INCLUSIVE EDUCATION
A Servant-Leadership Perspective

CAROLYN CRIPPEN

"A SERVANT-LEADER IS SERVANT FIRST. IT BEGINS WITH THE NATURAL FEELING THAT ONE WANTS TO SERVE. THEN CONSCIOUS CHOICE BRINGS ONE TO ASPIRE TO LEAD. THE DIFFERENCE MANIFESTS ITSELF IN THE CARE TAKEN BY THE SERVANT – FIRST, TO MAKE SURE THAT OTHER PEOPLE’S HIGHEST PRIORITY NEEDS ARE BEING SERVED. THE BEST TEST IS: DO THOSE SERVED GROW AS PERSONS; DO THEY WHILE BEING SERVED, BECOME HEALTHIER, WISER, FREER, MORE AUTONOMOUS, MORE LIKELY THEMSELVES TO BECOME SERVANTS? AND WHAT OF THE LEAST PRIVILEGED IN SOCIETY: WILL THEY BENEFIT, OR AT LEAST, NOT BE FURTHER DEPRIVED?"

THE CONCEPT OF INCLUSIVE EDUCATION IS COMMON TO THE CANADIAN EDUCATIONAL SYSTEM and involves service to our students. According to Young and Levin, “The provision of appropriate education to meet the needs of each student is increasingly accepted as a right in Canadian education. Most provincial legislation now reflects this requirement.” Bloom, Perlmutter & Burnell define inclusion as “a philosophy that brings diverse students, families, educators, and community members together to create schools and other social institutions based on acceptance, belonging, and community.” This suggests that all children, regardless of their ability level or special needs, could be included and accommodated in the regular school classroom. Tall orders indeed – but orders that are widely supported by the Canadian public:

The polls and research studies suggest that Canadians support inclusion, but individuals who must fulfill these expectations, whether they are employers or teachers, report that they need guidance and support. They repeatedly express that while they want to treat everyone fairly, they simply don’t know enough about disabilities and about changes that must be made in schools, workplaces, and the rest of society."
Teacher training and an understanding of exceptional learners are critical, of course. Strategies for differentiation are also necessary to meet the needs of individual learners. But, it seems logical that a positive mindset toward service in education would be the starting point in making any program work. How does one approach the service to our exceptional students and to all students? The concept of servant-leadership, as introduced by Robert Greenleaf, may provide the seeds for developing effective, supportive, learning environments for all learners.

This particular modus operandi was first introduced to special education resource teachers, classroom teachers, teacher assistants, and school administrators in Manitoba as part of a university course in education called Strategies for Organizing Inclusive Classrooms and Schools. The course examined the organization and implementation of school-wide support for access, learning, socialization, behavior, family liaison, clinical engagement, and community services. These learning objectives, along with the definition of inclusion and the description of a servant-leader, form the basis for my argument that the servant leadership philosophy provides a solid basis for inclusive education.

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Servant-Leadership

The term “servant-leadership” was introduced by Robert Kiefer Greenleaf in his first essay entitled, The Servant as Leader. He tells of discovering the concept of servant-leadership through reading Journey to the East, by Herman Hesse; the story of a band of men who set out on a long journey. Accompanying the men was a fellow named Leo whose job was to care for the band of men by doing all of the menial chores and providing for their comfort. The journey progressed well until Leo disappeared. At this point, the men fell into disarray and the journey was aborted.

Many years later, the narrator of the story encountered Leo and discovered that Leo was, in fact, the titular head of the religious order that had sponsored the journey many years ago. He was the leader, but his nature was that of a servant. His leadership was bestowed upon him, and could be taken away, by the band of men. His desire to serve the group came from his heart. Greenleaf saw in this story the message that one must first serve society, and through that service, regardless of position, a person will be recognized as a leader. “Effective servant-leaders can be so subtle about it that all anybody is likely to see is the result. They don’t see the cause.”

Working with educational, business and industrial organizations, Greenleaf’s goal was to develop strong, effective, caring communities in all segments of society – a goal that is consistent with a commitment to inclusive schools, but one that requires time to develop the necessary qualities of servant-leadership.

TEN CHARACTERISTICS

Spears, the Executive Director of the Robert K. Greenleaf Center in Indianapolis, describes ten characteristics of servant-leadership.

Listening. Effective educational leaders are great communicators and must be good listeners, to themselves (through their inner voice), as well as to others. This refers to a deep commitment to listening to others. Proponents of the servant-leadership model emphasize the need for silence, reflection, meditation, active listening, and actually “hearing” both what is said and what is unsaid. The best communication forces you to listen. It is critical that during case conferences, parent meetings, telephone conversations, etc., there is careful listening and “accurate” hearing in these conversations.

Empathy. A good servant-leader strives to understand and empathizes with others. But this understanding should be supportive as opposed to patronizing: “It is a misuse of our power (as leaders) to take responsibility for solving problems that belong to others.” I have always found that parents of students with special needs appreciate a caring and sensitive attitude from the school or resource teacher. The parental responsibilities for a special needs child are often considerable, and any compassion and empathy from school personnel can develop a positive home-school relationship.

Greenleaf wrote that trust could be developed through the use of empathy:

Individuals grow taller when those who lead them empathize and when they are accepted for what they are, even though their performance may be judged critically in terms of what they are capable of doing. Leaders who empathize and who fully accept those who go with them on this basis are more likely to be trusted.

Healing. Servant-leaders have the potential to heal both themselves and others. While healthy leaders cannot always find followers, “sick organizations really do contaminate.” Greenleaf, a lifelong meditator, views meditation as a service because one is taking time to think about things, to reflect: “I prefer to meditate; I have come to view my meditating as serving.”

A happy, positive school environment, where staff, students, and parents feel welcome, creates a sense of wellness.

Awareness. Servant-leaders develop general awareness, especially self-awareness, through self reflection, by listening to what others say about them, by being continually open to learning, and by making the connection between what they know and believe and what they say or do.

Opportunities for reflection and dialogue on educational practices are critical in dealing with the needs of students. Effective and supportive programs require ongoing checks that provide opportunities for revisions or redirection when needed. The Individual Education Plan (IEP) is one major vehicle to ensure appropriate action is documented, especially when and if a child moves to another location.

Persuasion. The servant-leader seeks to convince others, rather than coerce compliance. Ongoing and consistent
dialogue with parents, support people, and school leaders are necessary to the well-being of individual learners.

One is persuaded upon arriving at a feeling of rightness about a belief or action through one’s own intuitive sense, persuasion is usually too undramatic to be newsworthy. Significant instances of persuasion may be known to only one or a few, and they are rarely noted in history. Simply put, consensus is a method of using persuasion in a group.12

**Conceptualization.** Servant-leaders seek to nurture their own abilities to dream great dreams. Greenleaf describes conceptual talent as:

The ability to see the whole in the perspective of history – past and future – to state and adjust goals, to evaluate, to analyze, and to foresee contingencies a long way ahead. Leadership, in the sense of going out ahead to show the way, is more conceptual than operating. The conceptualizer, at his or her best, is a persuader and a relation builder.”13

**Foresight.** Greenleaf refers to this ability to foresee or know the likely outcome of a situation as a better than average guess about “what” is going to happen “when” in the future. Experience plays the greatest part in the development of foresight when working with special needs students and answering questions such as: How can the student be accommodated in a sensible and realistic way? What barriers could exist to prevent success? What necessary supports must be in place? Greenleaf says foresight is “the lead that a leader has” and goes on to state:

Foresight means regarding the events of the instant moment and constantly comparing them with a series of projections made in the past and at the same time projecting future events – with diminishing certainty as projected time runs out into the indefinite future.14

**Stewardship.** Greenleaf believed all members of an institution or organization play significant roles in caring for the wellbeing of the institution and serving the needs of others in the institution, for the greater good of society. Sergiovanni explains that stewardship, “involves the leader’s personal responsibility to manage her or his life and affairs with proper regard for the rights of other people and for the common welfare.”15 Inclusive schools provide an environment for “the common good of all students”, regardless of their particular needs.

**Commitment to the growth of people.** Servant-leaders are committed to the individual growth of human beings and will do everything they can to nurture others. “The signs of outstanding leadership appear primarily among the followers. Are the followers reaching their potential? Are they learning? Serving?”16 The purpose of our schools is simply that: promotion of the growth of others.

**Building community.** The servant-leader seeks to identify some means for building community. Sergiovanni states that caring is an integral part of shared community.17 Wheatley and Kellner-Rogers emphasize the sense of belonging defined by a shared sense of purpose that does not eliminate individuality, but focuses all energies into a resilient community.18 We want all our children to feel wanted and treated as valuable, capable, and responsible within the inclusive school community.
CONNECTING WITH EDUCATIONAL PARTNERS

In 1997 the concept of servant-leadership was introduced to a group of administrators in central Manitoba at the Parkland Leadership Academy. Over the past seven years, well over 1200 people in Manitoba have been exposed to and/or studied the writings of Greenleaf and the philosophy of servant-leadership. Comments from Greenleaf seem relevant to inclusive education in Canadian schools:

This is not a bandwagon idea; it is not a best-seller kind of thing; but nevertheless, these people (servant-leaders) do exist, and some of them have become very important to me.

And,

The difference between organizations is how people relate and how they actually function, which may not bear a whole lot of relationship to how the thing is sketched out on paper.\(^9\)

The Manitoba Association of School Trustees (MAST) brought servant-leadership to the attention of over 400 trustees at their annual fall conference (2002). During summer 2003, the annual Canadian School Board Association Congress was held in Winnipeg, and two sessions were presented on servant-leadership to sixty trustees and superintendents from across Canada.

In addition, several education courses at the University of Manitoba, Faculty of Education, included books by Greenleaf to form part of the required reading, reflection, and analysis. These university courses have been repeated several times. Networks of teachers and administrators are now pondering the prospect of “Greenleaf study groups”; several have/will attend conferences at the Robert K. Greenleaf Center in Indianapolis, Indiana.

CONCLUSION

Possibilities within the servant-leadership paradigm to create a strong foundation of inclusivity for our students seem real. In-service to educational stakeholders could provide a constructive mindset and approach to serving the needs of all our students and the issue of inclusive education in Canada.

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Notes

7 M. De Pree, Leadership is an Art (New York: Dell Publishing Group, 1989), 12-13, 102.
9 Spears, p. 81.
13 Ibid. 217.
15 T. Sergiovanni, Moral Leadership (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1992), 139.
16 De Pree, 12.
19 Greenleaf, as quoted in Frick and Spears, 343, 347.