

FAPE Model of Exceptional Student Education Leadership

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Abstract

The FAPE Model of Exceptional Education Leadership is defined as facilitative, affiliative, praising and rewarding, and experiential and empirical. The FAPE administrator uses a facilitative approach that guides and coaches to help employees find a pathway to success. This leader works to build emotional capacity between all members of the educational organization and is seen as accessible. The FAPE administrator recognizes and praises staff for their accomplishments and is a support for all employees. Finally, the FAPE administrator does not “go it alone”, but uses the resources of all staff and faculty and connects all instruction and curricular choices to empirical research.

FAPE Model of Exceptional Student Education Management

FAPE is a common acronym in exceptional education services. FAPE typically represents the terminology found in Section 504 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which is the cornerstone of assuring students with special needs a Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE), regardless of the nature or severity of the person’s disability (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). This acronym is widely known throughout the exceptional education community as a key tenet for providing educational equality to children with special needs. The acronym FAPE is used in an alternate format for the purpose of illustrating the following leadership model for exceptional student education administrators and exceptional education teachers who plan to pursue administrative roles.

Exceptional student education administrators vary in scope of responsibilities from a lead teacher and principals who oversee exceptional student education services in their school to state or federal administrators who create exceptional student education policy. All levels of these leadership positions are critical to ensure FAPE for students with special needs. This article details the attributes of exceptional education leaders and elucidates a combination of leadership ideologies correlated to successful leadership practices in exceptional education settings. These suggestions are intended to promote critical thinking among administrators, as well as current teachers who plan to pursue administrative roles. The proposed model of exceptional education leadership is based on the following constructs:

F - Facilitative

A - Affiliative

P - Praise and recognition of performance

E - Experiential and Empirical knowledge

Facilitative Leadership

Facilitative refers to an exceptional educational leader setting a vision, mission, and objectives for the teachers and staff. The administrator uses a facilitative approach that guides and coaches as needed to help employees find a pathway to success within the educational organization. This is in contrast to a transactional or authoritarian leader who typically leads with a less cooperative and more directive style. The leader is not the holder of all knowledge, but often takes on the role of organizer who understands and utilizes the strengths of team members. The education leader who takes the role of a facilitator:

blends his or her role of visionary decisive leader with that of listening and empowering leader. As a facilitative leader he or she involves followers as much as possible in creating the group's vision and purpose, carrying out the vision and purpose, and building a productive and cohesive team. (Rees, 1998, pp. 17–18)

Moore (2004) referred to the facilitative qualities of a leader as core values, underlying principles or action strategies that guide the leader. Based on the suggestion of Glickman, Gordon, and Ross-Gordon (2009), the administrator should be the glue of success that binds collegial teams and empowers them as decision makers who provide input toward the direction of the instructional program. Moore posited that “facilitative leadership helps people to better understand each other so that common goals can be established, agreed upon, committed to, and reached” (p. 236).

Moore (2004) described a hiring scenario to demonstrate an educational organization's use of a facilitative approach. Most would agree that in current practice, educational leaders make hiring decisions with very little input from staff members. Typically, a manager or panel of managers review applicants, interview and make a hiring decision. The case study group reported by Moore collectively shared everything they thought about “potential job candidates, they were able to discuss all strengths and weaknesses and to address those with the candidates themselves” (p. 236). Moore reported that the staff believed as a cooperative effort, they will hire people who better fit into the organization.

Affiliative Leadership

Affiliative refers to building emotional capacity. Emotional capacity strengthens through camaraderie between all members of the educational organization. The affiliative leader is seen as one of the team who is accessible to staff and students. Gurley and Wilson (2011) described an affiliative leader as “creating harmony and building emotional bonds” (p. 3). This is an important component of building collegial teams that collaboratively work to plan and implement the best curricula and instructional methods for students. The affiliative style supports a warm and friendly work atmosphere. Employees feel like team members who are valued as individuals, not just as workers. This style of management recognizes each educational team member's emotional needs and individual personality traits. The Colour Works (2008) (*a team performance building organization*) described the affiliative leadership style as:

promotes friendly interactions among staff; places less emphasis on task directions, goals and standards than on meeting staff's emotional needs; pays attention to and cares for "the whole person" and stresses things that keep people happy; identifies opportunities for positive feedback but avoids performance related confrontations; rewards personal characteristics as much as job performance (p. 1)

The idea of caring for the whole person seems to align with exceptional education ideology, which typically looks holistically at the child to determine what may impede learning. Sensory, emotional, and physical concerns are addressed along with cognitive abilities when considering a child's (with special needs) learning. The preference to accentuate positive feedback, while minimizing the need for confrontational leadership is easily correlated to tenets of positive behavior support plans often implemented by teachers working with students with behavioral disabilities. It should be understood that these leadership constructs are guiding ideas and not intended to be applicable in all situations. Some research demonstrates a concern for the affiliative style of leadership when organizations have deeply problematic areas of concern such as racism, sexism, or other circumstances that need immediate and direct attention from an educational leader.

Kenmore (2008) explained "If affiliative leaders are too concerned with creating harmony among team members for example, they can be unwilling to tackle awkward or sensitive issues head on. This can in turn lead to resentment and disharmony among other team members" (p. 25). Kenmore explicated (in this statement) that a more direct and less collaborative approach is at times necessary for leaders. This is not dissimilar to the role of teachers working with students with disabilities. Exceptional education teachers need to create a warm, inclusive feeling classroom that values all members, but at times must address issues with stern and precise decisions without the consent of the class. As a general rule, the teacher wants to create strong affiliation with students, as well as develop the affiliation of students and their peers. This process may be difficult with an educational leader who is typically directive or authoritarian. This leadership style requires immediate compliance and implements leadership philosophy more indicative of McGregor's Theory X style of leadership (Kenmore, 2008).

The affiliative leadership ideology is in many ways the antithesis of Theory X leaders who see their employees as incapable of organizational problem solving. A Theory X administrator who uses praise at times may be viewed by others as using disingenuous manipulations, rather than recognition of a job well done. Koppelman, Prottsis, and Davis (2008) suggested that the core of Theory X leadership implies that there is only one true way to manage. In contrast, the affiliative leadership style uses myriad methods to differentiate as needed. This is reflective of educators using differentiated instruction to meet the many needs of their students in a way that is personally thoughtful of their needs as learners. The adept educator works to build autonomy and self-determination in students in a democratic classroom setting. The affiliative leader collaborates with self-directed employees who have organizational input and are capable of making decisions that emphasize personal and organizational goals within the democratic constructs of the educational organization. This attribute may be particularly critical in dealing with what Sergiovanni (2009) elucidated as the management of paradox often found in educational institutions. The management of paradox is the leadership ability to bring together

ideas that seem to be at odds with each other. Sergiovanni used the following examples to clarify some to the paradoxical situations often found in school leadership:

Combining an emphasis on rigorous standards with a refusal to impose standardization or compromise local discretion; expecting a great deal from teachers while empowering them to take control of their professional lives; responding to adolescent needs for independence while providing the disciplined safe havens they need; involving parents without compromising professional autonomy; and bringing everyone together in a common quest united by shared values while honoring diversity and promoting innovative ideas are examples (p.11).

It is conceivable that an affiliative leadership style that empowers all stakeholders will help increase institutional support and likely alleviate some of the stressors mentioned in the paradoxical situations above.

Praise and Recognition in Leadership

Praise and recognition refers to the administrator recognizing and praising staff for their accomplishments. The FAPE leader is a support for all employees and works to empower employees to proficiently perform their duties. This leader empowers everyone in the organization to grow professionally and strive toward new professional goals and objectives. This leaders' accolades are not viewed as disingenuous manipulations, as might be found in a Theory X environment. The leader is genuine in approach and supportive in action. This leader understands that true leadership strength is derived not from personal power, but the ability to empower others toward the same common organizational goals. This leader also understands that people have varied interests and attributes that are personally important, but can be related to the overall strength of the educational organization. An administrator implementing the FAPE model of leadership appreciates differences in culture, personality, and personal interests and views these as a richness of organizational strength. Some may believe that faculty and staff members need to be clones of the administrator in order to act professionally. In contrast, this model purports that the leader should strive to learn staff members' interests and strengths. These interests should be recognized in the staff member's daily work and praised as components of vitality within the educational organization. Just as teachers should not treat students like automatons without individualized goals and interests, the leader should understand varied learning styles and interests found within the staff and faculty of the school.

Experiential and Empirical Leadership

The experiential construct of the FAPE leadership model refers to the administrator implementing teams to collaborate and share knowledge that is beneficial to shared students. Collegial teams build camaraderie and provide faculty and staff opportunities to use their experiential knowledge to provide input toward the direction of the school. This creates a greater feeling of buy-in and likely leads to reduced frustration and teacher attrition.

Empirical refers to the administrator deeply valuing research-based methods that promote productive behaviors by faculty, staff, and students. Empirical also refers to the administrator

using research-based curricula and instructional methods that create highly proficient learning environments for all students including those with special needs or who are at risk of school failure. This is especially important for students with special learning needs. Strategies such as the Strategic Instruction Model (SIM), which is based on over 25 years of research is one example of a strategy strongly supported by research. The SIM promotes “effective teaching and learning of critical content in schools. SIM strives to help teachers make decisions about what is of greatest importance, what we can teach students to help them to learn, and how to teach them well” (University of Kansas, Center for Research on Learning, 2011, para. 2). Marzano (2000) identified ten research-proven, effective instructional strategies that cut across all content areas and all grade levels (comparing, contrasting, classifying, analogies, and metaphors, summarizing and note-taking and non-linguistic representation). Administrators should ensure a school-wide implementation of all domains found in Bloom's Taxonomy (1956). There should be a holistic instructional ideology to promote the usage of all categories in Bloom's Taxonomy with students with special needs. Administrators need to stay continually apprised of best practices that are not instructional and curricular fads, but empirically grounded in peer-reviewed research. An educational leader needs to be the model of research-based practice that personifies this expectation for all faculty and staff members.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the FAPE administrator uses a facilitative approach that guides and coaches as needed to help employees find a pathway to success. This leader works to build emotional capacity between all members of the educational organization. This person is not seen as atop the pyramid, but part of the educational team who is collaborative and accessible to all faculty and staff. The FAPE administrator recognizes faculty and staff as individuals and empowers each person to strive toward self-actualization. Finally, the FAPE leader does not administer in a unilateral fashion, but collegially uses the resources of all staff members to make many decisions. Finally, the FAPE administrator stays informed to ensure that instruction and curricular choices are based on empirical evidence, rather than passing fads.

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