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Principal capability in special schools

Peter O'Brien
University of Wollongong

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Principal Capability in Special Schools

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the award of the degree

Doctor of Education

from

UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

Peter O'Brien

(Dip. Teach., Grad. Dip. Human Movement Science, M. Ed)

Faculty of Education

2010

Certification

I, Peter Barry O'Brien, declare that this thesis, submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Education, in the Department of Education, University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. The document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Peter Barry O'Brien

1 September 2010

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Abstract

Rapid changes in educational policy and practice, and widespread development in technological, communicative, legal, social, and medical fields, have dramatically impacted the global educational landscape over the last three decades. Educational research has subsequently generated a focus on educational leadership, and much investigation has been made into the nature and effects of a range of leadership styles, abilities and skills, and how they contribute to overall capability for successful school leadership. Yet whilst much of this research has been based in the mainstream educational setting, and some has examined educational leadership in the context of inclusive education, little has focussed on the leadership requirements for special schools, or Schools for Specific Purposes as they are known in the New South Wales public education system.

This study investigated the leadership skills, abilities, knowledge bases and overall capability required for successful leadership of special schools. It utilised a mixed-method model which sought the opinions of special school principals, teachers, support staff, and parents of children attending special schools. The perspectives of the special school principals in the study were compared with those of mainstream principals investigated by previous research. The study found that special school principals emphasised personal and interpersonal abilities more than the mainstream principals did, and there were several abilities which were statistically more important to special school principals than they were to mainstream principals: *having a sense of humour and keeping work in perspective, wanting to achieve the best outcome possible, and having a clear justified vision of where the school must head*. The study investigated the characteristics of special schools which might account for the different leadership requirements, and concluded that *challenging student behaviour* was considered by special school principals to be the most influential of those characteristics, as well as the most challenging aspect of being a special school principal.

In comparing the perspectives of the special school participant groups on the importance of a range of leadership abilities, the study produced a number of statistically significant results. Principals considered *having the ability to defer judgement and not to jump in too quickly to resolve a problem* as more important than the other groups did, parents

believed the ability to *develop interagency agreements to promote outcomes for students with disabilities (e.g. speech therapy, physiotherapy)* was more important than did the other groups, and support staff were of the opinion that both *being able to use Information Technology effectively to communicate and perform key work functions* and *understanding of industrial relations issues and process* were more important than the other groups believed.

This study has illustrated that there are indeed different leadership requirements between mainstream and special schools, and that there are different perspectives from the members of the special school community of what is required of a principal of a special school. In this regard, the study has provided a substantial resource for those who are already leading, or aspiring to lead, special schools, and with this in mind, the study recommends future research topics and the inclusion of a special schools leadership component in the on-going development and implementation of school leadership professional learning programs.

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List of Acronyms

The following table lists the acronyms used in the study in alphabetical order.

Acronym	Meaning
CEC	The Council for Exceptional Children
DET	Department of Education and Training
IEP	Individual Education Plan
NSW	New South Wales
NSW DET	New South Wales Department of Education and Training
SEN	Special Education Needs
SSP	School(s) for Specific Purposes
UTS	University of Technology Sydney