

## A Case Observation and Insights

# How Special Education Can Promote Adaptive Leadership

By Nancy Morris, Ed.D.

From the start of the Pandemic in March 2020 to now, educational leaders have been challenged more than anyone ever thought was possible. The sheer number of changes that they navigated and led their teachers and students through are astonishing. On the surface, there were daily changes in the Center for Disease Control guidelines that impacted enrollment, space utilization, instructional delivery, and classroom management. In addition to dealing with these operational issues, leaders supported their students' and teachers' physical and mental health, as stress was and is at all-time highs. As an assistant professor in special education and leadership, I could never in a million years have dreamed up a case study based on the Pandemic's impact on schooling for one of my graduate courses. Every leader's skill, stamina, and ability to adapt to changes and effectively lead through these challenges have been tested.

In reflecting on the type of skills that leaders require in order to be prepared to lead through change, Northouse's (2016) definition of the adaptive leader provides us with a solid foundation. An adaptive leader mobilizes people to tackle tough challenges and thrive. They are able to motivate, organize, and orient people and focus attention on what's important. This is particularly critical in situations where there is no clear or defined answer to the problem. When problems are complex and situations unknown, adaptive leadership is required to get in front of the situation or issue, identify the path to resolution, regulate the distress, and give the work back to the people to continue (Northouse, 2016). This is what we have watched school leaders do every day since March 2020.

In my study of leadership, I have found distinct connections between the adaptive leader and my experience working as a K-12 special education teacher. These connections are even clearer now, as we reflect on navigating the complexities of educating students in a Pandemic impacted world. As a special education teacher, I taught students who did not fit into the standard educational box. Their needs were diverse; their thinking and learning processes did not always align with a typical student. I approached my

work each day assessing individual student needs, assessing the standards and curriculum presented for their grade, and recreating their "boxes" so that my instruction was an educational fit. This is the work of the special education teacher - to adapt. I lived it every day and now teach students how to do it in my special education courses.

The pandemic has demonstrated that leaders need to be adaptive in order to successfully lead through unknown changes and challenges. They are recreating the educational "boxes" daily. The pandemic has simply brought to light the need for all educational leaders to develop adaptive leadership skills that are core to effective special education instruction.

### The Adaptive Leader and Innovation

The pandemic has opened opportunities for changes. So much has been learned regarding what we are capable of, what learning can look like, and best ways to reach students. Teachers learned how to transform instructional environments and how they teach, including instructing online, something unheard of prior to last March. Teachers learned that they have skills and mindsets they never realized before - they learned to be adaptive educators. We learned that students can thrive in a variety of environments, in fact, from in-person to remote, if instruction is adapted to individual needs and delivered skillfully. Adaptive leaders that are equity focused view the changes as evidence of growth and improvement, worthy of continuation.

Reflecting on the adaptive leader, a connection can be drawn between school leaders' actions and innovation. Characteristics representative of innovative behavior are the ability to embrace new challenges, being open to new things, willing to fail, demonstrating initiative, being collaborative, and engaging in the act of reflection (Amabile & Gryskiewicz, 1987; Warford, 2010; Bourrie, Cegielski, Jones-Farmer, & Sankar, 2014; Earl & Timperley, 2015). We can see that innovation is a core requirement for adaptive leadership, as well as it is an attribute that distinctly thrives in special education teachers and leaders.

## Adaptive Leadership and Special Education

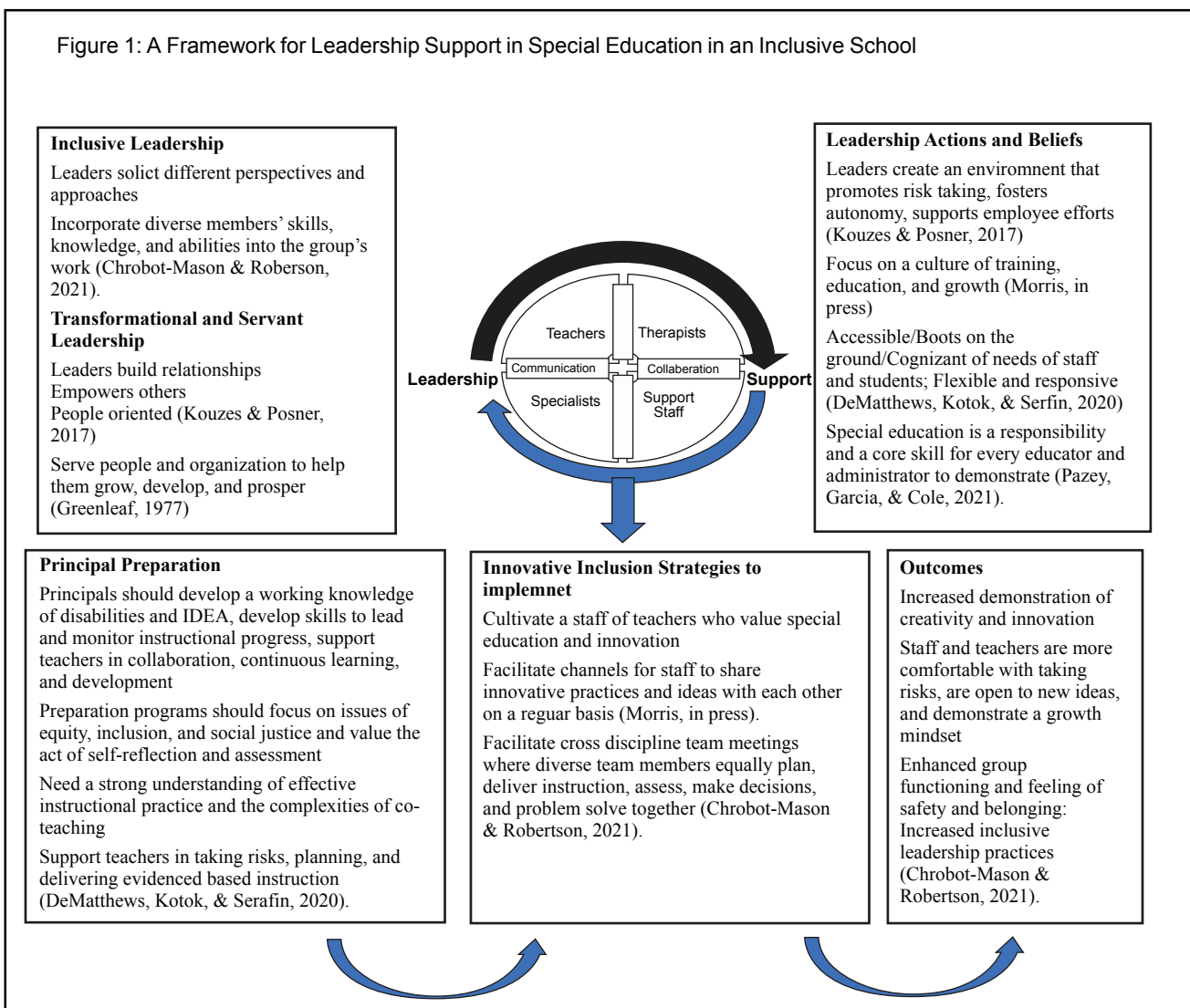
In studying a specific special education school in a Northeast state, I found that innovation lived within the intersection of teacher's attributes, the environment, and in the leadership practices and support. Teachers adopted growth mindsets from working in this school's environment, learned to embrace mistakes, and become open to change. Administration was able to achieve innovation through the building of relationships, demonstrating trust, and promoting autonomy. If schools wish to continue to grow and persevere through the challenges and changes that not only special education service delivery brings, but unknown changes like a world-wide pandemic, teachers and leaders must take on an innovative mindset (Paxton & Stralen, 2015).

This particular school's administration exemplified balance between being visionary and staying true to the core values of the school. Using the vision of the school as the driving force for change, innovation catapulted the

organization and its members forward. The drive for progress was a shared piece of the school's culture. A core value of the school was to provide the best possible education for the students and was embedded in the actions of all school personnel. Connected to this value was a drive for change, improvement, and innovation. Collins and Porras (1997) categorize this behavior as "preserving the core, stimulating progress" (p. 82). This behavior allows an organization to explore, experiment, and change. Instructional staff can remain true to their values but still be visionary.

In interviews with teachers and leaders in this district, I found that all lived a shared purpose and passion that drove individual actions and programming. This purpose was rooted in a commitment to the students and was the core driver for innovation at the school. The teachers and administrators did not set out to be "innovative." They set out to make their students' instructional lives better. Through these actions, innovative ideas and practices emerged, and ultimately, educational equity.

Figure 1: A Framework for Leadership Support in Special Education in an Inclusive School



## Inclusive Leadership: Leading Equity Through Change

The administration at this special education school demonstrated inclusive leadership (Chrobot-Mason and Roberson, 2021) which involves behaviors like sharing decision making, soliciting different perspectives and approaches, and incorporating different members' skills, knowledge, and abilities into the group's work. Leaders must hold pro-diversity beliefs as well as the school needs to have policies and practices in place that facilitates the participation of all group members. These antecedents can lead to higher group performance, feelings of safety and belonging, and increased creativity and innovation. This will produce an environment where members feel safe to take risks and learn from mistakes (Kouzes & Posner, 2017).

This conversation on adaptive leadership and innovative mindsets requires leaders approaching educational decisions to use a special education individualized instructional paradigm. It supports the need for stronger preparation in adaptive leadership for leaders in special education (Crockett, 2002; Praisner, 2003; Garrison-Wade, Sobel, & Fulmer, 2007; DeMatthews, Kotok, & Serafini (2020)). There has been recent research and guidance emphasizing the need for increased focus and rigor on principal preparation in special education law, practices, and pedagogy (Crockett, 2002; Pazez & Cole, 2012; DeMatthews, Kotok, & Serafini, 2020). Principals are responsible for the instruction and growth for all students in their school. The roles and responsibilities of the school principal and special education supervisor consistently intersect and overlap at increasingly higher rates (Lashley & Boscardin, 2003); Crockett, 2007). Principals' responsibilities are concentrating more and more on special education, prevention, and intervention, and leading an inclusive school, which suggests that preparation programs should adjust to meet this need. Across grade levels students are at divergent skill levels, skill gaps are widening, and personalization and differentiation are essential for all students. A special education knowledge and mindset supports administrators' abilities to adapt to changing environment, students, and situations. We can reframe adaptive leadership as an inclusive mindset, and ultimately, an innovative mindset.

## A Framework for Leadership Support of Special Education in an Inclusive School

The research demonstrates that special education and inclusive leadership practices should be a driving force in education and administration preparation. The created framework (**Figure 1**) illustrates how specific leadership actions and beliefs, leadership theory, and the power of diverse, collaborative teaming inform leadership preparation and a school's innovative inclusion strategies. Together, these elements produce the outcomes of increased innovation, creativity, intrinsic motivation, and feelings of teacher satisfaction and safety in a school environment. This framework guides administrators through

leading special education service delivery, supporting teacher training, collaboration, and instruction. More importantly, this framework (Figure 1) is derived from my observations in schools and research studies.

In Theoharis's (2007) definition of social justice, he states that principals should make working to eliminate marginalization in schools central to their advocacy, leadership practice, and vision. This includes inclusive schooling practices for students with disabilities. He builds upon the work on Sapon-Shevin (2003) who asserted that, "Inclusion is not about disability... Inclusion is about social justice. By embracing inclusion as a model of social justice, we can create a world fit for all of us" (pp. 26, 28). Innovation is special education and it's what every adaptive leader needs to embrace and live every day.

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