

Leadership of special students in strengthening their ability by understanding their weaknesses

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Abstract

This paper explores the traits of the leadership dexterity of special students. Leadership in special students is not an expected phenomenon. Cases of special students studying at the University of Tampere, Finland are reported on here. Each case contributes uniqueness and offers qualitative insight into this phenomenon. Interviews were conducted on the respondent's willingness. The interviewees were special students who suffered from different special dexterities such as cerebral palsy, dyslexia, and height phobia. The findings suggest that realizing weakness is important and transforming these in strengths that lead to behavioral changes. Initiating special abilities enhances in strengthening the weaknesses empowering them to perform better through adaptability. Their initiative persistence is high because they are pushing themselves harder. This empowers them to increase their competence through maintaining the stability and adaptability to perform. However, losing persistence is another form of weaknesses.

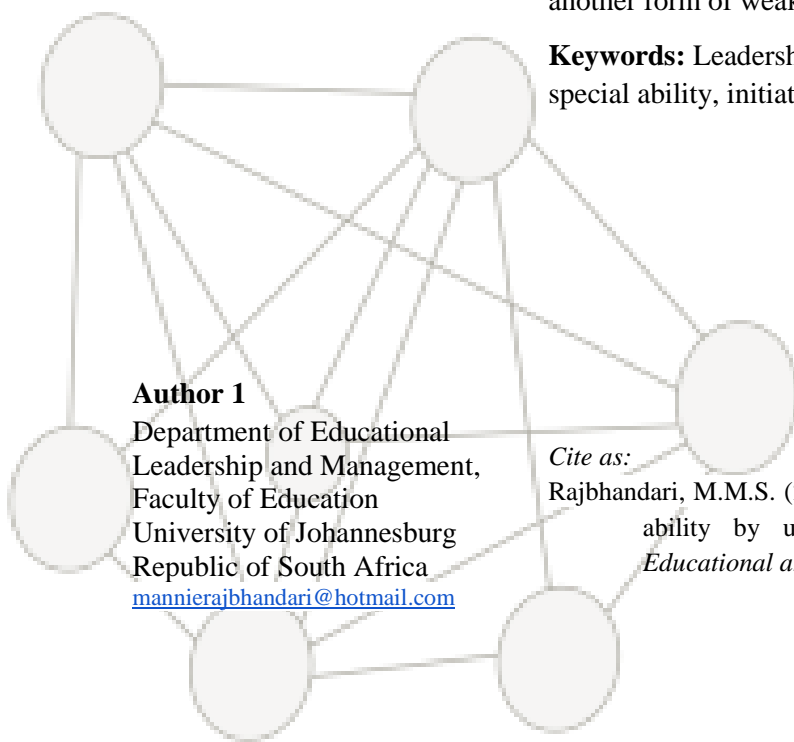
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INTRODUCTION

Leadership is widely discussed, but least understood phenomena (Burns, 1978, Derue, Nahrang, Wellman, Humphrey 2011). Why has leadership been complex and difficult to understand? The quest for understanding leadership from multiple perspectives requires that we explore leaders and their leadership more. However, difficult as it is, leadership still is the prime ingredient for success. Moreover, leadership in special students is much more complex and there has been limited study on their leadership skills and ability. The complexity of leadership in general education is gaining ground through exploring the leadership effectiveness and success (Durue, Nahrang, Wellman and Humphrey; 2011). This has an impact on the readiness of followers, since it entails the imposition of dominant leadership characteristics to influence followers. Special education exists on the other side of coin. Despite special education being different from general education, special education does attempt to enrich and enhance the potential ability of the special students to embark on the transformation to the normalization of living. For special students, having followers is quite a challenging phenomenon. Nevertheless, effectiveness at tasks and success in achievements may be an influential factor in the leadership qualities among special students.

Different countries have different laws for supporting special education. Special education has become one of the major concerns for developmental progress. Therefore, human capital is considered to be of pivotal importance, since it contributes significantly to a nation's development. Human also have few overriding factors that need to be considered. These factors can be psychological and physiological obstructions to being efficient and effective. The overriding factors have an immense impact on the leadership and motivational potentialities.

Leadership in special education is also an important concern, because it reduces the overriding factors that hinder leadership dexterity in special students. Rajbhandari (2011) states that overriding factors could come from various potential variables, such as, social, psychological, technical, physical, health related issues, difficulties to cope, and so on. There is always a doubt about the leadership qualities of special/disable students and about their ability to become successful and effective in their academic endeavors. This is a poorly informed assumption, since special students with different abilities have been able to perform well given the chance to accommodate them in a conditional environment that best suits their requirements.

A new special education law was imposed in Finland in 2011. The special education law differs from the general education law, and proffers equality and justice amongst all students that are categorized into general, intensified and special support (Official Statistics of Finland (OSF); 2013). The law suggests that every special child must have an opportunity to attend nearby schools. This requires the school organization to be equipped with necessary facilities to enhance special education. Every child is considered equal and is initially offered general support. This allows school experts to understand their behavioral patterns, especially with regards to adaptability. Secondly, the child is given intensive support through assistance and help with special needs and guidance.

Moreover, the appropriate means and methods of support in teaching and learning can empower special students to develop competences in terms of, for example, expert qualified teachers, special guidance, additional necessary special support, etc. These, in turn, enable the development of leadership competences in special students, although many other factors are associated with this. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore the leadership potentiality traits of special students performing differently within natural settings.

Research questions

The following research questions addresses the leadership of special students:

1. How can special students strengthen their weaknesses in leadership dexterity?
2. How do special students strengthen their leadership dexterity for future progress?

METHODOLOGY

This study is qualitative by nature and in design. The qualitative paradigm enabled me to understand the phenomena from epistemological judgments that offer the subjective views of the participants in this study. The term special is used synonymously for disabled students.

Research methods

This study used two methods for gathering data; observations and interviews. Observations offered various perspectives for analyzing and interpreting the observed phenomena, while interviews were used to understand experiential learning better. Observations and interviews allowed for multi-dimensional perspectives to emerge. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with special students registered at a university. Their experiential learning through the journey of achieving academic success offered realistic views. According to Illeris (2007), experiential learning involves balanced content, incentives and interactions. Moreover, Rajbhandari. et. al. (2011) explains that in academic, content learning and objective driven learning generates “*Theoractive learning*” which is assimilated by the process driven learning through critical reflection and participations.

Experiential learning was a method of constructing new ideas by drawing on the learner’s past. The experiential learning of special students offered wide range of leadership potential that was accessed through qualitative information. All participants are given pseudonyms Respondent 1, Respondent 2 and Respondent 3 to hide their identity.

Selection of Respondents

Respondents were selected within the student groups of special abilities at the University of Tampere. Random selection was conducted and participants were invited voluntarily to share their experiences. Support was rendered by the Special Educational center of the university. Open invitations were sent to all special students, and three special students

willingly offered to participate. The participants who were unable to speak were asked to offer their views in writing. The special students were both male and female. Respondent 1 suffers from dyslexia, Respondent 2 suffers from cerebral palsy, and Respondent 3 suffers from extreme height phobia. This study focused on their leadership traits and characteristics but not on their medical disabilities.

Data analysis procedures

Data analysis procedures were designed to give meaning to data. Interpretations of data narrating the experiential learning reflected journeying through leadership towards academic achievement and their future planned endeavor. Interpretations for studying leadership were coded specifically in relation to their leadership traits and their progress towards academic achievement. This coding was further illustrated in themes that enabled an interpretation of their experiences and for making meaning of the data.

Their interpretations of experiencing life as a student offered subsequent validation and reliability. Validation from participants was also acquired by giving them an opportunity to read and comment on the draft. Although this was time consuming, their comments and suggestions offered additional reliability and validity to the analysis. Consent was obtained from all three respondents for ethical reasons. Respondents were given the liberty to drop the question during interviews or writing, if they felt offended.

FINDINGS

The leadership dexterity of special students reflects the ethno-biography of their experiences journeying towards academic achievement. Their dexterity is strengthened by their experiences and their ability to adapt. Each special student has his or her own range of potentialities that drive him or her forward. The participants face their own challenges to environmental accommodation. Each case of special abilities is unique and reflects unique potentialities for lifelong learning.

Strengthening the weaknesses, a leadership dexterity

Realizing weaknesses is important and applying these weaknesses towards strengthening their capabilities illustrates the traits approach, which is relevant to personality development, perceptions and attitude formations. There is no one best way to demonstrate leadership. Various dimensions of traits and variables that are associated with social activities exemplify the success of leaders in influencing followers. For special students, when their weaknesses are immense, most of these traits to become feeble. Like many individuals, students who have special abilities demonstrate their dexterity through persistence. This allows for the strong determination to push harder to accomplish certain tasks that can lead to academic success. Respondent 1 supports this by stating that,

What happens with the people when they are pushing, they use their self-leaders because they realize that they will never achieve the same level like a normal person. Understanding this, they don't categorize themselves like a normal person. And they are free to do their own stuff and become separate from the group because of that they have inner instinct, they try and try so much to become one of them but they fail.

Special students have their own ability to demonstrate their leadership dexterity. However, followers cannot be easily influenced. Following a special student because of their ability to demonstrate their dexterity in the classroom by standing above average is how leadership emerged.

Trajkovski (2015) states that self-advocacy can lead to personal identity and furthermore to self-efficiency. In addition to this, Rajbhandari and Rajbhandari (2015) asserts that Psychological, Sociological and Physiological states of mind can enrich to developmental of wellness for oneself and others by generating the reciprocity of mirror effect. In leadership of special students, this can enhance the mirror effect reflecting on oneself towards generating competencies for achievement. Experiences shared by Respondent 2 towards her progressive development for adapting and excelling as well as her consistency in maintaining stability is evident, as she says;

I would like to think that I have always thought I'm like a normal person despite my difficulties. Especially, then, when I was younger, I didn't want to give up. I wanted to succeed at school so I did all my homework although my teacher said I don't have to do everything. Nowadays, I don't give up easily and at university, I want to succeed like others. Nowadays, I can be a bit more gracious to myself and skip doing something, if I'm tired.

Initiating the special abilities enhances in strengthening of weaknesses which enables them to perform better with a set of differences. For them, context contributes to bringing about challenges which empower them in becoming more adaptable. For example, height phobia causes physical distress relating to panic or a nervous breakdown. This can also cause cognitive weaknesses, such as dissonance and complexity. Suffering from extreme height phobia, requires extra caution and awareness about potentially distressing places. Clark (2001) states that people suffering from claustrophobia, height phobia and small animal phobia are always able to avoid such incidents, this is caused by the persistence of fear. Although most manage to adapt and overcome their difficulties, it seems not to be working for many. Researchers, for example LeBeau, Glenn, Liao, Wittchen, Baum, Ollendick and Craske (2010), claim that height phobia is the most dominant phobia of the natural environment. They further state that it is a comorbid anxiety disorder. Respondent 3 describes her difficulties as follows;

I am interested in developing myself. Teachers may not be familiar with my weaknesses of height phobia. When I came back last autumn, the first teacher was very helpful, he advised me to meet special students administrator for which, she made

recommendation about my conditions. I don't want every teacher should know my conditions.

Leadership traits model suggests leadership dexterity is also acquired through initiative and persistence (Stogdill, 1974, Northouse, 2010). Initiative and persistence are driving stimuli that generate craving for achievements. Moreover, special students have to undertake many hurdles to perform and to excel consistently. However, difficulties remain intact unless overcome. Respondent 2 expresses this by saying;

I'm a positive person who wants to try and try. If there's something I want, I work hard to get that.

Moreover, facing challenges and developing the trait of adapting to the environment for maintaining the consistency in performing requires persistence, which is driven by excelling, alertness and intellectual stimulation. Moreover, special students understand their weaknesses and admit to facing challenges like all others. This enables them to encourage a synergy of effects through initiative and persistence. Respondent 1 supports this by stating,

I don't tell teachers about my problem, and if I tell I get sympathy and I don't want that, I would rather want to be like other normal students. I haven't used my dyslexia card, if I use it, it makes things easy for me but I would rather want to do on my own like any other normal students do. This is how I am doing it, I accept my problem there is nothing I can do with it but I can always do better. I feel I can speak good English and I also am confident. I am doing well in speaking English compared to other Finnish students.

Initiative and persistence for adaptability and maintaining consistency is often demonstrated by special students. For Respondent 2, her initiative and persistence for excelling and to move about without a wheelchair profoundly addresses the initiation of persistent desire. She says,

I would like to tell that handicapped can achieve impossible things. When I was a little girl, one doctor told my parents, I would never walk. My parents wanted us to test the English rehabilitation at home. We did that for some 8-10 years. When I was 8, I started to walk on my own. Nowadays, I don't have to use a wheelchair at home

Moreover, the nature of problems and challenges differ. Initiative and persistence are important factors, which enable action-oriented behavior. Lack of consistency has been encountered as one of the major drawbacks from withdrawing the persistence of desire. Maintaining consistency with adaptability and stabilizing it can lead to achieving success. Hammond and Hercules (2000) states that dyslexia has nothing to do with intelligence. Respondent 1 illustrates this by saying that,

Dyslexia always brings difficulties, for me, there has always been difficulties and it come in a form of not being able to behave like others. Not just reading, it also come with normal constant action that you are surrounded with people and the difficulties comes with how I perceive life, words are not important to me as it is important to other. I see people action is more stable and I have impulsive action which causes a lot of problems how I act within the environment. Reading and then impulsiveness, I lose my patience but I tried and tried to remain patience which I succeeded and I think I am now doing better with many thing related to my studies

Few of the challenges are contextually based and can be a limitation to individuals. Understanding context enables the addition of support to maintain adaptability and stabilize it. Excelling consistently to maintain stability and adaptability also requires the ability of feeling secured, so as to demonstrate dexterity albeit with a difference. Moreover, variables in contextual settings could cause huge potential challenges for some. Respondent 3 expects the support in the contextual arrangements of administrative staff. She explains that;

Changes of classroom, where I have my courses and that is all the support what I really want to have. And I think that is enough for me. Actually, library would have been improved so that I cannot feel fear about the height that is seen through the glass bar.

Special abilities are not weaknesses, by are rather the ability to perform tasks with differences. Contextual variation can be challenging, although support was rendered, these students find it partially suitable to function optimally. Most action-oriented behavior is obtained by the inner stimuli that generate the motivation furthering the initiative and persistence to achieve their desired goals.

Strengthening the leadership dexterity for future progress

Leadership dexterity is acquired through many approaches; one of the old approaches is the leadership traits. Despite much criticism with the traits approach, some of the major aspects have been drawn from it to develop new theories in leadership. The trait approach to studying leadership has identified: intelligence, alertness, initiatives, persistence, insight, responsibility, self-confident and sociability, as the discrete aspects of leadership that can be harnessed. These leadership traits are also are found in most leadership theories. These traits can be found in individuals; however, the only problem understanding how we apply it into practical realities.

In the case of students with the special abilities, they understand their weaknesses, but also have the insight to use them to overcome the difficulties around natural settings. Respondent 2 says,

I'm studying Finnish language at Tampere University for the first year and I suffer from Cerebral palsy, it is difficult for me to move but I would like to share my experiences by writing or some other way.

Generating the inner stimuli motivates them to pursue their desires and objectives. Cerebral Palsy is a neurological, brain and muscles related problems (Kriger, 2006, Bajraszewski, Carne, Kennedy, Lanigan, Ong, Randall, Reddihough, and Touzel, 2008) Respondent 2 is determined to pursue her objectives further and struggle through initiating her persistence to overcome these weaknesses. Respondent 2 initiated her traits of intelligence, alertness, initiatives, persistence, insight, responsibility, self-confident and sociability by enabling them repeatedly to communicate, although speaking is lot more difficult in her case. Her intelligence and insight enabled her to transform into another method of communication by writing, which she explains;

If somebody doesn't understand me on the first time, I say that over again or then I write that.

Problems create difficulties, however, developing a solution to the problem is an intelligent trait of leadership dexterity, which was found among the special students. The identification of the problem is one of the leadership traits of intelligence. Intellectual stimulation is achieved by having multiple insights into the problem. The intellectual stimulation offers wellness that creates a conducive environment for oneself and to others (Rajbhandari, 2016), thus empowering to strengthen the leadership potential by gaining the mind set of socially wellbeing that generates a motivation to act upon the unattempt events that once led to unaccomplished endeavor. Respondent 3 states her challenges by saying,

If I feel motivated by what is there I definitely want to work for it. I have to go there somehow and I did go, I have tried to get rid of this phobia. I tried it by myself and with my friends, and with my psychologist, but it does not work, that's why I have to get the treatment. If I didn't have these problems, I would have gone for exchange, I have tried for exchange program and I just have to skip them and I knew I couldn't do it. I would not like to judge myself with the problems but I judge myself with my intention and action, I don't feel any inferior with the difficulties I have.

Furthermore, the weaknesses and the challenges that have been with her while moving around at the university buildings, Respondent 3 also claims to be having no problem with the complexity. She states;

The campus building, Pinni B, is out of my limit, I cannot even think about going there. But I tried I couldn't succeed. But perhaps I would like to try again. I feel equally competent like any other normal people. I am never going to get rid of this phobia but I am going to take therapy and try to function well with everyday life.

Leadership dexterity, considering the traits approach, results in suggestions that alertness and attentiveness are of prime concern for special students. The awareness of weaknesses enables them to try harder. Hence identifying the problems generated by their weaknesses, enables them to be extra alert, insightful and intelligent. Respondent 1 mentions his alertness and responsibility as he says;

My ears are always open and I hear what teachers are saying and I realized it and managed to go through exam, even though the reading was hard, I read the first book all of it when I was 17-18. I was able to read but the reading was always so slow, so slow that it wasn't very enjoyable. It was so slow and need so much patience. To read one page it takes 10 minutes while during this time I could watch a short movie. As I grew up, patience came along and I was more able to read.

In connection with responsibility, traits are also a reflection of being socially accountable. This further requires self-confidence, intelligence and persistence. Respondent 1 further states;

You need to have continuous action and I always want to progress and continuity. I do not want to be fed by anyone; I want to manage by my own. This motivates me to go further and work harder in studies. I want to be free and do not want to become a burden to the government and do not want to live my life with the government money. I could have stopped going to school and go live with benefit with Finnish society and I don't want to do that because I want to manage life on my own and this is my goal. I might not be able to achieve the goal I have planned but I shall try and go ahead like I have always been doing. There are certain people in Finland who live from the benefits received from government. And I want to be different.

The initiative and persistence of special students is so high that they often drive themselves too much. This enables them to excel and remain confident to maintain their stability and adaptability. Respondent 2 lists her capabilities by saying;

I think I'm competitive with others. I sometimes think I could be better without my cerebral palsy but I don't let my Cerebral Palsy inhibit my studies. I work hard and can also work harder. I would like to graduate from university, get a job, have a family, travel and live a good life.

In the determination to adapt in the normal environmental context, the special students exhibit their abilities to overcome the obstacles driven by initiative and persistence. This encourages them to plan and organize their wellness socially. Respondent 2 connects her motivational potentialities for accomplishing her vision by saying,

I'm motivated because I want to study and work in the future despite my cerebral palsy. I would like to become a reporter or get a job where I can write.

Additionally, motivational potentialities are driven by intelligence and self-confidence. Respondent 1 supports this by stating,

Two biggest goals I have in life, to have a worthy success and spiritual success.

Worthy success, I want to earn so much money that I do not want to depend upon government support and live my own life that I could support myself and my family.

Motivation varies with individuals and their objectives. For Respondent 3, her objective is focused on education despite the challenges she encounters in academic activities. She states,

I am in front of my bachelor and that my big goal at the moment. I would like to achieve my master's degree because that the requirement for finding a good job and I would like to travel

Her initiative and persistence generate motivation for pursuing academia further. However, the challenges constantly pull her back. Moreover, losing the persistence is another form of weaknesses for her. Therefore, she builds her tendency to push harder and enhance her capabilities to adapt and maintain stability for excelling.

DISCUSSION and CONCLUSION

Understanding the potential realm of special students leadership

Understanding leadership potential realms of special students were studied on the experiential learning and implementation of learning behavioral patterns of special students enlightening their academic achievement. Leadership traits have limited contributions for special students. However, it cannot be denied that leadership traits are completely absent in special students. These few leadership traits enable them to enrich their competences. For achieving excellence and competence, they perform with accuracy and through innovative thoughts. Hence, special students are able to generate creative innovation by bringing about creative destruction and creative imitation. Therefore, special students simultaneously develop leadership from within themselves. However, the situations are circumstantial and challenging. Moreover, overcoming these challenges has reflection of leadership dexterity.

Special students are unsung heroes and there is limited literature on special students' leadership. Heroes are hailed and many follow them as role models. For example, people with special abilities in music, academia and athletics have inspired the world with their dexterity to influence us. They never had any followers before; their effectiveness and success generated different paradigms for understanding leadership. Moreover, they have taught us to be effective. The questions remains, how many of us have become successful as leaders.

Following the trait theory of leadership, no debates were made with understanding that leaders are born. Later scientific researcher on leadership, especially, Stogdill (1945) study of behavioral leadership from Ohio State University and Likeret (1947) University of Michigan

enlightened new perspective on acquired qualities of leadership, defying the born qualities of leaders. Most importantly, to be a made leader, something must happen. This agitates and motivates the human mind. This motivation is unstoppable and may defy the leadership trait of born qualities. For special students, who are determined to *Focus*, be *Optimistic*, *Strive* for success and *Smiles* for challenges (FOSS) (Rajbhandari, 2011) have potential to capture leadership realm. This charisma influences many to follow them. Moreover, influencing is a potential component of leadership to lead the followers reflecting the quality of leadership as both born and made. However, the new insight can be reflected likewise, are followers born or are followers made?

Disabilities may not alone be a born phenomenon, accidental, circumstantial incidents and many other medical factors can make any normal people disable anytime. People born with special characteristic have tendencies to demonstrate born qualities of leadership, however, undesired and unexpected incidents may demand different abilities.

The leadership traits can also be found in special students, for example, according to Stogdill (1974, Bass & Stogdill, 1990) alertness, insight, achievement persistence, self-confidence, initiative, tolerance and adaptability. Many of these traits are difficult to impose on normal students. However, for special students any one of these traits can change in modifying of behavioral patterns to achieving success. Moreover, persistence, tolerance and adaptability can have a major impact on gaining effective leadership qualities.

By exploring the leadership potentialities of special students, leadership traits were identified. These traits reflected the dexterity of special students in pursuing the goal directed behavior. The model proposes the leadership traits enriching the special students in strengthening their ability, skills, willingness and tolerance for adaptability and excelling consistency for performance. This performance with a difference in addition empowered motivation to the special students towards reshaping and modification of their behavior.

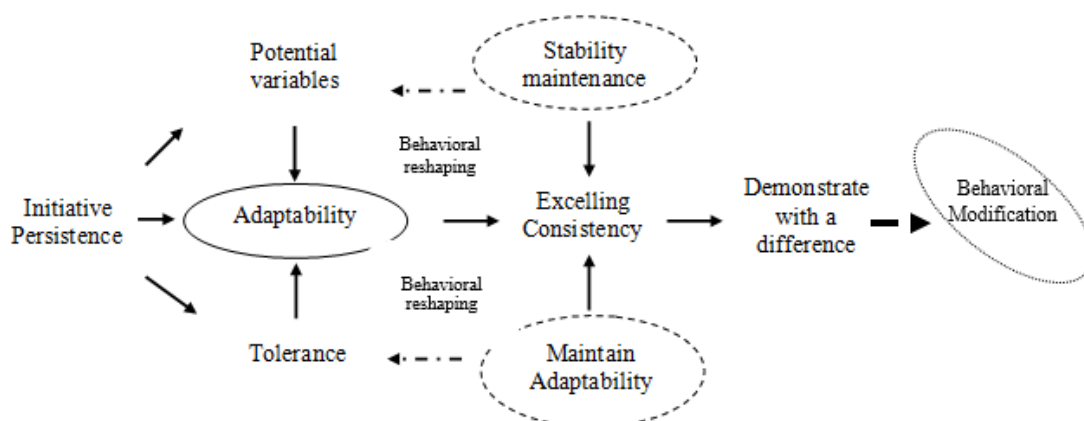


Figure 1 Potential realm of special students leadership. A trait model approach

Every student has their own traits, this is also true for special students. The proposed model in figure 1 suggests that special student's trait of initiative persistence drives them to

push harder to fit in the normal environment. Initiative persistence is a drive to goal oriented behavior. The adaptability to common environment offers exorbitant work and continuous practice. However, special students have different methods to exercise their practices, and have different abilities and skills.

Adaptability to the environment requires special students to constantly perform the same task frequently. However, overdoing it on a regular basis increases their skills and ability, furthermore, making the task even simpler. This empowers motivation towards progressing further. Moreover, maintaining consistency to adapt and remaining stable with such action-oriented behavior can further empower tolerance to overcome difficulties of similar potential variables. This in return enables easiness to performance in any activities they crave to enhance, reading, writing, movement and so forth. Nevertheless, for them every context is unique and challenging. Few succeed and few fail. For both success and failure, the significances of traits are always demonstrated with the difference. This however, is a way towards leadership realm.

Leadership dexterity of special students are generated within themselves by understanding their weaknesses. This generates the special students to initiate their persistence despite their differences. Leadership traits empowered special students. Implication of intelligence, alertness, initiatives, persistence, and insight empowered strength to overcome their weaknesses. This enabled the maintenance of adaptation to potential contextual variables. The trait model approach of special student leadership contributes to highlighting the potential inner stimulus that initiate motivation to develop leadership dexterity. This empowers them to inspire others by implying creative imitation and creative destruction. The dogma of incapability, inability characteristic of special students is actually not the weakest feature but rather is the strength to enhance further.

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