

## Leadership Matters in the Education of Students with Special Needs in the 21st Century

reviewed by Audrey Cohan & Elizabeth Stein – August 15, 2018

**Title:** Leadership Matters in the Education of Students with Special Needs in the 21st Century  
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Educators and administrators with a range of experiences will find useful guidance in *Leadership Matters in the Education of Students with Special Needs in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, edited by Festus E. Obiakor, Tachelle Banks, Anthony F. Rotatori, and Cheryl Utley.

The book's overall goal is to provide school leaders with practical ideas for how best to include students with special needs within general education classrooms. The collection of 13 chapters supports the notion that for students with exceptionalities to be meaningfully included within general education learning environments, leadership design must expand beyond the traditional view of the administrator as the sole leader. The leadership concept for the 21st century must also include teachers as leaders who are willing to advocate for integrated quality school cultures. The distinction between the need for classroom leadership and school-wide systematic leadership is clearly made. The book's objective is seamlessly met through the chapters' collective message that school leaders have the unique capacity to transform school environments and cultivate authentic, inclusive, rich learning experiences for all learners.

The challenge for any edited book is to connect the chapters. Obiakor, Banks, Rotatori, and Utley are experienced educators and sophisticated writers who masterfully connect the special education frameworks that exist today while also providing a much-needed historical context. In much of Obiakor and Rotatori's earlier works, the construct of special education is overlaid with social themes such as multicultural education and success for diverse learners. The special education commentary in this book is situated in the 21st century with a call for culturally competent and collaborative leaders. This book, while promoting a 21st century lens, offers historical reasons for this nation's "lack of educational attainment, and its inability to academically compete globally on standardized assessments" (p. 1). The solution, described by the authors, is to shift the leadership pattern for students in general as well as for special education. The authors argue that there are seven leadership characteristics underpinning the edited chapters. These seven dimensions are not new, but when combined may contribute to more focused, responsive leaders who recognize individual student learning needs. The dimension that is most memorable from the book is that "leadership creates contribution" (p. viii). For instance, leaders must allow others to develop and share ideas since every teacher and administrator has strengths and professional ideas to contribute.

Chapter One and Chapter Four are outstanding in that they both impart a well-defined vision for supporting classroom leaders. The information shared in the chapters guides educators and encourages them to expand their capacity to make empowered instructional decisions. Chapter One, written by Harris, Obiakor, Rotatori, and Graves offers two case studies related to improving schools through instructional leadership. The first demonstrates the critical need for general education teachers to be perceptively aware and capable in order to design and deliver instruction that meets the needs of students of all abilities. The second shares an example of how leadership may streamline professional development experiences for both special education and general education teacher preparation. Chapter Four, written by Strozier and Nelson Head, highlights the need for principals to embrace the concept of shared leadership and include teachers as leaders in the co-creation of meaningful, inclusive learning environments. Their strategy, called *think partnership*, "is at the heart of the idea of shared leadership in that key stakeholders are all considered equal partners" (p. 63). To that end, the authors focus on cultivating a collaborative classroom and school community that is consistent with a shared vision, shared responsibilities, and ongoing communication.

Chapter Five, written by Gibson, delves into the role of school leaders when managing challenging behaviors. The author makes a clear point that managing behaviors must happen at both the classroom level and school building level for a

strong, inclusive school culture. He also integrates positive behavioral interventions and functional behavior assessments, which are critical to an understanding of how problematic behaviors can disrupt the learning environment and take time away from instruction.

Chapter Eight, written by Uteley, expands the view of school leaders to include culturally responsive leaders whose goal should be to engage the entire school community through transformative actions that honor personal cultures while confronting social justice issues with transparency and collaborative practices. Additionally, Chapter Thirteen, written by Beachum, sums up the theme of the book with the statement, "A large part of the problem in special education is the lack of a sense of urgency" (p. 204). As reviewers, we agree that special education is "almost always positioned opposite that of general education" (p. 204). Perhaps we need to be asking not why leadership matters in the education of students with special needs, but why we are still separating general education and special education when addressing leadership. Through the lens of leadership, the editors are trying to shift this paradigm by selecting and sharing the thoughtful and strategic practices and routines of successful leaders.

A conclusion or summary chapter would benefit the book and tie some of the leadership initiatives for students with exceptionalities together, such as leadership roles, culturally responsive practices, technology, and South Africa as a global example. In addition, the issue of disproportionality is touched upon, particularly in Chapter Five, but a broader and more in-depth discussion would offer the reader a better understanding as to why educators need this book in the first place. Similarly, the "privatization of achievement" (p. 2) demands a greater analysis. As reviewers and special educators, we agree that this book will support leaders dedicated to practices that meaningfully include all students in their care.

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