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Integrating Diversity: A Challenge to the Vision and Leadership of School Principals

In spite of major obstacles to the successful integration of children with disabilities into ordinary schools such as inadequate resources and financial constraints, attitudes of school principals constitute significant factors in implementing change. Studies relating to the challenge presented to schools by legislative requirements in British Columbia, indicate that principals, as advocates for diverse learners, occupy pivotal positions in linking initiatives to effective action plans.

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INTEGRATION AND LEARNER FOCUSED EDUCATION IN CANADA

One only has to observe the local neighbourhood school these days to realise that constantly developing attitudes and policies regarding the education of special needs students are placing changing and complex demands on school administrators. The effect of these demands on schools and administrators can be positive, despite the overwhelming nature of the expectations.

In British Columbia, the challenges of meeting the needs of widely diverse learners in regular classrooms link naturally to the aims of the learner-focused approaches of the Year 2000 provincial education initiatives. According to O'Reilly (1991), when education is considered in this manner in terms of the self

worth of each individual, the blinders of habit and bureaucracy disappear and all pupils become individuals again. Literature which focuses on the impact of integration on school principals suggests that principals who cope successfully with the changes and demands that integrative school settings present, do indeed believe in and actively promote the individuality of each student in their school, however diverse their abilities.

INTEGRATION AND THE ROLE OF THE PRINCIPAL

Mainstreaming is the practice of integration, and refers to the temporal, instructional and social integration of eligible exceptional children with normal peers based on an ongoing, individually determined, educational planning and programming process and requires clarification of responsibilities among regular and special education administrative, instructional and supportive personnel. As an organisational change it impacts directly on many aspects of school operation and requires increased involvement by the principal in responsibilities such as budget preparation, recruitment, professional and para-professional appraisal, programme planning and evaluation, professional development, collective agreement management, external agencies liaisonship, student placement and records management and coordination of procedures recognising pupil and parent rights. In addition principals must lead the school staff in developing a philosophical and practical base from which to implement integration, as well as assist the school community in understanding and appreciating diversity.

The impact of the principal on integration is not receiving broad research attention. However studies which have examined administration and integration indicate that much of the responsibility for integration success or failure belongs to the principal. Everitt (1990) concluded that logistical problems of integration are resolved in schools where the staff accepts ownership for all students, and that because this process of breaking down artificial barriers and building educational settings is a continual one it requires a catalyst for change and a force to keep it in motion - the school principal.

POWER OF PROFESSIONAL ATTITUDES AND VALUES

Australian research identified that in addition to legislation, such as Public Law 94 - 142 in the USA and the 1981 Special Education Act in the UK, the most powerful determinants for integration have probably been changes in professional community attitudes.

FACTORS INFLUENCING ATTITUDES TO INTEGRATION

children with disabilities have the right to be educated in environments which are non discriminatory and which maximise the normality of their experiences;

the desire to develop efficient and flexible systems to deliver the highest quality of education to children with special needs,

and the need to develop schools which are maximally effective for all children. (Center, Ward and Ferguson, 1991, p. 78.).

Another Australian study revealed that personal characteristics of principals determine their attitude toward integration and that therefore explanations are identifiable for the ease or difficulty with which individual principals lead their schools to successfully accommodate diversity. The variables that were identified as having the most significant effect on the attitudes of principals to integration were the number of years service as a principal, the possession of an appropriate education qualification and some administrative or teaching experience with a special class. In reference to the length of time the principal had been an administrator, it was the principals with less than seven years experience who responded most positively to integration. Also more positive were those principals with appropriate special education qualifications. (Center, Ward, Parmenter and Nash, 1985).

If one relates these Australian findings to leadership theories which place high regard on the significance and role of values in educational administration, more light is shed upon why some principals are more able than others in leading integrated schools. Values, Greenfield writes, bespeak the human condition and serve as springboards to action both in everyday life and in administration. (Moorhead and Nediger, 1991, p. 24.).

PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS TOWARD EFFECTIVE INTEGRATION

In considering administration as philosophy in action, and values as central to action, as advocated by Hodgkinson (1988), the manner in which school principals operationalise their values as they relate to integration appears to be of major significance to program success. Davis (1980) raised a related point of discussion in his study of the perceptions of three hundred and fifty four Maine,

U.S.A., school principals toward effective integration, according to type and level of handicapping condition. He ascertained that principals tend to view the chances for successful integration of mentally handicapped pupils into regular classrooms as relatively poor when compared with those of other handicapped students. In his conclusion Davis contended that what may be regarded as an integration failure on the part of a retarded pupil may, to a large extent, be related to a principal's self fulfilling prophecy regarding that child's chances for success in such a programme. (Davis, 1980, p. 177). What tremendous significance his conclusion places on the attitude with which school principals approach their integration responsibilities.

IMPACT OF INTEGRATION LAWS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

In British Columbia, since the 1989 introduction of new special education legislation, public school administrators have been working overtime to accommodate the resulting changes. The bill requires school boards to ensure that principals offer to consult with the parent of a handicapped student regarding the placement of that student in an educational programme, and directs that unless the educational needs of a handicapped student indicate that the student's educational programme should be provided otherwise, a board shall provide that student with an educational programme in classrooms where that student is integrated with other students who do not have handicaps (B.C. Ministry of Education Bill 13, 1989, p. 6).

Nelson (1992) studied the impact of the changes associated with Bill 13 on principals in four British Columbia school districts. From the responses of twenty five elementary school principals to questions concerning the integration impact on staffing, programming and management she concluded that many elementary schools were meeting the requirements of the British Columbia Ministry of Education Bill 13 (1989) and that the concept of integration has been received positively by principals and within their schools they are striving to ensure its success. In their capacity as advocates for diverse learners, principals are attempting to provide these children with appropriate learning environments. The major obstacles to successful integration are, according to Nelson, external to the schools. They centre around inadequate professional and financial support and lack of district level planning and consultation. Lack of time is also a significant issue for principals in integration implementation and the reported rarity of vice-principals is a major contributing factor to this concern. Lack of input from school based administrators, to district level decision making processes regarding the issues of policy development and budgeting, is seen to be

detrimental to the long range development of quality integration. The increased workload assumed by principals to facilitate integration is not, Nelson argues recognised by school boards or district staff. Furthermore, parents of regular and special needs students require more understanding of the concepts of integrating diversity and all members of the education community would benefit from increased integration knowledge and experience.

THE SCHOOL PRINCIPAL - LEADER IN INTEGRATING DIVERSITY

In relating this Canadian study to the broader research base and to the current era of fiscal restraint in public schooling, an unclear picture emerges concerning the future of integration. What does emerge clearly however is that as leaders in the midst of massive, continually evolving education reforms in British Columbia, school principals are key players in the delivery of regular and special education programmes. Of particular significance is their pivotal position between theorists and practitioners, which affords them the opportunity to influence the linking of initiatives and action plans. Accomplishing this linkage requires sensitive and empowering leadership, which encourages school staffs to grow into teams of individuals committed to congruent goals. In an integrated school setting this coming together of individual and organisational goals can enable the school community to deal positively with the challenges of public school diversity.

As all partner groups work together with school principals to create successful learning environments for children, it becomes apparent that success in integration, and in administering a school is not making all students the same - it is in meeting the diverse needs of all learners.

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