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Leading school communities to implement a sustainable school-wide model leading to enhancing learning outcomes for students with ASD

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Abstract

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Keywords

learning, communities, enhancing, outcomes, model, students, asd, wide, sustainable, implement, leading, school

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LEADING SCHOOL COMMUNITIES TO IMPLEMENT A SUSTAINABLE SCHOOL-WIDE MODEL LEADING TO ENHANCING LEARNING OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS WITH ASD

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ABSTRACT

The crucial role of school leaders in inclusive schools for students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) has received more attention in recent years. A pilot study was conducted in three Australian/Queensland schools to trial a shared model of school leadership in implementing a whole school approach for students with ASD. Schools established an ASD leadership team, which was headed up by the school principal and head of special education (HOSE) but also included a classroom teacher, and a parent of a child with ASD. Together the principal and HOSE led the team in assessing their current practices and establishing an action plan to establish effective practices for students with ASD at a whole school, classroom and individual student level. Findings indicate that the active engagement of the principal in leading the vision and development of inclusive practices was essential to empowering the HOSE to become an instructional leader in the school. In addition, the partnership between the principal and head of special education were important in helping the principal to gain knowledge and skills in effective practice for students with ASD, and to position the HOSE to create effective instructional practices throughout the school for students with ASD.

INTRODUCTION

The number of students with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) attending mainstream schools has increased dramatically over the past

decade. According to a report by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2012), approximately 115,400 Australians had a diagnosis of ASD in 2012. This number includes an estimated 84,000 children from 5 to 19 years, most of whom attend mainstream schools. More importantly the majority of respondents (86%) reported experiencing both academic and social difficulties in school. The increase in numbers of students with ASD attending mainstream schools has placed a great deal of pressure on school leaders and teachers to support these students to achieve better outcomes.

Researchers (Bays & Crockett, 2007) have highlighted the important role that school principals play in the overall leadership of inclusive schools and achievement of students with disabilities. The role the principal plays in schools has also been cited as a key element of effective programs for students with ASD and other disabilities, with the principal assuming the responsibility of organisational leader, instructional leader, and moral leader (Crockett, 2002). Principals have reported, however, that they often have had little training to equip them in leading school programs for individuals with ASD (Praisner, 2003; Weller, 2012). Shaddock, Giorcelli and Smith (2007) emphasise that to be an effective leader for students, including those with ASD, school leaders need to establish a clear vision for inclusion of students with diverse needs. In addition effective school leaders in inclusive schools foster a culture in which staff are continually developing their

knowledge and skills as well as their ability to collaborate and build partnerships with families. Most importantly, research has stressed that the active engagement of principals with students with ASD, and the modelling of learning and collaborative processes by principals is extremely important to the realisation of school communities in which students with ASD achieve enhanced social and academic outcomes (Mrozowicz, 2009).

Shared, or distributed leadership has also been cited as an important aspect of successful school communities (Dempster, 2009; Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2006). Bays and Crockett (2007) report that successful school principals in inclusive schools share instructional leadership in both formal and informal ways. As inclusion in mainstream schools has become more common for students with ASD (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012), special education teachers have redefined their roles and responsibilities for students with ASD and have increasingly moved into roles as school leaders for inclusion (Crockett, 2002). At the same time general classroom teachers are being asked to take on more responsibility for instruction of students with ASD, but are reporting they often feel unequipped and anxious about meeting the needs of these students (Humphrey & Lewis, 2008). Both special education and general education classroom teachers have reported that the support of the school principal is essential to enable them to collaborate and develop effective strategies for students with ASD (Valeo, 2010; Weller, 2012).

Despite the extant research on successful school programs for students with ASD, limited studies have been conducted on how school leaders can utilise a shared model of leadership to implement a whole of school approach for students with ASD. This paper will discuss a recent project conducted in three Queensland schools¹ in which principals and HOSEs led the establishment of school leadership teams. These teams were provided with training and support to lead their school communities in the implementation of a sustainable school-wide approach enabling students with ASD to achieve higher levels of academic and social outcomes. The key aim of this project was to examine the

role of school principals and special education leaders in implementing a school-wide approach for students with ASD.

METHOD

This study was part of a wider project to investigate the employment of a whole of school approach to build the capacity of school leaders, leadership teams and school communities to achieve outcomes for students with ASD. The project took place over 18 months from August 2012 to December 2013. Full ethics approval was obtained from ethics committees at both Griffith University and the Queensland Department of Education, Training and Employment.

Participants

Schools. The study was conducted in three government schools located in an urban area of Queensland. A few months prior to the commencement of the project in August 2012, a full day workshop was held for schools in the area to discuss the needs of students with ASD as well as the challenges encountered by teachers and schools in supporting these students. This initial workshop generated an interest in the region in trialling a whole school approach.

The three schools were selected based on the willingness of both the principal and HOSE to create whole school practice in their schools for students with ASD. In addition, schools were selected to represent both primary and secondary programs as the researchers wished to examine whether school leaders would need to assume different roles in the two settings.

The three schools included one Prep to Year 12 school (School 1), one primary school (School 2), and one high school (School 3). School 1 had a population of approximately 1800 students (800 primary and 1000 secondary), including 52 students (27 primary, 25 secondary) who had been diagnosed with ASD, and an additional 12 students who were awaiting diagnosis. School 2 had 900 students, including 14 students with a diagnosis of ASD, and nine additional students awaiting diagnostic assessment. School 3 was close to School 2 and had 790 students, including 17 students with ASD, with two additional students waiting for assessment. It

1. The authors would like to acknowledge the contribution of the Queensland Department of Education, Employment and Training and Griffith University.

should be noted that although these were the initial numbers given when the schools first agreed to participate, during the project each school reported their population of students with ASD increased by 30-40%. In addition, this particular region of Queensland did not currently have a special school and all students with disabilities including students with ASD were enrolled in mainstream schools.

ASD School Leadership Team Members. At the beginning of the project, each school was asked to select individuals to comprise a school ASD leadership team. In keeping with previous research on shared leadership in special education (Bays & Crockett, 2007; DiPaola, Tschannen-Moran, & Walther-Thomas, 2004; Theoharis & Causton, 2014), the first two members of the team selected were the principal and head of special education (HOSE) at each school. In addition, in order to foster a culture of shared responsibility for students with ASD, schools were asked to include a classroom teacher. Finally, to incorporate the perspectives of parents and foster family involvement in educational programs for students with ASD, each school selected at least one parent to participate on the committee. As School 1 encompassed both a primary and secondary campus, the school's ASD leadership team included two parent representatives, two classroom teachers and two special education teachers. Information on schools and school-based leadership team members is presented in Table 1.

Implementation of the Model

The purpose of the project was to trial a model focusing on a whole school approach to build the capacity of school leaders and schools to improve outcomes for students with ASD. Engagement of school leaders is an initial component of the model and utilises Dempster's Blueprint for Leadership to target best practice for students with ASD (Iovannone, Dunlap, Huber, & Kincaid, 2003; Simpson, deBoer-Ott, & Smith-Myles, 2003) in the areas of: shared leadership, curriculum and teaching, conditions for learning, professional development, and connections with families and communities (Dempster, 2009). A professional development session was run by the researchers one month prior to the commencement of the project to provide school principals and HOSE with a theoretical background and understanding of

the steps required for implementing the project. Following this session, school principals and HOSEs were asked to establish the ASD leadership team.

Implementation of the whole school model included: firstly, school leaders working with ASD leadership teams to establish a shared vision statement for students with ASD at the school; and secondly, teams working together to assess their current practices and to develop an action plan that would address whole school, teacher, and individual practices leading to outcomes for both teaching staff and students with ASD across the school. In formulating school action plans, school leaders built on the research regarding use of a three-tiered model of systems change and programs for students with ASD in schools (Crosland & Dunlap, 2012), targeting outcomes and developing strategies at a whole school (primary), classroom or group (secondary), and individual student (tertiary) levels.

In addition, although it was initially planned that the research team would provide both initial and ongoing professional development and would assist with troubleshooting, it quickly became apparent that the support of an external coach/mentor/critical friend, who had specialised knowledge and expertise in research and practice of autism spectrum disorder, was necessary for school principals and HOSEs to implement the model over time. This role was assumed by one of the authors and member of the research team who assumed different roles over time including providing professional development and "coaching" sessions to individual schools as needed, touching base on a regular basis to discuss issues and targets with school leaders, and providing expertise and research-based knowledge when issues arose. The support of the coach/mentor/critical friend was subsequently identified by school principals and HOSEs as being necessary for the successful implementation of the whole school capacity building model in schools.

Data Collection

Prior to the commencement of the project, baseline data was collected through conducting initial semi-structured interviews with school principals and HOSEs regarding current issues and outcomes for students with ASD and current practices regarding leadership and

Table 1 *School and School-based Team Member Information*

<i>School</i>	<i>Level</i>	<i>Students with ASD</i>	<i>Team Members</i>	<i>Designators</i>	<i>Gender</i>
School 1	Prep - 12	52 diagnosed 12 awaiting diagnosis	1. Principal 2. Head of Special Education (HOSE) 3. Classroom Teacher	1. P1 2. H1 3. CT 1 4. SP 1 5. CT 1-2	1. M 2. F 3. F 4. F 5. F
School 2	Primary (Prep-7)	14 diagnosed 9 awaiting diagnosis	1. Principal 2. Head of Special Education (HOSE) 3. Classroom Teacher	1. P1 2. H1 3. CT 1	1. M 2. F 3. F
School 3	High School (8-12)	17 diagnosed 2 awaiting diagnosis	1. Principal 2. Head of Special Education (HOSE) 3. Classroom Teacher	1. P1 2. H1 3. CT 1	1. M 2. F 3. F

implementation of programs for these students. Additionally school leadership teams employed a whole school profiling instrument to complete a self-assessment of their school’s current practices for students with ASD in the five key areas of leadership outlined by Dempster (2012).²

Information on roles and responsibilities of school ASD leadership teams and individual team members (principals, HOSEs, classroom teachers, parents) was collected through interviews at the end of the project. Interviews were semi-structured and involved discussions with each team member around eight open-ended questions regarding the roles and actions of team members and of the team as a whole in implementing the whole school approach at their school. A list of interview questions is presented in Appendix A. In addition, this second set of interviews was designed to facilitate discussion of the ways in which team members had worked together to implement a shared leadership model for students with ASD across the school

The second set of interviews were conducted individually with members (i.e., principal,

HOSE, classroom teacher representative, and parent representative) of each school’s ASD leadership team. A total of 17 interviews were conducted, each lasting approximately 1 hour. All interviews were audio-recorded and were later transcribed for analysis. Participants were given a copy of the questions ahead of time and were asked to use these to guide their discussion of the impact of the project and particularly of their participation and role in the project.

Data Analysis

Results of interviews were analysed and coded for themes using the method of thematic analysis described by Boyatzis (1998) and Creswell (2007). After interviews were transcribed, transcriptions were read through a number of times, noting key points, words and phrases in the margins. From these memos, initial codes were constructed and a deductive approach was utilised to compare codes across transcripts and to consolidate these codes into initial subthemes based on the key roles of school leaders in inclusive schools identified by Crockett (2002). Finally subthemes were analysed in relation to the research questions and were compared to build and collapse subthemes into overall

themes, reflecting the essential experience for the participants. Themes and subthemes are presented in Table 2 – see following section. In order to check the validity of data analysis, member checks were conducted with participants from each school.

FINDINGS

Interviews revealed key themes regarding the varying roles school principals and HOSEs assumed throughout the project and the ways in which they engaged with school communities to implement the action plan for students with ASD at their school. In addition, subthemes were identified that reflected the specific actions and responsibilities of principals and HOSEs in relation to the overall theme. These themes and subthemes are presented below in Table 2.

Theme 1: Active versus Passive

The first theme encapsulates the experience of principals as school leaders during the project. Among the three principals, the amount to which they were either Active versus Passive had a profound impact on the ability of the team and the school to implement practices for students with ASD at the primary or whole school level. Principals reported that they were active leaders as they engaged with HOSEs, school staff, and parents to construct and model programs and outcomes for students with ASD. The principal at School 2 particularly indicated that they felt a critical part of their role was to model the implementation of the vision for students with ASD at the school. The degree and ways in which principals actively engaged with team members and participated in the project varied between the three schools from active and ongoing participation and support to regular monitoring and strategic support. In relation to the impact of active and ongoing participation and support on the practice of the HOSE and classroom teachers one principal (P2) stated, “It’s looking at those three frames: high quality teaching, working out how your personal pedagogy interacts with what’s going on in other teacher’s classrooms and how that connects to theory”. Another principal (P3) stressed the active engagement of principals as key to the implementation of the whole school approach for students with ASD saying:

That leadership issue and I think that’s probably one of the things that really differentiates this project because you know, that has been demonstrated to be such a key thing, to get that leadership from the principal.

Although this principal (P3) did recognise the importance of active leadership, he reported that he was distracted by other things and challenged to maintain an active role in leadership for students with ASD, engaging more routinely in regular monitoring and strategic support, which is reflected in his comment:

So I guess it was providing feedback as well, probably the role of oversight didn’t occur as much because the work was led from a position within the school. The oversight there was more probably checking in with me to know that I knew what was going on, rather than me checking in to make sure what was going on and that, you know is not the best system there.

Evaluation of action plans by school leadership teams and researchers indicated there was a link between the level of active engagement of the principal with the leadership team and implementation of actions and outcomes at both the school and student level. This finding concurs with Vivian Robinson’s research, which indicates that promoting and participating in teacher learning and development had the largest effect size in terms of making a difference to students’ academic outcomes (Robinson, Hohepa, & Lloyd, 2007). The school in which the principal was the most actively involved in leadership team meetings and overseeing the actions of the project was also the school in which the most participants stated they knew about the project, were involved in implementing the actions of the project and felt they had strong support and programs for students with ASD at the school. The following comment by a HOSE (H2) typified this kind of response:

Obviously the principal’s been very, very supportive. The leadership team have, through his guidance, accepted that there’s value in this. And I think

2. A copy of the whole school profiling instrument is available upon request from the authors.

Table 2 Roles of Principals and HOSEs in Leading School ASD Leadership Teams

Theme	Role	Subtheme
Active versus Passive leader	Principal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Philosophical leader • Organisational leader – administrative and instructional • Enabler – people and spaces
Empowered leader versus Operative	Head of Special Education (HOSE)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instructional leader • Project Manager • Implementer
Partnerships	Principal/HOSE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration • Reflection

probably that we did not keep it, we didn't sell it as it's just about ASD kids. This is about helping everybody, anybody who can use these approaches. I think that's been important in making it successful.

The school in which the principal was the least engaged in active leadership of the project and who spent more time on enabling others to take on responsibility for actions, was the school that reported the least systematic change at the whole school level, although the principal and HOSE reported improved awareness of teachers and outcomes for individual students as a result of actions implemented by the HOSE and leadership team. The HOSE (H3) also reported that the active leadership of the principal was essential in establishing the project as a priority at the school stating, "but when (principal) was bringing up that perspective it had a little bit more impact" (H3).

Underpinning the active or passive leadership of principals were the responsibilities and functions that principals reported they assumed both within the school ASD leadership team and in the overall implementation of the whole school approach. The responses of principals indicated that they saw themselves as taking on four essential functions: *an enabler of people and spaces; philosophical leader; organisational leader of administrative and instructional processes; and an active and engaged leader*. All three principals reported that they felt their role was primarily one of an *enabler of staff* providing support to the HOSE and staff to implement the project, as

exemplified by the statement of one principal (P3) "Enabling people, to say continue, keep going, you're doing a good job". HOSEs also confirmed that the principal's role of enabler involved them creating positive physical environments and spaces for students with ASD as indicated by the statement of one HOSE (H2), "That probably is a good place to start, yeah, look, it's just the physical environment as well, I think is something that we overlook for all students".

Principals also described ways in which they acted in the role of *philosophical leader* for the project and for inclusion of students with ASD in the school. This included actions such as communicating the intent, aspiration and ideas of the project and lending an authority to the project, (P3) "so going back to staff and explaining what we were doing, why we were doing, being able to do that and show that there was research based evidence". A third function described by principals was that of an *organisational leader of administrative and instructional processes*. Administrative tasks included checking in with the HOSE on dates and times, making sure the school had a functional ASD leadership team, and making sure the requirements of the project were being met. Additionally principals verified that they were responsible for overseeing and monitoring the implementation of the plan and working with HOSEs to troubleshoot issues as they arose. Principal 1 highlights this:

Certainly my role is to make sure that all the accountabilities around what's required of us in the project are being

met and we did have a leadership team that is functional, we did have a committee that is functional and certainly having regular updates and progress from (HOSE) was my role. So I guess knowing that the support's there from the top down is pretty important.

Principals also said that as an organisational leader they were also responsible for overseeing the development of instructional strategies for individuals with ASD, "It's about really mapping it out, well researched and well documented, that these practical applications are successful" (P1).

Theme 2: Empowered Leader versus Operative

A key theme for the Heads of Special Education was their journey from functioning as a *School Operative* for students with ASD (i.e., following rules and policies rather than leading initiatives) to an *Empowered School Leader*, not just for students with ASD, but for high quality teaching and practices for all students. One HOSE stressed that by getting the school principal actively supporting and leading the project, this in turn facilitated the involvement and interest of the administrative team (i.e., deputy principals, heads of curriculum) and ultimately empowered the HOSE to lead staff across the school in implementing strategies for students with ASD. Another HOSE reported that participating in the school leadership team, and particularly her work with the school principal, had enabled her to discern her own leadership skills and to implement systematic change at the school level. She (H2) observed:

I had the opportunity to show that you can, things that I've believed in or been talking to people about for years as I went around in my previous job visiting schools, I've actually had the opportunity to say "This is how you can, you can make it work. It's possible". Yeah. The fact that you can demonstrate that, yeah, you can be successful at doing these things.

and also added,

I don't think that they should just see it about ASD. It should be about best practice for meeting individual's needs.

It needs to be embedded. What we've done is we won't have a separate ASD plan. The emphasis is on elements that will be embedded in our annual school implementation plan. So it's seen as like everybody, that guides everybody's specific roles, and expectations. Yeah. I don't think that you are going to be as effective if you just make it about a certain type of kid.

HOSEs also acted as school leaders of knowledge of ASD. Often principals reported they didn't really have specific knowledge about needs of students with ASD and relied on their HOSE to lead schools in developing this knowledge. One principal (P1) noted, "The (HOSE) has done a fair bit of work on getting some clear expectations for the case managers and that's desperately needed".

All three HOSEs recounted that they served primarily as the *project manager*. Their approach differed depending on the amount in which their principal actively engaged in the implementation of the project and the amount of time HOSEs were able to interact with their principal about project issues. As project managers their role involved managing both administrative and collaborative aspects of the project including guiding the direction of the ASD leadership teams in a collaborative fashion and overseeing professional development of staff, particularly in regard to goal setting and overseeing data collection for students. They also assumed the role of managing communication about the stages of the research process, and worked closely with the coach/mentor/critical friend to identify and address particular issues and needs as they arose at their school, assuming responsibility for the paperwork involved in the project, and communicating with the research team. The following statement of one HOSE (H2) best sums up the role of project leader, "follow the process, engage people, and gather the data, come up with the actions, start implementing those".

Responses of HOSEs also indicated that they saw themselves as *implementers of key actions* throughout the project. The HOSEs were most directly involved in establishing case management processes for individual students, including setting targets and collecting data

on student progress. The HOSE were also responsible for working with staff to create snapshots of student strengths and needs and to develop smart goals and goal attainment scales for students. In addition, HOSEs worked very closely with staff to develop and implement staff training and to identify and implement more effective strategies for students with ASD in classroom and playground settings, as illustrated by one classroom teacher team member (CT 2):

We have open dialogue with the group (ASD leadership team) and staff so kids are looked after. People are becoming aware in the playground that kids might have issues. (HOSE) makes people aware. Management plans have made people aware of needs across the school.

As the person most responsible for communication of the project to a range of stakeholders, HOSEs also reported that a critical role they facilitated was as the chief parent liaison within the ASD leadership team. All three HOSEs stressed that working with parents was an extremely important aspect of their position. Each of the three HOSE implemented specific actions to engage parents within the team and the school, including implementing parent workshops, and establishing regular communication with parents. Parent representatives also reported that they communicated primarily with the HOSE regarding the purpose of the project and their role in the team. Parents differed on their comfort with communicating with other team or staff members. While the parent at School 2 reported she felt she could go to anyone on the staff, the parents at Schools 1 and 3 were less certain of whom to talk with other than the HOSE. As one parent (Pt 1) noted:

But only last week when I finally sat down with (HOSE) and (HOSE) goes "Yes, we can do this. Yes, we can do this." There were suggestions that I'd brought up at the end of term two with my daughter's teachers at parent/teacher interview, and with her case manager and everybody there told me "No, we can't do this. We don't have the resources." But when I spoke to (HOSE) she goes "Yes, of course we can do that." And so those things have been put into place.

Theme 3: Partnerships

Not only did individual members of the ASD leadership teams play a critical role in the implementation of the whole school model, but various *partnerships* between team members were identified that were essential to the ability of schools to successfully implement the model and change practices at both the whole school and individual student level. Of particular importance was the *partnership* that developed between the school principal and HOSE. It was apparent that at all schools, the amount and type of collaboration between principals and HOSEs and the way that these individuals worked together to manage the various roles and responsibilities for students with ASD at their school was linked to higher degrees of implementation of strategies across the school, change in practice demonstrated by staff throughout the school, and outcomes achieved by individual students with ASD.

This was particularly true at School 2 in which the principal and HOSE reported that the process gave them an action research framework from which they could examine key questions in relationship to the needs of students with ASD and utilise data to critically reflect on the current practices throughout the school and outcomes for students with ASD. They were then able to use this reflection as a springboard for engaging in the change process. Most importantly the HOSE and principal related that the process allowed them to engage in collaborative reflection around critical factors for students with ASD stating, "That they're able to use data to work out where the child is at along that continuum and then go from there in terms of what they need to do next to support the child" (H2). This was reiterated by another of the principals (P3) who reported that the model brought the needs of students with ASD to the forefront of his discussions with the HOSE and focused their work together on developing specific processes and outcomes throughout the school. This is evident in his statement:

Again I firmly believe it was an enabling thing. I think there was work in place that I had either identified or (HOSE) and myself had identified together. As you know we had already used our full time effective numbers to try and raise awareness, to try and improve the support, not just within what traditionally

has been seen as the allocated resources which would be the special education unit staffing. But to build capacity in staff, and I think that we've been able to build capacity in staff.

DISCUSSION

In today's culture of high expectations and inclusion for students with ASD (ACARA, 2011), building the capacity of school leaders and school communities to meet the unique needs of these students has been the subject of intense discussion. Previous studies (Weller, 2012) however, have suggested that many school leaders have limited knowledge about the needs of students with ASD and often feel ill equipped to make decisions regarding educational programs for these students. The current study was conducted to examine the role of school principals and special education leaders in leading a team in implementing a school-wide approach for students with ASD.

Consistent with previous research (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2010), the amount in which principals were active or passive leaders was linked to whether HOSEs were empowered as leaders or merely operatives of practice. Crockett (2002) contends that school leaders in inclusive schools must assume a variety of new roles including moral collaborative leadership. The three principals assumed different roles during the project, but particularly focused on enabling school staff and acting as the philosophical leader for inclusion and improved outcomes of students with ASD. More importantly there was a difference in the degree to which each of the three principals were actively engaged in leading the project as opposed to passively overseeing the project.

Confirming the findings of previous studies (Bays & Crockett, 2007; Mrozowicz, 2009), active engagement of the principal in leading and modelling implementation of strategies was connected with higher engagement of staff across the schools in the implementation of school-wide practices, as well as increased partnerships between principals and HOSEs. Active engagement of the principal was also linked to higher levels of knowledge and involvement of classroom teachers on the leadership team. This supports previous findings that school principals play an extremely important part in establishing the inclusion of

students with ASD as a priority (Kugelmass & Ainscow, 2004) for staff across the school. These results also suggest that building the capacity of schools to cater for students with ASD is only achievable if the principal is actively engaged in the process.

The characteristics of the partnerships that developed between principals and HOSEs was also important as principals played a critical role in enabling the HOSE to assume an increased leadership role across the school. Changing the perception of special education teachers has been identified as an important element of the change from traditional to inclusive school communities (Rhein et al., 2010). By placing the HOSE as a leader for developing effective instructional practices and environments for students, the principal modeled the shared ownership of students with ASD by both special education and general education teachers. Correspondingly, the partnership between the principal and HOSE also built the knowledge of principals about ASD and ways in which principals could enable staff to collaborate and take more responsibility for outcomes for students with ASD. Previous research (Horrocks, White, & Roberts, 2008) has found that principal's knowledge about ASD as well as their direct involvement with students with ASD, positively influences the decisions they make about school programs and processes for these students.

Although all principals spent time with their HOSEs, there was a difference between the three schools in the amount and ways that the principals and HOSEs worked together. In two of the schools, the partnership between the HOSE and principal evolved around more traditional roles, with the HOSE assuming more of a management role for the project and the principal supporting their actions with staff. In the third school, however, the principal and HOSE worked together to lead the school staff in school-wide inquiry of systemic change processes. The finding that this partnership and facilitation of all staff in the process affirms Mrozowicz's (2009) contention that effective leaders in inclusive schools empower others in a search for understanding and growth.

CONCLUSIONS

School Principals and HOSEs working together can enable leadership teams derived from a school-wide, shared-leadership model to

effectively implement a whole school approach for students with ASD and develop a sustainable model of shared responsibility and partnerships for students with ASD across the school. The active leadership of the school principal was critical in establishing the ethos and vision for the school and in empowering the head of special education to become an instructional leader through the school. In implementing a whole school approach for students with ASD, HOSEs assumed the role of project leader but also developed increasing roles as a school leader for ASD and effective practice. Partnerships between principals and HOSEs were critical in supporting the role of the HOSE as an instructional leader and in developing the knowledge and practice of principals for students with ASD.

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