

Ensuring the Success of Struggling Learners: the Role of the Principal

by

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A Master's Project Submitted in Partial Fulfilment
of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF EDUCATION

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Abstract

The purpose of this project was to develop an understanding of struggling learners, their needs and how principals can help them be successful. I surveyed administrators in the school district in which I am employed and looked at current literature on struggling learners, special education issues as they pertain to principals, and the impact of inclusion on teachers and principals. Through the survey of administrators in my school district I had hoped to find strategies or programs that they had used or knew to help struggling learners. In my literature search I looked at the strategies to support struggling learners. I considered topics such as strength-based interventions, self-regulation, behaviour support programs, and Response to Intervention. I found that Response to Intervention was a feasible and potentially worthwhile approach to supporting struggling learners.

The survey and questionnaire were also meant to determine the principals' knowledge and understanding of inclusion and their role in supporting struggling learners. The other aspect of the survey was to determine the level of training in special education that the principals and administrators possessed. I compared this data to previous studies from my Literature Review.

I also wanted to understand what the principals' and administrators' perceptions were about the barriers to supporting struggling learners. I also looked at the literature to see what other studies had found to be the important attributes that principals should possess to best be able to support struggling learners.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank everyone who has supported me in throughout the Masters programme. I would especially like to thank Dr. Darlene Clover for her amazing patience and ability to guide me through the completion of my Master's project. Thank you as well to all in the Department of Educational Psychology and Leadership Studies.

Most importantly, I would like to acknowledge my wife, Paula, and my children, Annika and Eric, for their support and understanding. I would like to thank my family in Canada and Germany, without them completing my Masters project would not have been possible.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this project to my father who passed away before I completed the project. He always supported me unreservedly and wanted the best for me in life.

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PART I

Introduction

When I started my project six years ago I was in the Educational Leadership Masters program. As a teacher I had perceived a real need to support what I would call ‘struggling learners’. These are students who have been officially identified and given a designation for their leaning disability or behavioural disability and those students who are not officially identified. I became concerned that many of these struggling learners, despite all good intentions, did not seem to be succeeding in school. There never seemed to be enough help for them. As a classroom teacher I found it difficult to address their specific leaning needs. In other words neither the school nor the staff in my opinion was addressing their needs adequately.

My goal for the project was to survey principals and administrators and review the current literature to develop some suggestions about how to help these learners succeed. One of my initial challenges as a teacher was managing so-called ‘unruly’ students. I felt that teachers needed to have more support from principal. The principal needed to help work with us to solve the problem. I believed the problem might be cultural – school discipline was lacking or a permissive culture existed in these schools. Perhaps it was the parents who did not instil proper manners, although children learn things beyond home and the school, things parents are neither aware nor would approve necessarily of. I believed the issues were beyond my control. I looked for solutions beyond myself such as Effective Behaviour Support (EBS) and school discipline models and questioned why the special education teachers were not doing more to help. There was no doubt that often the students’ behaviour issues were masking a learning disabilities but I never

seemed to be able to get at the underlying learning issues. In addition to the above factors, I also lacked inexperience, sometimes I was an itinerant French teacher, I often-changed schools and positions or I shared the teaching position with another teacher. This gave me little opportunity to establish myself – take ownership of the class.

More recently my situation has changed. I now have had the same classroom teaching position for four years. I am established in my classroom and behaviour issues are minimal. This allows me to see the issues for struggling learners differently. The reasons that struggling learners are not succeeding in school are even more complex than I first thought. One is that there are simply not enough resources for these students. There are very few programs that directly address their needs and it is difficult to do so in our classrooms because of class size and composition factors. But I have to state my own complicity in this problem. As a classroom teacher I tended to teach in a one size fits all model. This served the middle or low middle of the class but my struggling learners were not succeeding and frustration was setting in. Thus, behaviour issues continued or better said, were perpetuated.

What I now try to do is remove the pressure from struggling learners and help them to feel successful. If I can create situations where struggling learners feel successful and see themselves succeeding in classroom activities, then they will perhaps begin to develop confidence in themselves. In collaboration with other staff I try to create small group instruction scenarios for the struggling learners to increase their reading level, work with them one on one, utilize remedial reading programs with the whole class which in fact benefit all the students but particularly those who are struggling. These initiatives require frequent assessment and collaboration with other staff but it works -

more students are successful. They have a better self-image and take more risks in their learning. This more positive and successful atmosphere in the classroom lessens the behaviour issues too.

So on the one hand, what is required is a change in instruction: a stronger focus on the students and their learning needs, frequent interventions with those students who struggle, faster assessments, greater knowledge of the students, collaboration with teams or resource people to develop the most efficient and realistic strategies to implement in busy classrooms.

The principal, however, is also key. The principal needs to be the learning leader and help establish systems that support teachers and students. One of the systems that seem workable is Response to Intervention (RTI). It is a system that addresses the learning needs of struggling students through immediate intervention as soon as the teacher has identified that the student has learning challenges. The idea is to use frequent and rapid assessments and then provide students with help on an on-going basis as needed. This type of identification of learning needs is not like the more cumbersome identification of students with learning disabilities through determining the discrepancy between IQ and achievement (Hughes & Dexter, 2011). The principal also needs to make helping struggling learners a priority, create an atmosphere of collaboration, find release time for collaboration and assessment through better deployment of resources and help find the best resources (people and materials) to support teachers and learners.

Problem and the context

How do schools best address the needs of struggling learners? These students' needs range from minor to severe. The goal of the education system is to ensure that all students reach their potential. Yet we must also recognise that these students who are struggling academically often also exhibit challenging behaviours. The more that can be done to help a student to be successful academically, the greater the likelihood that student will feel good about himself and school allowing him to ameliorate his behaviour.

One also has to set the current education system in British Columbia and much of North America into context. Inclusion is no longer a trend but it is now the norm. Schools currently must educate all types of learners and this is generally done in an inclusive way. Learners identified with substantial challenges such as learning disabilities, behavioural challenges or physical or health related disabilities are now expected to be educated in a general classroom. The extra support that these students require is often inadequate. This inadequacy is often due to lack of proper funding. The current economic neo-liberalism that our society is experiencing is restricting schools from meeting the needs of students with special needs and students who struggle to learn. Funding for public schools has become less of a priority. Furthermore, the societal structure has changed as well in that families are working more to maintain their financial state, and, therefore, parents are less able to spend time with their children. More and more of the duties of child rearing are falling to the schools.

I argue that as an instructional leader, the principal of a school must play a key role in aiding struggling learners. Understanding the role of the principal, the emphasis of this project, as it specifically relates to the success of struggling learners, is the first

step to developing a school-wide culture where learning by all students is valued, thereby, ensuring the successful education of all students. The principal needs to operate within the constraints of the limited funding model of our schools. It is always a balancing act of allocating scarce resources.

This study was conducted in School District 64 (Gulf Islands). School District 64 encompasses four islands situated off the coast of Southern Vancouver Island, B.C. The school district is a rural area with a total student headcount of 1768 (B.C. Ministry of Education, 2012). There are a total of 11 schools in the district.

Purpose and Objectives of the Study

The primary purpose of the study was to determine how principals could best serve the needs of struggling learners (students with both diagnosed and undiagnosed or designated or undesignated disabilities).

The objectives of this study were:

1. To identify the attributes of principals, the instructional leaders, that are needed to best serve struggling learners.
2. To identify the barriers preventing principals from best serving the needs of struggling learners.
3. To identify programs, strategies, or interventions that principals have already successfully implemented.
4. To explore the perceptions that principals and senior district administrators have of principals in their role of instructional leaders helping struggling learners.

The barriers/attributes perceived by the principals and senior administrators may include a wide range of issues: prior training/experience of principals in special education, thoughts about inclusion, the belief in the capacity and ability of all students to learn, the role of principals, the curricular experience of principals and the personality traits of principals.

Literature Review

Inclusive Education

The school system in North America and many international jurisdictions has embraced inclusive education. It has become a central part of educational policy in a significant number of countries (Leo & Barton, 2006) and in fact it has been mandated by legislation or court decisions (Wakeman, Browder, Flowers & Ahlgrim-Delzell, 2006). In British Columbia the government through addendums in the provincial school act mandates inclusion.

A board must provide a student with special needs with an educational program in a classroom where that student is integrated with other students who do not have special needs, unless the educational needs of the student with special needs or other students indicate that the educational programs for the student with special needs should be provided otherwise (Special Needs Students Order en M397/95; am. M32/04).

Scholars in fact argue that inclusion creates many challenges for students and school staff as well as creating many benefits for individuals and society. "Inclusion benefits all students, not just those identified as having special needs. Students who are

not disabled learn to understand and empathize with their peers” (B.C. School Superintendents’ Association, 2002, p.6). Educators generally accept the concept of inclusion. They understand how inclusion enables the student with special needs to develop social skills and how non-special needs students are able to develop an understanding of and familiarity with special needs students. Inclusion facilitates both the social and educational development of all students (Lasky & Karge, 2006). Additionally, educators generally understand that the concept of inclusion is based fundamentally on moral considerations - all learners should be included in the social setting of schools (Leo & Barton, 2006).

There is, however, a concern amongst some educators and the public that inclusion puts a strain on the classrooms. Teachers must provide differentiated instruction that addresses the needs and strengths of diverse learners. Classrooms are now very heterogeneous which places demands on all educators. Teachers are spending more time dealing with disruptive students, designing more diverse and inclusive lessons, and supervising educational assistants. The issue of lack of training and proper support for inclusive classrooms is a common lament of classroom teachers (Naylor, 2002). A British Columbia Teacher’s Federation (BCTF) study of teachers’ views of special education found:

Teachers’ views span a continuum on the issue of inclusion. Some fervently support inclusion, while a few totally reject it. The majority of respondents to this survey philosophically support inclusion as a concept and a philosophy. They also express their concern that special needs are not met because of limited support, and articulate their anger that they are left to cope with the consequences of

implementing an expensive concept in an under-resourced system (in Naylor, 2002, p.25).

The same report states that 56% of the teachers surveyed strongly or somewhat strongly felt professionally unprepared to work with students with special needs. Whereas only 34% strongly or somewhat strongly felt prepared to work with students with special needs. In addition, close to 80% of the respondents felt the level of government financial and resource support and curriculum support (adapted and modified materials) for inclusion was inadequate (Naylor, 2002).

The principal's role and special education training

As inclusion becomes entrenched in the education system and the knowledge of learning and behavioural disabilities increases the time that principals will have to spend on special education issues will increase. Principals are increasingly being held accountable for the programs offered in their schools. They are responsible for reporting about the progress and efficacy of the educational programs. Collins and White (2001) state that principals report that between 15 and 45% of their time is devoted to special education issues. This will increase as the demands for more inclusion and better levels of service for students with special needs rise.

Harkening back, special education and inclusion has made the principal's job far more complex. Principals are no longer just building managers and student disciplinarians (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). They need to be knowledgeable about the many facets of education. If up to 45% of a principal's time is taken up with special education issues, it only seems logical that training programs for principals should

include course work on special education. In one survey 90% of administrators stated that formal special education training was needed to be an effective leader. The same study found that 92% of the responding principals did not have a special education license or certification. Furthermore, most of these principals had completed none or very few courses in special education in undergraduate, graduate or pre-service and in-service administrator training programs (Wakeman, et al., 2006). The authors go on to question the competency of principals: “To be considered competent, principals should have fundamental knowledge of special education as well as knowledge of current issues in special education” (Wakeman, et al., 2006, p. 154).

Researchers like DiPaola and Walther-Thomas (2003) and Collins and White (2001) developed recommendations for administration programs. Collins and White describe a pre-service program for administrators. The program’s three major objectives include:

- 1) To train pre-service school administrators (principals and assistant principals) in the leadership and management of school-based special education programs, 2) To train pre-service school administrators (principals and assistant principals) in system-change strategies related to the implementation of an effective school-based special education program for students with behavioral (sic) disorders ... (Collins & White, 2001, p.7)

The students in the program took specific courses in Special Education Law and Special Education Curriculum, Instruction, and Program Design. They participated in Leadership Institutes on specially selected topics to refine their skills and knowledge. Finally, they completed a year-long practicum (Collins & White, 2001).

DiPaola and Walther-Thomas (2003) looked at the literature about effective principals and identified five common instructional leadership priorities: “(a) defining and communicating the school’s educational mission, (b) managing curriculum and instruction, (c) supporting and supervising teaching, (d) monitoring student progress, and (e) promoting a learning climate” (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003, p.9).

I, and others, would argue more effective principal training programs could address these needs. An effective training program for principals would include training in programs to support struggling learners (Wakeman et al., 2006). This training would give the principals the ability to support classroom teachers and other professionals supporting struggling learners (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). The added benefit or rationalisation is that interventions we utilise for students with special needs can be utilised for all students. Indeed, “best practices for students with learning disabilities are generally best practices for all students” (Duvall, 2006, p.42).

Significance of the Study

This study is significant for two key reasons. Firstly, it adds to the growing body of literature that aims to address the barriers to effective inclusion of learners and students with disabilities and the lack of special education training for teachers and administrators. By speaking exclusively with principals, this study uncovered some of the barriers they face as they strive to be instructional leaders and assist those who often fall behind. What this means is that this study aims more towards systemic change in schools, rather than simply at the classroom level. Secondly, this study provides information upon which to make some modest recommendations that principals can use to help them to

improve the success of all learners, no matter their ability. Specifically, these recommendations are that principals need to initiate interventions programmes such as Response to Intervention for struggling learners and promote the professional development of all staff in these interventions. In general, teachers and principals need additional training in special education and teaching strategies for struggling learners. This training needs to occur in pre-service stage and on an ongoing basis through professional development or in-service training.

PART II

Methodology and Methods

The research approach that I used in this study was a mixed methods methodology. A mixed methods approach was used because it lends itself to developing a broad understanding by incorporating both quantitative and qualitative research methods (Creswell, 2009). The qualitative and quantitative data were collected concurrently.

I decided to survey the principals and senior administrators in the school district because I believe their insight into the issues of struggling learners is very pertinent. The overall study was limited to their role as well. The principals and senior administrators set the policy and deploy the resources that are needed to support struggling learners. Specifically, I used a descriptive survey to obtain a cross-sectional view, both opinions and attitudes from administrators, of how principals can support struggling learners. In this case there were no variables but I simply aim to describe the sample group of administrators and their opinions using simple percentages and proportions (Punch 2005).

The survey was divided into three parts (See Appendix A). In the first section I collected personal information on respondents using five questions. The five questions aimed to illicit information around years/length of teaching experience and as a principal. I also asked if they had any formal training in special education and how adequate they found the training. Questions also delved into what stage of his or her education the specific training in special education had been taken. In the second part of the survey I used 15 quantitative questions. These questions as well as the full set of survey questions

is included in Appendix I. The quantitative survey questions were designed to gauge the respondents' opinions about struggling learners, the roles of teachers and principals in supporting struggling learners and the need for specific training in special education. These questions asked for specific initiatives the principals and administrators might have put in place and what initiatives they felt would be most successful. In the third part of the survey I asked open-ended questions to obtain additional insight into the respondents views of the role of the principal and the challenges a principal faces.

The survey was conducted using a self-administered questionnaire because of its simplicity and because it was an efficient way to obtain the data (Creswell, 2009). I chose to survey the administrators in my district because I felt they would be a good representation of all school administrators and the data would compliment the review of the literature on struggling learners. I also wanted to incorporate the practical knowledge of the administrators. They have a full overview of schools, the competing interests, the financial constraints and personnel issues. I also wanted to limit the scope of the survey to save time. I felt that out of all the education groups, the administrators could give me the best overview.

Survey structure

The first and second sections of the survey generated quantitative data, as noted above, from which I was be able to make suppositions about the respondents' training and viewpoints. I was able to gather statistical data about the administrators' work experience, special education training, viewpoints regarding inclusion, special education,

roles and responsibilities in schools related to struggling learners and the need for training of those working with struggling learners.

For this quantitative portion of the survey I used 15 Likert scale questions. Likert scale questions or items use a rating scale, typically range from strongly agree to strongly disagree. I have used a 5-point scale, which means the middle point is a neutral response. Likert scales are used in research because of the efficiency they provide for quantitative data collection, their flexibility and their ability to combine measurement with opinion. Rating scales - in this case Likert scales - are useful for determining attitudes, perceptions and opinions of the respondents (Cohen 2000; Bell, 1999).

In the third section of the survey I was able to collect qualitative information about what the administrators thought the barriers were to helping struggling learners and what ideas they had on how to best help struggling learners. The questions in this section were open-ended and meant to compliment the questions in the first and second parts.

The questions were developed by the researcher to clarify issues that had been identified in the purpose and objectives section of this study. These qualitative questions were:

1. What are the most important responsibilities of a principal?
2. What are the greatest challenges for a principal?
3. In your opinion, what would be an effective program or programs for struggling learners (identified and unidentified)?
4. What might be the advantages of such programs for struggling learners?
5. What might be the disadvantages of such programs?
6. What do you see as the central issues impeding the success of struggling learners?

Survey Procedures

The survey was sent to 14 principals and vice-principals and two district administrators and one retired director of instruction using the school district's interschool mail system. The participants returned the surveys to the researcher via the interschool mail. The completed surveys were kept confidential: the identities of the respondents known only to the researcher. Summaries of the survey are detailed in Appendix II.

Respondents and Response Level

Principals, vice-principals, the present Director of Instruction and the past Director of Instruction and the Superintendent of the district were surveyed. The survey and consent letter was sent to 17 potential respondents in June 2007. The surveys were completed in June and July of 2007. Eleven surveys were completed and returned and six surveys were not returned – a 64.7% return rate.

Two of the returned surveys were not fully or properly completed. In one survey two of the 15 Likert scale questions were not answered and one question had two choices circled. In a second survey one of the 15 Likert questions was unanswered.

The respondents were six current principals, one vice principal who is now the district manager of personnel, two principals who have subsequent to completing the survey retired, the current director of instruction (since retired) and a past director of instruction.

Most of the responding principals are from the smaller schools – 150 students or less. The past principal from the middle school completed the survey. The middle school

traditionally has a population of about 300 students in grades six to eight. It includes a French Immersion program.

The high school has approximately 600 students in grades nine to twelve. The high school offers a French Immersion program as well. In the high school there is a distributed learning program and an alternative high school program.

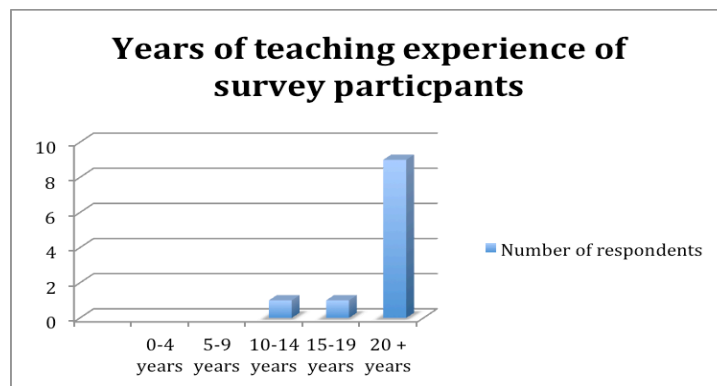
The responding vice-principal was assigned to the high school but was directing the alternative high school at the time of completing the survey.

There were four women and seven men in the responding group.

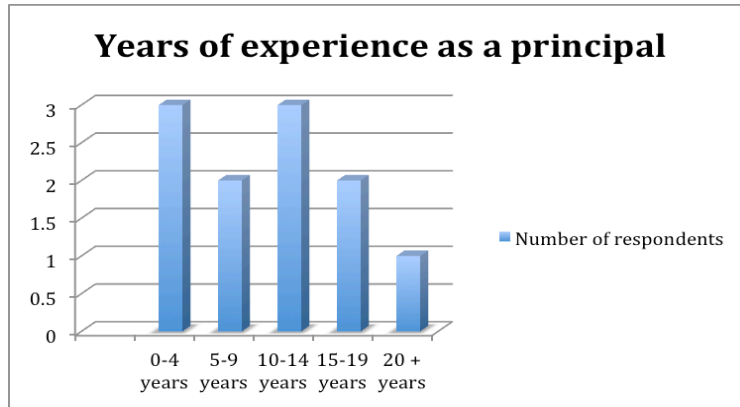
Findings of the Survey

Quantitative Analysis on questions 1 to 5 in section A

As a whole the group of administrators surveyed have many years of teaching experience. Figure 1 shows that most of the respondents have been teaching for more than 20 years.



The range of experience as principals is quite broad for this group and evenly distributed over the years experience categories.



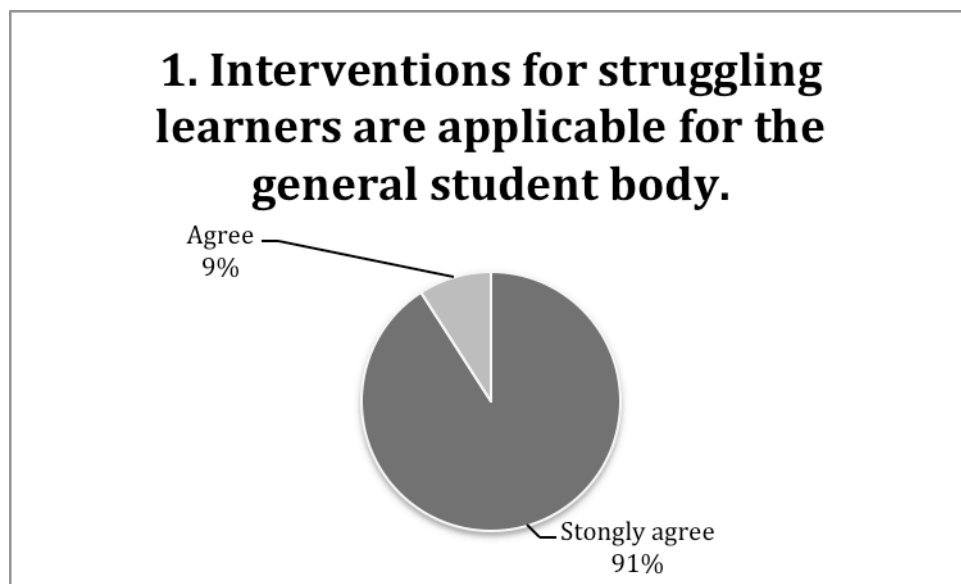
These two sets of data indicate that the group of respondents should be familiar with the issues of special education and support for struggling learners.

The responses to the background questions in section A indicate that most of the administrators had little or no formal training in special education. Only three of the 11 respondents indicated that they had formal training in special education. Most of the respondents indicated that they did take courses in special education at the in-service level. Ten respondents indicated that this is when they took courses or workshops in special education. Additionally, five respondents indicated that they took special education courses at the Bachelor of Education or Post-Degree Program (PDP) and five at the Graduate level. Only one respondent of the 11 said they had no formal training or course work in special education. However, six out of the 11 respondents felt their special education training was adequate and five found it not to be adequate. Overall, this data indicates the respondents have higher levels of training as indicated in some studies and greater comfort with issues in special education. The findings from previously mentioned study indicated that 92% of the principals had no special education certification and most had little or no training in special education (Wakeman et al., 2006). In this study's sample of administrators from School District 64 – Gulf Islands

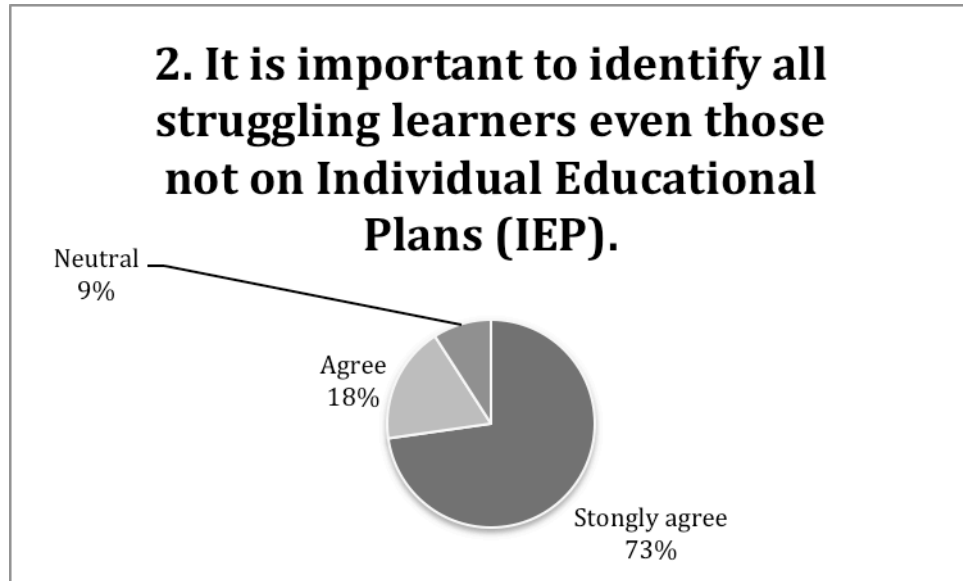
three of the 11 respondents or 27% indicated that they had formal training in special education. Also, 91% had taken at least some courses or workshops in special education and 55% said they felt their special education training was adequate.

Quantitative Analysis on questions 1 to 15 in section B

The questions in section B of the survey were designed to show what works and doesn't work when principals are supporting struggling learners. The questions ask the administrators for their opinions on the methods for supporting struggling learners and the barriers principals face in doing so. (Please refer to Appendix I for a list of these 15 questions). Some of the questions in which there was general agreement by the respondents dealt with the universality of the strategies used for supporting struggling learners and the need to identify these learners. The responses to Question 1 indicate strong support for idea that strategies used to support struggling learners are applicable to the general student population. The 10 out of 11 survey respondents strongly agreed and one agreed with the statement.

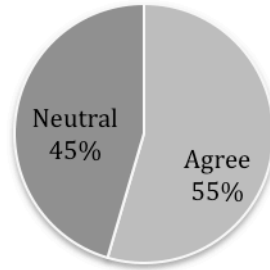


The responses to Question 2 were also closely clustered. Most respondents agreed that it is important to identify all struggling learners even if they do not have an Individual Education Plan (IEP). Eight respondents strongly agreed, two agreed and one was neutral about the statement.



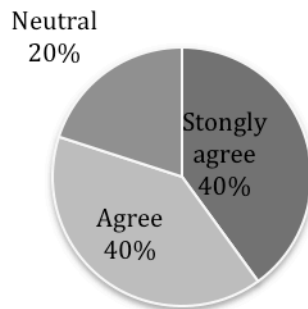
The response to Question 4 was also closely clustered. Six respondents agreed that “pull-out” programs or struggling learners sometimes being taught outside of the general classrooms was helpful. Five respondents were neutral about this statement.

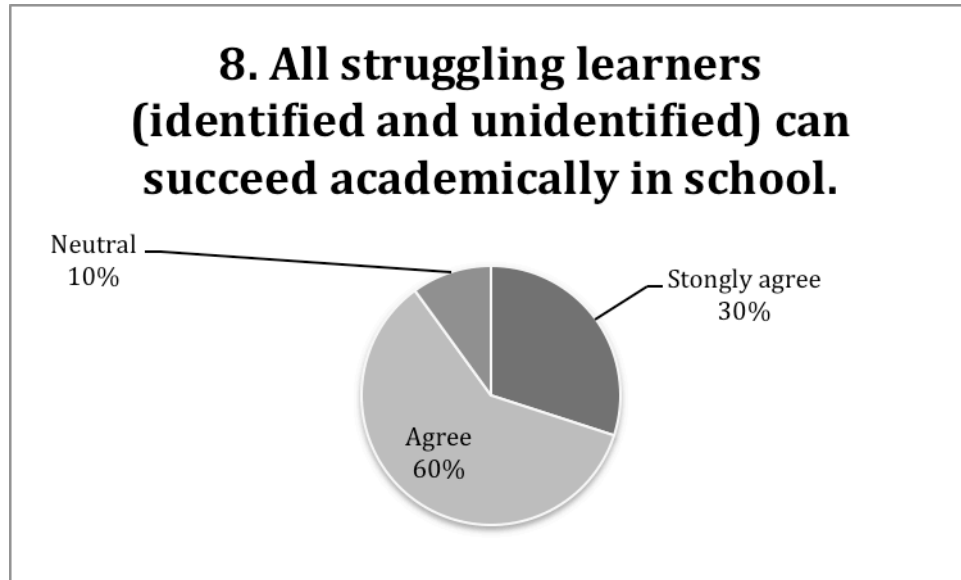
4. Pull-out programs help struggling learners succeed in school.



The last statements where there was general agreement dealt with the ability of struggling learners and students with IEPs being able to succeed and that all principals and teachers should receive mandatory training in special education. All respondents were either positive or neutral about Questions 7 and 8.

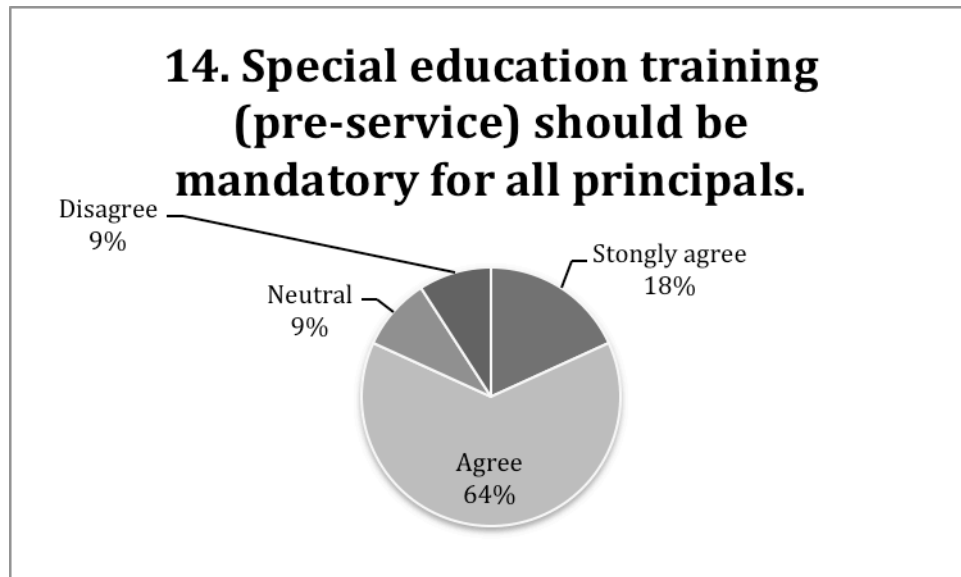
7. All identified struggling learners (specifically on IEPs) can succeed academically in school.





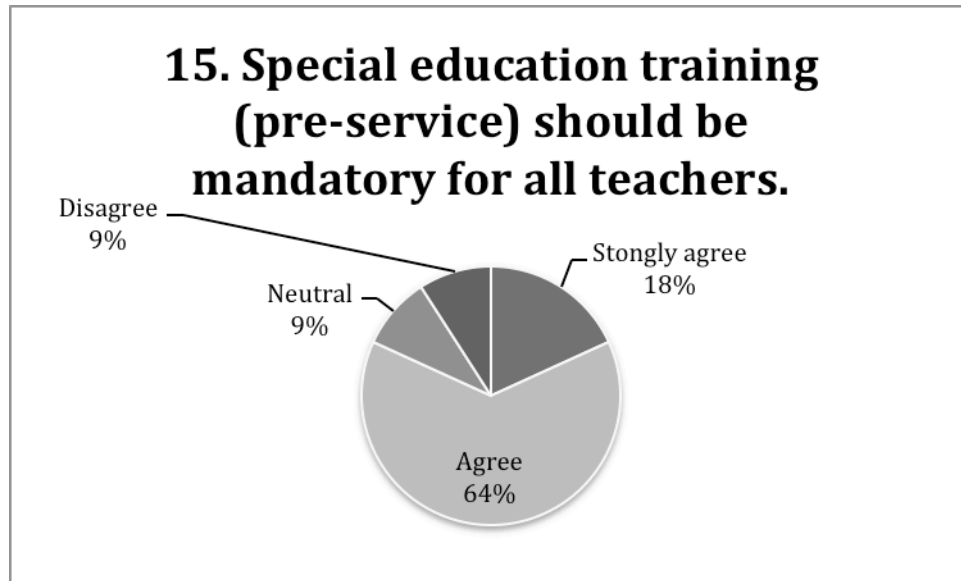
As with this study there is a generally held viewpoint amongst teachers and principals that all students can succeed in an inclusive setting (DuFour, 2002; Leo & Barton, 2006; Lose 2008; Naylor, 2002).

Most of the respondents strongly agreed or agreed that there should be mandatory training in special education for all principals and teachers.



In this study 82% of the respondents felt that special education training was needed for principals and in another study a survey of administrators found that “90%

indicated that formal special education training was needed to be an effective leader” (Wakeman et al., 2006).



The responding administrators identified the need for teacher training in special education at the same level.

Questions 9, 10 and 11 dealt with who is primarily responsible for ensuring the success of struggling learners. Is it the school principal, special education teacher or the classroom teacher? There was a fair distribution of opinions as to whom is primarily responsible, but more of the respondents agreed that it should be the classroom teacher, then the principal and, finally, the special education teacher. This may be true to a certain extent since it is the classroom teacher who interacts primarily with the learners.

However, the principal’s role cannot be overlooked:

Research has demonstrated that principals who focus on instructional issues, demonstrate administrative support for special education, and provide high-quality professional development for teachers produce enhanced outcomes for

students with disabilities and for others at risk for school failure. Thus the extent of administrative support affects the extent to which teachers and specialists develop and implement interventions designed to improve student performance (DiPaolo & Walther-Thomas, 2003, p.9).

Without the principal setting the tone and actively supporting inclusion teachers will not be able to ensure the success of struggling learners as well (Praisner, 2003).

The other questions in section B showed a greater diversity of responses. The opinions expressed in questions 3, 4 and 5 indicate that there is no real consensus on which setting is best for struggling learners. Separate classes or pull-out programs mentioned in questions 3 and 4 both did not have overwhelming support. Neither was there agreement that struggling learners should be taught only in the general classroom. There were diverse opinions about questions 12 and 13 as well. The respondents did not agree if there are not enough personnel or district resources to support struggling learners.

Qualitative Analysis on questions 1 to 6 in Section C

In the third section or section C of the survey I was hoping to gather specific information and ideas from the respondents on how to best support struggling learners. Through their written responses I had hoped that these administrators would share some of their experiences with struggling learners. The responses compliment statistical data from the first two sets of questions giving a more complete picture of the respondents' views.

In regards to question 3 of section C, programs for struggling learners, most administrators / principals felt there is no one single program to help these learners.

Unfortunately, the responses to this question did not generate any specific examples of successful programs. Those administrators with specific training in special education did suggest that programs to support struggling learners should have some of the attributes common to RTI. Some of these mentioned attributes include frequent and on-going assessment and monitoring of students, effective instruction. RTI includes these "... accepted instructional principles, such as:

- providing effective instruction for all students,
- intervening early,
- using research-based instruction,
- monitoring students' progress, and
- using assessments to inform decisions about teaching" (Crockett & Newkirk Gillespie, 2008).

The surveyed administrators did go into quite a bit of detail when talking about the challenges for principals and the issues impeding successful programs for struggling learners. Many of the respondents to the survey mentioned the greater need for accountability and paperwork as a great challenge for administrators. Several respondents mentioned the breadth of responsibilities – the increasing demands placed on them. This sentiment is reflected in many other studies of principals as well (Collins & White, 2001; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Praisner, 2003). Many of the respondents mentioned that at a time of increasing responsibilities and expectations to support all learners there seems to be a diminishment of resources both capital and personnel. Many felt there was not enough time to do all that was expected; Time - to do all that needs to be done.

Another issue mentioned by some of the administrators is the need for further training for all personnel who work with struggling learners. Some respondents even mention a perceived reluctance on the part of teachers to fulfill this role. Though most educators view inclusion positively for many the transition to inclusion has not been smooth (Barnett & Monda-Amaya, 1998; Naylor, 2002). One can not underestimate the need for professional development needed to support educators at all levels so that they in turn can support all learners not just struggling learners (DiPaolo & Walther-Thomas, 2003).

One of the issues raised by the survey and questionnaire is the misunderstandings that occurred with some of the questions. In some cases the respondents were unsure about a question and didn't answer it, answered it based on their own interpretation of the question or in two cases even reworded some questions. This does limit the validity of some of the data, but it does not greatly affect the value of the information for the purposes of this study. The survey questions and the complimentary open-ended questions still provide valuable information about administrators / principals and their understanding of inclusion, struggling learners and challenges principals face. Other limitations to this study include the small sample size for the survey. Another limitation is the response level. Eleven respondents returned the surveys from a total of 17 that were sent out. The study was also limited in geographic scope. It was restricted to simply one small school district. The survey / questionnaire was designed to simply obtain an indication of the administrators' viewpoints on inclusion, special education and how to best help struggling learners.

Discussion and recommendations

The quantitative and qualitative survey results indicate that many principals and thus schools still struggle with supporting struggling learners. Many of the survey respondents mention a need for more professional development in this area. The level of formal training exhibited by the surveyed administrators as in other studies is quite low. As I have struggled to become more aware and better able to help struggling learners, I have learned there is a real need for formal training in this area and for specific programs to support struggling learners.

Principals have the unique position in schools as instructional or learning leaders to influence and improve the level of knowledge and ability of all staff working with struggling learners (DuFour, 2002). To support staff working with struggling learners the principal does need to have a strong understanding of instructional strategies and special education issues (Lasky & Karge, 2006). Leadership programs for principals either pre-service or post-service need to include training that encompasses several areas related to special education. Principals need to understand the factors needed to develop successful educational programs for the diverse learners in an inclusive school. As mentioned in Collins and White's model courses on special education law are needed so that principals will be able to ensure the schools are in compliance with legislation and court decisions (Collins & White, 2001). Principals need instructional expertise; they should have more than just a general understanding of special education; they need to be informed about the best practices specifically for struggling learners and students with special needs (Praisner, 2003). In addition they should be able to advise teachers on how to implement

these strategies in the classroom to the benefit of all students (Collins & White, 2001; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003).

None of the respondents to the survey mentioned any specific strategies or programs for supporting struggling learners. Response to Intervention (RTI) is a program that has the advantage of being systematic in how it supports struggling learners. “RTI is basically a systematic and structured approach to increase the efficiency, accountability, and impact of effective practices” (Crockett & Newkirk Gillespie, 2007). This is a program of supporting struggling learners that principals could help to implement.

The advantages of a systematic program such as RTI if it is employed school-wide to identify and support struggling learners are many fold. As some of the surveyed administrators point-out some teachers are reluctant or most likely do not know how to adequately support struggling learners and even students with special needs. A program such as RTI utilizes instructional interventions for students that are based on individual and on-going assessment. Some of the responding administrators indicated the interventions that are used should be based on on-going assessment. This is central to RTI. Assessment and continued monitoring of the student will determine the form of intervention and changes to the intervention (Lose, 2008; Scanlon & Sweeney, 2008). Two other advantages of RTI are still being debated one is that the service delivery is faster than the traditional model of special education. Also, RTI with proper assessments is able to determine which students need support even if they do not fall into a special education category (Holden Johns & Kauffman, 2009; Lose, 2008).

RTI could help to solve many of the problems schools face in supporting struggling learners. It would be a responsive and systematic approach using effective

interventions based on continual assessment. RTI could be implemented within the existing structures (personnel) of schools with the proper training of principals, teachers and support staff.

To develop effective programs such as RTI that will meet the needs of struggling learners, teachers and staff need release time to collaborate and meet in teams. The principal has to facilitate and encourage the development of collaboration (Barnett & Monda-Amaya, 1998; DuFour, 2002). Teachers and principals would also need time to review and modify any intervention programs.

As previously cited, DiPaola and Walther-Thomas (2003) state that research indicates that principals who focus on instructional interventions, supporting special education and professional development for teachers will improve outcomes for struggling learners. These attributes will also affect the extent to which teachers will implement these interventions.

The final attribute that is important for principals to develop is a vision. They need to understand the philosophical underpinning of inclusion (Barnett & Monda-Amaya, 1998). With their vision as a basis, principals need to be able to articulate the benefits of inclusion and the best practices to make inclusion successful. They need to be able to articulate this vision of successful inclusion and the ability of all learners including struggling learners to be successful. Principals need to have the students, school personnel, parents and community understand this vision or philosophy and embrace it. This requires principals to be knowledgeable of and confident in the matters of interventions and strategies that support struggling learners.

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Appendices

Appendix I – Survey / Questionnaire

Section A – Background Information

Please circle the appropriate answer in questions 1, 2, 3 and 4

1. Years of experience in teaching
0-4 5-9 10-14 15-19 20+
2. Years of experience as a principal
0-4 5-9 10-14 15-19 20+
3. Have you had formal training in special education? Yes No
4. My training in special education has been adequate. Yes No

Please check as many answers as applicable in question 5

5. In which program did you take the courses in special education?
 Bachelor of Education or Post-Degree Program (PDP)
 Graduate training
 In-service training
 No specific courses taken

Section B – The Role of the Principal and Struggling Learners

For questions 1 to 15 please circle the appropriate response

1. Interventions for struggling learners are applicable for the general student body.
Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree
2. It is important to identify all struggling learners even those not on Individual Educational Plans (IEP).
Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree
3. Separate classes or programs help struggling learners succeed in school.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

4. Pull-out programs help struggling learners succeed in school.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

5. All students should be taught in a regular classroom setting 100% of the time.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

6. School-wide social-behaviour systems or programs are needed to ensure the success of struggling learners.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

7. All identified struggling learners (specifically on IEPs) can succeed academically in school.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

8. All struggling learners (identified and unidentified) can succeed academically in school.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

9. Amongst the school staff, the principal is primarily responsible for ensuring the success of struggling learners.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

10. Amongst the school staff, the special education teacher is primarily responsible for ensuring the success of struggling learners.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

11. Amongst the school staff, the classroom teacher is primarily responsible for ensuring the success of struggling learners.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

12. There are enough personnel resources (special education assistants and special education teachers) in the schools to support struggling learners.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

13. The school district resources are adequate to support struggling learners.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

14. Special education training (pre-service) should be mandatory for all principals.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

15. Special education training (pre-service) should be mandatory for all teachers.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree

Section C

For questions 1 to 6, please write your answers in the space provided. If needed you can attach an additional page with expanded answers.

1. What are the most important responsibilities of a principal?
2. What are the greatest challenges for a principal?
3. In your opinion, what would be an effective program or programs for struggling learners (identified and unidentified)?
4. What might be the advantages of such programs for struggling learners?
5. What might be the disadvantages of such programs?
6. What do you see as the central issues impeding the success of struggling learners?

If you have any additional thoughts or comments on this subject or on the survey, please, write them below.

Appendix II – Summaries of Survey Responses

Section A – Background Information

3. Years of experience in teaching

| Number of years teaching | 0-4 years | 5-9 years | 10-14 years | 15-19 years | 20+ years |
|--------------------------|-----------|-----------|-------------|-------------|-----------|
| Number of responses | | | 1 | 1 | 9 |

4. Years of experience as a principal

| Number of years as principal | 0-4 years | 5-9 years | 10-14 years | 15-19 years | 20+ years |
|------------------------------|-----------|-----------|-------------|-------------|-----------|
| Number of responses | 3 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 1 |

3. Have you had formal training in special education? Yes No

Number of respondents answering yes – 3
 Number of respondents answering no – 8

4. My training in special education has been adequate. Yes No

Number of respondents answering yes – 6
 Number of respondents answering no – 5

Please check as many answers as applicable in question 5

6. In which program did you take the courses in special education?
 (respondents could check as many levels as applicable)

| When special education courses taken | Bachelor of Education or Post-Degree Program (PDP) | Graduate training | In-service training | No specific courses taken |
|--------------------------------------|--|-------------------|---------------------|---------------------------|
| Number of responses | 5 | 5 | 10 | 1 |

Appendix II

Section B - questions 1 to 15

| Questions | Strongly agree | Agree | Neutral | Disagree | Strongly Disagree | Total Responses |
|---|----------------|-------|---------|----------|-------------------|-----------------|
| 1. Interventions for struggling learners are applicable for the general student body. | 10 | 1 | | | | 11 |
| 2. It is important to identify all struggling learners even those not on Individual Educational Plans (IEP). | 8 | 2 | 1 | | | 11 |
| 3. Separate classes or programs help struggling learners succeed in school. | | 2 | 4 | 2 | 3 | 11 |
| 4. Pull-out programs help struggling learners succeed in school. | | 6 | 5 | | | 11 |
| 5. All students should be taught in a regular classroom setting 100% of the time. | | 1 | 2 | 7 | 1 | 11 |
| 6. School-wide social-behaviour systems or programs are needed to ensure the success of struggling learners. | 3 | 2 | 4 | 1 | | 10 |
| 7. All identified struggling learners (specifically on IEPs) can succeed academically in school. | 4 | 4 | 2 | | | 10 |
| 8. All struggling learners (identified and unidentified) can succeed academically in school. | 3 | 6 | 1 | | | 10 |
| 9. Amongst the school staff, the principal is primarily responsible for ensuring the success of struggling learners. | 2 | 3 | 1 | 4 | 1 | 11 |
| 10. Amongst the school staff, the special education teacher is primarily responsible for ensuring the success of struggling learners. | | 4 | 1 | 5 | 1 | 11 |
| 11. Amongst the school staff, the classroom teacher is primarily responsible for ensuring the success of struggling learners. | 1 | 6 | | 3 | 1 | 11 |
| 12. There are enough personnel resources (special education assistants and special education teachers) in the schools to support struggling learners. | | 6 | | 2 | 3 | 11 |
| 13. The school district resources seem adequate to support struggling learners. | | 3 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 10 |
| 14. Special education training (pre-service) should be mandatory for all principals. | 2 | 7 | 1 | 1 | | 11 |
| 15. Special education training (pre-service) should be mandatory for all teachers. | 2 | 7 | 1 | 1 | | 11 |

Appendix II

Section C - Responses to Qualitative questions

Respondent 1

1. *What are the most important responsibilities of a principal?*
 - Enabling others to act
 - Relationship building
 - Ensuring that successful inclusionary practices are the norm
 - Supporting teachers in these practices via resources, in-service opportunities
 - Inspiring vision and modelling that vision
2. *What are the greatest challenges for a principal?*
 - Limited resources
 - Limited time and skilled personnel
 - Maintaining focus on the most important aspects (students) while being inundated with requests for accountability
3. *In your opinion, what would be an effective program or programs for struggling learners (identified and unidentified)?*
 - A program that focuses on choice – individualized and personalized
 - Focuses on strengths of the individual
 - Provides support for individualized programs
 - Enrols community
4. *What might be the advantages of such a program for struggling learners?*
 - High level of engagement
 - Effectively address needs (increase success, decrease disruption)
5. *What might be the disadvantages of such programs for struggling learners?*
 - Cost
 - Requires involvement from school and community - so fair amount of “buy in” required
6. *What do you see as the central issues impeding the success of struggling learners?*
 - We (educators) don’t do what we know – we allow limited resources to excuse our stasis
 - We don’t stay current with our own research
 - A system that values certain aspects of public education over others

Respondent 2

1. *What are the most important responsibilities of a principal?*
 - Safety of students (including emotional safety)
 - Smooth running of school (management, staffing, timetable, etc.)
 - Leadership – inspiring others to be the best through in-service and professional development opportunities
 - Optimize learning for kids

2. *What are the greatest challenges for a principal?*
 - Balancing all aspects with being a positive role model
 - Caring education
 - Knowledgeable
 - Professional
 - Organizational expertise

3. *In your opinion, what would be an effective program or programs for struggling learners (identified and unidentified)?*
 - Multi-faceted approach – ongoing professional development / in-service and skill development for all staff to deal with diversity
 - Effective levels of assessment (school / grade wide) and broad such as BC Performance Standards to identify students needing intervention as first level
 - Determining what needs require further school-based intervention and more refined assessment
 - Intervention through Learning Assistance or specialist teacher
 - Avenues for referral to more in-depth assessment by other professional specialists (District Psychologist) as needed

4. *What might be the advantages of such programs for struggling learners?*
 - Flexibility to meet the needs of more students
 - Appreciation for diversity
 - Teachers feeling successful

5. *What might be the disadvantages of such programs?*
 - Long term, ongoing investment
 - Needs to be a commitment to ongoing professional growth and belief in working together

6. *What do you see as the central issues impeding the success of struggling learners?*
 - Attitudes and beliefs contrary to the idea of “shared responsibility” of all students by all teachers / staff
 - Limited understanding about effective methodologies

Additional comments:

- Misperceptions about funding and support

Respondent 3

1. *What are the most important responsibilities of a principal?*
 - Fostering transformational leadership
 - Establishing school climate
 - Meeting needs of students, teachers and parents
2. *What are the greatest challenges for a principal?*
 - Having staff contribute and actively engage in creating and maintaining a positive school climate
3. *In your opinion, what would be an effective program or programs for struggling learners (identified and unidentified)?*
 - A triangulated approach that has student, teacher, principal and parent collectively supporting learners
4. *What might be the advantages of such programs for struggling learners?*
 - Accountability of all concerned individuals
5. *What might be the disadvantages of such programs?*
 - Communication
 - Identification of needs
6. *What do you see as the central issues impeding the success of struggling learners?*
 - Competence of staff in providing appropriate skills

Respondent 4

1. *What are the most important responsibilities of a principal?*
 - To support students and staff to ensure success
 - To ensure school is a safe and orderly place to help students succeed
2. *What are the greatest challenges for a principal?*
 - Meeting the needs of all students
 - Helping teachers make adaptations / accommodations to support students
 - Helping teachers to realize they need to make changes to their practises to support struggling learners
3. *In your opinion, what would be an effective program or programs for struggling learners (identified and unidentified)?*

- Providing in-class support rather than pull-out
 - If pull-out is necessary, it should be at a time when student will not miss class instruction in his/her area of need
 - If an SEA (teacher's assistant) is the support provided – SEA should work with the class and teacher should work with struggling learners
4. *What might be the advantages of such programs for struggling learners?*
 - Students would get support in class plus additional support if needed
 5. *What might be the disadvantages of such programs?*
 - Not enough resources within the district (money, people)
 - Some teachers do not know how to support struggling learners
 - Some teachers unwilling to change practice to meet student needs
 6. *What do you see as the central issues impeding the success of struggling learners?*
 - Too often the least qualified professional (SEA) is responsible for supporting students who have the most difficulty
 - Too much pull-out and not enough in class support
 - I think there exists with some teachers an opinion that they are not responsible for designated students – teachers are responsible for all students in their classes

Respondent 5

1. *What are the most important responsibilities of a principal?*
 - Leadership – creating an environment where all students can learn
2. *What are the greatest challenges for a principal?*
 - Leadership – creating an environment where all students can learn
 - Providing consistent supervision
 - Ensuring all students are supported in their learning
3. *In your opinion, what would be an effective program or programs for struggling learners (identified and unidentified)?*
 - That all teachers be consistent in setting high standards but appropriate goals for student to achieve
 - Teacher awareness of IEP's being a successful vehicle
4. *What might be the advantages of such programs for struggling learners?*
 - Consistent expectations by all staff
 - Sharing goals with parents and age appropriate learners
5. *What might be the disadvantages of such programs?*

- None
6. *What do you see as the central issues impeding the success of struggling learners?*
- Adequate training and in-service of all staff members including principal

Respondent 6

1. *What are the most important responsibilities of a principal?*
 - Ensuring a learning environment that provides opportunities for student success
2. *What are the greatest challenges for a principal?*
 - Providing adequate opportunities within financial constraints
3. *In your opinion, what would be an effective program or programs for struggling learners (identified and unidentified)?*

One where all partners participate (student, parents, classroom teacher, special education teacher, principal, possibly other agencies) and thoroughly understand the needs of the learner. There's no one program that fits all. A good program requires constant monitoring and revision.
4. *What might be the advantages of such programs for struggling learners?*
 - It meets their individual needs and is responsive to changes in the learner's path
5. *What might be the disadvantages of such programs?*
 - Time to consult and communicate with each other
6. *What do you see as the central issues impeding the success of struggling learners?*
 - Time for teams to monitor and meet so the learner's needs are clear to all – including the learner

Respondent 7

1. *What are the most important responsibilities of a principal?*
 - Supporting and maintaining the health and strength of the learning community so that all members can succeed
2. *What are the greatest challenges for a principal?*
 - Time – to do all that needs to be done

3. *In your opinion, what would be an effective program or programs for struggling learners (identified and unidentified)?*
 - One-to-one learning
4. *What might be the advantages of such programs for struggling learners?*
 - The learner is not lost in the class and has someone there to support them when needed
5. *What might be the disadvantages of such programs?*
 - Cost
 - Availability of staff or volunteers
6. *What do you see as the central issues impeding the success of struggling learners?*
 - Class size
 - Lack of home support
 - Focus on covering curriculum rather than discovery

Respondent 8

1. *What are the most important responsibilities of a principal?*
 - Ensuring that the school provides a safe environment and that all the students are challenged/encouraged to achieve their best
2. *What are the greatest challenges for a principal?*
 - Time – time to give everyone the individual attention they deserve
3. *In your opinion, what would be an effective program or programs for struggling learners (identified and unidentified)?*

Each learners needs are different therefore no one programme can ever fit all needs. It's not a matter of using a programme but of finding ways of helping each student. Why they struggle? How can we help them?
4. *What might be the advantages of such programs for struggling learners?*

There is no magic programme.
5. *What might be the disadvantages of such programs?*

There is no magic programme.
6. *What do you see as the central issues impeding the success of struggling learners?*
 - a) Societies desire to treat everyone the same. In school this means we are expected to have the same outcomes through the same curriculum for most students.

- b) The view that struggling learners can be “fixed” – rather than work with their needs trying to bring them up to expected levels of performance.

Respondent 9

1. *What are the most important responsibilities of a principal?*
Leading a team of educators who together work towards success for all students in all areas of their learning.
2. *What are the greatest challenges for a principal?*
 - Shrinking budgets and resources but increasing needs
3. *In your opinion, what would be an effective program or programs for struggling learners (identified and unidentified)?*
 - Teach to their needs and their strengths
 - Programs that build success and strengthen self esteem
4. *What might be the advantages of such programs for struggling learners?*
These students often fail at so many things that if it becomes their “personal story”. We need to change their stories.
5. *What might be the disadvantages of such programs?*
 - None that I have ever observed
6. *What do you see as the central issues impeding the success of struggling learners?*
 - Lack of support both at school and at home
 - Lack of programming, planning, time and funding

Respondent 10

1. *What are the most important responsibilities of a principal?*
 - Leadership, ensuring a “place for all” – socially, emotionally, educationally
2. *What are the greatest challenges for a principal?*
Ensuring that each child has access to quality service that meets their needs in an environment of decreasing resources and increasing expectations and entitlement.
3. *In your opinion, what would be an effective program or programs for struggling learners (identified and unidentified)?*
There is no one answer – each program would very depending on the learner and the factors contributing to the circumstances around the learning environment.

4. *What might be the advantages of such programs for struggling learners?*
“Struggling learners” is a broad term. It could be said that all of us struggle with our learning if we take it seriously.
5. *What might be the disadvantages of such programs?*
 - “One size fits all”
 - Labelling
 - Demoralization, resentment, etc.
6. *What do you see as the central issues impeding the success of struggling learners?*
Lack of resources, which are required to differentiate the learning experience to meet the learning needs of all learners.

Respondent 11

1. *What are the most important responsibilities of a principal?*
 - Lead people
 - Administer programs
 - Manage people
2. *What are the greatest challenges for a principal?*
 - Breadth of responsibility for things over which you have limited control
3. *In your opinion, what would be an effective program or programs for struggling learners (identified and unidentified)?*
A program in which
 - the needs of a learner are known by all
 - builds on individual strengths
 - a team approach is effectively employed
 - communication is meaningful and ongoing
 - assessment and evaluation are meaningful and ongoing
4. *What might be the advantages of such programs for struggling learners?*
 - Student feels well supported, capable, and is aware of incremental gains
5. *What might be the disadvantages of such programs?*
 - Requires time which is often at a premium
6. *What do you see as the central issues impeding the success of struggling learners?*
 - The bureaucratization of special needs services in the face of growing demands for accountability

- We spend too much time accounting for the direct service to kids that we don't have time for because we're too busy accounting for it.



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Human Research Ethics Board Certificate of Approval

| | | | |
|--|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------------------------|
| <u>Principal Investigator</u> Michael Berendt Master's Student | <u>Department/School</u> EPLS | <u>Supervisor</u> Dr. David Bird | |
| <u>Co-Investigator(s)</u> | | | |
| <u>Project Title:</u> Ensuring the Success of Struggling Learners: The Role of the Principal | | | |
| <u>Protocol No.</u> 06-368 | <u>Approval Date</u> 20-Dec-06 | <u>Start Date</u> 20-Dec-06 | <u>End Date</u> 19-Dec-09 |

Certification

This certifies that the UVic Human Research Ethics Board has examined this research protocol and concludes that, in all respects, the proposed research meets appropriate standards of ethics as outlined by the University of Victoria Research Regulations Involving Human Subjects.

 Dr. Richard Keeler
 Associate Vice-President, Research

This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above term provided there is no change in the procedures. Extensions or minor amendments may be granted upon receipt of a "Research Status" form.

06-368 Berendt, Michael



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Certificate of Renewed Approval

| | |
|--|--|
| PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: Michael Berendt | ETHICS PROTOCOL NUMBER: 06-368 |
| UVic STATUS: Master's Student | ORIGINAL APPROVAL DATE: 20-Dec-06 |
| UVic DEPARTMENT: EPLS | RENEWED ON: 17-Dec-10 |
| SUPERVISOR: Dr. Catherine McGregor | APPROVAL EXPIRY DATE: 19-Dec-11 |

PROJECT TITLE: **Ensuring the Success of Struggling Learners: The Role of the Principal**

RESEARCH TEAM MEMBERS: **None**

DECLARED PROJECT FUNDING: **None**

CONDITIONS OF APPROVAL

This Certificate of Approval is valid for the above term provided there is no change in the protocol.

Modifications

To make any changes to the approved research procedures in your study, please submit a "Request for Modification" form. You must receive ethics approval before proceeding with your modified protocol.

Renewals

Your ethics approval must be current for the period during which you are recruiting participants or collecting data. To renew your protocol, please submit a "Request for Renewal" form before the expiry date on your certificate. You will be sent an emailed reminder prompting you to renew your protocol about six weeks before your expiry date.

Project Closures

When you have completed all data collection activities and will have no further contact with participants, please notify the Human Research Ethics Board by submitting a "Notice of Project Completion" form.

Certification

This certifies that the UVic Human Research Ethics Board has examined this research protocol and concluded that, in all respects, the proposed research meets the appropriate standards of ethics as outlined by the University of Victoria Research Regulations Involving Human Participants.

 Dr. Rachael Scarth
 Acting Associate Vice-President, Research

Certificate Issued On: 20-Dec-10

06-368 Berendt, Michael