailova, 2018). Empowering marginalized students with disabilities favors educational equity (Gonzalez et al., 2017).

**What Needs to Be Established for An Innovative Learning Environment?**

Teacher-to-student and school-to-community partnerships help to establish an innovative learning environment (Lynn & Parker, 2006). Schools can empower communities to share what they believe students need for success and vice versa (Lynn & Parker, 2006). As noted in **Table 3**, four key elements must be considered when seeking to establish an innovative learning environment.

**Learners/Students**

Marginalized students with disabilities need feelings of safety in their classroom to be active learners. If not, feelings of inadequacy fuel passive learning. This leads to poor performance in school (Lynn & Parker, 2006). An actively engaged classroom can be structured as a microcosm of society, where instead of living in marginalized ways, students with special needs are placed at the center of the learning process (Gonzalez et al., 2017). An example of the classroom as a microcosm is found in a study centered on student voice (Falter Thomas, 2014), where students shared their own thoughts and posed their own questions. In that learning environment, Falter Thomas (2014) found students were more engaged and motivated in their learning as opposed to classes where students did not drive the lesson. Elevating student voice inspires students to think and speak critically about instruction and to discuss what is learned and how to best learn (Gonzalez et al., 2017; Ovbiagbonhia et al., 2019). When student voice is elevated, there is focus on what the learner knows and its application (Winthrop et al., 2018). From actively engaging in re-formations of their thoughts and actions, students with disabilities can be empowered to develop their creativity.

**Teachers**

Traditionally, teachers are viewed as the gatekeepers of knowledge. To shift this power dynamic, professional development can be geared toward teacher collaboration (Graziano & Navarrete, 2012) and the values of care and community (Lynn & Parker, 2006; Winthrop et al., 2018). At times, teachers can engage in self-reflection where they consider one's privilege in relation to students they are teaching (Kutoba, 2015). Moreover, teachers can

Table 2	
<i>Five Mindsets to Foster in Students</i>	
Number	Mindset
1	<i>The disciplined mind:</i> fully mastering a particular discipline
2	<i>The synthesizing mind:</i> taking into account multiple factors
3	<i>The creating mind:</i> developing fresh ways of thinking about things and unexpected answers,
4	<i>The respectful mind:</i> seeking to understand and work effectively with others
5	<i>The ethical mind:</i> questioning the “givens” in society and considering how citizens can best improve society
Note: Not all mindsets need to be cultivated, though preferable, in the learning environment	

**Table 3*****Key Elements of an Innovative Learning Environment***

<b>Key element</b>	<b>Key characteristics</b>
Learners/Students	Active learners
Teachers	Create a classroom focused on student-centered learning
Content	Driven by student interest primarily, standards secondary
Resources	Focus on teacher and school administration development

include reflections on the idea of control, taking calculated risks, power dynamics, and the idea of distributive leadership (OECD, 2015). Some purposes of reflection are: to nurture a teacher mindset that is flexible, to shift power dynamics onto students and encourage students to be their own gatekeepers of knowledge (Gonzalez, 2017; Kunnari & Ilomäki, 2016). Teacher reflections can shift outcomes for marginalized students with disabilities.

**Content**

Currently, the U.S. K-12 education system prioritizes standardization of content and programs for students with disabilities (Robinson, 2017). Standardization is a form of conformity that stifles creativity since everything should be done a prescribed way at all times (Robinson, 2017). Content standardizations obstruct students from developing the skills pertinent to successfully adapt in a fast-changing world (Robinson, 2017; Winthrop et al., 2018). Teachers who use a prescribed curriculum with little input from students will stifle diversity in ideas and thoughts (Winthrop et al., 2018). In comparison, teaching and learning experiences led by students' interests and needs effectively increases skill acquisition of the five mindsets and seven characteristics of creativity that skill development requires (Winthrop et al., 2018). Standardization indicates how many students are in each classroom in public K-12 education (Mlambala, 1992). Thus, standardization can lead to economic resources being shared unequally between people of color (Kubota, 2015) and the majority population.

There appear to be few resources available to address the growing diverse populations of students. Standardization reinforces a one-size-fits-all approach to learning in spite of the fact that needs are diverse. Differentiation is difficult in a growing, diverse population. (Winthrop et al., 2018). To combat standardization, school structures and culture can prioritize collaboration among all stakeholders (Kunnari & Ilomäki, 2016). School staffs can collaborate to

provide diverse teacher development in instructional practices that enable teachers to differentiate appropriate instruction to student needs. Also, scheduling teacher time to collaborate in the school day with others can be effective. A shift to focusing on creativity and innovation in K-12 education impacts positive societal growth and mastery skills distribution (Kubota, 2015 & Winthrop et al., 2018).

**What Impact Do Innovative Learning Environments have on Students with Disabilities?**

Innovative learning environments impact students with disabilities positively within their microcosm of the world (Gonzalez et al., 2017, Lynn & Parker, 2006). The education system is an institution that can be an equalizer for marginalized students with disabilities (Lynn & Parker, 2006). Everyone has a social responsibility to empower school communities by fostering creativity. **Table 4** summarizes key impacts of innovative learning environments.

**Impact of Student-Centered Learning Environments**

Due to rapid social and economic change, it is unclear what skills students will need to thrive in the world (Winthrop et al., 2018). Therefore, prescribed curricula and teaching practices cannot adequately prepare students for the world beyond school. A student-centered learning environment empowers marginalized students with disabilities to adapt to change through development of a creative mind. Students are empowered to make decisions that engage in evaluative thinking (OECD, 2015).

Those marginalized must be their own drivers in the struggle for their progression in society (Friere, 1972). However, in order to take on the role of driver, students must be encouraged to develop advocacy skills so that they can speak up for their rights as learners. As drivers of their own learning, students are encouraged to be collaborative and be critical in moments of uncertainty or in making decisions

**Table 4*****Impacts of Innovative Learning Environments***

Aspect	Implications
Student-centered learning	Student driven practice cultivating seven characteristics of creativity and five crucial mindsets in the classroom and outside the classroom
Future Society	All people, including those oppressed, can contribute to solutions to better society
Social responsibility of everyone	Everyone in society is responsible to assist in empowering those who are oppressed and marginalized

(Winthrop et al., 2018). Rather than stifle creativity, teachers must carefully consider how they encourage risk-taking in the classroom, how they support alternative solutions and creative ideas, and how they structure the classroom for full collaboration among all students. Positive attention to these domains prepares all students to be active participants in a diverse society where all are valued.

### **Impact on The Future of Society**

Keeping marginalized K-12 education classrooms standardized while the world changes keeps marginalized students with disabilities oppressed (Fiere, 1972, Gonzalez et. al., 2017, Winthrop et al., 2018). For society to positively grow, innovation must involve successful implementation of creative ideas, procedures, theories, and strategies (Ovbiagbonhia et al., 2019).

### **Social Responsibility of Everyone**

Social responsibility is an individual's duty that requires decisions for the betterment of society and the drive to follow-through (Ganti, 2020). It is socially responsible to provide all students with disabilities opportunities to adapt to the changing world (Kubota, 2015). Policies that promote the best interest of society involve all individuals, including people who are identified as having disabilities and marginalized. Their creative minds, ready to design and innovate, should be celebrated and their voices heard. There is a responsibility to continue to train future educators to celebrate diverse innovations (Keinänen, 2018). The current education system places overwhelming barriers and challenges on marginalized communities (Gonzalez et al., 2017). Education can aid in fighting these barriers and challenges through fostering the practice of freedom in the

classroom first (Friere, 1972). The practice of freedoms empowers people who are oppressed to become creative and transform their own world (Friere, 1972).

### **Conclusion**

Innovative classroom spaces allow students to experiment and test boundaries freely and safely. Being innovative is literally being an activist in education. The activism of key stakeholders in school districts can benefit our future society. Fostering a creative environment for innovation empowers marginalized students with disabilities to become critical thinkers, innovators and creative. By fostering innovative spaces, students benefit from diverse ideas, perspectives, and personal achievements.

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# How an Impartial Education Liaison Service Helps Education Leaders Effectively Manage Special Education-Related Conflict

By Rhea Settles, Ed.D., M.NCRP and Odilla Sidime, J.D.

## Abstract

This article presents some conflict-related issues that school leaders encounter in resolving disagreements and misunderstandings between parents of students with disabilities and school representatives. Two examples of special education service disagreements are employed to illustrate how a trained and impartial education liaison representative can facilitate conflict resolution.

## Introduction

It's mid-week at ABC Elementary and the school's refrigerators go on the blink, jeopardizing the lunchtime food provisions. Would the school principal rush into the kitchen, toolbox in hand, and attempt to repair the fridge? Unlikely. What if the school district's internet fails and administrators, staff and students are without internet access? Can you envision a special education coordinator watching a YouTube video about troubleshooting internet issues and then accessing the mainframe to fix the problem? Not a chance. How about when there is no bus driver to take students home from school? Despite that the school principal knows how to drive and has observed school bus operations numerous times, would he/she get behind the steering wheel, load up the bus and take off? Of course not! It follows that even if an education leader has some basic knowledge of special education and conflict resolution, leaving specialized services to professionals is always the best practice to accomplish appropriate and desired outcome.

We believe that education leaders should consult and engage neutral third-party conflict resolution professionals when any of the following eight factors that contribute to family-school conflict in special education is involved: (a) family's views about a student's needs differ from school agents; (b) IEP team members have insufficient knowledge of problem-solving or effective communication skills; (c) school has limited service delivery options to meet student's needs; (d) IEP team members fight for power; (e) IEP team members have constraints on time, finances or people resources; (f) one party puts less value on another's input; (g) communication is lacking, misunderstood, misleading or withheld; or, (h) broken trust or loss of faith exists amongst the IEP team (Lake & Billingsley, 2000, pp. 240-251).

In addition, when a case involves recurring issues, escalating conflict, refusal to sign the IEP or other documents, or a request for intervention has been made, a neutral third-party conflict resolution professional is warranted.

## How does policy support the need for neutral third-party conflict resolution professionals?

Conflict in special education is not new. There has been a consistent rise in the number of special education due process complaints over the years and the recent Covid-19 pandemic has caused an exponential increase in complaints. In 2000, schools spent "\$146 million to resolve special education disputes" (Mueller, Singer, & Draper, 2008, p.191). Due process litigation can cost "\$60,000 to \$100,000" when a decision is appealed (Mueller, 2009a, p.4). Alternatively, a Michigan Department of Education (2010) study showed that the average cost for a facilitated IEP meeting and mediation averages \$1,500 per session. Since schools started utilizing neutral third-party conflict resolution professionals to provide Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) services such as facilitated IEP meetings, mediation, and third-party consulting; written complaints have declined by 19%, due process complaints are down by 10% and due process hearings have decreased by 63% (Burkhart & Theis, 2017; Mueller, 2009a; Michigan Department of Education, 2000; CADRE, 2000; Henderson, 2008).

In addition to mandating that ADR services be made available to address conflict in special education cases, the 2004 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) endorses the objective third-party guidance of "an impartial mediator" or "appropriate alternative dispute resolution entity" (IDEA, 2004, 34 C.F.R. §300.506(b)(2)). IDEA (2004) reveals that employees or affiliates of a school district, Local Education Agency (LEA) or Special Education Local Plan Area (SELPA) cannot be considered a third-party; and, individuals having a personal or professional interest in the outcome of the ADR process cannot be considered impartial. These rules and principles disqualify school agents and families, and their affiliates, advocates or allies, from conducting ADR sessions to prevent intentional or unintentional influence over the ADR process and outcome.



Hereafter, we introduce the innovative concept of the "Impartial Education Liaison", an essential human resource with an integrated knowledge of conflict resolution and special education policies and practices. Underlying IDEA (2004) are basic tenets of fairness and due process which create the need for the Impartial Education Liaison, a specialist who has a unique combination of education and experience that can be of significant benefit to education leaders and school district in preventing, minimizing and resolving special education-related conflict. An Impartial Education Liaison has:

- Third-Party Status-no connection to any party
- Impartiality-no interest in the outcome
- Subject Matter Expertise-knowledge of the education system, federal and state education codes and special education principles and practices
- Professional Expertise- experience and knowledge of conflict resolution principles and practices (IDEA, 2004; Mueller, 2009b).

Literature and empirical data about the use of ADR services to address special education-related conflict is clear (Pudelski, 2016; Mueller, 2009a). First, compulsory schooling has always given rise to conflict over what constitutes an adequate and equitable education for students with disabilities. Second, it is untenable to expect education leaders to take on the additional responsibility of having more than a general knowledge of special education let alone expert skills in conflict resolution (Singh, 2015). Third, education leaders should engage neutral third-party conflict resolution professionals when special education-related conflict arises. In these cases, an Impartial Education Liaison is a critical resource that helps create conditions for students with disabilities to succeed and receive a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE); and families and school agents to collaborate and maintain healthy relationships (IDEA, 2004; Michigan Department of Education 2010; CADRE, 2000; Henderson, 2008; Mueller, 2009a).

### **How prepared are education leaders to handle special education-related conflict?**

Preparation for education leaders require the completion of a program in general education leadership theory and practice (Young, Mountford, & Crow, 2005; Lashley, 2007). Most education leadership positions, including school principal, vice principal, instructional or program coordinator or director require a certificate from a state-approved program offered at a 4-year college or alternative education agency (Boscardin, M. L., (2007). In most states, the course content is derived from the National Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) which includes six core areas: Shared Vision; Management and Learning Environment; Ethics and Integrity; Instructional Leadership; Family and

Community Engagement; and External Context and Policy (DeMatthews, Kotok, & Serafini, 2020; California Department of Education, CPSEL, 2010). Each of these core areas include sub-topics about supporting teaching and learning in general education with a cursory overview of special education (DeMatthews, et al, 2020).

In 2001, the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was reauthorized as No Child Left Behind (NCLB), 2002 integrating procedural safeguards requiring school agents and families to have equal input in the IEP process (Smith, Robb, West, & Tyler, 2010). However, the expectation that an education leader maintain control over school-wide and/or district-wide outcomes is counter-intuitive to the "equal input" mandate of education regulations and often causes power struggles and distrust between families and schools (DeMatthews, et al, 2020; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Sirotnik & Kimball, 1994).

The ever-changing and complex educational landscape makes the role and responsibilities of education leaders quite demanding. Most practicing education attorneys have only a rudimentary understanding of special education law and procedure; so, it is unreasonable to expect education leaders to have such specialized knowledge (Singh, 2015). In fact, the majority of education leaders learn about their critical role in special education "on the job"; while others never develop that knowledge and simply refer special education issues to the district's special education department (DeMatthews, et al, 2020, p.313). Both scenarios can cause conflict that leads to a fiscal nightmare and weakens the essential relationship between school agents and families.

For example, in one case, a school principal and general education teacher were unaware that IDEA required a Manifestation Determination before suspending a student with an IEP. The student was a Black male who had been suspended multiple times so the mother believed implicit bias, inequity and racial discrimination were motivating the school agents to repeatedly suspend her son. As the conflict escalated, discrimination became the focus and the student's learning needs became secondary. This situation shows how limited knowledge of special education policies and procedures, power struggles, lack of cultural competency and trust issues can derail the efforts of an IEP team (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). When the school principal reached out to an Impartial Education Liaison, the family and school agents were repeatedly reminded to keep the focus on the student, shown how to engage collaboratively and guided in IDEA compliance (Mueller, 2009b; Mayes, 2019).

The most effective education leaders focus their knowledge and limited time resources on instructional leadership, school culture and climate, student behavior and achievement, and managing operations related to fiscal and human resources. So, to address special education-related conflict, some purposefully engage an Impartial Education Liaison (Pazey & Cole, 2012).

## Methodology

This article is derived from qualitative research grounded in a participatory advocacy approach and illuminates the undeniable benefit of using an Impartial Education Liaison to address special education-related conflict (Creswell, 2015). The following illustrates the positive and significant impact an Impartial Education Liaison had on two long-standing, intractable special education-related conflicts between families and school agents.

### Case Study: DJ

#### *Before Impartial Education Liaison Engaged as a Facilitator and Third-Party Consultant*

DJ was a musically gifted 11-year-old Latino male with autism and some physical limitations. His mother, Ms. E believed in his potential and continually advocated for her son's educational entitlements. In this instance, Ms. E requested that DJ be retained in the same 5th class so he could achieve specific learning goals, improve his executive functioning and self-advocacy skills. However, the School Principal Ms. N believed DJ would never meet grade-level standards or earn a diploma; so, she decided to promote DJ to middle school with his peers. Ms. E appealed the principal's decision to the assistant superintendent only to be disappointed when he sided with Ms. N. In response, Ms. E filed a due process complaint but the district refused to budge on the issue of retention. Eventually, Ms. E gave in and DJ was promoted.

Unfortunately, conflict between Ms. E and school agents reoccurred during DJ's first year in middle school. Ms. E used her health insurance to fund bathroom support services at no cost to the district; then asked Special Education Supervisor Mr. L to permit the service provider to work with DJ at the school site. Although Mr. L professed to care about the students, he expressed a preference for limiting services. So, without discussing the issue with Ms. E and at the advice of the district's legal department, Mr. L denied the request. Upset by the denial, Ms. E gave Mr. L a piece of her mind. In response and despite being the assigned special education supervisor, Mr. L ceased interaction with Ms. E because he "felt bullied" and did not wish to have any further contact with her.

Because she had been on IEP teams that had success with Impartial Education Liaisons, another special education supervisor suggested the IEP team consult an Impartial Education Liaison. Ms. E, Mr. L and the other IEP team members decided to give it a try.

#### *After Impartial Education Liaison Engaged as a Facilitator and Third-Party Conflict Consultant*

The Impartial Education Liaison unpacked and mapped the conflict, identified communication gaps including cultural competency issues and perceived threats that

were impeding collaboration between Ms. E and school agents. The Impartial Education Liaison also furnished communication coaching to help Ms. E see how her word-choice was often unclear and tone could be considered offensive which caused the school agents to reject her message. The Impartial Education Liaison helped Mr. L understand how failing to effectively communicate with parents or involve them in decision-making could be perceived as arbitrary and inconsiderate. In addition, the Impartial Education Liaison helped the IEP team develop a partnership plan for future engagements about DJ's IEP. Because the conflict had built up over multiple years, trust was eroded and communication was significantly impaired, the IEP team agreed to use an Impartial Education Liaison to consult on DJ's IEP process and facilitate future IEP meetings.

### Case Study: Student H

#### *Before Impartial Education Liaison Engaged as a Mediator*

Student H was a middle-school-aged Black girl with developmental delays and a seizure disorder that impacted her ability to access learning. She was placed in a mild-moderate special education day class. Conflict between H's family and school agents started when she was in the 5th grade and resulted in the filing of two due process complaints. After over two years in litigation and tens-of-thousands of dollars spent, the parties finally settled. However, the damaged relationship between H's family and school agents continued to be plagued by ineffective communication, lack of faith and different views about the value of other's input.

H's family, led by her grandmother, believed the school agents were not complying with H's IEP or the settlement agreement which included a safety plan that required H be supported by a medically trained paraprofessional, escorted to the bathroom, seated on the other side of the classroom from the male students who had harassed her previously and the family received weekly progress reports and timely notification about H's medical incidents.

H's Special Education Teacher/Case Manager Miss B stated she was doing her best to meet H's needs. Miss B recognized that as a first-year teacher she was still learning about special education rules and procedures. She admitted "still figuring out how to do everything in the IEP" and being unaware of the settlement agreement and safety plan. Miss B also reported feeling intimidated by the grandmother's impromptu classroom visits.

Due to prior heated engagements, the school principal refused to have any contact with H's family and assigned the newly hired Assistant Principal Ms. N to the case. Ms. N explained that her role was limited to supporting Miss B during IEP meetings or at her request; so, she did not "know the specifics" of H's IEP and did not know about the settlement agreement and safety plan until the family became vocal about certain violations.

The Special Education Supervisor Mr. L who had been an assistant principal the prior year and had no experience in special education, admitted he had never reviewed the settlement agreement or safety plan and had very little knowledge about the family-school conflict because he generally took a hands-off approach to school site issues. Nevertheless, Mr. L stated his belief that H's family was devaluing the efforts and commitment of the school staff and administrators.

#### *After Impartial Education Liaison Engaged as a Mediator*

After more than two years of escalating conflict, the IEP team contracted an Impartial Education Liaison to assist with addressing the ongoing conflict amongst them. During initial case development, the Impartial Education Liaison invested more than thirty hours interviewing family members, school agents and related service providers; reviewing documents and mapping out the conflict before convening the two mediated sessions. The relationship between the family and school agents was beleaguered by miscommunication, resource constraints, distrust, inadequate problem-solving skills and disparate opinions about H's education needs (Lake & Billingsley, 2000). But during just four hours mediated by an Impartial Education Liaison, the parties resolved all pending issues. Given a lack of faith due to past implementation problems and severe relationship damage, the IEP team agreed to have an Impartial Education Liaison continue to provide third party consultation to manage future conflict and IEP facilitation to effectively address escalating conflict.

#### **Where to go from here?**

The employment responsibilities of education leaders focus on six core areas which are exceedingly demanding and time-consuming; therefore, it is unfair to expect education leaders to take on the additional challenge of becoming an expert in conflict resolution and special education. Fortunately, the combined knowledge and experience of an Impartial Education Liaison can be beneficial to education leaders and school districts in several ways. First, engaging an Impartial Education Liaison allows education leaders to invest their time resources on meeting the responsibilities within their scope. Second, instead of wasting up to \$100,000 on due process litigation, an Impartial Education Liaison can resolve the same conflict for as little as \$1500. Third, an Impartial Education Liaison helps families and school agents repair and sustain healthy relationships, an outcome that does not usually happen with due process litigation.

Finally, Alternative Dispute Resolution services provided by Impartial Education Liaisons are a proactive, progressive and inclusive service used to manage conflict so those involved believe and feel like the outcome is fair. It is imperative that families and school agents sustain healthy collaborative relationships to support the shared goal of students achieving and learning in the school environment.

It is encouraged that education leaders include the use of Impartial Education Liaisons in district-wide strategic plans, to provide ADR services which can be funded through state ADR grants; and, at no cost to the families, school districts or students. To maximize the benefit of this resource, education leaders should also create awareness of this resource and establish protocols for when and how to utilize an Impartial Education Liaison.

It is our hope that the guidance offered in this article ultimately benefits students so they receive the dignified and inclusive education to which they are entitled.

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# Leading for Success: Turning Professional Disengagement into Teacher Empowerment

By William Murphy, Ed.D., and Catherine DiMartino, Ph.D.

## Abstract

During the past two decades there has been a concentrated effort to enact standards-based education reforms at the federal, state, and local levels. Following a grounded theory approach, this article examines the experiences of secondary social studies teachers who have been directly impacted by the incorporation of English Language Arts based critical thinking and analytical skills to the New York State social studies curriculum. The findings reveal that teachers are frustrated by tensions that have emerged between standards-based reform implementation and the core tenets of social studies instruction. Additionally, teacher frustrations are augmented by a sense that they have been effectively silenced in the reform implementation process and seek relief through various means. This article originates a new theory about diminished autonomy's effects on professional engagement and contributes to the field by providing a model for school leaders to alleviate teacher frustration by means of professional empowerment. The new theory provides insight for school leaders to leverage a classroom practitioner's desire for self-efficacy and ensures successful adaption to a continuously evolving educational landscape.

## Introduction

One of the many goals of social studies education is to provide students with the knowledge and skills that are necessary to participate in a free and democratic society. The need for a quality social studies education has become a paramount concern as recent studies have shown Americans generally know very little about governmental processes and political institutions (Nie et al.; 1996; Niemi & Junn, 1998; Journell, 2011; Lo & Tierney, 2017). This article is based on a grounded theory study of social studies teachers who attempted to provide their students with a quality social studies education during the period of standards-based education reform between the years 2000 and 2020. Their experiences adapting to the changes that resulted from standards-based reform implementation provide the basis for a new theory that identifies how educators can successfully navigate an ever-evolving educational landscape through teacher empowerment and professional collaboration.

## Two Decades of Reform

Beginning with the No Child Left Behind Act (2002) and continuing with Race to the Top (2010) and Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), federal involvement in public education profoundly impacted school-level accountability, learning standards and teacher evaluation. By 2010, the Common Core Learning Standards became the embodiment of Race to the Top's (RTTT) aspiration for common education standards across the nation. The goal of the Common Core Standards Initiative was to provide benchmarks for student proficiency in English Language Arts and mathematics (CCSI, 2019, p. 1). The newly developed standards targeted specific skills for integration across all subjects with the hope of creating college and career-ready students. Since controversial debates over content had the potential to derail implementation, Common Core Standards intentionally avoided the hypothetical pitfalls associated with a mandated social studies curriculum (Thornton, 2005; Hess, 2014; Singer et al., 2018).

As a result of RTTT, New York State enacted legislation in 2010 requiring an annual professional performance review (APPR) of all teachers and principals. For social studies teachers, that meant that their numerical APPR ratings were tied to their students' performance on standardized tests that often included the Global History and U.S. History Regents Exams. When the New York State Social Studies Learning Standards were updated to reflect the new Social Studies Framework in 2014, there were subsequent changes to the Global and U.S. History Regents Exams as well as the mandated social studies requirements for graduation. The adoption of the new Common Core aligned social studies framework in conjunction with implementation of APPR resulted in teachers being assailed with several major educational reform policies within a relatively short period of time. Through interviews, observations and a review of documents, the present study examines the implementation of education reform through the experiences of social studies teachers. The following two questions guide this study: 1) What are teachers' perceptions regarding the impact of federal, state, and local standards-based education reforms on social studies education? and 2) How do secondary social studies teachers perceive the impact of standards-based reforms on their personal professional practices?

## Review of Literature

### *The Impact of Standards-based Education Reform*

Few would argue the nobility of NCLB's primary goal of developing fully literate students. However, Brooks et al. (2007) pointed out that NCLB created a "soft-bigotry" (p.755) of low expectations for educators and ultimately robbed students of a constructivist-based curriculum driven by student inquiry and delivered through meaningful interactions. By the time RTTT was implemented in 2010, NCLB already convinced many teachers that they were losing the liberty to shape curriculum and pedagogy within their classroom. A critical discourse analysis of speeches by former Secretary of Education Arne Duncan found the rhetoric used by policy makers and media organizations during the early days of RTTT perpetuated an "us versus them mentality" that resulted in policy makers taking sole responsibility for school improvement and teachers feeling dehumanized and disempowered (Anderson et al., 2014).

Common Core's authors made a conscious decision to focus on the identification, adoption, and implementation of academic skills necessary for lifelong success. However, the unintended consequence of implementing Common Core Standards across all subjects has been significant. Libresco (2015) found that social studies supervisors tasked with revising end of year assessments purposefully cut content questions in favor of those that emphasized academic ELA skills. Libresco noted that the supervisors avoided discussions about what content elementary and middle school curriculums should contain, and never addressed "the extent to which the civic efficacy purpose of social studies should be reflected in assessments" (2015, p.13). Accordingly, Singer et al. (2018) found that the adoption of Common Core Standards forced content-area teachers outside of English Language Arts to provide students with literacy experiences in place of subject content.

The degree to which standards-based education legislation impacts the purpose and practices of social studies education could potentially affect a teacher's perception of the control one has over pedagogical decisions (Thornton, 2005). When determining the specific implications of Common Core Standards-Based reforms in social studies, Kenna and Russell (2014) found that new state standards generally resulted in instructors "so overwhelmed by the sheer volume of standards that students rarely reaped any of the intended benefits" (p. 78). Richards' (2014) qualitative study of stakeholder perceptions about the adoption of Annual Professional Performance Review (APPR) in New York found teachers were discouraged and had developed a general sense of distrust regarding the educational establishment. Richards also found that teachers believed APPR resulted in educators being held accountable for factors that were out of their control.

In summary, the existing literature finds that current social studies teachers navigate an educational landscape that has been heavily impacted by the era of standards-based

reform between 2000 and 2020. As a result, teachers are frustrated by the perception they relinquished control of their classrooms and are largely ignored by the larger educational establishment.

## Method

The data for this article are drawn from a grounded theory study conducted by one of the authors during the 2019-2020 school year (Murphy, 2020). Methods of data collection included focus groups, one-on-one interviews and document analysis of submitted lesson plans (with accompanying printed materials and handouts). Conducted in a suburban central high school district located in New York State, participants consisted of 16 licensed secondary social studies teachers who possessed between 1 and 28 years of teaching experience. Participants were purposely selected based on their social studies certification and experience (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Data collection was triangulated through focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis to ensure the accuracy of the study's analysis of secondary social studies teachers' perceptions regarding the impact of standards-based reforms (**Table 1**).

Once an initial round of data was collected through five focus groups, individual participants were selected to participate in one-on-one interviews. As is common with grounded theory, subsequent rounds of interviews followed an interview protocol that emerged out of the previous rounds of categorization, coding, and analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 1967).

## Findings

### ***Tension Between Standards and Core Tenets of Social Studies Instruction***

The data revealed that all teachers in the study identified four distinct components of a comprehensive social studies education: mastery of subject content; fostering a sense of citizenship and civic responsibility; providing skills for entering the larger economy; and developing critical thinking skills. Teacher A, who has 13 years of experience, explained that an ideal social studies education would provide students with "an accessible yet comprehensive knowledge of US history, world history, geography, and economics." Teacher P has 22 years of experience and described how social studies should foster civic responsibility by stating, "I think our goal is really to produce informed citizens...We want them to make wise decisions about elected officials; not relying on other people's opinions, but their own decisions." As this data reveals, teachers believe that social studies should provide a comprehensive knowledge of historical content for the purpose of enriching the individual student and larger community.

### ***Teacher Frustration and Silencing***

All the teachers in the study recognized a relationship between the focus on assessment-based ELA skills

**Table 1. Participant Information**

<i>Participant</i>	<i>Middle School/ High School</i>	<i>Years of Experience</i>	<i>Subject(s)/Levels Taught</i>
<i>Teacher A</i>	<i>H.S.</i>	<i>13</i>	<i>A.P., Regents, Electives</i>
<i>Teacher B</i>	<i>H.S.</i>	<i>21</i>	<i>A.P., Regents, Electives</i>
<i>Teacher C</i>	<i>H.S.</i>	<i>22</i>	<i>A.P., Regents</i>
<i>Teacher D</i>	<i>M.S. &amp; H.S.</i>	<i>14</i>	<i>8th Grade S.S., Electives</i>
<i>Teacher E</i>	<i>M.S. &amp; H.S.</i>	<i>12</i>	<i>7th Grade S.S., Regents</i>
<i>Teacher F</i>	<i>M.S. &amp; H.S.</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>8th Grade S.S., Regents, Electives</i>
<i>Teacher G</i>	<i>H.S.</i>	<i>13</i>	<i>Regents, Collaborative, Electives</i>
<i>Teacher H</i>	<i>H.S.</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>A.P., Regents</i>
<i>Teacher I</i>	<i>H.S.</i>	<i>25</i>	<i>Regents, Electives</i>
<i>Teacher J</i>	<i>M.S. &amp; H.S.</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>8th Grade S.S., Regents</i>
<i>Teacher K</i>	<i>M.S.</i>	<i>13</i>	<i>8th Grade S.S., Electives</i>
<i>Teacher L</i>	<i>M.S.</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>7th Grade S.S., Electives</i>
<i>Teacher M</i>	<i>M.S.</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>8th Grade S.S.</i>
<i>Teacher N</i>	<i>M.S.</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>7th Grade S.S.</i>
<i>Teacher O</i>	<i>M.S. &amp; H.S.</i>	<i>28</i>	<i>Social Studies Department Chair</i>
<i>Participant P</i>	<i>M.S. &amp; H.S.</i>	<i>22</i>	<i>Social Studies Department Chair</i>

and a sense that they were micromanaged in their classroom activities. Most of the teachers qualified this idea with the caveat that they were not personally micromanaged by their building or district administrators, but by the larger education system. A 20-year veteran at the high school level, Teacher H explained, "As a teacher, I know if I could just have more control over what I do in the classroom... my students would love my class and be more engaged." Teacher F who has been teaching for only two years described a similar experience, "I think it just handcuffs social studies teachers. When it comes to direct instruction, I'm so paranoid that if I don't give the exact lesson they're looking for, someone somewhere is going to be angry with me."

Unfortunately, traditional avenues that could have potentially helped teachers adapt to standards-based reform implementation proved to be ineffective. Most of the teachers in this study believed that professional development was too focused on merely identifying specific aspects of standards-based reform implementation. Teacher I described personal antipathy by stating, "Basically, when our professional development is just alerting us to all the changes that are being implemented, it's deadening... It's frustrating that we don't get to do much in terms of how we can enliven our classrooms." Such repetitive, non-collaborative professional development added to teachers' frustrations because it reinforced a perception that teachers lacked real opportunities to navigate the negative effects of standards-based reform implementation in their classroom.

### ***Teacher Empowerment: Disengagement or Collaboration***

The initial reaction shared by most teachers in the study was to avoid the impact of standards-based reforms altogether by retreating into elective courses and grade levels that did not have standardized assessments. The alternative to disengaging from courses impacted by standards-based reforms was for teachers to increase their professional engagement by collaborating with other social studies professionals. Teacher F explained, "I think I have a lot of opportunities within my social studies department to ask questions and share thoughts. I work with several different chair-people and colleagues, so I have multiple sounding boards to help me figure things out."

Untenured teachers within the district where the participants worked are contractually required to regularly meet with administrators and each other. While such opportunities may be the result of contractual obligations, they need not be. In fact, most participants explained that collaboration with other social studies professionals through informal settings helped to mitigate their isolation and frustration. By way of informal and regular collaboration, teachers inadvertently initiated professional learning communities where concerns were addressed with other social studies professionals. Teachers who were reluctant to retreat into the sovereignty of elective courses cited informal collaboration as the key to alleviating the stress-filled reality of contemporary social studies education. Teacher F recalled the benefits of collaboration this way:



Just this week we had a meeting and we talked about different methods that we as teachers could use to develop certain skills and help students dive into what the framework is asking us for. I thought that was immensely helpful. The minute the other teachers were sharing, I started thinking, "How can I bring this into my own classroom?"

As a veteran high school teacher with 21 years of experience, Teacher B summed up the importance of informal collaboration with colleagues by saying, "It's all about the support. I need a lot of support from other teachers who share the same struggles and have great ideas about how to address them. That is the biggest thing." All the teachers in this study agreed that if they could not take part in school or district created professional collaboration opportunities, they desired time specifically designated to seek them out on their own. Data revealed that teachers recognized they were their own best resources due to the tangible benefits provided by a collegial sharing of practical strategies for successful integration of literacy and critical thinking skills.

## Discussion and Implications

For many teachers, standards-based reform implementation has come to represent a movement away from their ideal vision of a comprehensive social studies education. While recognizing the theoretical benefits of reading, writing and higher order thinking skills in their curriculum, social studies teachers are nonetheless frustrated by the need to cut historical content from their lessons in favor of standards-based literacy skills. Lacking avenues to effectively communicate concerns regarding the successful integration of learning standards into classroom activities, teachers in this study have developed an "us versus them mentality" regarding the larger education system (Anderson et al., 2014). The Theory of Diminished Autonomy's Effects on Professional Engagement (**Figure 1**) provides insight about standards-based reform implementation's effects on classroom practitioners (Murphy, 2020). Teachers are frustrated by the perception that reform implementation

has resulted in a lack of autonomy. The underlying imbalance of power within the current structure of social studies education provides teachers with no effective means to redress their grievances and has left the impression that their opinions are not valued. Having been essentially rendered powerless, social studies teachers seek to regain autonomy through two distinct means. Social studies teachers either alleviate their frustration by engaging in meaningful collaboration with other social studies professionals or escape the impact of reforms altogether by retreating into courses and grade levels that fall outside of accountability mandates.

Following the Theory of Diminished Autonomy's Effects on Professional Engagement, school administrators can provide meaningful collaboration opportunities as a productive alternative for teachers seeking to regain a sense of autonomy. Collaboration was repeatedly described as an indispensable coping mechanism for teachers struggling to adapt their practices to standards-based reforms. In addition to expressing appreciation for the cooperation and support that they experienced, teachers who participated in collaborative events cited less frustration with the current state of social studies education than their more isolated peers. Veteran teachers lauded the efforts of administrators who reserved time throughout the school year for teachers to informally discuss strategies for implementing new aspects of the social studies framework. Since organic collaboration increased their sense of self-efficacy, all the teachers agreed that if they could not take part in formal collaborative professional development, they preferred a designated time to create similar opportunities on their own.

School leaders need to maximize the potential benefits afforded by collaborative professional circles by empowering teachers to grow and adapt in an environment where their voices and opinions are heard and respected (DuFour & Eaker 1998; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy 2001). School leaders can maximize their greatest resource by empowering teachers to develop their own solutions for an ever-evolving educational landscape. By increasing individual teacher autonomy through professional collaboration, schools can alleviate the

**Figure 1. Diminished Autonomy's Effects on Professional Engagement**



entrenched "us versus them" mentality, decrease the overall sense of frustration that has developed over the past two decades and allow teachers to provide a truly comprehensive social studies education (Anderson et al., 2014).

While this article is derived from a study about the effects of standards-based reforms on social studies education between 2000 and 2020, it is applicable to current mandates and future reform policies across all grade levels and subjects. As districts continue to revise their current practices to reflect the N.Y. State Department of Education's Culturally Responsive-Sustaining (CR-S) Framework, it would be wise for school leaders to leverage their classroom practitioners' desire for self-efficacy while promoting successful adaptation to an evolving educational landscape.

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## From the Field: Practical Applications of Research

# Leveraging Student Strengths through Project-Based Learning and Authentic Assessment in an Integrated ENL Classroom

By Sharron Huang and Annette Shideler

### Abstract

Many project-based learning and authentic assessment studies have focused on general education students. This study includes the population of English language learners (ELLs) to contrast the benefits of project-based learning and authentic assessment for general and ENL learners.

### Introduction

#### Project-Based Learning

Project-based learning (PBL) has been shown to have a great impact on student learning in recent years. PBL involves completing educational tasks which result in a realistic product, event, or presentation to an audience. Thomas (2000) identified five key components of effective PBL: 1. embedded in the curriculum, 2. organized around driving questions that lead students to encounter central concepts or principles, 3. focused on a constructive investigation that involves inquiry and knowledge building, 4. student-driven and managed, and 5. focused on authentic, real-world problems. Many students who had previously struggled in traditional instructional settings were often found to excel when participating in PBL instruction. This is because PBL learning better matches their learning preference for collaboration and activity type learning (Kingston, 2018).

Research has shown that student learning is impacted more deeply when they can apply classroom-gathered knowledge to real-world problems, and when they take part in projects that require sustained engagement and collaboration. Through PBL, students are encouraged to participate in active learning as they connect with and explore the subject matter. This further allows them to apply their knowledge in the world around them.

#### Authentic Assessment

As 21st century teachers transition from traditional forms of assessment to authentic assessments, they are constantly finding new and creative ways to assess their students' learning. Authentic assessments are any type of assessment that requires students to demonstrate skills

and competencies that represent real-world problems and situations. Mantero (2002) discussed the effectiveness of using authentic assessments with ELLs, especially as they allow planning, revising discourse, collaboration among peers, and helping students 'play' within contextualized worlds inside of the classroom that are based on studied language's culture. As he explains, authentic assessments create a Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978) that accounts for cognitive and linguistic abilities and skills which allow for more self-expression, creation of meaning, and negotiation during communication.

#### Purpose of Study

A research brief by Kingston (2018) highlighted 20 studies that show how PBL can improve student outcomes. However, among the 20 studies, only two studies included ELL students and these studies either had no control for instruction or focused on problem-based learning instead of project-based learning. To explore the effects of project-based learning and authentic assessments on ELL students, this study compared the results of a PBL unit that culminated in an authentic assessment with the results from a previously taught, traditional, non-PBL learning unit. The control experiment was the non-PBL unit on Snowflakes, which traditionally taught students about different types of snowflakes, the science behind snowflakes, and how unique snowflakes are. The PBL unit with an authentic assessment task focused on upcycling and taught students about (a) ways to reduce, reuse, and recycle, (b) the harms of pollution and waste, and (c) ways to give discarded items a new purpose (upcycling).

The research question proposed in this study was:

1. How does the performance of ELL and general education students compare when the class receives traditional instruction and problem-based instruction?

The intended outcomes of this project were increased student performance on assessments. It was predicted that students would achieve higher marks because they would be actively engaging in real-world and personal,

meaningful projects throughout the unit. It is predicted that the stations would get students interested and motivated to learn as they see the topic of recycling and upcycling presented through subjects. It was also anticipated that students could connect more strongly to the topic as they have the choice of choosing their final project idea, therefore, they would perform successfully.

### Class Demographics

The integrated co-taught 6th-grade class consisted of general education students and English language learners (ELLs) aged 11-12 years old. There were 13 general education students and 8 ELLs with proficiency levels ranging from Entering to Commanding (2 Entering students, 1 Transitioning student, 3 Expanding students, and 2 Commanding students). All ELLs were Spanish speaking except for one Expanding French speaker. Among the general education students, there were 5 boys and 8 girls, and among the ELLs, there were 4 boys and 4 girls. Classes were in-person every day of the school week and were instructed for 5 class periods every day.

### Methods

To measure and observe student outcomes, students' station assignments, final project, contribution to the class project, and overall participation during the unit were evaluated. The average grades from this unit were calculated for each student individually and compared to the average of their grade from a previously taught traditional non-PBL unit. The overall class average grade on this unit was compared to the overall class average of the unit prior. It was predicted that students would perform better in this project-based learning and authentic assessment unit than the previously taught traditional non-PBL unit.

The unit was assessed through observations, networking with peers, group collaboration rubric, spelling and vocabulary quizzes, discussion, reading comprehension quizzes, and sequencing graphic organizers.

### Stations

In this unit, students were reading about recycling as they learn about the upcycling process and various ways to upcycle. The unit began with an interactive presentation on recycling and upcycling followed by an introduction to the stations and activities that were assigned. Every day, students broke up into stations where they learned about recycling and practiced their knowledge in various stations. The stations were as follows:

- **Guided Reading:** Students read with the teacher in small groups about the effects of improper disposal of recyclable materials on the Earth, learned about proper recycling, and how they can make a change.

- **Spelling/Vocabulary Station:** Students studied vocabulary lists of recycling and upcycling-related terms that they would be quizzed on. Students also created Vocabulary Log slides with definitions, pictures, and wrote sentences with the words.
- **Speaking Station:** Students recorded themselves, through Screencastify®, read assigned articles about reducing and upcycling, then independently talked about the article.
- **Writing Station:** Students completed a picture-prompt writing packet in which they were asked to write paragraphs answering the assigned prompts using the corresponding pictures. These questions asked students to infer about the pictures and reflect on their own opinions. Students also formed opinions on the importance of reducing, reusing, recycling, and upcycling on the environment and defended those opinions with facts when writing letters to their parents as a part of their final reflection project.
- **Chromebook Station:** Students researched Upcycling DIY Projects on their Chromebooks and created a Google Slides Project with ideas of potential final reflection projects and the materials they would need. Students also prepared a short speech about why they chose their final reflection project idea and how it could be used. Additionally, students were also asked to complete a Google Form to answer questions about mass consumption.

### Content Areas

In the stations, students learned about recycling and upcycling, then used their knowledge to research and explore ways to upcycle to create their own DIY projects. Following their DIY projects, students were asked to create a final project that was reflective and informative about recycling, upcycling, and their final products. Various curricular areas, such as ELA, science, social studies, art, and technology were incorporated in these stations for students.

### Data Analysis

**Tables 1 and 2** present the differences in the percent correct answers on unit exams between ELL and general education students who experience a non-PBL and a PBL lesson. In the non-PBL unit, the class attained an average grade of 78.46% with ELLs attaining an average grade of 73.45% and general education students attaining an average grade of 90.12%. The overall grades ranged from 65.32% to 100% with ELLs ranging from 65.32% to 88.32% and Non-ELL general education students ranging from 78.63% to 100%.

In the PBL unit, the class had an average grade of 88.61% with ELLs having an average grade of 79.58% and general education students having an average grade of 92.27%. The overall grades ranged from 67.93% to 99.79% with ELLs ranging from 67.93% to 88.32% and general education students ranging from 78.63% to 99.79% (See Table 1).

When comparing the non-PBL unit to the PBL unit, an increase in grades was seen in 15 out of 21 students total; 6/8 ELLs and 8/13 Non ELLs. These increases ranged from 0.45% to 15.65%. The students whose grades increased in the PBL unit had non-PBL unit grades that ranged from 65.32% to 99.34%. The average difference of class grades between the non-PBL and PBL unit was a 10.15% increase in the PBL unit. When considering ELL students, there was an average of a 6.12% increase while the general education student had an average of a 2.15% increase. Out of the students whose grades did not increase in the PBL unit, their grades did not decrease significantly. Among the students whose grades decreased rather than increased, the average decrease was by -1.51% and ranged from -1.48% to -5.78%. The students whose grades decreased in the PBL unit had non-PBL grades that ranged from 69.41% to 100%.

When looking at the students whose grades did not increase, it can be noted that all students whose grades did not increase in the PBL unit already had a 91% or higher grade in the non-PBL unit except for one student. The exception refers to Student #4 who is an Expanding ELL that began with a 69.41% in the non-PBL unit and ended with a 67.93 in the PBL-unit. Student #4 had a decrease of -1.48% without having had a 91% or higher grade in the non-PBL unit. However, having a grade over 91% was not directly indicative of a decrease in the PBL unit as there were two students, Student #20 and Student #21 whose grades increased even though they had above a 91% in the non-PBL unit. Student #20 had a

**Table 1.** Change in Percent Correct Non-PBL to PBL Test.

	Non-PBL Unit	PBL Unit	
Class Average:	78.46%	88.61%	10.15%
Student #1 (Entering)	78.38%	83.51%	5.13%
Student #2 (Entering)	65.32%	77.84%	12.52%
Student #3 (Transitioning)	73.37%	77.17%	3.80%
Student #4 (Expanding)	69.41%	67.93%	-1.48%
Student #5 (Expanding)	91.10%	88.32%	-2.78%
Student #6 (Expanding)	68.59%	84.24%	15.65%
Student #7 (Commanding)	71.12%	72.55%	1.43%
Student #8 (Commanding)	70.31%	85.05%	14.74%
Student #9	100.00%	98.31%	-1.69%
Student #10	73.52%	86.11%	12.59%
Student #11	99.12%	97.03%	-2.09%
Student #12	91.90%	89.96%	-1.94%
Student #13	71.55%	78.63%	7.08%
Student #14	95.40%	89.62%	-5.78%
Student #15	88.18%	91.88%	3.70%
Student #16	84.03%	90.47%	6.44%
Student #17	80.96%	67.61%	-6.65%
Student #18	100.00%	96.51%	-3.39%
Student #19	89.72%	93.86%	4.14%
Student #20	99.34%	99.79%	0.45%
Student #21	97.81%	99.60%	1.79%

99.34% and Student #21 had a 97.81% in the non-PBL unit and their grades increased to 99.79% and 99.60% respectively in the PBL unit.

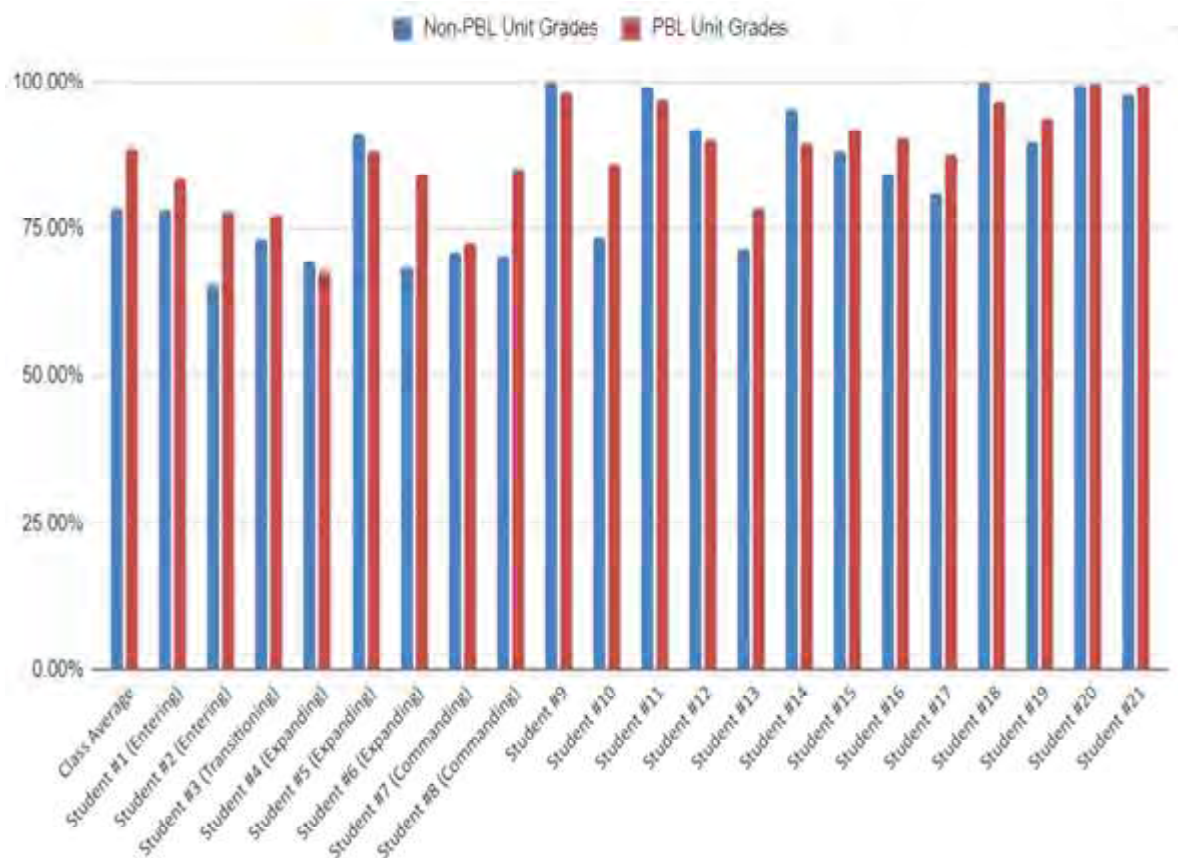
### Discussion

The results indicate that PBL can produce an increase in student learning and participation in class material. When comparing the PBL unit to a previous traditionally taught non-PBL unit, there was a stark difference in grades. The class had a 10.15% increase in overall grades from the non-PBL unit to the PBL unit. This increase reveals that the class performed better on the classwork and assessments in the PBL unit.

The increase was more notable amongst the ELL students than the general education student as the ELLs had a higher increase in average grade from the non-PBL unit to the PBL unit. The increase amongst ELL students in grades was nearly three times the increase amongst general education students. The PBL unit also brought students closer towards closing the



**Table 2.** Comparison of Individual Grades and Class Averages Between the non-PBL and PBL Units



achievement gap between ELLs and general education students as there was a 16.67% difference in the non-PBL unit and a 12.69% difference in the PBL unit.

Among the students' whose grades decreased rather than increased, the difference was minimal. Additionally, nearly all the students whose grades decreased in the PBL unit had high grades above 91% or higher in the non-PBL unit to begin with. The only exception to this was Student #4 who is an Expanding ELL. Student #4 was absent for much of the PBL unit and struggled to make up work. This is likely to have played a role in the student's decrease in grade as the student had missing assignments in the PBL unit. And while Student #4's grade did not increase, the decline in grade achievement was a small decrease.

In summary, the class performed substantially better in the PBL unit compared to the non-PBL unit. The ELL students especially had a jump in academic perfor-

mance during the PBL unit with nearly three times the average increase in grades compared to the general education students. The students whose grades did not increase in the PBL unit already had relatively high grades above 91% in the non-PBL unit. This level of performance may be due to their reliance and comfortability with traditional methods of teaching or it being difficult to surpass an already competitive grade. However, these students' PBL unit grades were not much lower than their non-PBL unit grade overall, students still achieved high scores.

### Giving Back to the Community

The Project-Based Learning unit discussed in this study involved collaboration with the community as donations of used tires were asked from the students' families, local auto shops, car dealerships, and so on. By accepting donated used tires from the community to create an artistic planting structure with the class, the tires were upcycled instead of spending decades at a

**Figure 2.** Student Application of Recycling



landfill before degrading. The final planters represented the school, with the district's colors (see **Figure 2**). Making the art structure one that represents the district encouraged as well as reminded students, faculty, and other members of the school district and the larger community to recycle. By recycling and upcycling as a community, we are doing our part in helping and saving the environment. In the future, we will also be collaborating with parents when asking students to write directly to their parents and community members about the importance of recycling. Students will apply information from multiple texts to develop a persuasive argument explaining why they should upcycle at home and in the community.

## Conclusion

The results of this study demonstrated that PBL has a positive influence on student learning and achievement, especially with ELLs and struggling students. The implemented PBL unit resulted in increased comprehension, engagement, interest, and assessment grades compared to a previously traditionally taught unit. Most students performed significantly better in the PBL unit where they were encouraged to participate in active learning as they connected with and explored the subject matter. When applying their knowledge through authentic assessment, students were able to attain higher scores and grades.

The PBL unit was beneficial for both ELLs and general education students in the class as there were significant increases in grades seen in both populations. ELLs had the most noteworthy increase in grades on average, which is crucial as it helped address the achievement gap between them and the general education students. The increase in performance of ELLs was related to their development of a sense of agency and ownership

of their learning. They were able to enhance their language skill and scientific literacy while also learning critical content (Wolpert-Gawron, 2018).

Traditional teaching practices are no longer enough to prepare children for real-world issues. This study calls for 21st century teachers to incorporate PBL units in their teaching to guide students in cultivating problem-solving skills as PBL and authentic assessments have been shown to be beneficial for students. PBL leads students to focus on a constructive investigation through inquiry, knowledge building, student self-management, and focus on authentic questions, and critical thinking.

Authentic assessments go hand in hand with this type of instruction as they allow students to demonstrate their skills and competencies in a creative and self-expressed manner beyond test-taking. When searching for ways to improve student performance and engagement, especially in the ELL population and with students who are struggling academically, PBL and authentic assessments are the keys to closing the achievement gap and propelling students forward in cross-context understanding.

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## From the Field: Practical Applications of Research

### Special Educator at the Helm: Tips for Training and Supervising a Team of Assistants

By Meghan Guard and Diana Baker

#### Introduction

I<sup>1</sup> began my career as a special educator teaching students with autism in an urban public school. Having just graduated from a teacher education program, I was ready to creatively modify lessons, design effective behavior intervention plans, and to create a tranquil and orderly learning environment for my students. But I realized quickly that there was one skillset I lacked.

In addition to the ten students in my classroom, I also had two experienced teaching assistants (TAs)<sup>2</sup> on my team and it had never occurred to me that my job description included training and supervising them. One interesting twist was that when I started teaching, the TAs had been working together for a couple of years and they already knew several of our students. In the beginning, I leaned on them a lot: they knew so much about the students and the school. They knew that Mary was a super smeller and that certain scents, like the tuna fish sandwich that Greg had every day for lunch, would drive her crazy. By simply assigning lunch seats with Greg and Mary at opposite ends of the lunch table we were able to head off mealtime chaos. And they knew that when Ali said "Elmo" she was asking to play a computer game. Knowing this allowed me to immediately build on her existing requesting skills rather than starting from scratch.

But the flip side of having an experienced team was that they were used to using certain default behavior management techniques and it was hard to get their buy-in when I wanted to change things. Time outs, for example, were one

of their strategies. At first glance the practice of using time outs seemed to be working: the problem behavior did decrease in the moment. But when I took a closer look, it was clear that the changes were short lived.

I had started learning about applied behavior analysis (ABA) and wanted to introduce proactive interventions, like token systems, to teach new skills to my students rather than simply punishing unwanted behaviors (Matson & Boisjoli, 2009). But these kinds of interventions were a hard sell: they were time-consuming to implement, and change was slow. Additionally, it was difficult to find time during the day for staff training in order to create buy-in or to give constructive feedback to staff in a setting that was on public display.

I needed help and I was not alone. Biggs and colleagues (2019) found that, across the board, special educators report needing more guidance and support working with the TAs in their classrooms. Our article responds to that call by providing effective strategies for improving collaboration between special educators and TAs that are grounded in firsthand experience and supported by empirical evidence.

#### Research on Supporting Paraprofessionals

Teaching assistants play a large role in the delivery of special education services for students with disabilities in the United States (Brock & Carter, 2015; Stockall, 2014) and "there is undoubtedly a place for well-conceived paraprofessional supports in special education" (Suter & Giangreco, 2009, p. 82). The sheer number of TAs in U.S. classrooms has increased dramatically in recent years (Reddy et al., 2020): their ranks now outnumber special educators (Suter & Giangreco, 2009). Alongside the boost in numbers, TAs have also experienced a shift in terms of their responsibilities largely moving away from non-instructional and clerical tasks to teaching, implementing behavior plans, recording data, and other complex assignments that require specialized training and knowledge (Sauberan, 2015 and Wallace, Shin, Bartholomay, & Stahl, 2001).

<sup>1</sup> In this article we use the first-person singular to convey to readers that the suggestions presented are drawn directly from firsthand experience. The classroom anecdotes, while grounded in everyday experiences do not depict individual students, staff members, or schools and draw on both authors' experiences in various settings. This is designed to protect the anonymity of all involved.

<sup>2</sup> Many terms are used to describe the teaching assistants who work in special education settings, including paraprofessional, paraeducator, aide. We use the term teaching assistant (TA) which we believe has a more positive connotation than paraprofessional (e.g., Appl, 2006)

Moreover, although TAs are often tasked with educating the students with the most complex learning needs, the majority are not trained in "evidence-based" strategies (Brock & Carter, 2013, p. 39). Researchers like McGrath and colleagues (2010), thus conclude that TAs do not receive adequate guidance and that the nature of the tasks they are asked to do often is not appropriate given their level of preparation (p. 2).

Research also suggests that paraprofessionals, themselves, feel ill-equipped to carry out their duties (Brown & Stanton-Chapman, 2017). Essentially, "through no fault of their own, too many paraprofessionals remain inadequately trained and supervised to do the jobs they are asked to undertake" (Suter & Giangreco, 2009, p. 82).

As for the special educators who are charged with supervising TAs, the majority (88%) report relying on real life experiences rather than pre-service training or district-level support to make decisions about how to work with paraprofessionals and many wish more formal training was available (Biggs, Gilson, Carter, 2018). The problem is two-fold: TAs themselves tend to be insufficiently trained and the special educators who would theoretically be positioned to provide supervision and training don't have the knowledge or resources to do so. This article addresses the second part of the equation, providing practical suggestions for special educators who have TAs in their classrooms.

## **Tips For Becoming a Leader and Manager in your Classroom**

### **Productive Team Meetings**

As Stockall (2014) points out, open communication and a good rapport with TAs in your classroom are essential for learning. My experience reveals that one of the biggest challenges for nurturing those relationships is simply carving out time and space in a fast-paced classroom. Holding regular team meetings is a best practice but schools and districts really set the tone in terms of extent to which paraprofessionals are involved in planning outside of official school hours: contract hours and compensation for after school meetings varies significantly from one district to the next (French, 2001).

If your school or district does not compensate paraprofessional staff for attending team meetings, there are things you can do within your own classroom to create a routine. One way to do this is by setting aside a time within your weekly schedule when students can be self-sufficient. I chose to use "choice time" on Friday afternoons. There were occasionally interruptions, but I found that my team and I got pretty good at tuning out background noise and squeezing in substantive conversations.

Because my team meetings were infrequent and time was always at a premium, I also wrote up weekly team notes to reinforce what we had talked about in the meetings and either e-mailed these to staff members or compiled

them in a "team notes binder" for staff to reference. I also used a spare white board for staff memos (e.g., times I would be out of the room for meetings, special school events, and professional development opportunities). In between our meeting times, TAs could post questions or comments for me, and I could respond and leave reminders and motivational notes or little tidbits of praise.

Even though our meetings were brief, I always included time for what I refer to as "glows" and "grows" in my agenda. Sometimes I strategically highlighted a "glow" that could encourage other staff members to engage in the same effective behavior. As for "grows," I found it important to be specific and provide a rationale so that staff understands why you're invested in tackling this issue. Introducing the "glow" first, keeps the tone positive and provides a platform for delivering the constructive feedback or "grow."

Finally, team meetings provide an opportunity to release responsibilities to your staff. I use a version of the "I do, we do, you do" approach to increase staff responsibility over the course of the school year (Stockall, 2014). For example, at the beginning of the year I will lead with the "glows and grows" and team discussions. As the year progresses, I let my TAs know that the following week I want them to think of "grow" or "glow" for themselves and later in the year, I ask them to give feedback to one another. This "I do, we do, you do" approach can be used for modeling and teaching other skills that are important for TAs as explained in the next section. I also point out that they can apply this same kind of approach when they're teaching new skills to students.

### **Teaching Your Teaching Assistants**

Just as you set aside time during the first days and weeks of the school year to establish routines and procedures for your students (Wong et al., 2005), the beginning of the school year is instrumental for staff training. This means that I unroll the curriculum more slowly. But, in the long run, the investment is well worth it. By planning easier activities for students, and providing time for me to observe and assist, I can give hands-on directions to help ensure staff understand what is expected.

Scholarly literature affirms my own observations that TAs benefit from high quality training opportunities (Hall et al., 2010). Giangreco (2003) posits that special educators should move away from merely being gracious host[s] to the TAs in their classrooms and reimagine themselves as "engaged teaching partner[s]," (p. 50). In fact, although many districts provide large-scale professional development opportunities, research shows that individual coaching within the classroom context is a more effective process.

Teaching assistants acquire the skills they need for their particular jobs more easily in the actual context where they will be using those skills. Indeed, special educators are essentially expected to be "leaders of on-going daily professional development for paraprofessionals" (Stockall, 2014, p. 204).

I tend to use in-the-moment modeling paired with opportunities to practice and targeted feedback. Just as we would model desired behaviors for our students, we can model the type of language, behavior strategies, organizational and teaching skills we want our TAs to use. For example, I might start by having one of my TAs watch me implement a token system with a student. Next, I would explain how each component of the process works (e.g., when to give a token, procedures for trading in) as well as the rationale for the technique (i.e., why token systems lead to enduring behavior change). And then I let the TA ask any questions and take a turn implementing the strategy with me observing and offering feedback (Ledford et al., 2017). Sometimes I question the investment of time in those first busy days of the school year. But when my classroom is running smoothly by Thanksgiving break, I remember that systematic training leads to consistency and when it comes to working with students with autism, consistency is key.

### **Cultivating a Productive Classroom Environment**

Each school has its own code of conduct and cultural norms. As the leader of your classroom, you have a lot of power in establishing a positive culture within your own classroom. (When I have worked in schools with less healthy cultures, I always reminded myself that I could close my classroom door and create a sort of sanctuary). Research suggests that teachers who approach the relationship with their TAs with "patience, empathy, and thoughtfulness" and who are also professional, skillful, and knowledgeable about their jobs are most likely to foster positive classroom environments (Biggs et al., 2016, p. 262).

It is critical that you lead by example. You gain the respect as the leader of your team if you adhere to the same rules that you are asking everyone else to follow, for example, refraining from using your phone during school hours and minimizing non-work-related conversations during instructional time. By modeling these behaviors, you set a professional tone for your classroom, and you can still find ways to connect with staff on a personal level without disrupting the learning environment. For example, you might organize a potluck before a school break, or a gift exchange for the holidays.

Additionally, creating a well-organized classroom environment helps staff to keep the classroom in order and running smoothly. I use visuals, not only for my students but also to remind myself and other staff members about important classroom information or expectations. For example, I assign each staff member (including myself) to a different pair or small group of students each day and I keep these assignments prominently posted within the classroom, which is also helpful to therapists and other classroom visitors.

Finally, when working with a team of educators, I always remind myself that each of us brings unique strengths to the classroom. As the team leader, it is your job to recognize this, and foster a culture in your classroom that draws

upon individuals' strengths in order to establish the most productive support team for your students. I have sometimes found it humbling to realize that one of my TAs has an easier time establishing a good rapport with a particular student or family member than I do. Chemistry can be hard to explain but I always have more luck when I give these natural alliances room to breathe rather than working against them.

On a more mundane level, if someone shares that they are creative or enjoy making crafts, assigning them responsibilities for decorating bulletin boards or cutting out materials for crafts increases their commitment to the class objectives. If someone finds hands-on-work soothing, I assign them to cut and laminate pieces for new projects, assemble student work folders, or record and graph behavioral data. And once we have carved out our areas of expertise, I often ask each TA to take on a particular leadership role within the classroom, providing support and training to other staff members in her area of expertise. Having designated roles empowers staff members and gives them authentic roles in the classroom. It also fosters a deeper understanding of classroom or student decisions.

### **Conclusion**

The field of special education is evolving in terms of the expectations of both teachers and TAs. My personal experiences along with research literature suggest that teachers need better preparation in how to be leaders and managers in their classrooms in order to harness the skills of their TAs and to maximize student learning. Since special educators come with specific training and dispositions already, we are well positioned to support the staff in our classrooms. We are trained to teach, individualize our instruction, and give feedback, all of which can be applied to training staff. Therefore, future special educators should have confidence that they already possess many of the skills needed to lead and manage a team of staff members.

However, there is still a need for specific management and leadership training to prepare teachers for this role both in teacher preparation programs and for in-service or professional development training. Providing teachers with this training can also help overcome some of the obstacles teachers in these leadership positions encounter in general lack of time or private space to train staff or give feedback. In suggesting tools and strategies that are easy to incorporate into the classroom culture or routine, we hope to help teachers minimize classroom stress and create more effective teams.

Research suggests that some teacher preparation programs, and school districts are offering courses "on how to manage and train paraeducators" (Trautman, 2004, p. 134). Our experience is that this type of coursework remains fairly rare, which is one of the reasons we are keen on sharing the lessons that we have learned with other educators in this article.

Another approach for sharing knowledge at the school or district level would be for administrators to create formal opportunities for teachers to collaborate and exchange strategies that educators already have established as their own sets of best practices. This additional training will better prepare teachers to support their staff, benefitting, in turn, the students in their classrooms.

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- Meghan Guard is a Special Education Teacher at Midlakes Education Center in Phelps, NY and also a BCBA who graduated from Hobart and William Smith Colleges with her Bachelor's in Psychology and Masters of Arts in Teaching.
- Diana Baker's special education career started in a classroom where she taught eight students with autism and supervised four teaching assistants. She is currently an Associate Professor of Education at Hobart and William Smith Colleges where she prepares future teachers and engages in research related to multilingual students with disabilities among other topics.

## **Book Review:**

### **IOU Life Leadership**

**By Dr. Joe Famularo**

Reviewed by Kevin N. McGuire, Ph.D.  
Retired Director of New York State Center for Leadership

As important as leadership is, there has been a subtle yet incessant misunderstanding that leaders are born; that there is a possible genetic factor effecting leadership abilities. Dr. Joseph Famularo in *IOU Life Leadership* dismisses this idea and demonstrates that the opposite is true. Leaders are self-made.

*IOU Life Leadership* is all about developing leadership ability. It is not about owing someone something. It's personal, it's about developing oneself and therefore affecting families, colleagues, and organizations.

New York Times and Wall Street Journal bestselling author Stephen Covey commented that Famularo's "concept of owing something to ourselves resonates with me and aligns with my belief that development is best achieved from inside out, that is, we must grow ourselves inwardly before we can professionally develop outwardly."

Within the structure of three universal life leadership principles, Inward, Outward and Upward, Famularo explains and encourages the reader to become involved in learning about, recognizing and developing leadership attributes and behaviors. He is immensely practical and supportive as he leads the reader to understand the intentional development of these IOU life principles.

Famularo's blueprint starts with the concept of Inward development. By reflecting on life maps, one can consider changes that would alter old and less effective scripts for new and more positive designs. Then, the author presents the Outward dimension or relationships with others. Here he alerts his readers to outward actions including facial expressions, tone of voice, body language and social space issues that either enhance or inhibit communication.

The third life principle is about Upward living which is based upon our Inward and Outward Actions. These Upward principles generate a sense of personal Peacefulness, Happiness, Healthiness, and Excellence or what the author labels as PH2E. Peacefulness in PH2E is inward serenity. This inward serenity helps one see clearly to conceive effective decisions. Happiness is something everyone wants in their life and is acquired by staying true to one's beliefs and being considerate of all relationships. Healthiness is critical for leadership to exist. Without it visions will remain dreams.

The author encourages setting goals that address eating, exercising, and sleeping. The last piece of PH2E, Excellence is the process of constantly improving. All potential leaders must travel this path.

After developing these concepts by sharing stories, nautical references, illustrations, and presenting activities to reinforce new insights, Famularo introduces his 12 Essential Life Anchors: six providing additional detail supporting the Inward Life leadership principle and six supporting the Outward Life leadership principle.

The Inward Life Anchors are personal including but not limited to aspirations, vision, character, and opinions. The Outward Life Anchors are about interactions with others and relationships including trust, common language, traditions and other timeless principles. The reader can download IOU Anchor Planning pages at [www.iouanchors.com](http://www.iouanchors.com). These pages are designed and provided to support the commitment to follow through.

Very importantly, Dr. Famularo focuses on "the space" between Inward thinking and Outward actions. This critical space is where Peacefulness, Happiness, Healthiness and Excellence are increased or not increased. It is in this space where character is nurtured. When one is true to oneself, true to one's inward thinking and actions become positive, effective and consistent pathways to Peacefulness, Happiness, Healthiness and Excellence.

To get the most out of Dr Famularo's lessons requires the reader to become involved in a deep way. Potential leaders or individuals in leadership positions often overlook their own best qualities, frequently not realizing their own potential. Famularo calls upon potential leaders to appreciate who they are and identify their own strengths. To become a leader, one must be realistic about oneself, examine how one lives, identify personal motives, and conduct inner self communication. This is a highly introspective and effective process.

Famularo presents tools and lessons for enriching the quality of one's life. He does not believe that leadership is an exclusive club. Connect his lessons with personal desire and nothing can keep a person from becoming a leader.



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