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A Case Study Assessing a School District's Readiness to Support Successful Implementation of Inclusive Education

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A Case Study Assessing a School District's
Readiness to Support Successful Implementation of Inclusive Education

by

Michelle M. Dow

A THESIS

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to examine the readiness of schools within a large urban school district to implement Alberta Education's inclusive education policy. Through the investigation, the degree to which four factors supporting inclusive education environments were evident in these schools was examined: (a) a shared understanding of inclusive education, (b) inclusive leadership, (c) capacity building, and (d) parent engagement. An evaluative case study (Merriam 1998; 2009) was conducted to examine readiness for inclusive education in randomly selected schools in the district. Data were collected through 7 semi-structured individual interviews and 2 online surveys of staff and parents from participating schools. The data were analyzed using category construction (Merriam, 2009). Five findings emerged from the analysis of the data: (a) definitions of inclusive education vary among stakeholders; (b) ways to support implementation need to be discussed with stakeholders; (c) challenges exist to building staffs' understanding of inclusive education; (d) decision-making on students' needs is based on the staff member's role; and (e) parent input is not being sought in creating an inclusive environment. These findings are significant in four important respects. The study provides evidence that (a) the district is ready to develop inclusive education environments and to facilitate inclusive practices within its schools; (b) stakeholders demonstrate a clear interest in being involved in the process; (c) there is still work to be done by the district in developing a shared understanding of inclusive education; and (d) more effective communication about inclusive education is needed.

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Finally, to the participants of my study, thank you for taking the time to share your stories with me. Thank you for your reflections and all that you do to make education better for children.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to William Gabriel Dow and all the students I have had the privilege to work with. Thank you for reminding me why I teach and for giving me a reason to keep learning and growing.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

For years, educators and policymakers have discussed and explored the challenges involved in meeting the learning needs of students with special needs. One of the challenges faced by educators in addressing those needs is understanding and implementing practices in transitioning from segregated education to inclusive education. Identifying the readiness of educators to successfully implement inclusive education is an important step towards meeting the needs of children with special needs. The literature indicates that readiness to implement inclusive education practices involves examining several factors, including a shared understanding of inclusive education by stakeholders', inclusive leadership, building capacity, and addressing the concerns of parents by engaging them in the decision-making process (Loreman, 2007; Ryan, 2006; Yssel, Engelbrecht, Oswald, Eloff, & Swart, 2007). Alberta's transformation to a single, inclusive education system in 2014 was not far behind the move towards inclusion by several other countries.

Special education reform initiatives have been developing in countries around the world for several years. In the United Kingdom (UK), for example, there has been a strong push towards schools developing inclusive learning environments for more than a decade. In the United States (U.S.), legislation such as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act (2001), required schools to create least restrictive environments (LREs) for children with special needs as well as ensure equal educational opportunities for all children. Global agencies such as the Council of Administrators of Special Education (CASE, 1997) and the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC, 2010), two influential American organizations, and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) continue to propel educators forward in developing stronger inclusive education practices, leading to more successful implementation of

inclusive education environments. CASE and CEC support students' rights to quality education in inclusive education environments. UNESCO similarly has contributed to the debate highlighting the importance of inclusive education and "the development of strategies to seek a genuine equalization of opportunity" (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization [UNESCO], 1994, para. 7), which they view as a human right and supported by several nations around the world.

UNESCO is comprised of 37 nations. "UNESCO is known as the 'intellectual' agency of the United Nations" (UNESCO, 2016a, para. 9). The organization was founded after the Second World War with the goal to reconstruct the education systems once peace was restored (UNESCO, 2016b). In early March of 1990, the World Conference on Education for All convened in Jomtien, Thailand. It included the executive heads of the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), UNESCO, and the World Bank. It was hosted by the Royal Government of Thailand and co-sponsored by 18 other governments and organizations. It was at this conference that the World Declaration on Education for All was adopted. The documents from the conference "represent a world wide consensus on an expanded vision of basic education and a renewed commitment to ensure that the basic learning needs of all children, youth and adults are met effectively in all countries" (UNESCO, 1990, p. 4). The documents also identified universalizing access and promoting equity, focusing on learning, broadening the means and scope of basic education, enhancing the environment for learning, and strengthening partnerships as part of their expanded vision (UNESCO, 1990). The Salamanca Statement, which was later released in June of 1994, further proclaimed that

Regular schools with this inclusive orientation are the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, creating welcoming communities, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all; moreover, they provide an effective education to the majority of children and improve the efficiency and ultimately the cost-effectiveness of the entire education system. (UNESCO, 1994, p. ix)

Following the conference in Salamanca, the World Education Forum adopted the Dakar Framework for Action, Education for All: Meeting Our Collective Commitments in April of 2000 reaffirming the vision set forth in 1990 and 1994 (UNESCO, 2000). Today this continues to be the vision of UNESCO, as the organization believes in the right to education by every individual as documented in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

Education shall be directed to the full development of the human personality and to the strengthening of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It shall promote understanding, tolerance and friendship among all nations, racial or religious groups, and shall further the activities of the United Nations for the maintenance of peace. (Article 26, para. 2)

This belief is represented in various government legislations across the globe including Alberta.

The Alberta Human Rights Act proclaims in paragraph one of its Preamble; “WHEREAS recognition of the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all persons is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world;” (Alberta Human Rights Act, 2015, p. 2).

Special education in Alberta has been a concern in the province for several years (Alberta Education, 2009, 2010). In 2007, problems were identified in the way students were coded, assessed, and provided supports and services. In addition, inconsistencies were noted in the interpretation of policy and the management of student files. An increase in the number of

children being diagnosed and coded as having severe disabilities led to the government of Alberta investigating the reasons for the increase in the coding and identifying any discrepancies. Findings of the investigation, which were reported in the 2007 Alberta Education Severe *Disabilities Profile Review* (Alberta Education, 2008a), revealed that about half the students coded with severe disabilities actually met the ministry's policy requirements. As a result, Alberta Education set out to correct the issues with special education in the province leading to *Setting the Direction Framework* in 2008 (Alberta Education, 2009b). In the years that followed, Alberta moved from recommendations and initiative phases to implementing a single inclusive education system, focusing on meeting the diverse learning needs of all students. Since implementation of this initiative in 2014, Alberta Education continued its move towards enacting an inclusive education policy. A policy that aligns with Alberta's Human Rights Act and states:

To support children and students in attaining the goals as stated in the Ministerial Order on Student Learning, school authorities must ensure that all children and students (Kindergarten to Grade 12), regardless of race, religious belief, colour, gender, gender identity, gender expression, physical disability, mental disability, family status or sexual orientation, or any other factor(s), have access to meaningful and relevant learning experiences that include appropriate instructional supports. (Alberta Education, 2015, p. 25)

School boards throughout the province have begun to make the necessary steps to operationalizing inclusive education practices. As schools move towards developing inclusive education environments, one of the challenges they face will be ensuring all stakeholders have a shared understanding of inclusive education. Robinson (2011) stated, "If leaders are to achieve the expected results, they need access to up-to-date knowledge to shape educationally sound

administrative practices” (p. 149). This knowledge would aid in building capacity, developing efficacy of stakeholders, as well support good distributive leadership.

Leadership is a critical element to implementing inclusive education practices. Leithwood and Louis (2012) identified the goal of leadership to be improvement of an organization. “More specifically, it is about establishing agreed-upon and worthwhile directions for the organization in question and doing whatever it takes to prod and support people to move in those directions” (Leithwood & Louis, 2012, p. 4). One form of leadership described by Leithwood and Jantzi (2012) was collective leadership, which “refers to the extent of influence that organizational members and stakeholders exert on decisions in their schools” (p. 11). Robinson (2011) explained that the effectiveness of leadership is measured by the impact it has on educational outcomes of students (p. 4). She identified this type of leadership as student-centered leadership. Robinson posited, “Student-centered leadership is about knowing *what* to do and *how* to do it” (p. 16). Ryan (2006) went a step further stating that leadership should be collective and promote inclusion. He argued that “inclusive leadership is organized above all to work for inclusion, social justice, and democracy not just in school and local communities but also in wider national global communities” (Ryan, 2006, p. 2)

Building capacity is significant to developing inclusive education practices. Schlechty (2009) stated, “Capacity building is both the end and the means of school transformation” (p. 224). He further expressed that schools need to be concerned with social capital in addition to civic capacity and need to work with parents and community members “in ways that build trust and increase feelings of ownership of the schools” (Schlechty, 2009, p. 203). Likewise, Robinson (2011) explained that leadership was “about tackling the work in ways that build trust through learning and making progress together” (p. 43). Ryan (2006) asserted that promoting dialogue is

vital to developing inclusive communities; “For everyone to be meaningfully included, schools need to provide opportunities for people to communicate effectively with one another” (p. 119). In order for this to happen, Ryan said participants must be emotionally invested in the conversations and be able to trust one another.

In addition to building capacity and developing trusting relationships, educational partnerships and parent engagement are also important components to implementing inclusive education environments. Ryan (2006) argued that teaching practices need to be inclusive and consider community knowledge, practice, and values. He stated, “For community inclusion to work, school communities need to work together to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to either participate or be fairly represented in governance processes” (Ryan, 2006, p. 91). Additionally, Garrick Duhaney and Salend (2000) contended that parents can support inclusive education by connecting system personnel and community members. They explained that parents’ perspectives and experiences could impact the inclusive education process. “When parents share their perspectives on inclusion, they not only demonstrate their involvement in schools, but they also affect their children’s education” (Garrick Duhaney & Salend, 2000, p. 122). Engaging parents in the process is critical as their perspectives can impact their roles in the school community as well as family–community–school partnerships (Salend & Garrick Duhaney, 2002; Yssel et al., 2007).

As schools continue to evolve in the 21st century, they are challenged by the diversity and complexity of students and families they serve. It is no longer acceptable for children to be excluded based on race, gender, or any distinguishing feature. The belief that every child has a right to an education is supported through legislation in many countries around the world, though it is not necessarily a lived reality. In developed countries such as Canada, the right to equal

opportunities to education is non-negotiable. As such, education authorities like the provincial ministry of Alberta Education have a duty to all children and their families to ensure that the educational needs of all children are being met.

WHEREAS it is recognized in Alberta as a fundamental principle and as a matter of public policy that all persons are equal in: dignity, rights and responsibilities without regard to race, religious beliefs, colour, gender, gender identity, gender expression, physical disability, mental disability, age, ancestry, place of origin, marital status, source of income, family status or sexual orientation. (Alberta Human Rights Act, 2015, p. 2)

It is therefore imperative that school districts in their efforts to improve opportunities for students acknowledge these rights and use them as a guide to improve and develop more inclusive education practices.

Problem

To support school boards as they move towards implementing the provincial inclusive education framework in Alberta, a deeper understanding of professional staff capacity and readiness is needed. There is currently no research in Alberta that I have found assessing the readiness of school staffs to initiate the transformation to an inclusive education system. Furthermore, it is unclear to what degree school staffs and families are being included in processes that support the development of inclusive school communities and the degree to which there is a shared understanding of inclusive education. A case study review of current practices and understandings is an important first step to informing the transformation of an organization.

Purpose of the Study

Given that the educational system in the province of Alberta is committed to inclusive education, my purpose in this research study was to examine the readiness of school and school

staffs within a large urban school district, the Springfield School District (SSD),¹ to implement inclusive education as articulated by Alberta Education's policy and framework (Alberta Education, 2015). More specifically, through the investigation I examined the degree to which the following four factors were evident in schools participating in this study: (a) a shared understanding of inclusive education, (b) inclusive leadership, (c) capacity building, and (d) parent engagement. The research literature I examined indicated that these factors contribute to the successful implementation of inclusive education. I have used these four factors to develop the conceptual framework in Chapter 2, which served to guide this study in the development of the research questions, the organization of the literature review, the collection and analysis of data, and the recommendations offered at the conclusion of the study.

Research Questions

In this study, I examined the readiness of schools within a large urban school district to successfully implement Alberta Education's approach to inclusive education in meeting the learning needs of children with special needs. I sought to answer four research questions:

1. To what degree do stakeholders have a shared understanding of inclusive education?
2. How do district and school leaders support the implementation of inclusive education environments?
3. What strategies are being used to build staff capacity to implement inclusive education?
4. In what ways are parents being engaged in the implementation of inclusive education?

¹ In order to provide anonymity, I have used SSD as a pseudonym for the school district that is the subject of my study.

² In order to provide anonymity, I have used XYZ Consulting as a pseudonym for the consultant hired by SSD to perform the public engagement study.

Research Design

In this study, I used an evaluative case study (Merriam, 1998; 2009) to guide data collection from selected schools within a large urban school district in Alberta. An evaluative case study “involves description, explanation, and judgment” (Merriam, 1998, p. 39). “Evaluation research collects data or evidence on worth or value of a program, process, or technique” (Merriam, 2009, p. 4). My aim in this case study was to examine the readiness of schools within SSD to successfully implement Alberta Education’s inclusive education framework by identifying whether there was a shared understanding of inclusive education in the district and its schools, establishing how parents and staff are engaged in the decision-making process, and identifying how school and district leaders help to build capacity among staff and parents. The voices of individuals who were directly involved in implementing the educational initiatives or supporting the learning needs of students was critical in understanding where schools and the district were in their efforts as engagement of stakeholders is an essential piece to successful implementation of inclusive education practices.

The research focuses on the readiness to implement inclusive education, which provided the central framework for this study. Through the conceptual framework (see Figure 1 in Chapter 2), I examined key factors, including stakeholders’ shared understanding of inclusion; opportunities and need for capacity building; educational partnerships through inclusive leadership and engagement, and the impact these factors have on implementation of an inclusive education environment.

I conducted this study using both survey and interview data. I collected survey data concurrently with qualitative data both from parents and staff. For the purpose of this study, staff refers to any individual employed by the SSD working with students. I surveyed and interviewed

staff about their involvement in the decision-making process, about their access and contribution to professional development, and about being well informed about inclusive education policy and practices. I surveyed and interviewed parents about their experiences with their child's school and the system. I also interviewed a district administrator to understand the perspective and stance SSD holds regarding inclusive education and the move towards developing inclusive education environments in schools.

I determined that a case study using category construction (Merriam, 2009) of survey and interview data was the best approach for this study. I intended for the parent and staff surveys to aid in generalizing information gathered from participant interviews. I used findings from both the survey and interview data to enhance the credibility of the research by providing a diversity of viewpoints; however, due to the limited number of participants across the sampled regions, this study was not generalizable.

Assumptions

There are several assumptions made in this study based on my experience and knowledge as a teacher and an employee of SSD. The first was that stakeholders shared the same level of understanding regarding inclusive education and practice. I made this assumption on the basis that SSD provided information and documentation about various areas of education and provincial mandates through leadership meetings, professional development, and stakeholder engagement efforts at the school level so that information is evenly disseminated. Second, I assumed that district and school leaders worked together to implement provincial mandates and engage stakeholders in the education process. I based this assumption on the premise that without SSD support of school leadership, efforts to implement successful inclusive education environments would be strained. Third, school staff were engaged in professional development;

therefore, they were capable of applying knowledge gained in helping to develop an inclusive environment. This assumption was based on literature on professional learning communities and what the province expected and required of professional learning communities. Fourth, provincial mandates and resources led to implementation of inclusive education at the school level, thus stakeholders were equally engaged. I made this assumption based on the premise that school districts are required to adhere to provincial legislation and governance regarding education, and, given the principles of inclusive education and values held by the district, SSD has taken steps to ensure this. Finally, I assumed that parents were engaged in conversations around the needs of their child and the services provided as well as supports required at their child's school and were consequently part of the decision-making process. I assumed this parental involvement based on provincial legislation, mandates, and the *Standards for Special Education* (Alberta Learning, 2004).

Rationale and Significance

The rationale for this study stems from my own work in the field of special education and my desire to see children be a part of the school community regardless of their needs, my belief that various factors need to exist to implement inclusive education so as to increase the opportunities for academic success, and my desire to provide an opportunity for the voices of parents and instructional caregivers of special needs children to be heard. Alberta's new inclusive education system opens the door for all students to receive equitable supports and services in meeting their learning needs; however, various steps must be taken to ensure successful implementation in developing a full inclusive environment and establish a school environment where students benefit socially and academically.

Inclusive environments present challenges for schools. Without proper supports and a clear understanding of inclusive education, successful implementation of inclusive practices will be slow or even not possible. It was anticipated that data collected throughout this study could provide SSD with pertinent information regarding its readiness to implement inclusive environments in its schools. It was anticipated that study data could also serve to inform district and school leaders of the concerns of staff and parents in facing this process as well as identify the presence or lack of a shared understanding of inclusive education. The outcome of this study could further aid the district in identifying measures to ensure successful implementation and development of inclusive education environments throughout its schools. Finally, it was anticipated that the findings of this study might contribute to the field of education by providing data to support further investigation of factors necessary for successful implementation of inclusive education practices; findings could also help to determine readiness of school jurisdictions.

The Researcher

I have worked with children in various capacities for 17 years. I am currently president-elect for the Council for Inclusive Education. My interest in special education came as a result of my work with Deaf and hard of hearing children (DHH). Over the years, I have worked to address their needs collaborating with stakeholders to support academic success as well as foster social-emotional relationships among my students and their peers. As a teacher I have learned that my role extends beyond the classroom and into the homes of students, as parents or caregivers have consistently demonstrated or requested the need for my support in providing strategies for behaviours at home, knowledge of their child's learning needs, or simply a sounding board for their frustrations. In addition, my experience with employment in two large

urban school districts in two large cities and two countries has given me the opportunity to witness the frustrations and concerns of parents of special needs children and school staffs who work with these children, and there are many similarities across borders. A common concern among parents and teachers of special needs children is the feeling that their voices are not being heard and the needs of these children are not being met.

Though I began my professional practice with the New York City Department of Education, I am currently employed by a large urban school district in Alberta and have been a teacher here in Canada and with the district for 10 years. It is here in Alberta, that I began developing my understanding of inclusive education. As an employee of this large urban school district, I recognize that my knowledge of the system and my experience with my own school may have been a limitation in the study. As well, my relationships with my students and their families and my role as a teacher create several biases and have impacted the design of the research questions and interpretation of the findings. As a result, various steps were taken to increase the reliability and validity of the data collected; however, due to the lack of participants across the district, the findings of this study represent the thoughts and opinions of a small group of stakeholders within the district. While these participants do not represent the majority of stakeholders in the district, the findings may offer support for future research and next steps to facilitating the development of inclusive education environments across the district.

Additionally, in addressing my biases I have been explicit in my assumptions. Due to my positionality as both a staff member and researcher insider/outsider (Andres, 2012), I was cautious and cognizant in ensuring that participant voices were clear in telling their story, remaining transparent throughout the process. While I have my own thoughts and concerns as an insider, it was important for me to stay neutral and maintain the role of the researcher through the

collection, analysis, and synthesis of the data so as not to merely confirm my assumptions. It was also important for me to recognize how my role as an outsider, academic, could impact the willingness and responses of the study's participants. I discuss my positionality in greater detail in Chapter 3.

Definitions

Special needs student: Any child who is identified by a school board as having specific learning challenges and requiring the need of a special education program as described by section 47(1) of the School Act (2015) due to the student's behavioural, communicational, intellectual, learning or physical characteristics, or a combination of those characteristics.

Inclusive education: "Every learner has unique needs. Some learners have profound and ongoing needs and others have short-term or situation-based needs. This calls for flexible and responsive learning environments that can adapt to the changing needs of learners" (Alberta Education, 2016a, para. 1).

Inclusion: "Inclusion is not just about learners with special needs. It is an attitude and approach that embraces diversity and learner differences and promotes equal opportunities for all learners in Alberta. Alberta's education system is built on a values-based approach to accepting responsibility for all children and students" (Alberta Education, 2016b, para. 1).

Setting the Direction: A framework created as a result of an extensive evaluation of special education in the province of Alberta. The framework recommended a strategic direction to support a single inclusive education system where all stakeholders were responsible for the education of students with disabilities or diverse needs (Alberta Education, 2009).

Action on Inclusion: The name used to signal the implementation of Alberta's Inclusive Education System throughout the province (Alberta Education, 2011).

SSD: An acronym for the large urban school district, Springfield School District, which is the focus of this case study.

Organization of the Dissertation

In Chapter 1 of this study, I describe briefly the literature pertaining to inclusive education practices, specifically to implementing it in schools. I also provide a brief description of special education reform initiatives around the world and the move towards inclusive education. I identify the problem and purpose for this study as well as the rationale for the research design and significance for conducting the study. In addition, I present the focus of this study laid out in four research questions, through which I sought to examine the readiness of schools within a large urban school district in Alberta to implement an inclusive education environment by identifying whether key factors, according to the literature—a shared understanding, support by district and school leaders, capacity building through inclusive leadership, and parent engagement—are present. I conclude the chapter with the definition of key terms that I use throughout the following chapters.

In Chapter 2, I provide a review of the literature and the factors identified as strong supports for inclusive education. I explore past and current issues in special education and the move towards inclusive education in Alberta and around the world. I review the literature pertaining to the five factors outlined in Chapter 1 as supports to implementing inclusive environments in schools. I examine the scholarly perspectives and support for a shared understanding of inclusive education, various types of leadership and reasons to develop inclusive leadership skills, the pros and cons to capacity building, the impact of parent engagement, and the significance of accountability in maintaining an inclusive environment. I conclude Chapter 2 with an explanation of the conceptual framework for this study.

In Chapter 3, I present a detailed description of the methodology used in the study. It includes an overview of the study, the rationale for using a transformative mixed methods design, and the rationale for using a case study methodology. I also give a detailed explanation of the research sample and how the sample will be determined. In addition, I describe the setting in which data was collected, the information needed to conduct the study, each phase of the study, and how the data collected was analyzed. I conclude the chapter with an explanation of the administration procedures, an explanation of the roles of participants in the research, including my own, and a discussion on maintaining validity and reliability.

In Chapter 4, I explain the key findings in the study. I present a breakdown of the data collected from both surveyed and interviewed participants. I also give voice to survey and interview respondents, presenting excerpts from interview transcripts as well as open-ended responses collected from staff and parent surveys. I conclude Chapter Four with a summary of those findings.

In Chapter 5, I present the analysis of the key findings identified in Chapter 4. I examine the findings in relation to the literature explored in Chapter 2. I further break down the data and the implications for transformation of schools in SSD to successfully implementing Alberta Education's inclusive education system in its schools. I conclude the chapter with a summary of the interpretation of the findings.

I conclude the study in with a review of the four research questions. I summarize the five findings presented in Chapter 4 in addition to providing conclusions based on analysis of the findings in Chapter 5. I include recommendations based on the five findings as well as recommendations for future research and actions by SSD. I conclude the chapter with a brief personal reflection.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

There are several key factors identified in the literature on inclusive education that have been shown to be supportive of successful implementation in schools. In this chapter, I present a review of the literature that addresses four of those factors: (a) a shared understanding of inclusive education, (b) inclusive leadership, (c) capacity building, and (d) parent engagement. I examined past and current research on inclusive education to achieve a greater understanding and/or a solution for the problem presented in this study; there is little research that has assessed the readiness of school staffs to initiate transformation of schools to an inclusive education system in Alberta. As well, the literature review serves to support the purpose of this study outlined in the previous chapter, which is to examine the readiness of schools within SSD to implement inclusive education. In addition to reviewing barriers to inclusive education, I examined concerns by key stakeholders and supporters regarding inclusive practices.

I begin the chapter with a history of special education and reform efforts to move Alberta away from a dual system of education to one single education system focusing on inclusive education. The history identifies the meaning of inclusive education and examines how Alberta began its transformation. I continue with a review of the literature on inclusive leadership and the impact this type of leadership has on transforming an organization. Through the literature on leadership, I also explore the role district and school leaders have in capacity building and the significance of trust in implementing and maintaining inclusive environments. Additionally, I examine through the literature review the role of parents in implementing inclusive education, specifically how parent engagement supports the development of educational partnerships and the strengthening of community relationships. I conclude the chapter with a review of previous studies and their findings regarding inclusive education environments in schools.

The literature review informs this evaluative case study through four factors. Those four factors are examined with regard to their significance in contributing to the development of inclusive education environments. These four factors (a) shared understanding, (b) supporting implementation of inclusive education, (c) inclusive leadership: building capacity, and (d) parent engagement are displayed in Figure 1 and form the conceptual framework that guided and organized the literature review, shaped the research design, data collection, analysis and interpretation in this study.

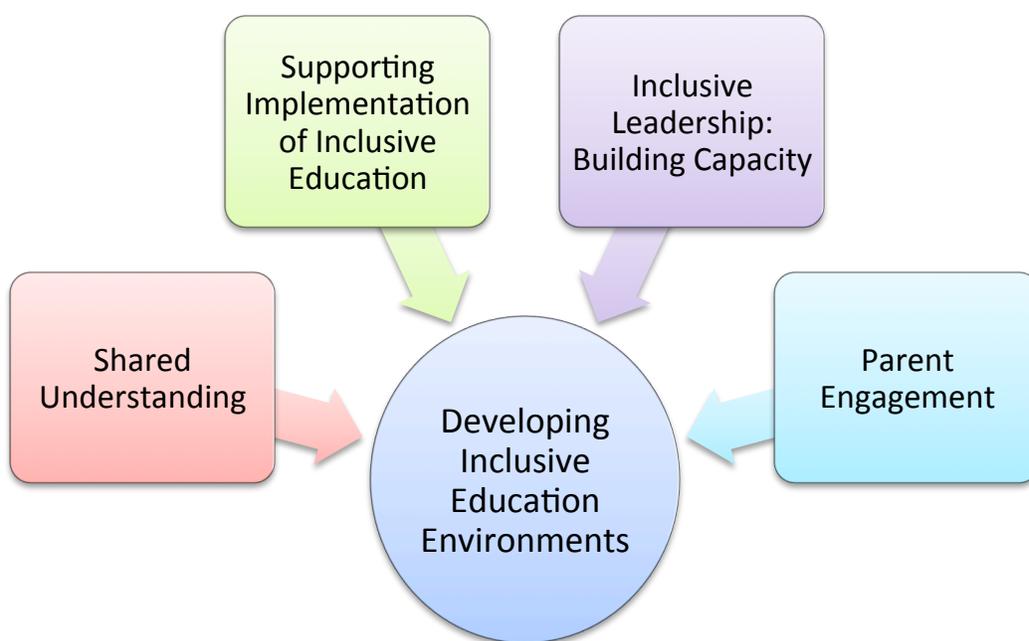


Figure 1. Conceptual framework – developing inclusive education environments.

Inclusive Education

School boards across North America have gone to tremendous lengths to strengthen their school learning communities and to further reform initiatives, such as developing inclusive environments, by creating meaningful partnerships among stakeholders. Schools that have made this revolutionary change did so by recognizing the roles and impact a range of stakeholders play

in student achievement. Sanders (2003) argued that in theory “community involvement in schools is an opportunity for a more democratic and participatory approach to school functioning—one that can serve to enhance students’ achievement and well-being, build stronger schools, assist families, and revitalize communities” (p.173). Moreover, successful school reforms are enhanced by the ability of stakeholders to collaborate effectively. It requires a development of trust between all parties and a shared understanding of vision and values.

Bryk and Schneider (2003) contended, “Relational trust is the connective tissue that binds individuals together to advance the education and welfare of students” (p. 45). Consequently, if leaders hope to transform their organization, build capacity, and develop educational partnerships, they must seek ways to develop trusting relationships and work collaboratively with teachers, families, and community members by engaging in meaningful discourse about educational issues and develop strategies to facilitate learner outcomes together. Developing strong working relationships is critical for the success of special education initiatives. To exclude voices and/or limit participation of stakeholders only serves to derail reform efforts, and as the shift towards inclusive education in Alberta’s schools continues, it is imperative that schools’ leaders examine the factors necessary to implement such a transformation.

The move to inclusive education has proven to be a challenge for schools and policymakers across the world. “The development of inclusive policies and practices within rapidly changing education systems is a complex business” (Ainscow, 2005, p. 121). There has been much debate over inclusion in the field of special education from ways to define it, to strategies and policies needed for successful implementation in meeting the needs of all children and not just those with special needs (Ainscow, 2005; Ainscow, Howes, Farrell, & Frankham 2003; Kavale & Forness, 2000; Morsink & Lenk, 1992). Inclusion is seen by some as a

movement seeking to create school environments that meet the needs of all learners through the establishment of learning communities for students with diverse needs learning from each other (Kavale & Forness, 2000; Salend & Garrick Duhaney, 1999). Inclusion, however, is not merely a movement but a Human Right. UNESCO (1994) proclaimed that

Every child has a fundamental right to education, and must be given the opportunity to achieve and maintain an acceptable level of learning... those with special educational needs must have access to regular schools which should accommodate them within a child centered pedagogy capable of meeting these needs . . . (p. viii)

Over the years, as debate around inclusion progressed, researchers worked to identify factors that would support inclusive practices, while Alberta continued to explore ways to reform their schools and make their classrooms and school communities a more inclusive environment.

Special education reform initiatives have been increasing in several countries around the world for several years. In the UK, for example, there has been a strong push towards schools developing inclusive learning environments for the past 10 years. In the U.S., legislation such as the NCLB Act (2001) has required schools to create least restrictive environments (LREs) for children with special needs. American organizations such as CASE and CEC have expressed their views on the impact federal legislation and education initiatives have on meeting the needs of special needs students. Likewise, the international community has weighed in on the development of special education and the need for proper services and supports for children with special needs.

In the U.S., CEC and CASE have taken strong positions on LRE and inclusion stating that all children have a right to a quality education in a unified education system within their community. The CEC policy manual on Inclusive Schools and Community Settings states,

CEC believes that a continuum of services must be available for all children, youth, and young adults. CEC also believes that the concept of inclusion is a meaningful goal to be pursued in our schools and communities. In addition, CEC believes children, youth, and young adults with disabilities should be served whenever possible in general education classrooms in inclusive neighborhood schools and community settings. Such settings should be strengthened and supported by an infusion of specially trained personnel and other appropriate supportive practices according to the individual needs of the child.

(1997; 2010; Part 1 Ch. 3, para. 6)

CASE's position on delivery of services to students with disabilities took a similar stance stating, Currently, rather than focus upon the environment, a focus upon levels of scope and intensity of educational services (least restrictive alternatives) is considered appropriate. Special education (specially designed instruction) is not a site or setting, but a service delivery system that is responsive to the unique needs of each child. The educational community is increasingly advocating for a more "inclusive" public education system for ALL children. The result is an evolving philosophy of inclusionary programming for our nation's students with disabilities. (1997, para. 3)

Similar to CEC and CASE, International organizations such as UNESCO have taken similar positions, holding fast to the claim that

inclusion and participation are essential to human dignity and to the enjoyment and exercise of human rights. Within the field of education, this is reflected in the development of strategies that seek to bring about a genuine equalization of opportunity.

(1994, para. 7)

It is the work of organizations such as these that continue to propel nations ahead in developing inclusive practices for children with special needs in schools. Moreover, it is the advocacy of organizations such as CEC, CASE, and UNESCO and the support of strong, rigorous research that continues to move schools forward towards developing successful inclusive education settings; however, the perspective with regard to the definition of inclusive education varies as many people still view inclusive education in relation to the supports provided to children with special needs (Ainscow, 2005; Ainscow & César, 2006; Gilham & Williamson, 2014; Round, Subban, & Sharma, 2016) despite the government legislations and organizations like UNESCO that identify it as a basic human right (Alberta Human Rights Act, 2015; UNESCO, 1990;).

Opposition to inclusive education. While countries and organizations around the world have taken a position on inclusive education, there is still opposition and apprehension about developing inclusive education environments (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Boyle, Topping, & Jindal-Snape; 2013; Connor & Ferri, 2007; Daniel & King, 1997; Forlin, 2001; Forlin, Earle, Loreman, & Sharma, 2011; Gunnþórsdóttir & Jóhannesson, 2014; Slee & Allen, 2001). Resistance and reservations towards inclusive education appear to be a result of various factors including stress, lack of training and additional workload felt by teachers as well as fear by parents that their children will not receive required supports in a mainstream classroom in addition to teachers being ill equipped to educate students with diverse needs (Daniel & King, 1997; Shelvin, Winter, & Flynn, 2013; Stanovich & Jordan, 1998). Such stressors and fears have also been further impacted by well-intended education policies.

Slee and Allen (2001) argued that educational policy-making actually moves schools towards exclusion. They addressed the focus of inclusive education on special education and

identified four key points in an effort to shift education research and policy past special educational needs. They argued that inclusive education is not a linear progression of various practices of special educational needs and explained that a deeper understanding of the exclusionary practices within policy is required (Slee & Allan, 2001). Connor and Ferri (2007) evaluated resistance to inclusion by examining public discourse in major newspaper publications in the U.S. and the UK between 1987 and 2002, which again examined special education in mainstream education. This review led the authors to conclude that the view of special education students was a “statement about insufficient progress towards the integration of people in society at large” (p. 74), an even greater issue.

Schools supporting inclusive education have been faced with many other challenges, including lack of supports available to teachers, training, workload, and the various needs of the students (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Forlin, 2001; Forlin et al., 2011; Gunnþórsdóttir & Jóhannesson, 2014). Gunnþórsdóttir and Jóhannesson (2014) concluded that the problem in terms of teachers’ willingness to embrace inclusive education was that teachers viewed inclusion as an additional task. Additionally, the findings from a Boyle et al. (2013) study of secondary teaching staff from a local Scottish education authority indicated that teachers started out fairly inclusive, but the majority of them showed a significant drop in attitude towards inclusive education after the first year. The findings of the study suggested that with some professional development there may be an increase in positive attitudes towards inclusive education from teachers. A research analysis done by Avramidis and Norwich (2002) indicated that teachers’ attitudes towards inclusion was also based on the nature of a student’s disability and the type of supports provided to teachers, including learning support teams and teacher training; and Forlin’s (2001) study identified teachers’ professional competence and a student’s behaviour as the two

most stressful categories for teachers. Teacher negative attitudes and perceived constraints to inclusive education thus appear to be the result of the lack of basic requirements to developing inclusive environments (Forlin et al., 2011; Shelvin et al., 2013; Stanovich & Jordan, 1998). Apprehension towards inclusive education, however, extends to other stakeholder groups as well.

Parents have expressed concern about inclusive education. “Parents have expressed concern about the adequacy of support received by their children in mainstream schools and even parents of ‘other’ children have questioned the impact of inclusion policies, especially where there are disruptive children” (Allan, 2007, p. 9). Results of a Daniel and King (1997) study of the effects of students placed in an inclusion classroom versus students in a non-inclusion classroom indicated that parents of students in the inclusion program expressed a higher degree of concern than the parents in the non-inclusion program. In a study by Pivic, McComas, and LaFlamme (2002), which examined how inclusive schools were after 25 years of educational reform in Canada, the researchers identified differences between parents of elementary students and parents of secondary students. Pivic et al. (2002) found that parents of elementary students were mostly concerned with social difficulties, isolation, and their child’s self-esteem in addition to “unintentional attitudinal barriers on the part of the educators” (p. 103). Parents of older students reported that there was a need for teachers and students to be better educated about disabilities, their impact, and ways to encourage participation. Parents also suggested the use of other resources to create a more accessible environment.

Inclusive education in Alberta. The inclusion movement in Alberta began in the 1980s. It was believed that by including children with special needs in the regular classroom, a more inclusive system of education could be created thus providing a model of education that would better serve or meet the needs of all students, especially those who were at risk of being

denied equal opportunities to education such as students with special needs. This evolution, however, has taken some time. Phase 1 of setting the direction was *Setting the Direction for Special Education in Alberta*. In the message from Alberta's Education Minister at the time, Dave Hancock stated, "Setting the Direction for Special Education in Alberta is a major project to create a new framework that will ensure students with special education needs get the supports they need to be successful" (Alberta Education, 2008b, p.1). Alberta has since moved towards an inclusive view focusing on the needs of all students in accordance with the Alberta Human Rights Act.

Though there has been tremendous debate around inclusive education, some scholars argued that a move towards inclusive education of special needs students would diminish the support provided to both teachers and students, while others argued that teachers should have the necessary skills to teach all students and therefore with proper training provide the necessary support to special needs students without having them pulled out of the classroom (Andrews et al., 2000; Kavale & Forness, 2000; Lindsay, 2003; Salend & Garrick Duhaney, 1999). This debate continues today; however, provinces such as Ontario and New Brunswick (New Brunswick Department of Education and Early Childhood Development, 2013; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2009) have already moved to a full inclusive education system, and now, at the government level, so has Alberta. Alberta's move towards inclusive education is not only grounded in provincial and federal legislation, Alberta Human Rights Act (2015), and the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (1982), but it is further supported by other notable international policies such as the United Nation's *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (1948) and UNICEF's *Convention on the Rights of the Child* (1990).

Alberta Education's policy has changed over the past two decades. Public policy, which "refers to the governing set of principles given force and effect by elected officials in order to meet recognized public needs" (A. L. Charette Consulting, 2008, p. 3), is determined by the values and principles governments wish to develop in a particular service area and based on the current and perceived future needs of the public. In the 1990s, Alberta's policy changed with a newly elected premier. During the early 90s, Alberta was struggling to strengthen its economy and reduce debt. Premier Ralph Klein promised to balance the province's budget in 4 years in addition to changing the role of government in education (Taylor, 2001). There was a move away from education being bureaucratic to a more flexible partnership. Alberta Education promised to work with stakeholders to provide private and public specialized schools to give students opportunities to develop their strengths and to prepare students to compete in the global economy (Taylor, 2001). Education policy was changing to meet the economic and future needs of the province. This change in Alberta's policy led to an outcry of opinions from the public and educators alike regarding the direction of education and special education throughout the province. While the belief of some was that the "policy decisions, and indeed accountability and funding decisions, should move special education toward the desired state and be congruent with the principles" (A. L. Charette Consulting, 2008, p. 5), it was unclear how this restructuring was going to improve education.

During the 1990s, as part of a restructuring to Alberta's education system, the province moved to redesign their education system to be more accountable to stakeholders (Taylor, 2002). In an effort to avoid "having to go through the more complex process of having Alberta Education make funding decisions on individual students" (Alberta Education, 2008a, p. 1), special education policy was decentralized to local jurisdictions. "The current process of

identifying students for support in Alberta is based on the psycho-medical or individual deficit model, where difficulties with school and education are considered to lie within the student” (Graham & Jahnukainen, 2011, p. 273). Students were identified by teachers or parents for evaluation and then through psychological assessments, students were coded based on the results, which helped to identify the financial supports they receive from the province. Education policy in Alberta as outlined in the Standard for Special education requires teachers to complete individual program plans (IPPs) as a means of accountability and a way to track student progress and services for students identified as having special needs (Alberta Learning, 2004). The rights and responsibilities pertaining to special education are also identified in sections of the School Act (2015) and consistent with the requirements of the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (1982), which assures every individual right of access to education (Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, 1982; School Act, 2015) and requires school boards to provide appropriate opportunities for students to meet the standards of education set by the Minister (School Act, 2015).

The *Principal Quality Practice Guideline* released by Alberta Education in February 2009, identified several leadership dimensions that are leadership responsibilities all school leaders are expected to develop throughout their careers, including fostering effective relationships by having to “promote an inclusive school culture respecting and honouring diversity” (2009a, p. 4) and providing instructional leadership whereby “the principal ensures that students have access to appropriate programming based on their individual learning needs” (2009a, p. 5). In addition to this guideline, the *Standards for Special Education* (Alberta Learning, 2004), the School Act (2015), and the Alberta Education standards (Alberta Education,

2016c) require school boards to provide appropriate training to staff and necessary accommodations so that districts can properly identify appropriate programming for all students.

Inclusive education is a human right. Alberta's move towards inclusive education is recognition of the equal rights of all individuals regardless of "race, religious beliefs, colour, gender, gender identity, gender expression, physical disability, mental disability, ancestry, place of origin, marital status, source of income, family status or sexual orientation" (Alberta Human Rights Act, 2015, p. 4) and the commitment of schools to meet the needs of parents and their children. "The policy framework in Alberta supports the inclusion and integration of children with special needs in regular classrooms" (Kohen, 2010, p. 14); in addition, other legislation, such as the Family Support for Children with Disabilities Act (2003), has been created to support children with disabilities as well as their families.

In the fall of 2007, a severe disability funding profile review was conducted, which identified problems in the way students were coded, assessed, and provided supports and services (Alberta Education, 2009b). In addition, the review recognized inconsistencies in the interpretation of policy and the management of student files (Alberta Education, 2009b). This led to the *Setting the Direction Framework* (2009b), which was intended to re-evaluate special education in Alberta and redesign the system and programming for students with special needs.

Though the *Setting the Direction Framework* (Alberta Education, 2009b) attended to how children with special needs would be served in Alberta, the document placed emphasis on the system being responsive to the diverse learning needs of all students. It de-emphasized the idea of differences. Moreover, the framework aimed to eliminate a system that according to provincial legislatures had been split into two systems focusing on mainstream education and special education. The framework recommended moving in a direction that would make the

responsibility of students with disabilities and diverse needs the responsibility of all stakeholders, not just individuals with a special education designation. This was the central idea within the *Setting the Direction Framework* (Alberta Education, 2009b).

The government of Alberta responded favourably to the framework accepting all the recommendations. They supported the idea of creating a single inclusive education system that identified and worked towards meeting the learning needs of all students. Inclusive education in Alberta is explained as education where

every learner has unique needs. Some learners have profound and ongoing needs and others have short-term or situation-based needs. This calls for flexible and responsive learning environments that can adapt to the changing needs of learners. (Alberta Education, 2016a, para. 1).

This new vision continued to develop and Alberta Education pressed ahead not only by engaging the public in discussions around the changing education system but also by seeking out student voice. These combined initiatives propelled the province forward in transforming the education system. As a result, in 2011 the *Setting the Direction Framework* (2009b) evolved into Action on Inclusion, indicating the implementation of Alberta's inclusive education system.

Provincial legislation and established standards for principals, teachers, and education has provided the groundwork for inclusive education in Alberta to develop within schools. Such legislation includes the Education Act of 2012 (2016); which includes in its preamble:

WHEREAS education is a shared responsibility and requires collaboration, engagement and empowerment of all partners in the education system to ensure that all students achieve their potential; . . .

WHEREAS the Government of Alberta recognizes the importance of an inclusive education system that provides each student with the relevant learning opportunities and supports necessary to achieve success; (p. 10–11)

Though it has not been proclaimed and continues to be extensively reviewed by the government, the Education Act, which received Royal Assent in 2012, outlines clear expectations for inclusive education. Despite efforts to solidify this legislation, schools have been on hold as the province has been working towards possible proclamation of the Education Act in addition to revising other policy documents and frameworks, such as the *Standards for Special Education* (Alberta Learning, 2004), to reflect the change in the education system.

In the midst of these policy changes, how then do schools move from providing supports and services in separate LRE to providing full inclusive environments? How do schools begin to recognize the needs of all children regardless of their background or capabilities? How do school districts know if their schools are ready for such a transformation? Current and previous literature point to effective collaboration from all stakeholders as well as linking research to practice as being significant to successful inclusion initiatives. Successful inclusive education practice requires systemic change (Andrews et. al, 2000; Council for Exceptional Children [CEC], 2010; Council of Administrators of Special Education [CASE], 1997; UNESCO, 1994). Researchers cite having a shared vision, adequate funding, attitudes and perception of staff, staff development, engagement of parents and community, and collaborative leadership as critical components to successful inclusion policy (Ainscow, 2005; Ainscow et. al, 2003; Kavale & Forness, 2000; Loreman, 2007). Without the background and contextual conditions being in place, inclusive education cannot be implemented successfully (Loreman, 2007).

The recognition by countries for policy and legislation pertaining to inclusive education is evident (Alberta Human Rights Act, 2015; Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedom, 1982; UNESCO, 1990, 1994). Such policy and legislation have sought to remove barriers and protect marginalized children from being denied the same educational opportunities offered to children who seemingly do not share the same struggles or social, educational or physical barriers. Despite governments' efforts to minimize or remove disparities however, there is still much research and discussion offering varying views on the effectiveness and challenges to inclusive education (Avramidis & Norwich, 2002; Boyle et al., 2013; Forlin, 2001; Forlin et al., 2011; Gunnþórsdóttir & Jóhannesson, 2014; Kozleski, Artiles, & Waitoller, 2011; Idol, 2006; McDermott, Edgar, & Scarloss, 2011). Through the literature reviewed in the following sections, I seek to demonstrate specifically how a shared understanding of inclusive education, leadership support of inclusive education, capacity building through inclusive leadership, and parent engagement set the ground work for which inclusive education environments exist and support the readiness of staffs to implement more inclusive practices (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Fauske, 2011; Fullan, 2007; Jones, White, Fauske, & Carr, 2011; Toson, Burrello, & Knollman, 2013) and the challenges faced implementing inclusive practices.

Developing a Shared Understanding

There is a need for diverse stakeholders to be involved in developing a shared understanding about inclusive education practices. "Dialogue among teachers, staff, and school leaders is central to the notion of creating communities of inquiry and systemic thinking about school processes" (Fauske, 2011, p. 15). Fauske (2011) further explained that the function of language is to build community "in which participants have a shared understanding about common purposes and processes and an opportunity to explore the translation of these into the

practice of the school and classroom” (p. 15). Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) maintained that developing a shared understanding within an organization is a critical part of leadership. The need for stakeholders to develop a shared understanding of what inclusive education is within a school context is essential to developing an inclusive environment that supports inclusive education practices. Ekins (2013) explained that one of the key challenges in discussions about special education needs (SEN) and inclusion is the result of the interchanging ways (SEN) and inclusion are discussed. She stated,

There is a danger that as the terms have become so commonplace within educational policy and discourse, there is an assumption that the terms are understood with shared understanding of the meaning of those terms.

A critical approach taken to exploring the underlying meanings, attitudes and implications for practice embedded within different uses of the term is therefore essential. (Ekins, 2013, p. 19)

Ekins (2013) further explained that the way the term is used in practice is “dependent on personal attitudes and values in relation to how we view education and inclusion more broadly” (p. 20).

Learning and performance cannot be changed “without creating a strong, visible, transparent common culture of instructional practice” (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2011, p. 32). To assist in the creation of such a culture, Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson (2006) suggested rational planning and the development of long-term inclusive development be used to create increased coherence. In so doing, district and school leaders can strategically plan and develop how to actively engage stakeholders in meaningful discourse around the need for inclusive practices, identify areas of strength and concern, as well as begin mapping out what successful

implementation of inclusive education would look like for stakeholders and instructional practice. This could serve to facilitate the development of a shared understanding and purposeful accountability by all stakeholders. “It is one thing . . . to articulate a commitment to inclusive education, and quite another to actively implement practices in schools which will contribute to its success” (Loreman, McGhie-Richmond, Barber, & Lupart, 2008, p. 3).

Ainscow et al. (2006) explained that schools are generally limited in their discretion in terms of development; being explicit about their values, initiating an action plan, and eliminating discrepancies between values is within their discretion. They argued, “The coherence over values helps to reinstate an emphasis on rational planning and the building of long-term sustainable inclusive development” (Ainscow et al., 2006, p. 88). Further to this point, Schlechty (2009) contended,

The capacity of a school, or any other organization, to be oriented toward the future depends on the ability of the organization and its leaders to develop a shared understanding of the problems that give rise to the need for change and the ability to communicate a clear vision of the direction that change will entail. (p. 226)

Clarification of the meaning within the district and school context is important to developing a shared understanding of inclusive education. Ekins (2013) explained,

At times, discussions about inclusion have become too narrowly focused and the concept of inclusion has come to mean the placement and provision of pupils with SEN and discussions about inclusion are reduced to discussions about the needs, or usually, the difficulties, of pupils with SEN. This narrow focus can close down opportunities for reflective practitioners to really engage with the wider notion of what it means to include all pupils within the given school context.

Thus, we need to acknowledge that the term ‘inclusion’ does not just equate with meeting of needs of those pupils with SEN. A much broader awareness and conceptualisation of the term ‘inclusion’ needs to be agreed and shared within the school context to ensure that ALL pupils are valued and are given equal opportunities to access and participate in all learning opportunities provided. (p. 20)

This view is also illustrated in the shift by many countries and organizations in the recognition of the rights of all children (Alberta Human Rights Act, 2015; Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, 1982; CASE, 1997; CEC, 2010; UNESCO, 1994).

Supporting Implementation: Leadership

Leadership is a vital part of running a school or any organization. It is an essential component to implementing, developing, and maintaining reform initiatives in schools.

Leithwood and Louis (2012) identified the goal of leadership as being to improve an organization. Ryan (2006) argued that leadership should be collective and promote inclusion. He contended that inclusive leadership works for inclusion, social justice, and democracy, not just in school and local communities. Robinson (2011), however, argued that the style of leadership is not as important as the practices. She contended that the effectiveness of a leader is the impact that leader has on educational outcomes of students. She identified this practice as student-centered leadership (Robinson, 2011). In addition to student-centered leadership, there are several other types of leadership approaches, including shared, collaborative, distributive, and what Ryan (2006) called inclusive leadership. These are several different perspectives on leadership, yet all are necessary and significant when discussing the relevance and impact leadership has on implementing and maintaining an inclusive education environment. In the

following sections, I examine leadership through the lens of social justice, leading organizational change, and the meaning of inclusive leadership.

Social justice and inclusive education. Understanding inclusive education and the factors necessary to implement it requires a review of the literature around social justice in special education as well as social justice and leadership. These discussions and the research to support claims in these areas provide the foundation for the implementation and development of an inclusive education environment.

Pazey and Cole (2013) contended that the current trend in educational leadership is social justice orientation. Inclusive education involves identifying and accommodating the needs of all students with and without disabilities; “although not without its controversies, inclusion represents in practice the ideals of social justice and equality for all students” (Loreman et al., 2008, p. 3). Social justice is defined in a multitude of ways, although Theoharis (2007), in addressing special education issues within social justice practice of school leaders, had this to say in discussing issues in the U.S. He defined “social justice leadership to mean that principals make issues of race, class, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and other historically and currently marginalizing conditions in the United States central to their advocacy, leadership practice, and vision” (Theoharis, 2007, p. 223). Theoharis identified that students such as English language learners and children with special needs who are often segregated in schools are also included in this definition, which “centers on addressing and eliminating marginalization in schools” (2007, p. 223). Sapon-Shevin (2003) furthered this point saying that “inclusion is not about disability, nor is it only about schools. Inclusion is about social justice (p. 26). Sapon-Shevin contended that inclusive classrooms do more than address the needs of individual

students or the school setting; they also support the development of a more inclusive democratic society, a concept further supported by Gordon and Louis (2013):

A school that is accountable to the community is one that reflects local values and customs, has indicators of success that are visible and well-communicated to the public, and allows parents to choose other schools if they are not satisfied with the service, but that also acknowledges the special role of educational professionals and community members working together to support student development. (p. 350)

Democratic societies are supported by stakeholders' self-efficacy and collective efficacy, which are contributing factors in developing successful school–family–community partnerships. Self-efficacy is confidence in one's own abilities, and collective efficacy is confidence in the abilities of those an individual works or collaborates with (Wahlstrom, Louis, Leithwood, & Anderson, 2010). Harris and Goodall (2008) posited that parents' sense of self-efficacy is a contributing factor to being engaged with the school. They argued that parents are more likely to be involved if they feel they make a difference in their child's achievement and if they feel it is part of their responsibilities as parents (Harris & Goodall, 2008).

Efficacy affects the choices a person makes and impacts the amount of effort applied when dealing with challenges or failure (Leithwood, Mascall, & Jantzi, 2012). Parents' positive self-efficacy supports their ability to advocate for their child as well as assist them in being actively engaged in the decision-making process regarding inclusion practices intended to serve their child (Pazey & Cole, 2013). School leaders need to understand policy and standards and speak to parents openly about how children benefit from an inclusive setting. They must know how to bring parents and students together with staff and service professionals when determining what services would best meet the needs of students and advocate for them. Pazey and Cole

(2013) explained that collaborative decision-making involves multiple stakeholders, including the school staff, parents, and other service agencies. Efficacy is, therefore, an important part of social justice as it contributes to the degree of collaboration and amount of work expended by stakeholders in advocating for the needs of children and is necessary if stakeholders hope to create a successful inclusive environment.

Organizational change. Stability is the goal of management and improvement the goal of leadership, yet both are incredibly important as they have a symbiotic relationship (Leithwood & Louis, 2012). The goal of leadership in organizational improvement is specifically to “establish agreed-upon and worthwhile directions for the organization . . . and doing whatever it takes to prod and support people to move in those directions” (Leithwood & Louis, 2012, p. 4). “Organizations are created and developed on an assumption of continuity, to continue surviving, and to last” (Burke, 2011, p. 2). Fullan (2007) takes this notion a step further as he explained, that “staying the course means that careful attention is paid to developing the leadership of others in the organization in the interests of continuity and deepening of good direction” (p. 59).

Burke (2011) identified several theories to defining leadership. He explained that overall leadership is the ability to exercise the capacity to influence others, “the act of making something happen that would not otherwise occur” (Burke, 2011, p. 250). Schools are open systems. Open-system theory maintains that systems are open when they are dependent on and continuously interacting with the environment in which they reside (Burke, 2011). Organizations survive on the energy they receive from their environment (Burke, 2011). Energy used by a school might include feedback, material and human resources, or work from the staff and other stakeholders. That energy, Burke explained, is transformed into a product or service that is eventually put back into the environment. The output for a school moving towards inclusion, for example, would

include change in practice and school structure, development of various areas of the building to create an inclusive environment, and learner outcomes being met by students. The system of taking and returning energy to the environment is then repeated. This cyclical process or feedback loop connects the input to the output, thus maintaining survival of the organization. Schein (2010) might identify the energy Burke speaks of as part of the culture. “Culture is constantly re-enacted and created by our interactions with others and shaped by our own behaviour” (Schein, 2010, p. 3). Schein, however, explained that as organizations change or evolve, culture is about the deeper assumptions made about what is real.

While organizations are engaged in a continuous flow of energy, they are also internally actively involved as well. Open theory purports that there are components or parts within organizations that serve a specific function but which together make up the organization. As a result, when organizations are undergoing changes, it is critical to examine the entire system, as change to one part of the organization will impact the others. Organizational changes should be systemic (Burke, 2011). Ainscow et al. (2006) contended that there needs to be awareness of the cultural resources available to schools, understanding of the social relations between stakeholders within the school communities, and knowledge of the wider relations and structures of society to know how schools will respond to inclusive practices.

Change to one component of the system does not occur without change to other parts eventually (Burke, 2011). District and school leaders need to clearly understand how to carry out changes in the organization. Preparing for change means organizations need to prepare all members, not just one or a few. “Leaders developing other leaders is at the heart of sustainability” (Fullan, 2007, p. 59). The Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC), governed by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA), a national

consortium of major stakeholders in educational leadership and policy in the U.S., emphasizes the importance of district leadership stating,

A district-level education leader applies knowledge that promotes the success of every student by sustaining a district culture conducive to collaboration, trust, and a personalized learning environment with high expectations for students; creating and evaluating a comprehensive, rigorous, and coherent curricular and instructional district program; developing and supervising the instructional and leadership capacity across the district; and promoting the most effective and appropriate technologies to support teaching and learning within the district. (National Policy Board for Educational Administration [NPBEA], 2011, p. 10)

The *Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action* (UNESCO, 1994) also stressed the role educational leaders have in a system stating,

Local administrators and school heads can play a major role in making schools more responsive to children with special educational needs if they are given necessary authority and adequate training to do so. . . . Each school should be a community collectively accountable for the success or failure of every student. The educational team, rather than the individual teacher, should share the responsibility for the education of special needs children. Parents and volunteers should be invited to take an active part in the work of the school. (School management section, No. 35 & 37)

If social justice is at the core of an organization's principles and values, there must be a significant change to the system (Pazey & Cole, 2013). Principals must be adequately trained and knowledgeable about the laws around special education and capable of facilitating collaborative

discourse and decision-making in their school community so as to successfully develop a full inclusive environment (Pazey & Cole, 2013).

Organizational changes occur in several ways and at different levels. For the purpose of changing a school to create an inclusive school community, Burke (2011) explained that two types of changes could occur: revolutionary changes (transformational) or evolutionary changes (transactional). In the case of a school moving from a top-down form of governance to a school learning community based on collective decision-making and partnerships between all stakeholders to foster an inclusive environment, the system would need to make revolutionary changes from the district level to the school level to achieve the organization's new mission. "The change of mission affects all other primary dimensions of an organization: leadership, strategy, structure, culture, and systems" (Burke, 2011, p. 77). This type of change is revolutionary because the district and school would be engaging in transformational changes to the deep structure of the organization by changing the school's mission to fully engage all stakeholders and develop inclusion practices. Burke (2011) acknowledged, however, that 95% of organizational changes are evolutionary changes, incremental improvements to fix parts of a larger system over time.

A significant change which seeks to create full inclusive environments intended to meet the needs of all students, requires partnerships among all stakeholders. Successful partnerships necessitates district and school leaders reflecting on the way they perceive stakeholder involvement as well as how to engage those stakeholders in key decisions and change what is normal to them. Unlike Burke (2011) who identified change occurring systemically, Levin (2010) argued that changes to schools are difficult primarily because "many of the changes have not brought the desired positive effects or have not been sustained" (p. 64). He argued that

change does not have to happen to all the parts of a system and the problem being initiating change in the right way identifying three main reasons educational changes fail:

1. They are the wrong changes.
2. They do not give adequate attention to political dynamics.
3. They are not effectively implemented. (Levin, 2010, p. 67)

Levin (2010) argued that changes should be determined based on “the potential impact” (p. 68) the change will have on student outcomes and the “feasibility” (p. 68) of the change being implemented and sustained. Additionally, he explained that various kinds of politics “have an enormous amount to do with whether the right changes get adopted” (p. 74). Finally, Levin contended that innovations can and will fail if badly implemented. “Real change in schools requires will and skill, capacity and understanding and commitment, and that developing these requires considerable and carefully designed effort” (Levin, 2010, p. 81).

Fullan (2007) explained that educational change in practice could occur at many levels, yet it “is not a single entity] . . . [innovation is *multidimensional*” (p. 30). Similar to Levin (2010), Fullan (2007) identified three areas to consider when implementing change. He explained, “There are at least three components or dimensions at stake in implementing any new program or policy”:

1. The possible use of new or revised *materials* (instructional resources such as curriculum materials or technologies,
2. The possible use of new *teaching approaches* (i.e., new teaching strategies or activities), and
3. The possible alteration of *beliefs* (e.g., pedagogical assumptions and theories underlying particular new policies and programs). (Fullan, 2007, p. 30)

Organizational changes are often very unsettling for the individuals involved as they are taking place at an individual, group, and system level and demand a considerable amount of trust. Developing trust is critical as “a climate of trust bestows a variety of benefits to the organizations that can foster it” (Tschannen-Moran, 2001, p. 313). Burke (2011) contended, “Organizations do not evolve but are more likely to change in strategic reorientations that demand significantly different patterns of operations” (p. 75). Therefore, changes to the culture and relationships at the district and school level must strategically consider the voices of the various groups that make up the school’s community. In so doing, an environment is created where changes, though unsettling, can begin to take shape. Inclusive leaders will seek ways to engage stakeholder voices and foster structures that encourage participatory practices thus prompting democratic decision-making processes (Pazey & Cole, 2013). Excluding voices would only lead to a compromise in the trust that exists between groups and disrupt the process.

Factors that impact school transformations are district level support and the ability of school leaders to build capacity and empower teachers as well as parents (Gordon & Louis, 2012; Levin, 2010). Gordon and Louis (2012) argued that districts have tremendous influence on the relationships between the school board and the community. The district’s role in developing these relationships, they maintained, is critical to creating successful partnerships that support democratic relationships within the organization (Gordon & Louis, 2012, p. 89). Gordon and Louis also maintained that at the school level, principals could further develop a democratic school community and support school improvement by encouraging communication between teachers and families. This is critical to developing inclusive school environments. Principals can nurture a greater sense of accountability in families and the community when they are viewed as partners. Tschannen-Moran (2001) posited that when teachers and parents are able to contribute

to the decision-making process, better quality decisions are made and teachers, in particular, are more motivated and committed to the decisions.

Idol (2006) contended that the lack of principal support could often be the reason why inclusion practices do not always occur. In schools where top-down leadership is commonplace, leaders need to change their style of governance while developing relational trust among stakeholders, demonstrate competency, build capacity and social capital, as well as encourage self and collaborative efficacy (Bryk, 2003; Fink & Markholt, 2013; Leithwood, Anderson, & Louis, 2012; Leithwood et al., 2012; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2012; Louis & Wahlstrom, 2012; Pazy & Cole, 2013; Schlechty, 2009). As educational organizations evolve, school leaders are encouraged to change their practice and reflect on their leadership. In doing so, they are faced with accumulating literature that supports school–family–community partnerships, collective and inclusive leadership practices, in addition to inclusive education practices (Ainscow, 2005; Ainscow et al., 2006; Cox-Peterson, 2011; Epstein & Salinas, 2004; Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Forlin, 2001; Jones et al., 2011; Levin, 2010). Organizational change does not occur without considerable challenges. “Developments within individual schools are more likely to lead to sustainable development if they are part of a process of systemic change” (Ainscow, 2005, p. 117). In order for successful transformations to occur, district and school leaders must adequately prepare stakeholders for partnerships and the impact perception and culture have on the inclusive environment. Additionally, they must be willing to provide the supports necessary to facilitate a move towards inclusive education.

Building Capacity

Given the quantity of research around the development of inclusive environments, researchers identify building capacity as one key factor in developing inclusive education

environments (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Bennett, Deluca, & Bruns, 1997; Fauske, 2011; Forlin, 2001; Fullan, 2007; Levin, 2010; Loreman, 2014; Porter, 2002). There are many barriers to implementing inclusive education practices and building staff capacity, including leadership and lack of training or knowledge among staff hindered by the lack of time as a result of increased workload and larger class sizes. Morsink and Lenk (1992) and Finn, Pannozzo, and Achilles (2003) highlighted how class size reduces teacher interactions with their students as well as impact teacher focus on instruction versus behaviour. Morsink and Lenk (1992), for example, argued that a diverse classroom of students with larger numbers of students decreases the student–teacher interactions, which lead to more passive participation versus more active student. In addition, they maintained that teachers in general education settings may not have adequate training to support the needs of children with disabilities, or the behaviours or disability of the child may be a risk to other children.

Finn et al.'s (2003) review of 19 studies on individual class sizes and why smaller class sizes are beneficial to students concluded that the research they examined consistently supported two conclusions: “Students in small classes in the elementary grades are (a) more engaged in learning behaviours and (b) display less disruptive behaviours than do students in large classes” (p. 351). Finn et al. (2003) identified that within the research on class size one explanation provided by researchers and practitioners regarding the benefits of a small class size “is that teachers change their teaching strategies when class sizes are reduced, providing more individualized instruction and higher quality instruction generally” (p. 322). This results in teachers having the opportunity to meet the needs of more children.

Lack of planning time and professional development has also created obstacles to developing inclusive education environments. Bennett et al. (1997) stated, “Additional planning

time for teachers is one of the most important strategies for enhancing the inclusion experience” (p. 128). They further posited, “Teachers are the key to the implementation of inclusion. They often need to learn strategies and skills for working successfully in inclusion settings” (Bennett et al., 1997, p. 129). Porter (2002) explained that as a result of classroom teachers being the primary resource for instructional supports provided to students with special needs in New Brunswick, teachers needed “to continually refine their skills or knowledge, as well as to develop new ones. Therefore staff development at the school and district level is critical in order to develop successful integrated educational practices” (p. 77).

Factors contributing to a leader’s ability to build capacity of stakeholders according to the literature on inclusive education and leadership include developing a shared understanding and inclusive leadership (Ainscow, 2005; Ainscow & Sandhill, 2010; Fauske, 2011; Fink & Markholt, 2013; Schlechty, 2009). Leaders must have enough expertise and develop their leadership to “influence and mobilize action” (Fink & Markholt, 2013, p. 329). Fink and Markholt (2013) maintained,

Leaders charged with the improvement of teaching practice must understand and be able to explicate what good practice looks like in order to lead and guide professional development, target and align resources, and engage in ongoing problem solving and long-range capacity building. (p. 328)

Ryan (2006) claimed that improvement of professional expertise and the commitments made by educators cannot be exclusive of truly collaborative efforts, as they traditionally have been, but rather they must be inclusive. He contended that professional teaching practices “must incorporate a range of diverse community knowledge, practices, and values. To ensure that this happens, parents and community members have to play some part in collaborative governance

arrangements” (Ryan, 2006, p. 90). Ryan explained that participation by these stakeholders in determining the knowledge endorsed for the classroom and how it is used will help to support and include perspectives that are often excluded. Moreover, such participation will serve to improve learning for all students while alleviating disparities, which have afflicted many areas of life and educational organizations.

A methodology for developing inclusive practices must take account of such social processes of learning that go on within particular contexts. It requires a group of stakeholders within a particular context to look for a common agenda to guide their discussions of practice and, at much the same time, a series of struggles to establish ways of working that enable them to collect and find meaning in different types of information.

(Ainscow & Sandill, 2010, p. 403)

Ainscow (2005) explained that developing a common language is also important so that colleagues can have discussions with one another and reflect on aspects of their practice.

Likewise, Fauske (2011) maintained, “the dynamic nature of systems is related to the human dimension and information flow, primarily language, which is the substance of human interaction” (p. 16).

Schlechty (2009) defined capacity as having “to do with potentials and limitations: what a person, group, or organization is capable of doing if called on to act” (p. 223). He explained that the most significant capacities are those needed for ongoing transformations and to adjust the systems required for those transformations. In addition, he maintained that schools need these transformations to “develop the capacity to support continuous innovations” (Schlechty, 2009, p. 224). Schlechty identified three general capacities that must be present if systemic change is to be sustainable as illustrated in Figure 2. Within these capacities, Schlechty identified several

system capacity standards. Three of those standards apply most to implementing and developing an inclusive education system; developing a shared understanding of the need for change, developing shared beliefs and vision, and developing structures for participatory leadership.

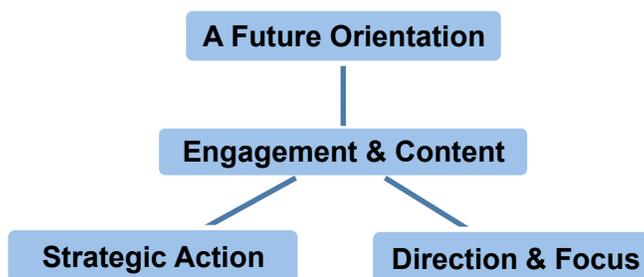


Figure 2. Schlechty’s (2009) three general capacities to support innovations.

According to Schlechty (2009), leaders must be oriented towards the future and thus must build the capacity to do so. He maintained that in order for leaders to strengthen their capacity, it is imperative that leaders develop a shared understanding of the problems that elicit change; articulate a vision of the future developing a shared commitment to determine and follow through on a course of action; as well as develop structures for participatory leadership. Similar to Ryan’s (2006) definition of inclusive leadership, Schlechty identified participatory leadership as the ability of leaders to involve others in the decision-making process, strong enough to own failure on behalf of other stakeholders, and secure and confident enough to acknowledge the success of others. He argued that leaders who develop the capacity to lead in a participatory way are more likely to have the support of individuals committed to a common vision based on shared beliefs and be willing to stay the course when they encounter challenges or obstacles.

Collaboration is thus critical to fostering inclusive practices. As with Schlechty’s (2009) *System Capacity Standards*, Fullan (2011) identified five elements for developing collaborative cultures, the third and the fourth being to “aim for collective capacity building[and] work on individual capacity building” (p. 91). He explained that collective capacity building

“‘democratizes’ the change process by extending power to other members of the organization” (Fullan, 2011, p. 92) and focuses on the functioning of the group, whereas individual capacity building is about being a part of the team and learning from leaders and peers. Fullan argued that organizations that succeed in building collaborative cultures have leaders at the center of their organization that focus on the development of individual skills and the ability of those individuals to be a part of a team; they then nurture that team to be intent on learning and problem solving as opposed to seeking blame.

The work of scholars such as Ryan (2006), Schlechty (2009), and Fullan (2011) has helped to support policies established by districts, schools, and organizations when examining leadership and inclusive practices. The ELCC, for example, stressed the responsibility of educational leaders in their 2011 standards for districts and administrators. Standard Two of the NPBEA’s 2011 ELCC Building Level Standards states,

A building-level education leader applies knowledge that promotes the success of every student by sustaining a school culture and instructional program conducive to student learning through collaboration, trust, and a personalized learning environment with high expectations for students; creating and evaluating a comprehensive, rigorous and coherent curricular and instructional school program; developing and supervising the instructional and leadership capacity of school staff; and promoting the most effective and appropriate technologies to support teaching and learning within a school environment. (p. 9)

This standard reiterates several of Schlechty’s (2009) *System Capacity Standards*. In addition, Ryan (2006) maintained that leaders “need to be prepared to actively promote inclusion” (p. 105) and compel others to support the move towards an inclusive future. He

identified several strategies to support inclusive practices, including involvement of school and community stakeholders in developing the outcomes for supporting all students.

Inclusive leadership. Education discussions over the past two decades have evolved, focusing on other areas of education that impact the classroom, specifically the impact leadership and stakeholder collaboration has on inclusive education. Loreman (2007) identified seven pillars of support for inclusive education: (1) the development of positive attitudes; (2) supportive policy and leadership; (3) school and classroom processes grounded in research-based practice; (4) flexible curriculum and pedagogy; (5) community involvement; (6) meaningful reflection; and (7) necessary training and resources. Loreman (2007) also argued that the seven pillars represented a theme evident in the research and literature and are essential for successful inclusive education. Developing in these areas, however, requires school communities to engage in meaningful conversations around how to best foster and sustain an environment that welcomes stakeholder participation and cultivates trusting relationships.

Meaningful education reform recognizes the significant influences family and community engagement have on student achievement and the role school and district leadership play in fostering those relationships. Successful school leaders bring all stakeholders to the table allowing for equal involvement. They engage in collective leadership, “the extent of influence that organizational members and stakeholders exert on decisions in their schools” (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2012, p.11). Fullan, Bertani, and Quinn (2004) maintained that the number of good leaders that are developed and left behind to sustain and advance the work is what characterizes successful leaders, not the role they play in student learning. Collective leadership, however, requires leaders to trust their staff, parents, the community, and above all, the collaborative process. This said, collective leadership pertains only to a school and its community.

There are several forms of leadership identified in the literature; collective leadership as mentioned, shared leadership, instructional leadership, distributive leadership, and student-centered leadership to name a few (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2012; Louis et al., 2010; Robinson, 2011; Louis & Wahlstrom, 2012). Ryan (2006), however, identified another type of leadership, inclusive leadership. He viewed inclusive leadership “in terms of positions or individuals who perform certain tasks but as a collective process in which everyone is included or fairly represented” (Ryan, 2006, p. 16). According to Ryan (2006), there are three critical elements to this definition: first, the implication of influence; second, a process, “an array of practices, procedures, understandings, and values that persist over time” (p. 17); and third, a focus on meeting specific ends. Ryan argued that the goal of inclusive leadership is to achieve inclusion beyond all areas of schooling to both the local and global community through the use of an inclusive process. In his explanation of inclusive leadership (IL), Hollander (2009) stated, “Inclusive leadership is about relationships that can accomplish things for mutual benefit” (p. 3). Hollander (2009) believed inclusive leadership to be another level of leadership where leaders were engaged in “doing things with people[as opposed to] doing things to people” (p. 3). He maintained “improving decision making and achieving desired ends are among its goals, without relying on one person’s capabilities alone” (Hollander, 2009, p. 3). Inclusive leadership he argued promotes fairness to all involved. “The key features of IL include interpersonal evaluation, legitimacy as perceived by followers, upward influence, and fairness in social exchange” (Hollander, 2009 p. 1). “Inclusive leadership approaches include all members of the school community in influence processes” (Ryan, 2006, p. 101).

Pounder, Reitzug, and Young (2002) maintained that inclusive schools “prepare students for democracy while functioning as democracies” (p. 269). Shepard and Hasazi (2007) similarly

contended, “Inclusive schools rarely emerge in authoritarian or hierarchically-bound structures; rather, these schools reflect democratic principles such as ongoing discourse, reflection, and community participation” (p. 427). They further maintained that inclusive leaders who are dedicated to maintaining social justice in their schools not only be active in communicating a belief that all children are important and capable of learning but also work towards structuring their school to support this belief.

Educational partnerships. Developing an inclusive environment requires district and school leaders to foster relationships with all stakeholders, which can occur through meaningful collaboration. Schlechty (2009) explained that collaboration was one of the barriers to strategic action by schools and districts. Cox-Peterson (2011) identified educational partnerships as “two parties coming together for the common good of a school or to enhance student learning” (p. 5). Partnerships can include teachers, students, families, or communities working collaboratively to support student achievement. The role of parents in education is only one type of partnership that has an impact on student achievement. Community partnerships represent another thread that connects schools to families as well as to the values and beliefs of the community fostering additional support for student achievement.

There are many kinds of partnerships that enhance student learning. School leaders need to consider the impact these partnerships have on developing inclusive environments. Collaborative governance is the key to ensuring that professional teaching practice is inclusive (Ryan, 2006). School–community partnership activities evolve from the relationships established with school partners. Stakeholder partnerships should include parents, but should go beyond them including other agencies such as universities and community organizations (Keith, 1996). Primary community partners include businesses, universities, and service professionals (Sanders,

2003). Business–school partnerships provide students with experience in the workplace thus helping to develop the work force. University–school partnerships are significant relationships as they help create professional development opportunities as well help to improve instruction and expose students to possible areas of study on career paths upon completion of high school. School–service partnerships increase civic involvement for students. For example, students get involved in volunteer experiences that contribute to global and social issues that help to enhance their civic capacity.

Community partnerships are seen by some as the relationship or connections that exist between schools and individuals, businesses, or organizations within the school’s local or greater community. These connections provide schools with an opportunity to tap into the expertise and resources of these community agencies as a means to support curriculum objectives or support a greater understanding of diverse topics. Supporters of school–community partnerships stress effective school functioning, economic competitiveness, student well-being, and community health and development as significant reasons for schools and districts developing relationships with the local and wider school communities (Sanders, 2003). Communities provide schools with access to individuals and other resources they otherwise may not have.

Community partnerships can strengthen a school’s ability to prepare students for the workforce as well as foster opportunities for students to increase their social capital necessary for healthy development (Sanders, 2003). Social capital is created through relationships and the sharing of knowledge and values and can be developed from school–community partnerships. These relationships can be fostered through volunteer and community outreach programs. In addition, there is a greater likelihood for developing social networks through educational, economic, and cultural opportunities that are needed to enhance economic growth through

community partnerships (Keith, 1996; Sanders, 2003). Such community collaborations support healthy environments for students as they provide strong socioeconomic and service infrastructures (Benson, Leffert, Scales, & Blyth, 1998).

Benson et al. (1998) argued that in order to convey a positive, clear, and consistent message to children, there must be shared core values among the primary social systems (e.g., family, school, community organizations). Creating a healthy environment for students requires positive influences from family, school, and community members. “Parents are involved with schools, schools work seamlessly with community resources and communities provide plentiful support and resources that strengthen families” (Benson et al., 1998, p. 141). Members whose values and beliefs are clear, which significantly increase the potential for student achievement, support healthy environments. Without a shared vision, learner outcomes are diminished as values and perspectives tend to differ.

Schools are challenged to identify and understand the values that exist within a community as well as to assist community members in understanding curriculum and educational reforms mandated by districts so that the vision of schools also reflects the core values of communities. Through collaboration with the community, social capital may increase and values and beliefs may change as a result of being engaged in educational discourse with school and district leaders. This is critical when educational systems are engaged in transforming their schools. School leaders hoping to develop inclusive environments in their schools must develop relationships and provide opportunities to build capacity among stakeholders and create a strong sense of belonging. This will not only lay the foundation for inclusive education in the school but also create a healthy, trusting environment.

Community partnerships are often underdeveloped by some schools and require more attention. Zuniga and Alva (1996) suggested that schools identify and evaluate the strengths and resources in a community by examining the “funds of knowledge,[which they state represent the] social and intellectual resource for schools and the community” (para. 3). Funds of knowledge are “the essential cultural practices, bodies of knowledge, and information that households use to survive, to get ahead, or to thrive” (Moll, 1992, p. 21). These funds of knowledge, they explained, can be used to support discussions and initiatives towards change and improvement in education by helping parents to realize that their skills and experiences are benefits to learner outcomes. Ryan (2006) argued that schools transforming to inclusive environments must also adopt inclusive policy-making processes. He stated, “Policy deliberations can embrace inclusion in two ways: first, by promoting policies that favour inclusive values and, second, by organizing policy deliberation processes that are themselves inclusive” (Ryan, 2006, p. 128). Ryan also posited that in order for schools to ensure community interests are represented, they need to have individuals who can represent those interests be involved in policy discussions.

Through parents, teachers and schools can access the community as additional assets and identify other resources that are valuable to parents and community members (Benson et al., 1998; Sanders, 2003). By doing this, parents and the community become engaged in the teaching and learning process. “Treating relationships with parents and communities as powerful learning relationships is essential” (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998, p. 71). Though this led to considerable debate due to the lack of expertise of community members Schlechty (2009) argued, “If local citizens are not sufficiently informed to make decisions about what children should learn in school, the answer is to educate the citizens rather than take power from them” (p. 189). Engaging parents and community members in the education process not only demonstrates

openness by schools and teachers to other stakeholder voices, it also promotes a sense of belonging, a key component of inclusive education. “Teachers and principals need to reach out to parents and communities even, and especially, when the initial conditions do not support such efforts” (Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998, p. 67). Building trusting relationships with parents and community members is imperative to strengthening and applying inclusive practices in schools.

While some might debate the appropriateness of parents’ and community members’ involvement in learning and the decision-making process of schools, Elkins (2005) argued that “inclusive education must be part of wider community participation, and schools should anticipate visits by people who use wheelchairs, or Braille information, as well as by those who use language other than English” (p. 46). In fact, schools should not only anticipate visits by members of the community with diverse needs but also welcome and encourage involvement from community members who can offer their expertise and support inclusive education (Elkins, 2005; Ryan, 2006). Connections to the community and the opportunities that are created as a result of those connections are paramount and should not be minimized as to the impact they have on supporting student achievement, increasing a sense of belonging, and meeting the learning needs of students with or without disabilities. Robinson (2011) explained that students are more likely to thrive if there are enough bridges to make learning more familiar.

Communities provide several bridges to support schools and learning.

Developing educational partnerships is necessary as it is the collective responsibility of all stakeholders to improve education for all children. “When the community, schools, and families work together, they can provide the best possible resources and expertise to enhance the education of all children” (Cox-Peterson, 2011, p. 11). This is the foundation of inclusive education. Without these partnerships, schools cannot possibly hope to meet the learning needs

of their students. Schools must, therefore, seek meaningful ways to develop school–community partnerships.

Given the mounting evidence to support school–family–community partnerships, it is surprising that there are many districts and schools that still engage parents in traditional ways and involve the community only when it serves their needs. Hargreaves and Fullan (1998) posited:

Parents and other community members are crucial and largely untapped resources who have (or can be helped to have) assets and expertise that are essential to the partnership. However well or badly they do it, parents are their children’s very first educators. They have knowledge of their children that is not available to anyone else. They have a vested and committed interest in their children’s success, and they also have valuable knowledge and skills to contribute that spring from their special interests, hobbies, occupations and place in the community. (p. 68)

Loreman (2007) in his description of seven key factors necessary to support inclusive education stated that “the most important group in the wider school community are parents” (p. 30). In addition, he further supported community involvement in schools as an important contributor to the success of inclusive education.

Developing trusting relationships. Relationships in school communities are characterized by the respect and collaboration that exist between its members: teachers and parents, teachers and students, teachers and teachers, teachers and school leaders, and school and community. Relational trust and collective decision-making is crucial to school reform and student-centred leadership (Bryk & Schneider, 2003; Robinson, 2011). “For a school community to work well, it must achieve agreement in each role relationship in terms of the understandings

held about these personal obligations and expectations of others” (Bryk & Schneider, 2003, What is Relational Trust section, para. 1). Trust is created among the members through the existence of a safe environment, where all members feel less vulnerable and more supported by each other. “For everyone to be meaningfully included, schools need to provide opportunities for people to communicate effectively with one another” (Ryan, 2006, p. 119). Allowing members of the school community to have a voice where they are supported and feel safe to share their concerns will help foster a more inclusive environment. Without trust, meaningful dialogue cannot occur among stakeholders, building capacity becomes a challenge, and developing a strong school community is near impossible.

School learning communities are important to developing successful inclusive environments. “A school learning community works with many partners to increase students’ learning opportunities and experiences” (Epstein & Salinas, 2004, Collaborating with the Community section, para. 1). Therefore, leaders must be purposeful in how they engage all stakeholders and above all build relational trust. Robinson (2011) maintained that the level of trust among the members of a school community has a significant impact on the level of collaboration between them, which plays an integral role in the social and academic progress of students (p. 34). Leaders build trust based on four qualities: interpersonally respectful, personal regard for others, competent in role, and personal integrity (Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Leaders who can model these qualities can expect the same from those around them.

Leaders build trust through collaboration (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Fullan, 2007; Louis & Wahlstrom, 2012). Partnerships are more likely to be established and trust fostered when stakeholders feel their voice is respected and their experiences and/or expertise valued (Fauske, 2011; Fullan, 2007; Ryan, 2006). Parents trust schools when they feel their concerns are not only

heard but also taken seriously. “The knowledge that others care reduces one’s sense of vulnerability, increases social affiliation, and invites reciprocal regard” (Robinson, 2011, p. 35). Teachers trust principals when their work and effort is appreciated. Principals, who provide opportunities to teachers to lead and support the decisions they make, are more likely to have teacher buy-in and support for school and district-wide initiatives. “Collaboration and trust are reciprocal processes; they depend upon and foster one another” (Tschannen-Moran, 2001, p. 315). Schools that demonstrate minimal collaboration between the key members of its community (principal, teachers, and parents) will also demonstrate limited or no trust among those community members (Tschannen-Moran, 2001). A breakdown in trust prevents inclusive education practices from occurring. Moreover, this leads to a breakdown in communication. “For school communities to promote critical consciousness and inclusive communities generally, they need to nurture dialogue” (Ryan, 2006, p. 119). Without opportunities for stakeholders to communicate effectively, schools cannot possibly foster strong educational partnerships, thus weakening the foundation necessary to support an inclusive education environment.

Robinson (2011) explained that students need to have a way to connect between their experiences and life at home with what can be unfamiliar to them at school. She identified two kinds of bridges, one created by educators who take advantage of the resources of the local community in teaching and school activities and the other that engages and supports parents in having a role in the work of the school. These relationships help to create a safer school environment, improve attendance and develop parent–school and community–school trust. According to Robinson, trust makes an important difference in the relationships that are built between stakeholders and the success of collaboration between them. Widespread trust among stakeholders encourages collaboration with schools and communities (Grogan & Fullan, 2013).

Engaging Parents

The issues around parent–school conflict and the diminishing parent–school relationships within special education are not new. In fact, questions pertaining to developing the relationships between school and families in education have been posed and evaluated for years (Cox-Paterson, 2011; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; McKenna & Willms, 1998; Nowell & Salem, 2007; Sheridan & Kratochwill, 2007). Engaging parents in meaningful discourse regarding the needs of their child and working with them to meet those needs in and outside of school has remained a challenge for educators and policymakers alike. Several studies (Anderson & Minke, 2007; Lake & Billingsley, 2000; Nowell & Salem, 2007) have been conducted to analyze the relationships that exist between schools and parents and ways to strengthen these relationships, yet very little research exists to explain or shed light on why relationships between schools and special needs parents deteriorate or fail to develop.

Discussions around parent engagement and developing school learning communities have been part of school reform efforts in Canada and abroad (Anderson & Minke, 2007; Bryan, 2005; Epstein & Sanders, 2006; Epstein & Sheldon, 2006; Hargreaves & Fullan, 1998; Jahnukainen, 2011). District and school officials have turned to various scholars and their research in an effort to provide supporting evidence of student achievement and a correlation between parent and community involvement. There have been multiple perspectives and tremendous efforts made to illustrate the significance of these partnerships and learner outcomes.

Educators have been discussing the importance of learning communities in student achievement; as well, researchers have evaluated the importance of professional learning communities and communities of schools as they engage parents and community members as partners. There has been considerable debate as to what these communities look and feel like and

whether they in fact lead to student achievement (Corter & Pelletier, 2004; DuFour, 2004; Epstein & Salinas, 2004; Harris & Goodall, 2008; Zuniga & Alva, 1996). What is a school learning community? What are the advantages of creating one for children with special needs, and how does it support inclusive education environments?

Schlechty (2009) posited that a “community is not a place. It is an orientation and a source of personal identity as well as group affiliation” (p. 190). Communities foster a sense of belonging, a common identity and association—members of a community share the same values and destiny. A school learning community therefore is the identity of a school and the relationships among the various groups that make up the members of that school. It seeks to further the goals and live out the values of a school’s members. “A school learning community includes educators, students, parents, and community partners who work together to improve the school and enhance students’ learning opportunities” (Epstein & Salinas, 2004, para. 1). These stakeholders strive to facilitate student growth and develop learner outcomes. If included in the process, together they can make decisions that consider district initiatives and educational mandates to create learning environments that will meet the needs of all the students and enrich the school community. Ryan (2006) supported this idea, explaining that parents and community members need to be included in collaborative governance. He stated, “For community inclusion to work, school communities need to work together to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to either participate or be fairly represented in governance processes” (Ryan, 2006, p. 91). However, this can occur successfully only if all voices are included and the influence of those stakeholders makes its way into the classroom.

Over the past decade, there has been more of a push by educational governance for educators to embrace the knowledge of parents, tap into their experiences and expertise in other

areas, and involve them in educational discourse, as their role in student achievement is significant. Researchers especially cite parent engagement and efficacy as a key contributor in school reform; however, parents are most often engaged in superficial roles such as volunteering for various school activities or participating in school-initiated functions (Lopez, Scribner, & Mahitivanichcha, 2001). The literature suggests that parents need to be engaged in ways beyond merely inviting them into the school. As well, “districts should take an active role in teaching parents and other community members how to be involved in education” (Gordon & Louis, 2012, p. 105). Yssel et al. (2007) argued that schools should be open to parents. If schools were committed to developing partnerships, it would benefit them to understand what parents want for their children. Parent engagement, community involvement, and increased teacher leadership have been identified as beneficial and key ingredients in fostering student achievement and developing strong school communities as well as contributors to developing inclusive environments (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002, 2006; Ryan, 2006; Stelmach, 2004; Weiss, Lopez, & Rosenberg, 2011). Schools, therefore, must find ways to fully engage these groups if they are to develop strong inclusive school communities.

Parent engagement or parent involvement has been viewed as the time parents give or spend at the school volunteering in classrooms, participating in class trips, or performing certain duties such as fundraising or participating on school advisory committees such as school councils. Parents have typically not been viewed as equals partnering with school leaders to facilitate learner outcomes or develop and maintain the vision of the school. In fact, the level of involvement among parents has varied due to a range of circumstances. Several factors create barriers and minimize parent involvement including socioeconomic status, parents’ level of education, time constraints, and/or immigrant status (Harris & Goodall, 2008; Lopez et al., 2001;

Ryan, 2006). As a result, schools and districts have been challenged to develop innovative ways to connect with parents and view them in light of their context and needs instead of dismissing them as not being interested.

Research has moved some districts and schools away from this view of parent involvement, providing evidence that increased parent engagement in decision-making and educational discourse at the school and district level has a positive impact on student achievement (Epstein & Salinas, 2004; Lee & Bowen, 2006; Zuniga & Alva, 1996). “Parents should not be saddled with running schools, nor should they be subordinated to the existing structure. Instead, a model needs to be developed that allows for parents and educators to collaborate on certain parts of children’s education” (Ryan, 2006, p.89). This belief has compelled many schools and districts to develop programs and implement changes in the way parents are engaged in student learning.

Parents are important to successful school reforms. Student achievement is not determined only by what is learned at school but also by how that learning transpires into experiences and meaningful interactions with parents and community members at home. Harris and Goodall (2008) argued that parents are key contributors to student success and “the most important influence on learning” (p. 286). “An inclusive school is built on shared responsibility and a sense of belonging—a community where diversity and human relations are valued” (Yssel et. al., 2007, p. 358). “Parents need to be seen as an integral part of the learning process. They need to know they matter” (Harris & Goodall, 2008, p. 286). School leaders, therefore, need to acknowledge parent voice and find more meaningful ways of engaging them if schools hope to develop partnerships with parents and make a successful move to inclusive education.

Epstein and Sheldon (2006) identified seven principles developed to view partnerships between parents, educators, and the community. In the first principle, Epstein and Sheldon posited that “school, family, and community partnerships is a better term than parental involvement to recognize that parents, educators, and others in the community share responsibility for students’ learning and development” (2006, Principle No. 1). They argued that educators need to consider how they communicate, connect, and work together with families and community partners to help students succeed to their full potential. This is especially critical for the success of inclusive education. “When parents share their perspectives on inclusion, they not only demonstrate their involvement in schools, but they also affect their children’s education” (Garrick Duhaney & Salend, 2000, p. 122). Engaging parents, however, has presented challenges for schools and districts in both special education and general education. Nonetheless, leaders are encouraged to implement changes in how they engage families and seek to find innovative ways to do so.

Parent engagement initiatives have evolved from simply including parents in numerous school activities to developing partnerships between the school and the family and the school and the community. These partnerships, when established, can prove to be pedagogically sound as educators are finding that if what students are learning is meaningful to their interests and experiences, they tend to be more motivated to learn (Robinson, 2011). Connecting curriculum to student and community values is a positive and successful way of engaging students, families, and communities in facilitating learner outcomes. Furthermore, “when families feel that their involvement is valued and needed, they are more likely to develop active partnerships with school staff in support of student learning” (Weiss et al., 2011, p.3). Schools need to understand the needs of parents and develop respect for the cultural values and beliefs of their families and

community. This relationship building, however, is not common practice, and parents who are more visible at the school tend to be viewed as the ones who care to participate in school events or activities, thus limiting or diminishing or not understanding how marginalized families are involved. Overcoming negative perceptions and working to meet the needs of parents creates additional challenges for school leaders. Nonetheless, strong parent–school partnerships are critical to developing successful inclusion environments (Garrick Duhaney & Salend, 2000; Yssel et. al., 2007). District evaluations of these partnerships at the school level are important and can only serve to strengthen parent engagement initiatives.

The core business of schools is education and improving the school environment to enhance learning opportunities and outcomes for learners. While some schools have been led to develop school–family–community partnerships as a result of government mandates such as the NCLB Act (2001) in the U.S. and the Alberta Initiative for School Improvement (AISI; 2012) in Alberta, Canada, some schools still struggle to engage families and the community. Perhaps this resistance or apprehension is due to fear of relinquishing leadership authority and control or possibly an inability to effectively engage stakeholders in educational discourse. Regardless of the reasons, research nonetheless continues to demonstrate that

when family members are involved in their children’s education, children are more likely to earn higher grades, enrol in rigorous classes, go on to college, and have better academic-achievement-related behaviours, such as good social skills and regular attendance at school. (Bryan, 2005, p. 221)

School leaders need to find a way to initiate changes in their schools and educate their staff, parents, and community members about what it means to engage in collaborative and collective leadership. In so doing, student achievement remains at the forefront of all school decisions.

Parent involvement in school events or participation on parent councils is not enough to meet the learning needs of students, especially students with special needs.

If the purpose of engaging the community is educational benefit for children, then leaders' efforts should go into involving parents in ways that create a stronger *educational* partnership between the school and its parents because that is the strategy that is most likely to deliver the intended results. (Robinson, 2011, p. 135)

“School principals and school faculties should be oriented to understand their critical role in building community understanding of educational issues” (Schlechty, 2009, p. 203). In order for students to feel empowered and connected to school, there needs to be consistent voice and presence of adult stakeholders (Benson, et al., 1998). Loreman (2007) argued that schools would benefit from inviting advocacy groups into the schools as they can provide support to students and families. He contended that “without such groups very little progress would have been made along the road to inclusive education” (Loreman, 2007, p. 31). This type of consistency, and a developed partnership with advocacy groups, would be one way of holding schools and districts accountable and assuring more voices at the table.

Teachers, parents, and community members often feel excluded from educational decisions in traditional top-down decision-making models of schools. In contrast to those traditional models, however, “school-family-community partnerships are collaborative initiatives or relationships among school personnel, parents, family members, community members, and representatives of community-based organizations such as businesses, churches, libraries, and social service agencies” (Bryan, 2005, p. 220). Nevertheless, there are many obstacles faced by schools among these various stakeholders in creating strong partnerships. Factors identified as strong influences on parental engagement, for example, include socioeconomic status, parents'

emotional capital, prior education of caregivers, work commitments of caregivers, and sense of personal efficacy (Harris & Goodall, 2008; Lopez et al., 2001). Additionally, among community members there is often a feeling that members should not have a say in how schools operate as they either do not have the knowledge to help make informative decisions or they do not have direct ties to the school, such as children or grandchildren. Likewise, teachers are either viewed as not having the expertise to make key educational decisions, or they lack the self-efficacy and trust to make leadership decisions.

Several factors build and diminish school–family–community partnerships. Levels of parent engagement, which are greatly dependent on a family’s personal circumstance, can limit communication between school and home. Subsequently, the biggest factors affecting parent engagement are socioeconomic status and parents’ level of education (Tschannen-Moran, 2001). Additionally, family structure and time constraints due to work and childcare limitations have a tremendous influence on school–family partnerships as well (Tschannen-Moran, 2001). Parents are unable to attend conferences or participate in school activities, which then lead to those parents being viewed as apathetic or hard to reach. Furthermore, there are varying perspectives of the roles of parents and what their work with their children should be (Harris & Goodall, 2008; Lopez et al., 2001).

Bryan (2005) argued that developing trust between home and school can be difficult due to negative experiences parents have or have had with school. She argued, “There must be a shift from seeing parents as peripheral to education, and as deficient” (Bryan, 2005, p. 222). Schools need to see parents as resources, having “a shared responsibility and equal capacity to contribute to the education of their children” (Bryan, 2005, p. 222). Schools must move away from accumulating negative social capital to accruing positive capital. “Partnerships with parents and

community members tend to cast them in the role of service recipients and willing supporters of school practices—as the objects of change rather than as change agents” (Keith, 1996, p. 240). In order to develop civic capacity and increase social capital of students, schools must find alternative ways to give voice to parents and community members as well as to involve them in helping to meet learner outcomes and facilitate student achievement.

One of the leading challenges for educators is identifying who is considered a participating stakeholder, what their participation looks like, and how their participation is synchronized to develop learner outcomes and promote student achievement. “Principals seem to be reluctant to extend genuine influence to teachers and parents, perhaps assuming that they do not have the expertise to make valuable contributions or because they do not trust them to make decisions in the best interest of the school” (Tschannen-Moran, 2001, p. 309). Trust is one of the building blocks to strong leadership and collaboration. It instills confidence in others, demonstrates a sense of support and belonging, as well as develops relationships. It is essential that leaders foster relationships that will build trust and support meaningful collaborations.

Developing school–family–community partnerships requires leaders to let go and relinquish the need to feel powerful or in control. Leaders need to focus their attention on building social capital and civic capacity. Civic capacity is the ability of groups within a community to work together (Schlechty, 2009), whereas social capital is the “resources stored in human relationships whether casual or close . . . the stuff we draw on all the time, through our connections to a system of human relationships, to accomplish things that matter to us and to solve everyday problems” (de Souza Briggs, 1997, p. 112). School–family–community partnerships engage stakeholders in meaningful ways through social networks and social norms. In doing so, the community’s civic capacity is increased, and through the pursuit of shared goals

and a shared vision, social capital is likewise developed. Moreover, schools are better able to move their work forward, and for schools moving towards inclusive education, the development of strong school–family–community partnerships can only help to strengthen these goals.

Summary

Successful inclusive education creates an environment where stakeholders are responsible for the education of all students, with or without disabilities. Creating an inclusive environment is not without challenges. As district and school leaders work to transform their system and schools towards an inclusive system, they must recognize the role stakeholders play in developing inclusive practices. In addition, leaders are faced with evaluating their views on social justice, inclusive leadership, and educational partnerships so as to begin creating an environment that welcomes discourse and the implementation of inclusive education. “Inclusive education challenges social injustice, seeks to minimise educational disadvantage, and prepare citizens for a just and democratic society” (Taskforce, 2004, as cited in Elkins, 2005, p. 45). Only once a clear understanding of inclusive education has been developed among stakeholders can the foundation of a strong school community be built that supports empowerment of marginalized groups within schools and its surrounding communities. Developing inclusive education environments requires facilitation of a shared understanding by stakeholders. In order to facilitate inclusive practices and thus inclusive environments, schools and district leaders will need to support implementation, build staff capacity through inclusive leadership, and engage stakeholders in shared decision-making, specifically parents.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

As Robinson (2011) indicated, “Leaders work in systems that expect schools to enable *all* students to succeed with intellectually challenging curricula” (p. 2). During the first two decades of this century, approaches to meeting the needs of all learners have been shifting in this direction (Alberta Learning, 2003, 2004; Alberta Education, 2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2010). With the province moving to a single, inclusive education system, the purpose of my study was to examine the readiness of schools within a large urban school district to successfully implement Alberta Education’s approach to inclusive education in meeting the learning needs of children with special needs.

I undertook this evaluative case study (Merriam, 1998, 2009) to examine whether there is a shared understanding of inclusive education, how parents and staff are engaged in the decision-making process, and how school and district leaders help to build capacity among staff and parents. I sought to find answers to four research questions:

1. To what degree do stakeholders have a shared understanding of inclusive education?
2. How do district and school leaders support the implementation of inclusive education environments?
3. What strategies are being used to build staff capacity to implement inclusive education?
4. In what ways are parents being engaged in the implementation of inclusive education?

In this chapter, I provide a detailed explanation of the research study. I discuss a rationale for the use of qualitative research; I then explain the rationale for my use of case study methodology. Following that I describe in detail the research sample and the data collection

methods. In the administration procedures, I review my role as the researcher, the role of the participants, and the timing of the study, as well as the information I required to conduct the study. In the data analysis section, I detail and justify the methods and tools used to analyze that data. I conclude the chapter with an explanation of the ethical considerations, the steps taken to ensure trustworthiness, and finally the limitations and delimitations of the study.

Research Setting

For the past 8 years I have been a teacher in SSD, working primarily with students with special needs. During the course of my tenure, I have been engaged in numerous conversations and witnessed the effects of frustrations brought on by evolving provincial and system mandates. My research study helped me to examine what led to these frustrations and how district and school leaders were working to help minimize the overwhelming feelings shared by both staff and parents, while moving to implement Alberta's inclusive education system.

I conducted seven personal interviews and administered two surveys for this case study. The interviews were designed to examine participants knowledge of inclusive education, the changes made at the provincial level, uncover what steps towards the development of inclusive education environments were being made or were already in place, and identify how inclusive leadership capacity was being developed. The surveys were designed to gather information around the same topics but intended to connect with more individuals where time and availability would possibly pose as obstacles. I interviewed three staff members: one from an elementary school, one from a high school, and the other in administration. I also interviewed four parents; one of the interviews was a joint interview.

Rationale for Research Design

This study was an evaluative case study (Merriam 1998, 2009) of the readiness of schools within SSD to successfully implement Alberta Education's approach to inclusive education.

"Particularistic is a feature of case studies, where the focus is on a particular situation, program, or phenomenon" (Merriam, 2009, p. 43). The phenomenon I investigated in this study was the district's readiness to implement inclusive education. An evaluative case study "involves description, explanation, and judgement" (Merriam, 1998, p. 39). I intended for the study design to help me to determine whether the factors necessary for successful implementation of inclusive education existed in the schools within SSD to implement such a transformation by exploring the role of various stakeholders as well as their perceptions.

I used a qualitative research design because "qualitative case studies share with other forms of qualitative research the search for meaning and understanding, the researcher as the primary instrument of data collection and analysis, an inductive investigative strategy, and the end product being richly descriptive" (Merriam, 2009, p. 39). Qualitative research "begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem" (Creswell, 2013, p. 44). "Qualitative researchers *are interested in understanding the meaning people have constructed*, that is, how they make sense of their world and the experiences they have in the world (Merriam, 1998, p. 6). During the data collection phase of this study, I interviewed participants where they felt most comfortable: at work, their homes, or in another location of their choosing. Data collection involved direct conversations with participants within context. Results from the interviews gave a clear sense of participant voice and also allowed for my reflective thoughts as the researcher who was interpreting data from multiple participants.

Quantitative research is based on the positivist paradigm. “Quantitative research is a mode of inquiry used often for deductive research, when the goal is to test theories or hypotheses, gather descriptive information, or examine relationships among variables” (Creswell, Klassen, Plano-Clark, & Smith, 2011, p. 4) determined by the researcher. For the purpose of this study, I used quantitative methods in the form of surveys to gather more descriptive information from a wider range of participants that would otherwise be difficult to interview due to time and other constraints. My secondary goal in using the survey was to support more generalizations from the findings. Yet, while quantitative methods were applied to support triangulation of data in this study, it was “understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (Merriam, 2009, p. 5) that led me to use case study as a methodology. I wanted to better understand the role of various stakeholders in this large urban school district and their knowledge of inclusive education as I examined the readiness for inclusive environments to be created. Data generated by open-ended surveys and interviews provided a rich, more detailed understanding of participant perspectives.

Rationale for Case Study Methodology

Case study research examines an issue within a specific context. Luck, Jackson, and Usher (2003) defined case study “as a detailed, intensive study of a particular contextual, and bounded, phenomena that is undertaken in real life situations” (p. 104). Case studies involve the collection of data from various sources such as interviews, open-ended surveys, documents and reports, or audio and visual recordings. “Case studies can be done by using either qualitative or quantitative evidence. The evidence may come from fieldwork, archival records, verbal reports, observations, or any combination of these” (Yin, 1981, p. 58). In seeking to understand the

readiness of schools to implement inclusive education, I used interviews, open-ended surveys, and district and provincial documents.

I deemed case study to be the best research methodology for this study because it provides “an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (Merriam, 2009, p. 40), a bounded system being the focus of the study. Merriam (2009) explained that various methodological characteristics appear as relevant features of case study inquiry, one of those features being that case studies rely on multiple sources of evidence. For the purpose of this study, I used various sources to gather evidence to determine the readiness of schools to implement inclusive education. In addition to case studies allowing for design, data collection techniques and analysis to vary, Merriam (1998) explained that

case study does not claim any particular methods for data collection or data analysis. Any and all methods of gathering data, from testing to interviewing, can be used in a case study, although certain techniques are used more than others. (p. 28)

Therefore, given the research questions being explored and the need to triangulate the evidence being gathered, I chose case study as the most appropriate methodology for this study.

Research Sample

There are multiple sampling strategies that can be used for case study research. In this study, I used non-probabilistic, purposeful sampling. Patton (2002) argued that “the logic and power of purposeful sampling derives from the emphasis on in-depth understanding [leading to the selection of] *information-rich cases* for study in depth” (p. 46). Merriam (2009) identified information-rich cases as ones where the researcher can learn the key issues of importance to the purpose of the study. In an effort to gain a deeper understanding of the readiness to implement inclusive education environments by the SSD in this case study, I gave careful consideration to

the sample. While there is benefit to having a representative sample from various stakeholders, for the purpose of my doctoral dissertation, my sample groups needed to be smaller. Therefore I focused on two groups of stakeholders: (1) staff working with students with special needs, and (2) parents.

Merriam (2009) explained two categories for which she stated research is typically divided, basic and applied. Applied research, unlike basic research, she stated, “is undertaken to improve the quality of practice of a particular discipline” (Merriam, 2009, p. 3). She explained that case studies are chosen when researchers seek insight, discovery, and interpretation. By designing an evaluative case study (Merriam, 1998, 2009), I was able to gain insight into the experiences and perspectives of staff and parents within SSD pertaining to inclusive education environments and practices.

I randomly selected the schools for the study from various geographic areas within SSD due to their proximity to me (Fowler, 2009; Mertens, 2010). In an effort to purposefully gather information about the organization within this study, identifying specific groups of participants was vital to answering my research questions. I used this sampling strategy to identify individuals who play different roles in the inclusive education process and, therefore, provided varying viewpoints on the implementation of inclusive education practices. The participants had different roles so it was my expectation that their views would reflect their diverse perspectives. These different perspectives led to a sound qualitative study by illustrating a complex picture of the phenomenon (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011).

I collected the survey data through a purposive self-administered Web-based survey design. I used a non-probability-based sample to choose the survey participants; this type of sampling in survey research was helpful as the selection process was not random. “Rather, these

strategies require the judgment of the researcher to select the sample” (Andres, 2012, p. 97). The number of participants was the result of access to the surveys provided by gatekeepers (Creswell, 2009, 2012, 2013). Many principals—gatekeepers—who were contacted for this study, either did not respond or declined to participate. Finally, the number of participants was also based on how many surveys were completed. Several surveys were started but not submitted.

Data Collection Methods

I selected several types of data to conduct this research. There were three phases to the study. The first phase focused on staff and parents. I used surveys to collect information from both parents and staff members who worked with students with special needs (see Appendices A and B for survey questions). Survey responses supplied information on the trends within the schools in SSD pertaining to a shared understanding of inclusive education and inclusive leadership. I used Simple Survey (<http://www.simplesurvey.com/>), an online survey program to collect, categorize, and chart some of the data.

In addition to survey data and information from parent interviews, I also conducted individual staff interviews during the first phase of this study. The reason for the individual interviews was to maintain confidentiality. There is always a fear that participating in a study could lead to unfavourable consequences to participants. Because this study depended on feedback from staff members, it was critical participants who were employed by SSD felt comfortable taking part in the study. Three staff members accepted my invitation to share their experiences regarding inclusive education, as they understood it, as well as their experiences with inclusive decision-making in addressing the learning needs of students with special needs. I conducted interviews in locations of the participants’ choosing, ones where they felt comfortable sharing their experiences.

Data collection, for this study, occurred at several points during the course of the research; I collected survey data in the first phase of the study, while simultaneously conducting interviews. Creswell (2012) recommended a sample size of approximately 350 participants when completing a survey study but notes that various factors may cause the size to vary. There were seven individuals who participated in interviews, four parents and three staff members. Additionally, there were 204 individuals who accessed the staff survey; however, only 88 participated in taking the survey; 19 were partially completed and 69 entirely completed and submitted. Likewise, 359 parents accessed the parent survey; 152 participated with 66 partially completing the survey and 86 entirely completing and submitting the survey. As a result, the survey results represent the perspectives of a very small group of staff and parents from SSD.

It was necessary for me to gain permission prior to collecting data from participants. This process involved approval from the University of Calgary's (U of C) Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board (CFREB). Upon approval from the U of C, I applied for permission to conduct my research through the Educational Research Committee of SSD. "These boards have been established to protect the rights of individuals participating in research studies and to assess the risk and potential harm of the research to these individuals" (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011, p. 176). This was a crucial step in conducting a study and was required prior to my making contact with any potential participants. Once approval was given, I was required to contact principals of the schools that were randomly selected. The principals were the gatekeepers to my participants.

Data Analysis

The second phase of this study involved the analysis of the data. Data analysis is an important part of any study. In this study, I analyzed both survey and interview data.

Onwuegbuzie and Teddlie (2003) argued that mixed methods provides a greater comprehensive analysis technique than using only quantitative or qualitative data analysis. While this study is not a mixed methods study, I used open-ended survey data to support the qualitative findings, and, as such, I used a concurrent, exploratory approach when analyzing the data.

I began the study by requesting from principals permission to conduct my study by being granted access to their parents and staff. Upon receiving permission, I emailed parents and staff asking them to participate in a survey (see Appendices A and B). I provided a link to the survey in the email (see Appendices C and D). Concurrently, I invited parents to participate in a focus group and staff to take part in individual interviews. I provided information about the study to interview participants prior to the interview (see Appendices E and F) chose participants based on the number of respondents. As stated in the Data Collection section, due to the inability to successfully coordinate dates and times with parent participants, a focus group was not possible so I interviewed parents when they were available. While gathering the data from the surveys, I was also collecting data from parent and staff interviews. I recorded the interviews using an audio digital recorder.

I created two tables to identify the number of parents and staff who were surveyed, the number of respondents and the number of non-respondents. Response rates were calculated by Simple Survey, the online survey program I used based on the number of participants who completed the survey divided by the number of people sampled (Fowler, 2009). The lack of response created both non-response error and non-cooperation error. Non-response error is when individuals who are included in the survey and have accessed it, do not respond (Andres, 2012). The survey was voluntary; therefore, individuals I invited to participate did not have to

participate. When individuals choose not to participate in a survey, this is referred to as non-cooperation error (Andres, 2012).

“The overall process of data analysis begins by identifying segments in your data set that are responsive to your research questions” (Merriam, 2009, p. 176). I collected and coded the survey data identifying themes pertaining to my research questions. Both the open-ended surveys and interview transcripts were coded and analyzed first by using QSR Nvivo software (<http://www.qsrinternational.com/>).

I analyzed the data in three phases. The first phase involved transcribing and coding of all the interviews. After transcribing the seven interviews, I coded each interview and then separated the data into two groups, staff or parents. I determined the best way to identify themes was to create categories of emerging themes as I reviewed each interview. As new themes were identified, I created subthemes to narrow the codes. Once the coding process of individual interviews was completed, I went back and categorized the codes based on my four research questions. Several themes in the data identified other areas of concern outside of the four research questions. I identify these in Chapter 4 and discuss their implications Chapter 6.

Phase 2 of data analysis involved coding open-ended responses to survey questions. Again I identified emerging themes and then categorized those themes as they applied to my four research questions. As noticed during the coding of the individual interviews, several themes in the survey data identified other areas of concern outside of the four research questions. I discuss their implications later in this chapter and in Chapter 6.

In phase 3 of data analysis, I looked at both of the themes that emerged from both the individual interviews and the survey data. I further narrowed and consolidated the codes from the two data sets in order to answer each of the four research questions. I discuss those themes and

findings as they relate to the four research questions further in Chapter 4 and explain their implications in greater detail in Chapter 5. Data collected was from only three geographical areas of SSD. Only three staff members and four parents respectively among hundreds were interviewed, and survey respondents were from only 12 schools; therefore, while these findings are informative, they are not generalizable as they are limited in their scope.

Upon completion of the data analysis, I interpreted and recorded the results. I organized the data based on participants and their role in the school district. I created a matrix to help organize the information and provide efficiency in retrieving it. I used the information gleaned from consolidating both sets of findings to inform the conclusion, recommendations, and implications for further research.

Survey Demographics

As stated, I completed this study by collecting data from participants using surveys and by conducting individual interviews with parents and staff (see Appendix G, H, and I). I chose three geographical regions of SSD to select the schools in which to invite participants for this study. Out of the more than 200 schools in this district, I randomly selected 66 schools and contacted them all by email or by telephone. Figure 3 identifies the number of participants from the 12 schools that agreed to participate in this study.

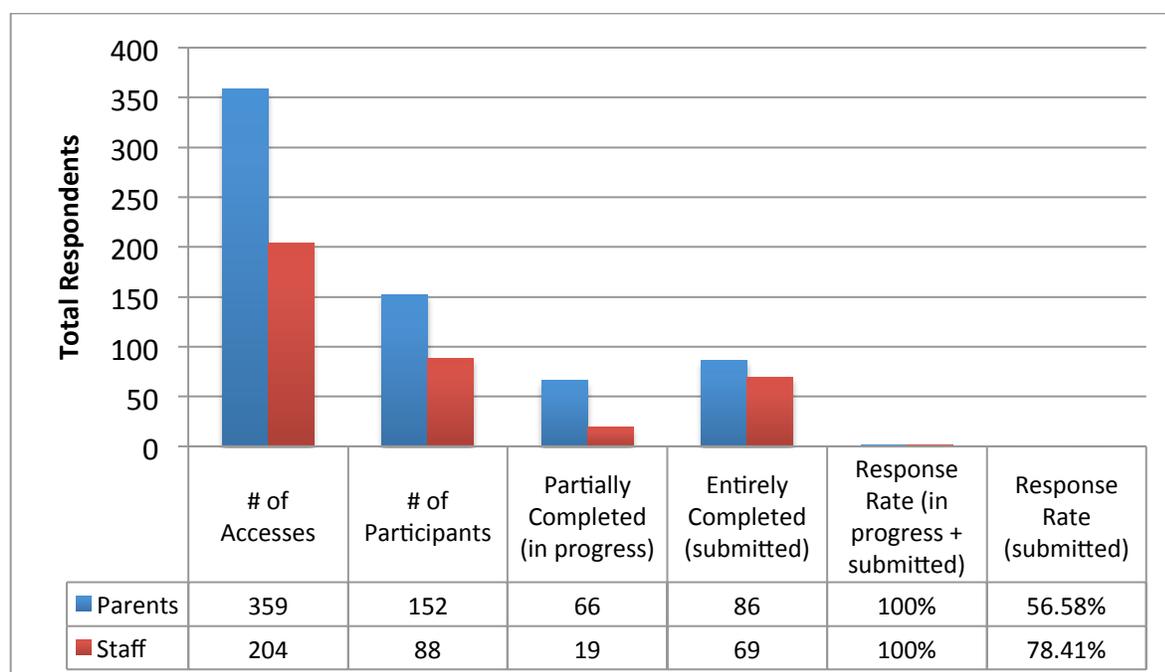


Figure 3. Parents and staff participants survey statistics.

I collected specific information about parent participants, including the ages of respondents' children and their grades. Out of 147 respondents, most of the parent respondents were parents of students in grades 7–12 (see Figure 4), which would suggest that most of the completed surveys came from parents with children in either junior or senior high school, given the data illustrated in Figure 3. Of the 88 staff respondents, most were teachers, individuals who have worked for SSD between 5 and 15 years (see Figures 5 and 6), as well as individuals who have worked with students with special needs in an integrated or mainstream classroom (see Figure 7).

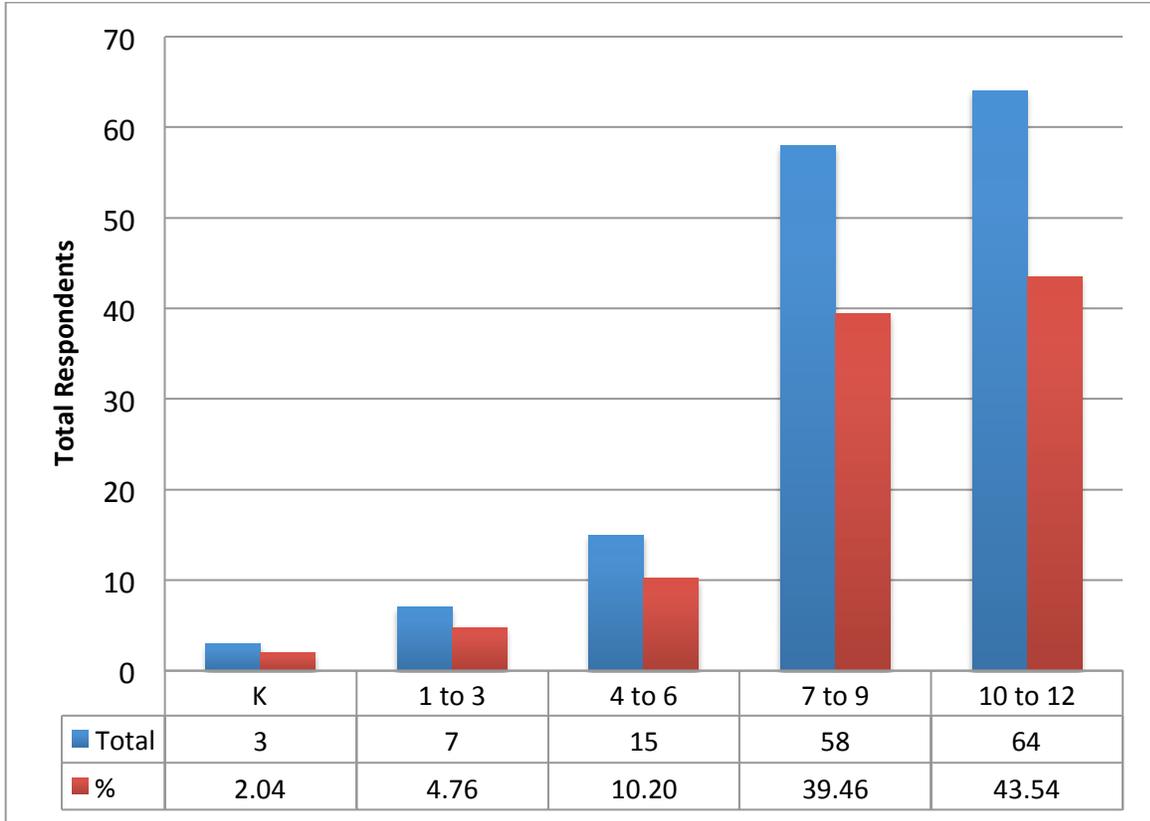


Figure 4. Grade levels of the respondents' children.

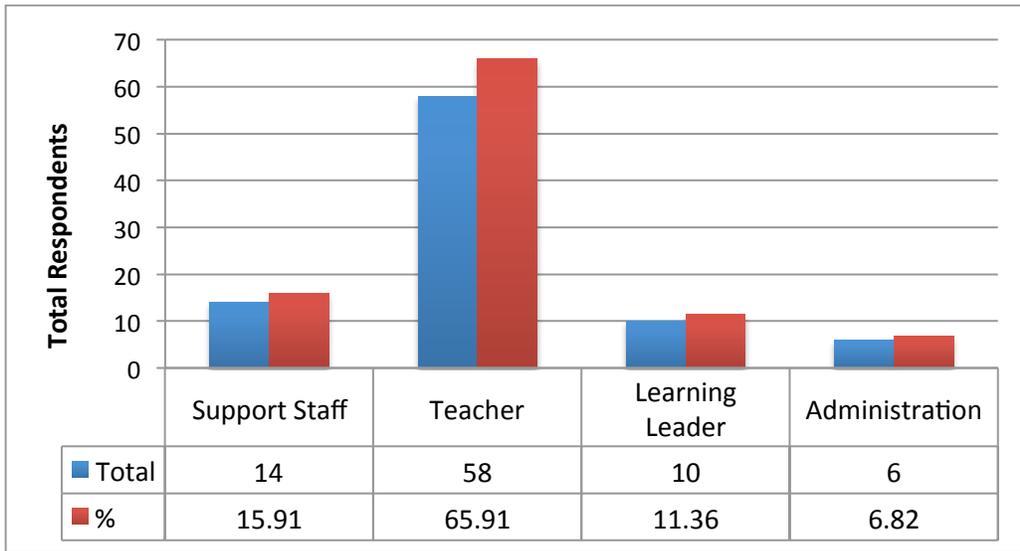


Figure 5. Staff participant demographic.

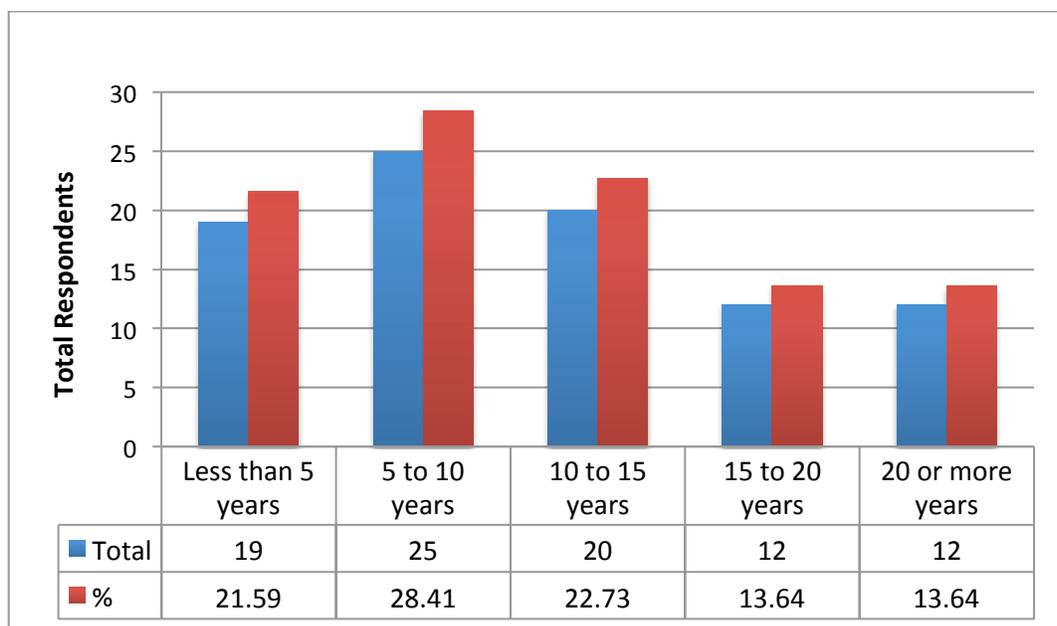


Figure 6. Years with district – Staff survey.

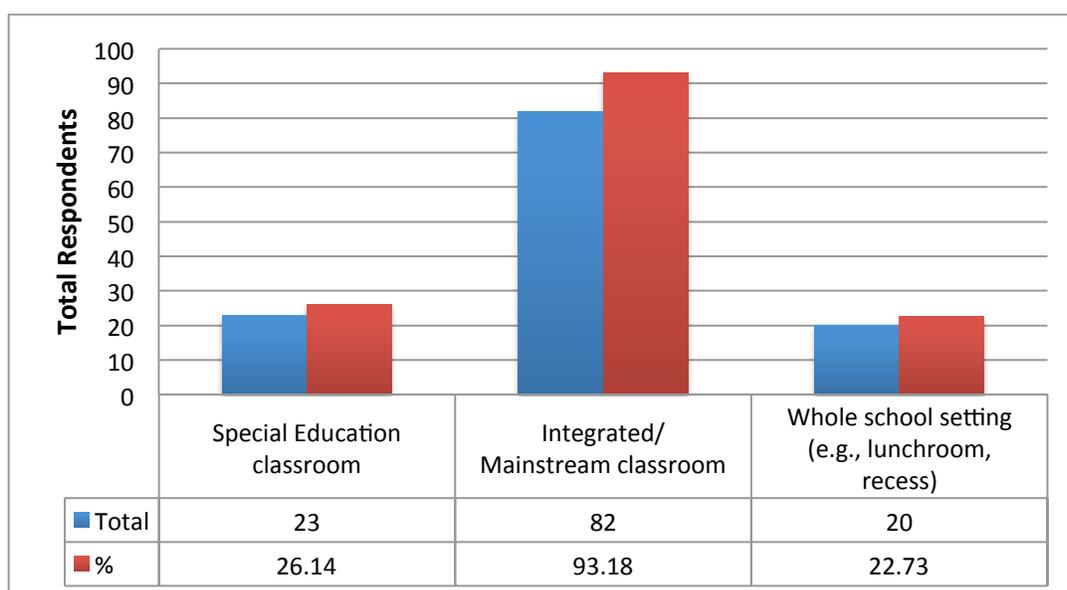


Figure 7. Capacity for which staff worked with special needs students.

The descriptive data about parents and the grade levels of their children (Figure 4) is relevant and important to keep in mind as part of the interpretation of feelings and perspectives shared by parent respondents. For example, a parent of an elementary-aged child may not share the same concerns as a parent of a junior high or senior high student and vice versa.

Additionally, the demographic information of staff is also helpful in understanding some of the responses provided. For example, principals or learning leaders may not share the same perspective on leadership and staff capacity as that of a teacher or support staff member given they are in leadership roles and/or a position of authority.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations are critical to all research. How researchers go about collecting data, engaging participants and engaging in their environment is crucial to attaining unbiased and untainted results. I needed to consider several issues in conducting this study as it involved human participants. It was imperative that I acknowledge and respect the experiences, feelings, and concerns of all participants when creating survey, interview, and research questions. Moreover, it was necessary for me to establish clear and explicit boundaries with all participants and maintain a safe space when engaging in discourse with one or more participants. Participants needed to feel they were part of the process and not as if they were being placed under a microscope or being used to further a hidden agenda.

Prior to beginning this study, I took steps to acquire approval from U of C's Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board (CFREB) and complete SSD's Application to Complete Research. Upon receiving both approvals, I wrote a clear description of this research to clearly outline the intentions of the study in addition to time commitments and the research process. I notified participants of their and my role in the study, the measures I would take to secure data collected, and how I would use the data. First, I sent the information to principals of the randomly selected schools, as they were the gatekeepers to participants. The information was also provided on the first page of the surveys shared with staff and parents, and finally it was given to participants willing to participate in an interview. Additionally, I also informed

participants of their right to withdraw from the study or refrain from responding to questions at any time without reason.

Given that this case study involved one interview with two people, there was no guarantee of privacy and confidentiality with regard to the information gathered during that session, which I explained to the two participants. Additionally, I made the decision to keep all staff interviews separate so there would be no perceived power differences or pressures to give certain answers or behave in a specific way.

Trustworthiness

Validity and reliability carry different weight in quantitative and qualitative studies. While quantitative researchers hope to demonstrate high levels of validity and reliability in their study, qualitative research focuses more on validity as reliability generally pertains to agreement met by coders on a research team about the codes used for passages in a text (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2011), internal validity refers to “the extent to which the investigator can conclude that there is a cause and effect relationship among variables, and . . . external validity is the extent to which the investigator can conclude that the results apply to a larger population” (p. 211). External validity was therefore of greater concern to me in completing this study, and the focus of the survey results in this study were a means to understand the experiences of staff and parents in answering the research questions and examining the readiness of schools within a large urban school district to successfully implement Alberta Education’s approach to inclusive education in meeting the learning needs of children with special needs.

In contrast to quantitative research, qualitative research does not assess validity based on causal relationships or similarities in experience of a large population to a specific phenomenon.

Instead, qualitative research assesses validity based on how well what is reported accurately represents the experiences of the participants to the phenomenon being examined (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). I was collecting a considerable amount of qualitative data in this study; therefore, accuracy in participant account was critical to establishing qualitative validity and equally relevant to that of the qualitative data collected. I did, however, employ mixed data collection methods, and assessing the validity required examining more than the data collected.

Determining validity when using mixed data collection methods is different than assessing validity in a quantitative or qualitative study exclusively. In this study, I depended on both interview data and open-ended survey data and assessing validity of both as they related to each other was necessary to the success and credibility of the research. Validity could be determined in several ways. Triangulation was one strategy. Often in reference to Denzin (1978) when being defined, triangulation is the use of multiple sources to derive a common theme or understanding of a phenomenon (Cox & Hassard, 2005; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011; Jick, 1979). For the purpose of this study, I used documentation from SSD with regard to inclusive education, information collected from the surveys, and the interviews to develop a deeper understanding of the readiness of schools within SSD to successfully implement Alberta Education's approach to inclusive education in meeting the learning needs of children with special needs. However, given the limited scope of the participants, the study is not be generalizable though it has provided compelling evidence to encourage further research and discussion on inclusive education in the district.

Limitations

As I designed and conducted this case study, several limitations became apparent. “Boundaries that are external to the researcher (e.g., inability to gain access to certain populations) are called *limitations* of a study” (Andres, 2012, p. 18). The limitations of this study pertained to participant sampling; buy-in by gatekeepers, school principals; my role in the study as the researcher and employee of SSD; time and scheduling constraints; and the data collection instruments I used.

Participants in this study were a limitation in both the number of participants and diversity of roles those participants had in the education setting. Ideally, a larger sample size would have been best, especially for the face-to-face interviews, but there was no way of knowing how many parents and staff would agree to be a part of the study. This study was completely voluntary. It was quite possible to have had participants from only one of the designated groups. Additionally, sample sizes from both the face-to-face interviews and the Web-based surveys were too small to generalize my findings.

My dual role as the researcher and as an employee of SSD also created a limitation. It was important that I remained neutral for the duration of the study; however, my personal experiences in the field and feelings about inclusive education presented biases that were difficult to eliminate but important for me to minimize. This meant I had to identify my biases and feelings and remain neutral as I conducted my analysis, recorded my findings, formalized my conclusions, and made my recommendations. Additionally, it is possible that my role in this district created uncertainty for potential participants.

The gatekeepers of this study were principals of the randomly selected schools. Upon receiving permission from SSD’s Educational Research Committee, I needed principals’

permission to distribute my surveys and approach their staff and parents for interviews. Gatekeepers are “individuals at the research site that provide access to the site and allow or permit the research to be done” (Creswell, 2009, p. 178). The principals were a limitation because I had no control over what they felt or thought about my study or the decision they would make. Principals ultimately made the decision for their staff and parents as to whether they would have the choice to participate in the study or they would not be given the choice at all.

Time constraints were also another limitation as interviews had to be arranged around my schedule and the schedule of participants. As a result of scheduling conflicts, I was unable to arrange a parent focus group. Given the challenges, I made the decision to conduct individual parent interviews with the exception of the first parent interview, which I conducted with two participants. Responses from these two parents demonstrated the benefit of having parents use each other to further the conversation (Creswell, 2012; Mertens, 2010). Additionally, meeting with staff was a challenge because I too was working, and, as I found to be the case, I either needed to take a personal day to interview a staff member during school hours, or staff were unable to meet after school hours for any number of reasons. Because this study was dependent on feedback from parents and staff, flexibility was necessary in arranging face-to-face interviews. I also had to consider the time needed to review and transcribe the interview notes and analyze the data. Check-ins with participants was equally important to ensure an accurate account of what participants said in their interviews, which added to the time constraints.

Finally, the instruments I used were also a limitation. Surveys are helpful questionnaires in collecting data; however, if questions are not answered thoughtfully, they could be more time consuming than informative. Likewise, there is always a possibility many surveys are not

completed or submitted; this was the case for the Web-based surveys distributed to the staff and parents of the 12 schools that participated. Out of the 204 staff members who accessed the survey, only 69 fully completed and submitted the survey while 19 partially completed the survey. Similarly, 359 parents accessed the parent survey whereby 88 fully completed and submitted the survey while 36 parents partially completed it. Furthermore, the questions used in both the surveys and during interviews were critical to acquiring the information necessary to answer the research questions. Interview questions needed to be thoughtful and without bias, yet allow participants the opportunity to share their understandings and concerns about the inclusive education process. In addition, interviews provided only the perspective of the individual(s) being interviewed. They did not offer a complete picture of what has actually taken place within the schools, the relationships between stakeholders, the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders in the schools, or the level of understanding and buy-in by potential participants or respondents.

Delimitations

There were several delimitations in this study. “Decisions that within the purview of the researcher to create boundaries around the research (e.g., location of the study, that nature of study participants) are called *delimitations* of a study” (Andres, 2012, p. 18). I describe these delimitations in the following sections.

For the purpose of this study, I invited to be participants only staff who worked with students with special needs or who were in a leadership role in the school district. This decision was a delimitation because the decision excluded the students themselves as well as other individuals who, while they did not work with students with special needs, still had a perception of the readiness of schools in SSD to successfully implement Alberta Education’s approach to inclusive education in meeting the learning needs of children with special needs. Additionally,

the wording of the survey may have unintentionally created a delimitation by excluding parents of children who did not have a diagnosed or perceived special need. As well, the fact that the surveys were only provided in English eliminated any interested participant who did not speak English.

Another delimitation of the study was the self-administered, Web-based survey design, which required participants to have access to computers or digital technology as well as Internet access. Andres (2012) also identified a disadvantage to online surveys as the inability to ask leading questions as well as confirming or disaffirming behaviour. The Web-based survey I created took me, the researcher, away from the participants, not allowing for me to answer potential questions or clarify any aspect of the survey.

Literature on staff engagement during the planning of professional development was also not reviewed in this case study, nor was the literature on student engagement in the inclusive education process. I made this decision to reduce the time needed to complete the study as well as to minimize the number of researchers or the need for a research assistant. My purpose in this case study was to identify the readiness of schools in a large urban school district to successfully implement Alberta Education's approach to inclusive education in meeting the learning needs of children with special needs by focusing on specific stakeholders, their experiences, and their perceptions. Adding those two elements to the study would have changed the scope of the study and increased the time and researchers needed to conduct it.

Finally, this study was not designed to be a case study on all the schools in SSD. There is not enough time in which to gather data from every school, and I am the only researcher. The study was limited to three specific geographical areas and randomly selected schools.

Positionality

“Positionality is determined by where one stands in relation to the ‘other’” (Merriam, Lee, Kee, Ntseane, & Muhamad, 2001, p. 411). Given the qualitative nature of this study, as the researcher I was also the data collection instrument (Bourke, 2014). Therefore, I need to be very clear on my positionality and the impact it may have had on the research process, which Bourke (2014) explained is a reasonable expectation. Bourke (2014) contended,

The concept of self as research instrument reflect the likelihood that the researcher’s own subjectivity will come to bear on the research project and any subsequent reporting of findings. Interpretation consists of two related concepts: the ways in which the researcher accounts for the experiences of the subjects and of her or himself, and the ways in which study participants make meaning of their experiences. (p. 2)

As a result, I was intentional about trying to transparently locate myself in the research (Andres, 2012). As a teacher of students with special needs for 17 years and a staff member of SSD for the past 10 years, I am positioned as an insider (Andres, 2012; Merriam et al., 2001). I was able to access district and school leaders, documents and other artifacts with greater ease than someone who was not a member of SSD. I was also able to collect, analyze, and interpret data through the lens of my current professional experiences. As researcher and a doctoral student, however, I was also positioned as an outsider. From this perspective, I recognized the position and power (Muhammad et al., 2015) attached to me as an academic when interviewing participants and the impact it might have on their responses despite also being an insider. By using methods triangulation (Merriam, 2009), I was able to compare and cross-check data collected and to support my attempt to remain transparent and neutral through the research process.

Summary

In this chapter, I described the methodology and methods I used to conduct this evaluative case study on the readiness of schools within a large urban school district to successfully implement Alberta Education's approach to inclusive education in meeting the learning needs of children with special needs. I provided a detailed explanation justifying the use of a qualitative design, the research setting, and the rationale for a case study methodology using open-ended surveys to support the interview data collected. I also explained the data collection methods used to conduct the study. I followed this explanation with a detailed discussion of the data analysis I used, detailing the measures and instruments used. I concluded the chapter with the ethical considerations, an examination of how trustworthiness would be maintained, the limitations and delimitations of the study and my positionality in the study. In Chapter 4, I detail the findings and emerging themes of the study.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

My purpose in this evaluative case study was to examine SSD's readiness to implement Alberta Education's inclusive education system by identifying whether there is a shared understanding of inclusive education, engagement of parents and staff in the decision-making process, and by identifying how school and district leaders build capacity among parents and staff. I conducted seven personal interviews and administered two surveys for this case study. I also collected additional documentation from SSD on its approach to inclusive education. The findings presented in this chapter provide insight into the thoughts and feelings of parents and staff as to their understanding of inclusive education and the development of inclusive education environments in SSD in addition to some of the challenges and frustrations held by these two groups of stakeholders. Knowledge gained from them can provide district and school leaders with a starting point to begin or further develop inclusive education environments within schools throughout the district.

In this chapter, I review several key findings gathered from both personal interviews and open-ended surveys. I provide an explanation for the process I used to analyze the data collected, and I also present the five findings that emerged from this study. I discuss these findings as they apply to each of the four research questions. I give details to support each finding, including participant voice to provide a clear illustration of the case. I have left participant quotes verbatim and for the most part unedited. Relevant participant quotes have in some instances been added in a list format.

Finding 1: Definitions of inclusive education vary among stakeholders

With respect to research question 1, I found a reoccurring theme in the data: there was no clear understanding of inclusive education among participants. Some participants were confused

by the term; others felt it focused on meeting the needs of all children, while several participants were confident it simply meant special needs students were being integrated into a regular classroom setting. The data also indicated that parents were interested in having a better understanding of inclusive education in schools and believed students should all have an equal opportunity to learn; comparatively staff felt there needed to be a clear explanation of inclusive education and how it was to be implemented.

Both the survey and interview data indicated a general understanding of Alberta Education's inclusive education system. Participant definitions of inclusive education varied, though three key ideas were common. One common idea was that inclusive education provides students with special needs equal access to learn in a regular classroom environment. The second common idea was that inclusive education provides all children with a flexible learning environment where all children are accepted and needs are met through personalized learning. Finally, several parents indicated they had no understanding of inclusive education. I will discuss this data in greater detail in the following sections of this chapter.

Staff survey. Among the staff surveyed, when they were asked if they understood Alberta Education's inclusive education system, 12 out of 69 respondents indicated that they did, 17 responded that they did not, while 40 indicated they somewhat understood. Of those 69 respondents, 50 participants gave an explanation of their understanding. Most staff members who responded indicated they felt inclusive education was a move towards eliminating segregated classrooms by giving students with special needs the opportunity to learn in a regular classroom or meeting the diverse learning needs of students in a regular setting with supports and services. Several staff members also indicated that their understanding of inclusive education was about

meeting the needs of all children, regardless of who they were, through personalization of learning. Staff expressed their thoughts in the following ways:

I understand this to mean that children with special (or exceptional needs) shall be included in the “mainstream” or “regular school program. (Staff Survey Response)

Providing every student with the opportunities and supports they need to be successful. (Staff Survey Response)

Meeting the needs of all diverse learners in the school settings. Personalized learning, that all students should be provided with opportunities to best achieve their potential. The goal is to focus on the strengths of a student and what they can do rather than their limitations, to provide a sense of belonging and acceptance for all students. (Staff Survey Response)

Meet the unique learning needs of every student. (Staff Survey Response)

Students are entitled to a program that meets their physical, intellectual or behavioural needs. Programs are modified or adapted. Inclusion to community school options is the first choice. (Staff Survey Response)

Having students with developmental disabilities be a part of the ‘regular’ classroom with some or full time support for the best education for the student. (Staff Survey Response)

Providing students from a variety of diverse backgrounds and abilities the opportunity to work together in an inclusive classroom. Everyone is valued – all children are considered special – not separated based on needs. (Staff anonymous)

Additionally, some staff indicated that they had never heard of the term inclusive education, while others expressed concern for teachers’ lack of knowledge and understanding of special needs students, given their understanding of inclusive education.

Parents have the choice to enrol their children with special needs, be it behavioural, mental or physical, into the mainstream school system. The government is supposed to be providing extra money and support for teachers so that they can deliver the best education for all students and meet everyone's needs. However, teachers put forth a lot of extra time and sincere care to meet everyone's needs, yet often lack the knowledge and true understanding for programming of those with special needs. (Staff Survey Response)

I have never heard of Inclusive Education or it is "new" jargon for practice in education that is more frequently referred to by different terminology. I might be aware of the concept but I do not understand this specific terminology "Inclusive Education." No one has ever used that terminology in my professional circle. (Staff Survey Response)

Parent survey. Of the 98 parent respondents to the question, "Do you understand Alberta Education inclusive education system?" 16 parents indicated that they understood Alberta Education's inclusive education system, while 57 stated they did not, and 25 said they had somewhat of an understanding. Parents who provided their definition of inclusive education seemed to hold meanings of inclusive education that were similar to staff. Parents' responses ranged between understanding that the inclusive education system was for meeting the needs of all students and providing a non-segregated learning environment for students with special needs. Additionally, many parents indicated not knowing or understanding the term inclusive education. Out of the 76 parents who provided a definition of the term, 31 parents indicated they did not know what the term meant, 16 parents indicated it meant meeting the needs of all students, and 18 defined inclusive education as creating a non-segregated environment where special needs students are integrated into a regular classroom. Several parents had this to say:

I was not aware of the term Inclusive Education and associated system until reading this survey. (Parent anonymous)

Basically students with different learning needs/disabilities should be included in regular classroom. (Parent anonymous)

Ensuring all students get the support they need to learn the way they learn to be the best they can be. Individual learning plans for each student. Means not segregating students into pre-defined groups where individual students may or may not fit the group they are assigned to, i.e., special learning group. (Parent anonymous)

Parent personal interviews. Within the responses provided by interview participants, I observed a variance in the definition of inclusive education between parents and staff. Participants either did not understand the term, recognized it as a move to meet the needs of all students, or saw it as a way to remove the barriers between special education and regular education, creating a non-segregated learning environment. Susan, a parent of two in the district, defined inclusive education stating,

You have kids of all needs that are – not separated but you provide them the tools and resources they need in order to be able to succeed at the same level – and be able to – I guess – not block them from being involved in part of the normal community. You take their learning needs and put them aside and include everyone together. (Personal Interview)

Nora, a parent of two, one still in high school and the other having graduated, defined inclusive education in a similar way:

I see it as a – not children being separated from a group. Children being part of a group, but being given the tools . . . being given the tools and resources for them to be successful in their academic pursuits. (Personal Interview)

Marion defined the term saying,

Inclusive to me would be that everyone has equal access to education whether you know, they be of different learning styles or different races or different cultures. That everyone is accommodated. (Personal Interview)

Jennifer, however, was unclear about the term. When asked what her understanding of inclusive education was she responded to the question with, “I was going to ask you what it was because I don’t know.”

Staff personal interviews. As observed with parents, staff also had varying ideas of inclusive education. It was evident that most people had a general understanding of the inclusive education system, but no shared understanding across all participants. This finding is illustrated in the following excerpts:

My understanding of inclusive education is that regardless of learning ability, all students would be under the auspice of one teacher or in one shared classroom environment.

Inclusive education, to me, is being in a classroom where you have a broad range of learning ability, a broad range of learning needs, and all of those needs are being met by the educator, and students are getting a full education. (Olivia)

Further, Karen indicated that it was her belief that teachers in the regular classrooms were already doing it. She explained:

Inclusive Education . . . all of us in the regular classrooms are doing it. Like you have children that are really high and children that are really low, children that are [autistic], children that might have physical or mental disabilities so just including all children.

Yvonne, however, explained that inclusive education was not something done at her school; it is not a placement but rather a value. She stated,

Inclusive is a value to me. It's about the valuing of each individual student for their uniqueness. It's not about a place; it's really about the – when I look at it – Inclusive Ed – it's that we understand each child, their uniqueness, that we engage them in work worthy of them, and they that truly belong to the community in which that learning is taking place.

The variance in responses would suggest that while there is a general understanding of what inclusive education might entail, it is unclear to many staff Alberta's inclusive education system actually is. There was no shared understanding of inclusive education existed among participants of this study.

Finding 2: Ways to support implementation need to be discussed with stakeholders

In the second research question I asked, “How do district and school leaders support the implementation of inclusive education environments?” The school-based staff and the district leader I interviewed indicated that the primary way of supporting inclusive education was through personalization of learning in the classroom. Parents indicated that inclusive education was not a topic discussed, and information about the school or district was shared through emails, parent–teacher interviews, or school council meetings.

Parent respondents. The data collected showed that more than half of the staff and parents surveyed had not been engaged in conversations about inclusive education with system

administrators or school staff. Among parents surveyed, when asked if the school district had reviewed Alberta Education’s inclusive education system with them, approximately 33% of the 95 respondents indicated that the school district had somewhat reviewed Alberta Education’s inclusive education system compared to 55% who said they had not (see Figure 8).

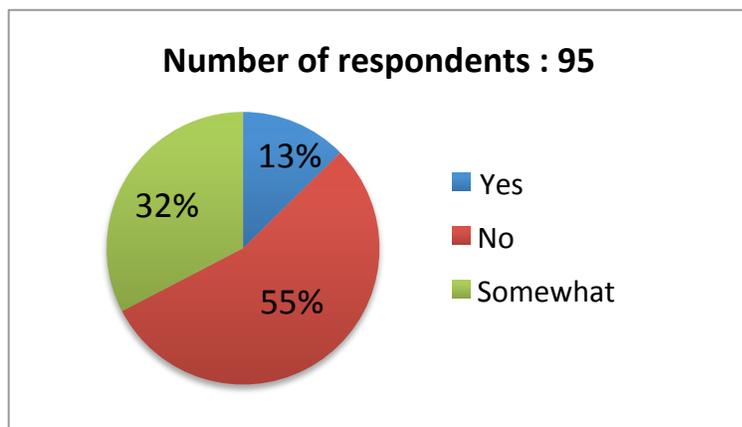


Figure 8. District review of Alberta’s education system – Parent survey data.

When asked about district involvement one parent interviewed had this to say:

I don’t know how much time they actually make for sitting down with parents. I’m not aware of opportunities to be able to do that. But it may be that I haven’t paid attention to it, so – but it’s not obvious to me. It’s not obvious to me that there’s opportunities for that. I would think that it’s a good measure – it’s a good evaluation of your system. Any human resource would say that if you’re evaluating, you should do a 360 evaluation, right? You should look at, at the consumer; you should look at co – whoever your co – colleagues are, look at the immediate supervisors, and look at the people who are using the service to give you a good indication of how well or not you’re doing and what areas. You know, I also understand education is a very emotional topic for families, and parents, and kids, and so, you know, the process might be one where there is actually a facilitation process to invite people to come every, you know, at the end – or sometime

during the school year and have an open – have an open discussion that’s facilitated, because it can become very complex. (Nora)

Susan expressed with some frustration that the district really is not involved unless there is a concern and would like to see more involvement by the district with parents. She explained,

Right now I see it as – right now, it’s – it’s only if there’s a problem. Period! It’s just a problem. How I think it should be is that there should be a district person who serves as a non-partial parent advocate, if need be. If you know a parent feels they’re not being heard or whatever, that they’re able to have a person come in and sit next to them and so that you can get similarities of IPPs being implemented across the board in a similar fashion. So rather than just the ideas of this one school being implemented, you have a specialist that’s an IPP specialist, or some sort of services specialist, basically who knows all the resources, who knows all the things that can come in. I don’t feel that those specialists come in enough.

The data I collected about information provided at the school level yielded similar results. Of the 94 parent respondents, when asked if school administrators had reviewed Alberta Education’s inclusive education system, 30% indicated that school administrators had somewhat reviewed Alberta Education’s inclusive education system, while 56% said they had not (see Figure 9).

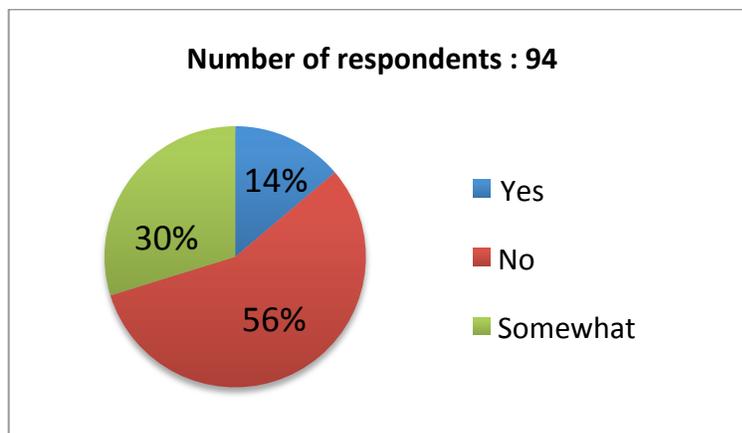


Figure 9. Parent respondents' perception of administration review of inclusive education.

When asked how often parents are engaged in conversations with school staff, administrators, or district administrators regarding the changes in the field of education in Alberta, Marion commented,

Well I can say for myself, zero. I mean I've never had a conversation with our school principal. There's lots of different layers when you get into the upper levels in terms of umm . . . you know you're just not dealing with a principal and a school secretary and a hand full of teachers. You're dealing with ahh . . . it's more of an organization and so there's quite a disconnect I find between administration and the parents. It's like they're upper management and we're just the customer. And I think that's why a lot of people who can afford to do so are leaving public education and going into umm . . . umm . . . you know a specialized setting or a little college for their kids because the voice of the parent, the voice umm . . . is more easily heard. . . . I don't know. I think there is just more willingness. There is better access. I feel quite removed from our administration.

And not to say it is any fault of theirs. It is just the way things are.

Jennifer, a parent with children at the elementary level shared a different experience saying:

I think they would meet as much as you need them to meet or need to meet with them anyways. At the start of the year I was there [the school] at least once a week at the start of the school year. But once he got more comfortable at the school then slowly it kind of declined. But in my own experience, they have been willing to meet any time that I ask. Jennifer later indicated that as a member of her child's School Council, there are not very many parents in attendance.

We . . . they try to meet once a month. Whether or not parents actually come . . . actually, I know they just don't come. You have two or three parents who come to the meetings. . . . That's when a lot of the meetings happen to talk about the needs of the kids and all that kind of stuff. That's when it usually happens. I know the school opens it up for parents to come, but parents don't come.

Jennifer's comment supported the survey data collected from parents around participation in school council where 58 of the 94 respondents indicated that they did not attend school council meetings at their child's school, and only 36 respondents saying they did. When asked why parents did not attend, the following statements are several of the reasons that were given:

I have allocated my time to volunteering in my child's classroom. Parent's council meetings don't generally work with my schedule. (Parent Survey Respondent)

I have three small children, 5 and under, with no support. (Parent Survey Respondent)

My English is not good enough to understand all the talk. (Parent Survey Respondent)

I chair the school council at another school (where my son is), and the evening set for school council meetings at this school (my daughter's school) does not work with my schedule. (Parent Survey Respondent)

I was involved with parent council for more than 8 years at the elementary and junior high level – I found it did very little to help me be more aware of/or empower me to affect change in any school policy, especially in the area of inclusive ed./special education and I am a speech language pathologist who has worked for more than 25 years with school age children with a variety of learning challenges and needs. (Parent Survey Respondent)

My children are both in high school and I find much of the parent council meetings have to do with programs my children do not participate in. I find that the way I best support my children's learning is through help at home and direct communication with their teachers. I am also a full time working, single mom and find that there is not a lot of time left over to help with 'big school projects' and organization. (Parent Survey Respondent)

My impression is that the forums are intended to distribute information, rather than influence the process and the system. I lack confidence that my participation will have any meaningful impact on the educational system. (Parent Survey Respondent)

Not a priority. (Parent Survey Respondent)

Many parent respondents, however, indicated that time and an already busy life was a huge factor for not attending school council meetings, as illustrated in the following comments:

Time constraints with a full time career and family. (Parent Survey Respondent)

Time. Very busy professional lives and extracurricular lives for our children. (Parent Survey Respondent)

I travel a lot for work and many of the meetings have fallen on the days I'm out of the city. (Parent Survey Respondent)

These responses, in addition to the previous data collected regarding district and school administration involvement with parents, suggest a possible breakdown in the relationship between parents and school/district leaders and staff. Data collected on communication between parents and teachers further supports a need to evaluate this relationship.

The data I collected regarding communication between teachers and parents showed that 5% of the 95 parent respondents indicated that they had engaged in a conversation with their child's teacher about education changes in the province while an overwhelming 91% indicated they had not had any conversations with their child's teacher about inclusive education and the changes to Alberta's education system (see Figure 10). This result fell in line with staff survey respondents as more than half of them said they did not or somewhat had conversations with parents about inclusive education (see Figure 11). Respondents had this to say when asked about their conversations about inclusive education with parents:

It hasn't come up. (Staff Survey Response)

Means and opportunity. (Staff Survey Response)

Currently, I teach in the TLC program, which is not inclusive. (Staff Survey Response)

I generally only have time to talk about the progress of their child. If a parent comes in whose child has special needs, I will talk to them about their accommodations but I do not talk to them about inclusive education as a theory to them. (Staff Survey Response)

Not asked about it. (Staff Survey Response)

Yes, when I believe it applies to their child and our conversation will benefit the child or is used as communication between the school and home. (Staff Survey Response)

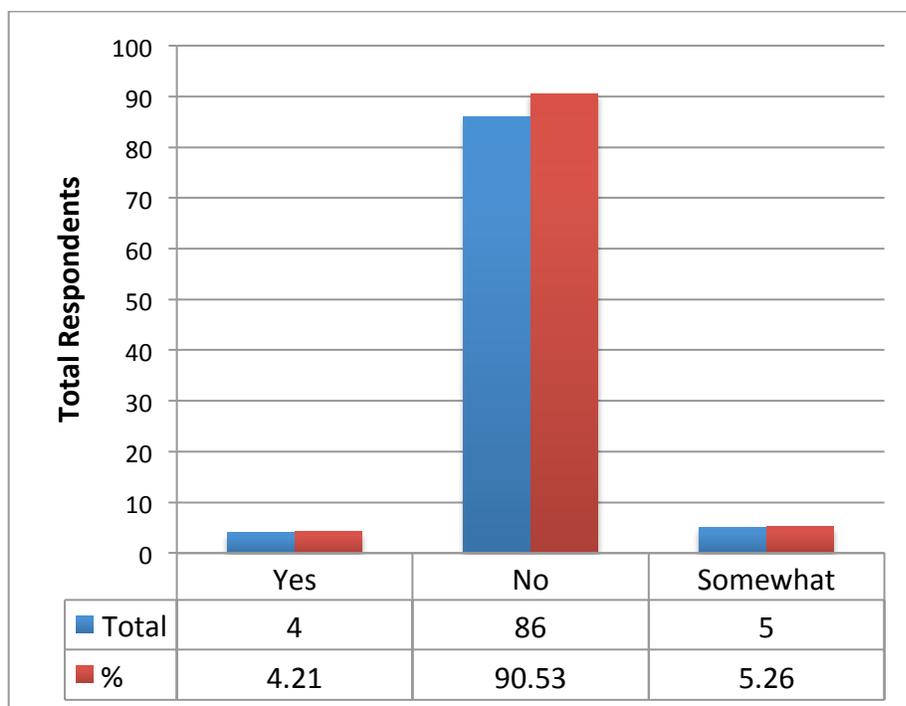


Figure 10. Inclusive education conversations with child's teacher – Parent survey data.

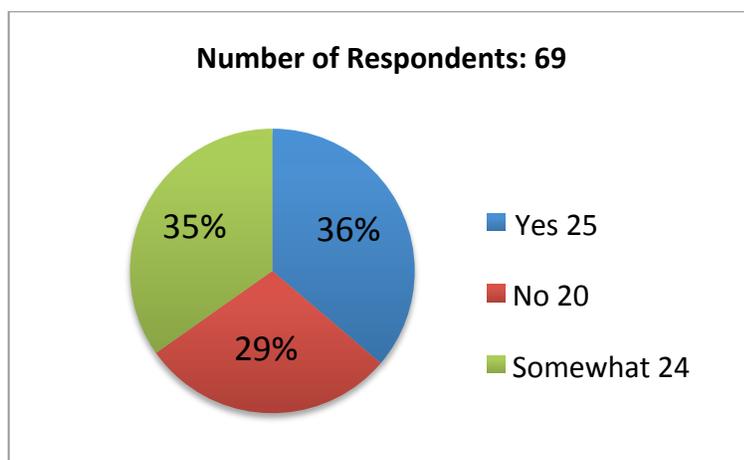


Figure 11. Staff conversations with parents regarding inclusive education – Staff survey data.

Staff survey respondents. Survey data that I collected from staff respondents illustrated similar results to that of parent respondents, indicating that more than half the 69 staff respondents had not been engaged in meetings or workshops with either district or school administrators on Alberta's inclusive education system (see Figures 12 and 13). These results suggest a possible need for a re-evaluation of when and how information is shared with staff by

school and district leaders to develop a shared understanding of inclusive education with the district and schools.

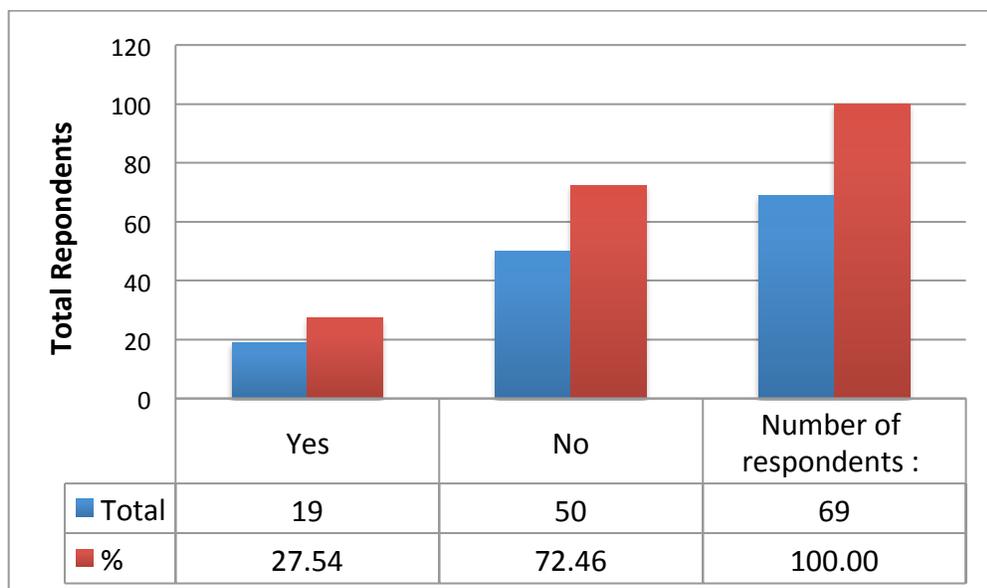


Figure 12. Meetings or workshops with the district on inclusive education – Staff survey data.

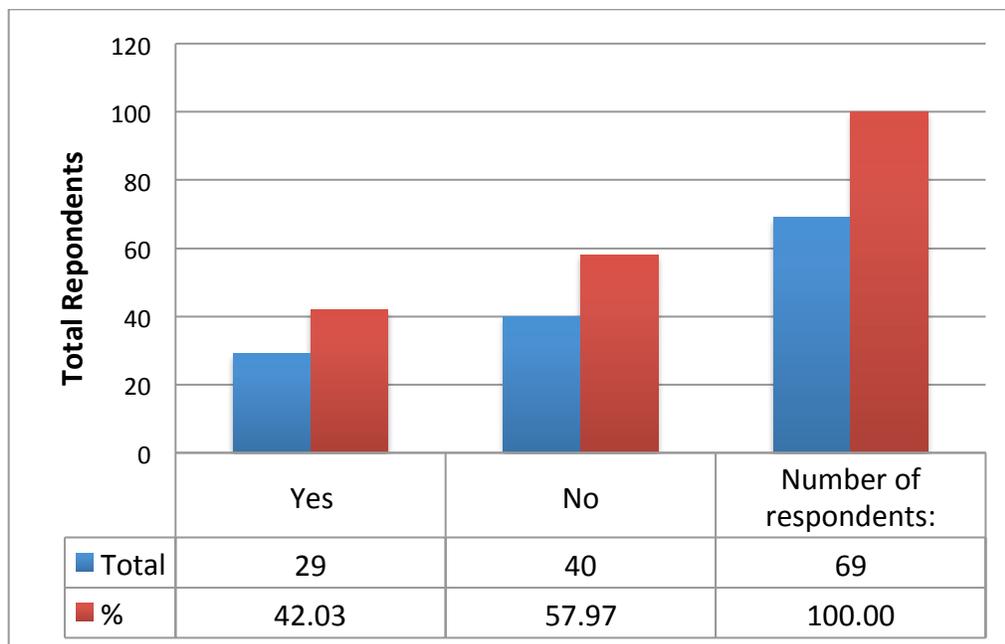


Figure 13. School meetings or workshops on inclusive education – Staff survey data.

I asked staff members if they engaged in conversations with their colleagues about inclusive education, and the responses varied with approximately 42% saying they had, 14% saying they had not, and 43% saying they had engaged in such conversations somewhat (see Figure 14).

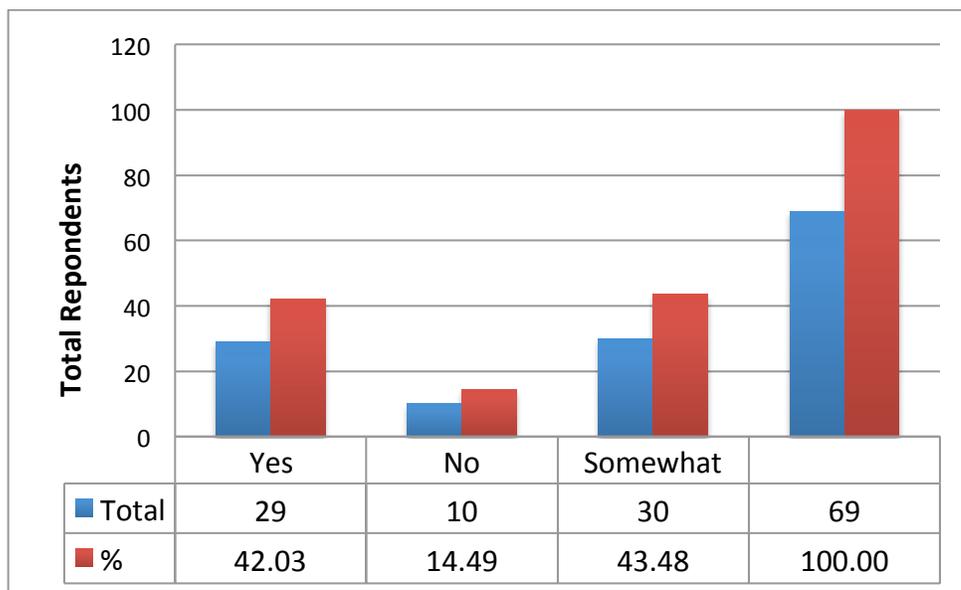


Figure 14. Inclusive education conversations with colleagues – Staff respondents’ survey data.

When I questioned why they had not engaged in any conversations about inclusive education, some staff responded,

I am waiting to hear more information about details for special education programming within an inclusive model. (Staff survey data)

Only if we are feeling overwhelmed with trying to meet the needs of special needs students that are placed in our class. We may talk about students and recruit support/ideas from other colleagues. (Staff survey data)

It is not something that is brought up in conversation. (Staff survey data)

There is so much workload put on teachers that teachers do not necessarily have the time to engage in effective conversations with colleagues. However, if there is a person who

has or has had a student with similar needs, then yes, those conversations would take place because ultimately it benefits the child. (Staff survey data)

We need more time to collaborate for the needs of these students. We are not given this additional time and are just expected to make it work. (Staff survey data)

Interview participants differed somewhat in their responses to the frequency of conversations they had regarding inclusive education and professional development. The three staff members I interviewed indicated that while the topic of inclusive education had not necessarily been addressed, personalized learning for children was how they were involved in addressing the needs of students. Karen, an elementary school staff member, stated,

We talk a lot about personalized learning. . . . So every child will have their own personalized program for the way they learn. We always talk at meetings about what we are doing. Don't just teach to reach the average middle of the road kids. You have to make sure you get those kids who are gifted and get the kids who are below average.

Olivia on the other hand expressed that no conversations or professional development on inclusive education had occurred at her school.

None! . . . On inclusive? No. The only thing I would say would be as an IPP coordinator I met specifically with each department and spoke a little bit about how to properly write IPP goals.

. . . But in terms of actual strategies that they can use, there's been no professional development in that capacity. None whatsoever. . . . I don't think we ever used the term, ever. Ever!

Yvonne's comments supported the data I collected from the surveys and the personal interviews regarding the implementation of inclusive education environments from a district perspective:

I would not say any formal professional development. I think it's a value that is held within our (district). . . . If you look at the Mega End of our (district) – you know, the valuing of each student, you know, their personal development, lifelong learning, all those, that they would graduate or leave school with all the, – you know, fully developed. And I think that that is about each student. I think that we have a Board of Trustees that values each student, and wants, has a vision for each student, and . . . And so back to your point: Have we been involved? No, I think it has been – I think that's always been resident with the [district], the importance of the individual child.

The data I collected would suggest that information regarding current education policies and changes to Alberta's education system is not being disseminated consistently across the district and within schools by administration and/or staff, which may be connected to the confusion and frustration regarding Alberta's inclusive education system. According to Yvonne “what Alberta Education did is they presented a vision, but they never presented an implementation plan, or how you would go about that.” She later explained why the system had not yet done anything, stating,

The system has done nothing formally, explicitly, around that [inclusive education]. And I would say, to the best of my knowledge, I think it's been taken up perhaps by some schools individually, but not universally. . . . Alberta Ed. released this change around inclusive education in 2010/2011 and they've gone silent on it. – And so I think Boards across the province are wondering. . . . We have all these really good forty thousand

dollar, forty thousand foot visions, but we need to kind of land them. And then in the midst of all that, you know, there's some things, I think that the province has – I mean, they're looking at redefining curriculum, and the curriculum prototyping. We have a new Education Act in . . . So it seems like we've kind of been stalled or stuck in midair for a while.

Another theme that presented itself with regard to communication with parents was addressed by Olivia who stated that while there are opportunities to meet with parents three to five times a year, there may be some apprehension on the part of teachers where communicating with parents is concerned. She explained,

I think teachers don't like contacting parents. I think, you know, as an educator, you need one or two bad experiences with the parent, you know? – You know, I've had them – and it really scars you from wanting to – to talk about a student's achievement with parents, because often times – not all the time, but often times, if a student isn't achieving, the first person thrown under the bus is the teacher and it's – for a lot of teachers, I think it's just easier for them to stick their head in the sand, the kid fails, and they leave the parents out of it. You know, and that's not right, but I certainly understand why sometimes they're reluctant to bring parents on board. Because it can turn into a very confrontational, you know, full of conflict conversation.

This response suggested that staff perhaps were not willing to communicate with parents because parents may be difficult to communicate with. Therefore, it would be easier to avoid the potential for conflict as teachers may see communication with a parent being necessary only when there were concerns or issues with their child. This possible intentional lack of communication further supports the breakdown in the relationship between staff and parents and highlights a need for

better communication between parents and staff as well as a need for school and district leaders to encourage communication beyond addressing issues or concerns with a child.

While there were opportunities for discussion among stakeholders, many factors presented challenges to discussions pertaining to inclusive education, such as limited or no formal professional development, lack of time, and limited opportunities for regular involvement or participation. Staff identified personalization of learning as a means to supporting implementation of inclusive practices and having multiple opportunities to meet with parents; however, parents appeared to be in the dark about inclusive practices in schools and what and how inclusive education was being facilitated throughout the district and schools. Possible reasons include perceived or potential conflict between parents and staff, apprehension by staff to connect with parents because of past experiences with parents, time constraints for both staff and parents, as well as the opportunity for formal discussions about inclusive education.

Finding 3: Challenges exist to building staff's understanding of inclusive education

With regard to research question 3, "What strategies are being used to build staff capacity to implement inclusive education?" I identified three findings during coding. The first finding pertains to strategies being used to build staff capacity, the second addresses the challenges to building staff capacity, and the third pertains to shared decision-making. The lack of a shared understanding of Alberta's Inclusive Education system is not a surprise given the findings and themes in relation to research question three.

Staff indicated that while there was availability workshops or professional development on various topics and access to specialists to help build staff capacity in various areas, there were several factors that presented challenges to furthering their understanding of inclusive education in the province. A desire to develop an understanding of inclusive education was suggested, but

staff expressed frustration with the challenges they faced. One factor that presented challenges to building staff capacity was time to meet with other professionals who could support their understanding of inclusive education and practice within the classroom and school environment. Other factors included workload, lack of workshops on inclusive education, and class sizes. Staff participants suggested that successful implementation of inclusive education would depend on funding to support implementation, more professional development, more time, and a decrease in workload and class sizes. Surveyed respondents had the following to say:

There is no time to attend workshops. There is too much to do in the regular course of the job to be able to free up time to find a relevant workshop, if one happens to come up, and actually attend the thing. I have only booked attendance at three workshops in my career because there are so few that are useful and available during a time when I could benefit from them. (Staff Survey Respondent)

My teaching load is heavy and it is difficult to find time to do this. (Staff Survey Respondent)

Time constraints. With a new curriculum recently introduced in my subject area the majority of my time has been dedicated to developing resources to implement the new curriculum. (Staff Survey Respondent)

Karen shared some of her frustrations when addressing workload, stating,

So many teachers my generation would say, “Just let me be with the kids. I want to be in my room. I want to be with the kids. Just let me do that.” But there’s so much other stuff that you almost can’t do that. Like you know you have this great lesson you want to do but you don’t have time at lunch to go get your stuff or to plan or whatever because you have all the other stuff going on.

Yvonne's comments beautifully summed up some of these challenges when she said,

You know, with the cutbacks from education over the last four or five years, we haven't had the same level of support for teachers. I'm not about giving support to children. I think that's the teachers' job. I think our best target is to help teachers understand how they might do that [inclusive practice], okay. Because if you only support a child, then you're – we're not building the capacity of the teacher to learn how to do that. . . . I think our teachers are very busy, considering all the children they have, all the expectations placed upon teachers. I think their role has grown exponentially in terms of what we ask them to do, and the level of that expectation too, without, I think, the time to provide that level of training for them. What we ask of them has to be met by the opportunity to learn how to do that. I think that's a big challenge. We're only funded to have teachers teach in classrooms.

When asked to identify what she thought an inclusive education environment should look like, Karen expressed some concern for how far behind schools were by saying, "Oh schools have a long way to go." She later expressed some doubt about implementing inclusive education environments stating, "We're expected to do inclusive education but we don't really have all the tools that are needed – or the training." In response to building staff capacity at her school Karen stated,

My principal is pretty good at that because he always tells us. People get mad at him cause our old principal used to shelter us, protect us from all that stuff. She just took it all upon herself because she knew we had enough stuff to worry about; but my principal now he'll tell us once a week at the staff meetings what they do at his meetings and

what's coming from above. So he's really good at keeping us informed and he forwards us a lot of emails that he gets.

Karen later explained that as a staff, her principal encourages involvement from the rest of the staff pointing out,

We're allowed to speak freely in staff meetings or if we go to a workshop or we go away on course somewhere. He always encourages us. He doesn't say you have to present at a staff meeting, but he says, "Do you want to get up and present at a staff meeting and show what you did?" Or, "do you want to take a group at lunch and teach them?" Yeah we always do that, especially on the TASK teachers. She's really good at computers so she leads in computers. She'll give these workshops to show us how to do different things. So there's always for the people that want to be leaders.

Olivia expressed her desire to lead and be involved in conversations but expressed frustration at not being in the right role. She stated,

I think – and this is just – I think I'm definitely a visionary. I think I have great leadership qualities. I think I would be an excellent leader. I feel that I can notice and identify inefficiencies, but I feel that when I share those ideas with my administration . . . it's triaged. It's – What Olivia thinks is so far down the priority list, they don't care. They're just trying to operate on a day-to-day basis. There are so many changes that I – I would make if I was in a more leadership role. Having said that, I'm also just a teacher. Right? I'm not – I'm part of a learning leader community; I'm not on the admin team. That's the nature of the position that I'm in. So would I feel, perhaps if I was a learning leader, that my learning – that my leadership skills might be being developed? Maybe a little bit, but

now? Certainly not! No. Not in any respect. I feel very, very under the thumb of just being here and shutting my mouth, and doing what I'm told to do.

This response suggests that staff voice and willingness to lead may not be seen as a value, and there may be feelings of being underappreciated by staff that may be unnoticed or unaddressed. It is unclear if and how often school leaders engage in conversations with staff about the various roles or opportunities available to lead or be involved in decisions beyond a staff member's designated position, but this response would suggest a need for school leaders to explore what staff believe they can offer in helping to develop inclusive education environments, which may be a possible strategy to building staff capacity.

Likewise, survey respondents varied in their responses, some indicating involvement in workshops and professional development, while others clearly expressing reasons for not being involved. Survey data showed out of 69 respondents, 26 people indicated participation in workshops about inclusive education by specialist councils or other organizations, and 42 people said they had not attended such workshops. This was to be expected given the responses provided by staff respondents about attending meetings or workshops offered by district or school administrators (see Figures 12 and 13). Most staff indicated they had not. Some of the reasons for not attending any workshops ranged from time to availability to knowledge of specific workshops to support a better understanding of inclusive education. The following comments were provided by some of the survey respondents as to why they did not attend any workshops at all:

I'm nearing the end of my career. I have 4 years left until I retire. I give my all during the day and do planning and marking in the evenings. I would rather use any spare time to

spend with my family and friends. It is important to have work/life balance. (Staff Survey Respondent)

There are many new initiatives that also require our attention. (Staff Survey Respondent)

I've used my professional development funds and the ones that I've been interested in going to, are quite expensive. (Staff Survey Respondent)

There haven't been any workshops given during our Staff Association Conventions that pertained to Inclusive Education. I've looked for them for 5 years and there hasn't been even one. Also, all professional development opportunities happen during our work time when the students need us [Ed. Assistants] the most. It'd be WAY better if I could spend on the PD days at a class. (Staff Survey Respondent)

Doesn't seem to play as large a role at the high school level. (Staff Survey Respondent)

What is inclusive education? (Staff Survey Respondent)

Not available, or we pick from a list of various activities and that's not one I will choose. (Staff Survey Respondent)

Yvonne addressed two important roles, that of the teacher and the principal. She expressed that as a teacher, she did what needed to be done to create learning experiences for her students.

As a teacher, I mean, I learned very – and I've been around this business a long time.

And as a teacher, I mean, I certainly realized, you know, the first day in my classroom that all children don't learn the same way, at the same rate. I had to design those experiences for children; those learning experiences where they would be successful. I was a math teacher and a science teacher, and I realized that students had different entry points. They had different backgrounds, different contexts. So I had to, you know, design

those learning experiences to pay attention to the individual and the group in the context of the curriculum. . . . So I learned a lot as a classroom teacher. And, I mean, you see the kids that, you know, that are excluded, and so you create those – those learning opportunities for students to understand each child.

Yvonne went on to speak to her experience when she was a principal, identifying the critical role principals play in the school culture. She had this to say:

I think as a principal of a school, I think you're the chief instructional leader, and you also set the tone for the school. You help your staff develop that culture in the school, and not only where – where we are a community, where we learn together, where we have fun together, where we grow together, both the staff and the students.

When asked how she would work with staff to help them adjust to some of the challenges, Yvonne expressed a need to be a good listener.

I mean, whether it's inclusive education or not, when I was a school principal, teachers – it wasn't uncommon for teachers to come forward – so the first thing I always did as a principal – and you're an instructional leader. You have to support your staff. You have to listen. You have to see where they're coming from and just listen to them and see. So if someone said to me, "I can't meet the needs of all the kids." I would say things like: Well tell me about it. Who are these kids? You know, what are the challenges? So I stand to – I don't jump in and give advice until I really understand what the issue is. And this is like with a child or – I don't mean they they're children, but it's: Where are they at, and where do they need to go, and what is the plan of support for them? Whether it might be the resource teacher helping them, it might be me going in. Like what are the supports that they might need to get where they need be?

These comments from participants speak to not only the challenges faced in building staff capacity but also many of the obstacles faced by staff in meeting the everyday needs of a class balanced with other expectations of the job needed to support growth, understanding of new initiatives, and the facilitation of strong professional learning communities. Staff members have a tremendous amount of work and expectations placed on them that perhaps contributes to the under development of inclusive education practices within the district.

Finding 4: Decision-making on students' needs is based on the staff member's role

Involvement in the decisions made to support and meet student needs appeared to be based on the designated role of the staff member. Principals expressed that they have the final say in all decisions. Teachers noted they were responsible for writing and implementing IPPs as well as being a part of the Student Learning Team (SLT) meetings. I collected very little data from support staff, but the few who participated indicated they are not as involved in the decisions made. Staff had this to say when asked about their involvement in the decision-making process:

I'm the school principal so it is ultimately my responsibility. (Staff Survey Respondent)

My principal . . . is exceptional. He includes us in the decision-making process. (Staff Survey Respondent)

Privately with the teacher, in group meetings with the parents and staff. Although, I would add that I do not feel like I am asked or consulted with on big decisions. I also do not feel like I am taken seriously enough professionally by my teacher. (Staff Survey Respondent)

I am involved in most SLT [Student Learning Team] meetings. (Staff Survey Respondent)

Through professional conversations with parents and admin staff. (Staff Survey Respondent)

As a teacher, our team meets regularly to discuss the needs of all our students. (Staff Survey Respondent)

As part of the school leadership team. (Staff Survey Respondent)

Only within the classroom. (Staff Survey Respondent)

When asked about her contribution to the decision-making process at her school, Olivia indicated that she was not involved as the question related to administration and leadership. She went on to say:

I'm a member of the PD committee, so – but that's because I choose to be involved in things around professional development. . . . But, no, I mean it's – Everything feels very top down, very rushed I would say. There isn't a lot of grassroots, ground up decision-making, in my opinion. Not a lot of collaboration between admin and teachers.

Karen, on the other hand, stated, "Our principal is really good cause he's really into collaboratives. So we talk. We tell him what we need. We tell him what's working."

It would appear based on the data collected to determine answers to whether staff members were included in the decision-making process, decision-making is determined by the role of the staff member. Staff members with greater authority have final say, whereas other staff may be involved in conversations, which may include administration, parents, teachers, and support staff. Figure 15 shows the results of staff survey respondents.

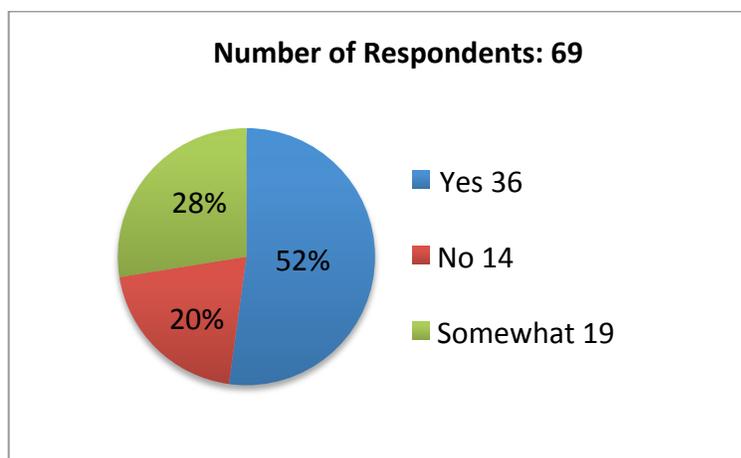


Figure 15. Staff response to being included in the decision-making process.

Finding 5: Parent input is not being sought in creating an inclusive environment

With research question 5, I asked “In what ways are parents being engaged in the implementation of inclusive education?” School and district leaders engage parents through school council meetings, parent–teacher interviews, and decisions regarding their child, although there is little evidence to suggest parents have been informed about inclusive education or the implementation of inclusive education environments in schools or how they can assist in helping to create inclusive education environments.

As previously touched upon in finding 2, parents indicated overwhelmingly that they did not engage in conversations with their child’s teacher about inclusive education (see Figure 10). Parents surveyed were asked about their involvement in school council as well as their involvement in the decision-making process at their child’s school. Of the 94 respondents, 58 indicated not being involved in council meetings for various reasons, ranging from time constraints to council participation not making a difference to other commitments. This data is relevant as it speaks to one of the primary ways that schools communicate and receive feedback from parents. If the majority of parent respondents, 61% as indicated in the survey, are not attending school council meetings, not only are they potentially not receiving information about

changes in education and the impact these changes will have on their child's school, parents are also not able to provide their thoughts and concerns during an organized and documented meeting. This data would support the idea that perhaps, while there may be means and opportunity for parents to be a part of the decision-making process, due to various circumstances, there is not enough parent voice in school decision-making processes.

Engaging parents in the decision-making process. Figure 16 illustrates parent respondents' engagement in the decision-making process at their child's school, indicating that parent respondents felt they were somewhat a part of the process and/or their involvement was only in relation to their own child more than those who felt they were involved in the decision-making process. Some insight was provided as to what this look likes and some potential challenges.

Administration is open to listening to parents at the parent council meetings. (Parent Survey Respondent)

We had much more involvement, engagement and support in elementary and junior high, and almost next to nothing in support and engagement for high school despite the fact that Grades 10-12 are the most critical years for learning support and success. (Parent Survey Respondent)

Funding for instructional materials which impact learners is discussed and accounted for through School council funds. Allocation of staff is discussed with parents. Special programming, including enrichment experiences is discussed and decided through council. (Parent Survey Respondent)

Other respondents addressed the challenges with parent engagement, stating,

This is very difficult to do; it really depends on the administration at the school and the knowledge and involvement of the parents. I think there should be some more guidelines and strategies on how parents are to be included or not included. (Parent Survey Respondent)

It can be tricky as often the professionals know best. However I believe a parent should be involved with their child. (Parent Survey Respondent)

I found in attending council meetings that parents brought concerns to the table and issues were not addressed, so I stopped going. (Parent Survey Respondent)

Another parent addressed the perspective of parents he/she felt had clear views about inclusive education and what it would mean for children who were not identified as special needs. He/she had this to say:

I believe there is a vocal minority who feel that students with special needs are a burden that is born by other students in the classroom. I do not share this view. (Parent Survey Respondent)

This response would suggest that perhaps there is a feeling that some parents may be incapable of making unbiased decisions or decisions that only benefit a specific group or population. School and district leaders would therefore need to consider how they would address bias and strategies for better educating parents. Additionally, this notion of bias and the need for education around inclusive education further supports Findings 1 and 2: there is a necessity to develop a shared understanding of inclusive education, and there must be formal discussions to support implementation.

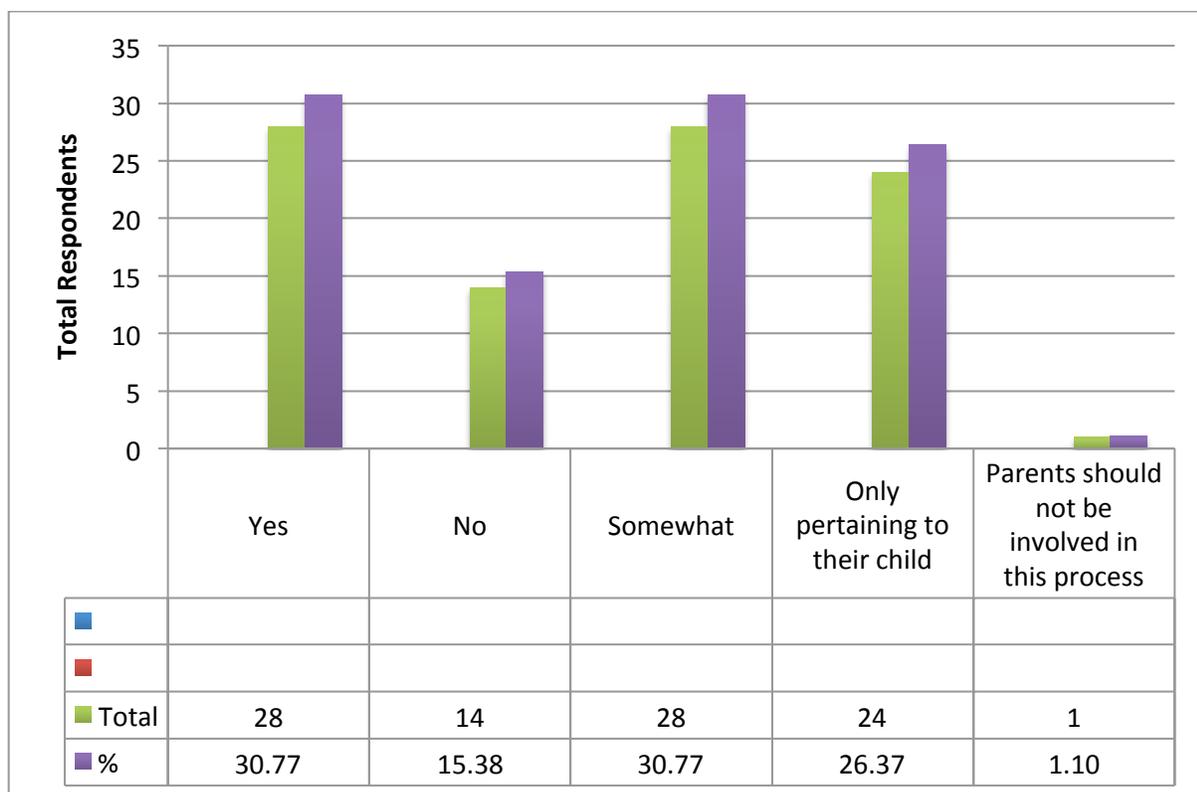


Figure 16. Parent engagement in decision-making.

Nora discussed the issue of uniformity across the district as an issue of concern for her. She explained that having had experiences with different schools, schools do not approach parents the same way.

Different schools for me, different experiences. So – one child went to one high school; this child is going to a different high school. First child in high school, exceptionally difficult to meet with teachers and to – or for there to be parents involved in – sort of in discussions with administration about educational curriculums, or tools, resources. This high school with my son, exactly the opposite. If there’s a question, it’s answered right away. If I request for a – you know, to have a meeting, it’s: “Anything that we can do.” It’s [a] completely different experience. And so it’s not uni – this is not a uni – it’s not uniformed across the system is what I’m trying to say.

Marion had a different take on parent engagement. She expressed that one must keep in mind how busy parents are and are therefore are not available:

I think in a perfect world, yes. You would have parents involved. But I think the piece to keep in mind is that the vast majority of parents, that I know anyways, are busy working. . . . For example, there is a pretty high ESL component there [child's school] and I think a lot of those parents who come from places like China and the Middle East, they're struggling to get themselves established while their kids make their way in the world. And at the end of the day, there's not a lot of time. . . . But there are some people, and you'll find too that the people that are engaged in those conversations are generally a lot of parents who perhaps stay home. So they have the time. . . . I think it's a situation you got a lot of working parents who are just trying to keep on top of the bills, keep their houses running, umm – they've got commitments in the work place. They've got commitments with their kids outside of school, and so umm – the ones that I think you will see that will engage in those kinds of processes are the people who for whatever reason they're either self-employed or maybe they're at home and they can get to the school to be a part of those conversations.

Marion's comments echo many comments from parent respondents with regard to attending School Council meetings and why they did not or could not attend (Finding 2). Time constraints appear to be huge challenges for parents. Given that school and district leaders use School Council meetings as one way to share information with parents, it would appear that these meeting are not able to do so effectively if the majority of parents are unable to attend. Another challenge is consistency or lack thereof among schools in the district. Parents are unclear of what is expected of them, and as students transition between schools, what can be

expected at one school cannot necessarily be expected at another. Parents appear to be unsure of their role throughout the entire education process and as stakeholders partially because schools take different approaches to engaging parents; parents have various commitments, which create time constraints preventing them from attending meetings, and in general, parents seemingly do not have the knowledge educators do.

Meeting the needs of all students and potential challenges. The following explanations were provided by staff respondents pertaining to parent involvement in the decision-making process regarding meeting the needs of students at their child's school. Out of 69 staff respondents, 3 indicated parents were not involved in meeting the needs of students at their school, 17 said parents were somewhat engaged, 26 staff members indicated that parents were only involved in decisions regarding their child, and 1 staff member indicated that parents should not be involved in those decisions.

Figure 17 illustrates parents' responses to being a part of problem solving potential challenges to inclusive education at their child's school. This data suggests that many parents just do not feel they are engaged in decisions at all at their child's school. This data supports comments also made by staff survey respondents.

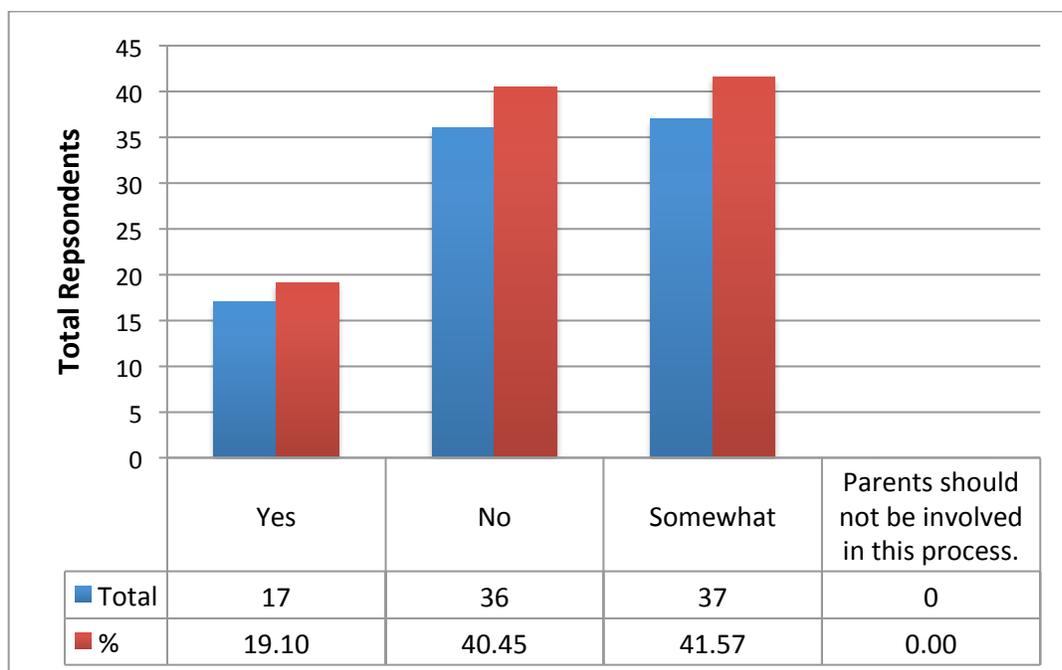


Figure 17. Parent engagement in problem solving potential challenges.

Staff respondents offered these thoughts:

Parents should act in an advisory capacity to support their child's learning environment but the decisions rest with the school. (Staff Survey Respondent)

They [parents] should be involved to understand all impacts and why decisions are made. (Staff Survey Respondent)

Other staff again highlighted the importance and role of school council in engaging parents:

Parents at the school council level are involved in supporting the goals of the school, which includes the needs of all students. (Staff Survey Respondent)

At school council, we aim to build capacity around inclusionary practices and the notion around personalization of learning. (Staff Survey Respondent)

I believe that clear communication and collaboration with parents always has room for improvement and creative ingenuity in creating more opportunities in creating a stronger

and more transparent partnership is essential to the success of inclusive educational practices. (Staff Survey Respondent)

Parents are encouraged to work with their child and school staff on IPPs. (Staff Survey Respondent)

We discuss goals together, and meet regarding the IPP. Parent voice is included in this document, and provides some direction as to their concerns and priorities for their child. Parents however don't have any say in the aids or many of the school wide decisions for inclusion. (Staff Survey Respondent)

Information is communicated regularly to parents and parents should always be involved in the decision-making process with their child. (Staff Survey Respondent)

Some staff differed in their opinion stating,

They are not given a voice in what their children are doing, not the actual content, or how they are doing tasks. Except when it comes to extra attention, then they are heard. (Staff Survey Respondent)

Parents should NOT have the ultimate say into which programs their child/children should go into. For example, if a student is concluded to be more suitable in a Bridges program or a PLP or PACE program, the parents of that students should NOT be able to keep their child out of that program because in order to be recommended for those programs there IS CLEAR evidence that the student is not doing well in the inclusive Classroom & therefore NEEDS to be in a special program. (Staff Survey Respondent)

These staff responses illustrate a key obstacle facing parent engagement: consistency among staff with regard to parent engagement. The data also supports Nora's concerns about uniformity across the district with regard to how schools approach parents and involve them. Not only might

there be a difference across the district with how parents are engaged, based on staff responses, there also may be a difference across a school and how parents are engaged. This inconsistency illustrates why it is difficult for parents to understand their role not only across the district but also within individual schools. Parent involvement is valued and welcomed by some staff, while others seemingly keep parents at a distance.

Engaging parents to meet the needs of their children. Figure 18 illustrates parents' survey responses to being a part of the decision-making process in meeting the needs of their child. Looking at Figure 18, about half of the parents surveyed confirmed involvement and decisions regarding their child, while 41 of the 92 respondents said they were either not involved or only somewhat involved. There may be a number of reasons for this, but ultimately the data suggests a possible breakdown in communication and/or the relationship between the school and some parents.

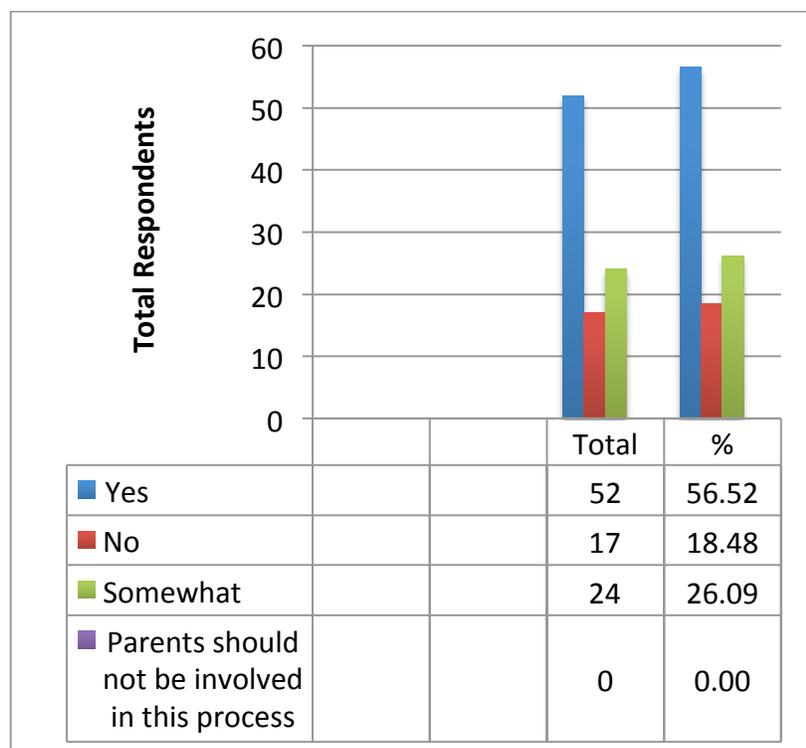


Figure 18. Parent engagement in meeting needs of their child – Parent survey respondents.

Out of 92 parent survey respondents, almost half said *no* or *somewhat*. This would suggest some parents feel left out of the decision-making process concerning their child. However, several parents indicated that they are engaged in one of the following ways; they participate in parent–teacher conferences, they have an open dialogue with their child’s teacher, or they have regular meetings with their child’s teacher for updates. Other parents had this to say:

Absolutely parents should be involved – but there is some big gap between inclusive ed and appropriate learning accommodations/strategies/support between lower grades and high school. (Parent Survey Respondent)

My philosophy is that the education system provides the basics for children to function in the world. If you want your child to succeed and excel, it is incumbent on parents to provide additional after-school teaching and guidance. (Parent Survey Respondent)

Through the IPP. However, this tool feels very bureaucratic and static. It is not very responsive to the dynamic changes in each individual learner. (Parent Survey Respondent)

From my experience I have found that speaking to the schools has been largely a waste of time. (Parent Survey Respondent)

This data illustrates clear differences in perspectives among parents about their involvement in the decision-making process regarding their children. These parent responses indicate that while some parents feel they are adequately involved, others feel that perhaps parent–teacher conferences, regular meetings with the teachers, and Individual Program Plans (IPP) are not enough. There are perceived differences between schools in the supports provided, and some parents feel they need to be a part of ensuring success for their child beyond what is offered by

schools. These varying opinions further support the lack of clarity with regard to parent role previously identified.

Summary

In this chapter, I presented five key findings revealed in this study. I coded and organized data and findings in response to the four research questions: To what degree do stakeholders have a shared understanding of inclusive education? How do district and school leaders support the implementation of inclusive education environments? What strategies are being used to build staff capacity to implement inclusive education? In what ways are parents being engaged in the implementation of inclusive education? The data I collected from survey respondents and personal interviews provided insight into the perspectives and perceptions of both parents and staff participants. Excerpts from interviews and survey responses serve to give voice to participants. While there is not enough data for this study to be generalizable, there is enough to give a small glimpse into how some stakeholders in SSD are feeling about inclusive education and inclusive practices.

The first finding of this study indicated a general understanding of Alberta Education's inclusive education system among some participants. Participant definitions of inclusive education varied, though three key ideas were common. One common idea was that inclusive education provides students with special needs equal access to learn in a regular classroom environment. The second common idea was that inclusive education provides all children with a flexible learning environment where all children are accepted and needs are met through personalized learning. Finally, several parents indicated they had no understanding of inclusive education. Although participants provided varying definitions of inclusive education and offered their perspective on what inclusive education environments should look like, the underlying

consensus was that there needed to be a clear explanation of inclusive education by schools that was uniformed throughout the district.

The second finding indicated that the primary way of supporting inclusive education was through personalization of learning in the classroom. Parents indicated that inclusive education was not a topic discussed at the school, and information about the school or district was shared through emails, parent–teacher interviews, or school council meetings. Participants described how schools facilitated inclusive education practices as well as how information from schools and the district was shared with stakeholders. That data indicated that more than half the staff and parents surveyed had not engaged in any conversations with district administrators about inclusive education. The data also showed that parents had also not been engaged in conversations about inclusive education with their child’s teacher, nor had staff been involved in any meetings with school or district administrators regarding inclusive education. Interviewed participants talked about the need to have more information regarding inclusive education in the district regarding the development of inclusive education environments. The feeling among participants was that there was still a lot to learn about Alberta’s inclusive education system.

The third finding indicated several factors presented challenges to building staff capacity. One factor was time to meet with other professionals who could support their understanding of inclusive education and practice within the classroom and school environment. Other factors included workload, lack of workshops on inclusive education, and class sizes. It was suggested that successful implementation of inclusive education would depend on funding to support implementation, more professional development, more time, and a decrease in workload and class sizes. There was a general consensus that the day-to-day expectations of the job did not provide time or opportunity for professional development.

The fourth finding revealed that involvement in the decisions made to support and meet student needs appeared to be based on the designated role of the staff member. Principals expressed that they have the final say in all decisions. Teachers noted they were responsible for writing and implementing IPPs as well as being a part of the SLT meetings. I collected very little data from support staff, but the few who participated indicated they are not as involved in the decisions made. Some staff indicated good communication within their school; others indicated a need for better communication and more of a role in helping to determine how to meet the needs of students.

The fifth and final finding revealed that parents were engaged in various ways, although there was little evidence to suggest parents have been informed about inclusive education, the implementation of inclusive practices in schools, or how they can assist in helping to create inclusive education environments. Several parent survey respondents indicated while they were involved in the decision-making process for their own child, they were not a part of inclusive decision-making or problem solving potential challenges to inclusive education at their child's school. It was also suggested that due to the busy lives of many parents and their children, time might be a factor for the lack of engagement by many parents. Some staff respondents also indicated for the most part that while parents should be involved in the decision-making process for their child, it would not be appropriate for parents to be involved in other aspects of the decision-making process. Other staff respondents suggested parents needed to be educated about policy, curriculum, and changes in the education system to better inform them so they could be engaged.

In Chapter 5, I give an analysis and interpretation of the previous findings, which I offer in light of current theories and best practices for developing inclusive education environments. I use the literature presented in Chapter 2 to provide support for my interpretations of the findings.

CHAPTER 5: ANALYSIS, INTERPRETATION AND SYNTHESIS OF FINDINGS

My purpose in this evaluative case study was to examine SSD's readiness to implement Alberta Education's inclusive education framework by identifying the existence of several key factors: a shared understanding of inclusive education, engagement of parents and staff in the decision-making process, and by identifying how school and district leaders build capacity among parents and staff. I sought to answer four questions:

1. To what degree do stakeholders have a shared understanding of inclusive education?
2. How do district and school leaders support the implementation of inclusive education environments?
3. What strategies are being used to build staff capacity to implement inclusive education?
4. In what ways are parents being engaged in the implementation of inclusive education?

The research questions generated five key findings.

Finding 1 highlighted a major theme throughout the data in answering my first question, "To what degree do stakeholders have a shared understanding of inclusive education?" A clear lack of understanding of inclusive education was identified among many participants. While both the survey and interview data indicated a general understanding of Alberta Education's inclusive education system, participant definitions varied. Based on my analysis of the data, three key ideas emerged: a belief that inclusive education is intended to provide students with special needs equal access to learn in a regular classroom environment; a belief that inclusive education provides all children with a flexible learning environment where all children are accepted and

needs are met through personalized learning; and no understanding of inclusive education among many of the parents.

Finding 2 emerged based on the analysis of that data to answer my second research question, “How do district and school leaders support the implementation of inclusive education environments?” This finding supported the idea that inclusive education was not a topic being widely discussed by schools or the district. The school-based staff and the district leader I interviewed indicated that personalization of learning was the primary way of supporting inclusive education at the time.

My third research question asked, “What strategies are being used to build staff capacity to implement inclusive education?” Two findings were generated during my analysis of the data: first, there are various challenges to building staff capacity, including workload, lack of workshops, and class sizes; and second, the involvement in the decisions made to support and meet student needs appeared to be based on the designated role of the staff member.

My fourth research question asked, “In what ways are parents being engaged in the implementation of inclusive education?” Based on my analysis of the data one finding emerged: school and district leaders engage parents through school council meetings, parent–teacher interviews, and meetings regarding their child, but there was little evidence to suggest parents have been informed about inclusive education or the implementation of inclusive education environments in schools or how they could assist in helping to create inclusive education environments.

In Chapter 4, I identified the findings generated from the data analyzed in this case study over three phases. The first phase involved the transcription and coding of all interviews. The second phase involved the coding of open-ended responses to survey questions, and in the final

stage, I looked at the themes that emerged from both the individual and the survey data so they could be consolidated and narrowed to answer each of the four research questions. I presented and discussed these themes and findings in relation to the four research questions. My purpose in this chapter is to interpret these findings by attempting “to reconstruct a holistic understanding of” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 133) the study by analyzing and synthesizing the information presented in Chapter 4 to create a clear picture of SSD in this study. In Chapter 5, I examine the efforts that have been made by SSD since data was collected for this study, identify practices already in place, and a re-examine my assumptions and biases.

Analysis, Interpretation, and Synthesis of Findings

I completed the analysis, interpretation, and synthesis of the five findings I presented in Chapter 4 by first identifying patterns and themes that emerged from the data. While I began this process using a qualitative analysis software program, NVivo, I found the quantity of data to be overwhelming and the program not as helpful as I had hoped. As a result, I shifted my approach to teasing out the themes and defining the categories using a simple Excel spreadsheet, which according to Merriam (2009), is one way of organizing and analyzing data.

First, I began by charting and graphing the data collected from surveys. I went through all the survey questions and responses given by parent participants and graphed the responses to the close-ended questions, completing the same process for the staff survey participants. I then went through the survey questions and identified the responses that answered or pertained to each of my research questions. Having used an online survey tool, Simple Survey, I was able to have some of my data graphed prior to exporting it into my Excel spreadsheet. The most notable piece of data that was gleaned from both surveys was the variation in definitions participants had for

inclusive education. Seven different categories of definitions for inclusive education emerged from the survey data.

What I thought might be a somewhat easy process actually presented tremendous challenges. I found gatekeepers to participants to be the greatest obstacle to gathering the data I had hoped to collect. My initial intent was to interview at least three to four staff participants from several schools in the three chosen geographical areas of SSD; however, this would not be the case. Upon receiving ethics approval from the school district to conduct the research, I then needed to acquire permission from school principals to approach their staff and parents. Out of the 66 schools I approached through random selection, only 12 principals agreed to participate in my study. This limited me in my scope because I did not have enough participants across the three geographical areas of the large urban school district.

My findings presented some insight into the experiences of some key stakeholders. Upon analysis of the survey data, I began to evaluate the interview data more closely. I used the data collected from the seven interviews I was able to conduct and created four data summary sheets that pertained to each of my research questions, highlighting the themes in the interview data and the frequency for which responses fell within those themes. I then compared those themes to the themes identified in the survey responses by both parents and staff. I found there to be many overlapping themes, which shaped and clearly defined my five findings. I have organized this chapter by the following themes and analytical categories:

1. Definitions of inclusive education vary among stakeholders (Research Question 1).
2. Ways to support implementation need to be discussed with stakeholders (Research Question 2).

3. Challenges exist to building staff's understanding of inclusive education (Research Question 3).
4. Decision-making on students' needs is based on the staff member's role (Research Question 3).
5. Parent input is not being sought in creating an inclusive environment (Research Question 4).

The four research questions in this case study align with the aforementioned analytic categories. These categories emerged during coding of both survey and interview data, and I used them in presenting the six findings in Chapter 4. In the following sections, I highlight and connect patterns within these categories as well as make relevant connections across the five categories in an attempt to identify the readiness of SSD to implement Alberta Education's inclusive education framework. I also examine the themes and categories in this case study in comparison to factors that support and challenge inclusive education as presented in the literature. I conclude this chapter by re-examining the steps SSD has taken to facilitate the process of implementing inclusive education practices throughout the district and in its schools, identifying the practices already in place, as well as a reviewing my assumptions and biases.

Through my first research question, I sought to determine if there was a shared understanding of inclusive education and specifically identify what this understanding was among study participants. It asked, "To what degree do stakeholders have a shared understanding of inclusive education?" Throughout the data, a reoccurring theme was the fact that there was no clear understanding of inclusive education as defined by the province or SSD. Participants consistently shared varying definitions relating to students with special needs being placed in a

regular classroom environment, flexible learning environments for all students, and/or participants having no knowledge at all of the term inclusive education.

Finding 1: Definitions of inclusive education vary among stakeholders

Through my first research question, “To what degree do stakeholders have a shared understanding of inclusive education?” I sought to determine if there was a shared understanding of inclusive education and specifically identify what this understanding was among study participants. Throughout the data, a reoccurring theme was the fact that there was no clear understanding of inclusive education as defined by the province or SSD. Participants consistently shared varying definitions relating to students with special needs being placed in a regular classroom environment, flexible learning environments for all students, and/or participants having no knowledge at all of the term inclusive education.

Schlechty (2009) explained that an organization must be clear in its intentions for change or solutions presented to assist in changes are easily abandoned. “It is imperative that the organization have the capacity to develop and sustain a clear vision and sense of direction as well as the ability to communicate the need for the types of systemic changes that will be required for the innovation” (Schlechty, 2009, p. 226). Ryan (2006) argued that in order for the challenges of inclusion to be met, everyone “will need to acquire new knowledge, understandings, and attitudes” (p. 109). He explained that stakeholders would need to be “both teacher and learner” (p. 109). Viviane Robinson (2011) identified five dimensions to student-centered leadership: establishing goals and expectations, resourcing strategically, ensuring quality teaching, leading teacher learning and development, and ensuring an orderly and safe environment. Robinson also identified three capabilities that support these dimensions: applying relevant knowledge, solving complex problems, and building relational trust. She posited that together these dimensions and

capabilities lead to high-quality teaching and learning. Robinson acknowledged that fragmentation and incoherence can occur within schools due to the changes in government policies and the list of required responsibilities of schools. She contended, “Leaders can reduce the fragmentation and promote coherence through the process of setting and communicating clear goals” (Robinson, 2011, p. 45). Robinson further explained that this is how leaders communicate the importance of what is expected.

Given the 3-year educational plan of the SSD and the goal to engage stakeholders and build professional social capital, I was shocked at what little had been done to develop a shared understanding among stakeholders given the Ministerial Order and the direction the province was moving in. When asked, Yvonne, an interview participant from the district, explained that the district had not provided any formal professional development, but she felt it was a “value within the district.” This value did not seem to be shared or recognized by other participants in the study. According to the survey data, the majority of parent and staff participants indicated that they either did not understand Alberta’s inclusive education framework or they somewhat understood it. Other staff members, such as Olivia, also indicated that there had not been any professional development on inclusive education. Olivia was very pointed when she said, “None,” explaining that her role at her school and the conversations she had been a part of were around the IPP since she was the IPP coordinator, but nothing specifically on inclusive education. Karen expressed that her school staff had engaged in a fair bit of conversation around inclusive education as it pertained to *personalized learning*. Though she too discussed the role of the IPP saying that there had been some “talk about things like eventually every child will be on an IPP . . . so every child will have their own personalized program for the way they learn,” but

Karen too was unable to identify how inclusive education was being defined or facilitated by her school or SSD.

Among the three staff members interviewed, it was clear that there really had not been a discussion around what inclusive education was or what it entailed at either the district or the school level. Parent participants who also varied in their explanations of inclusive education further supported this fact. They too were unable to identify times when their child's school or the district discussed inclusive education with them. The data collected showed that 50% to 90% of parents stated not having any conversations with administrators or teachers about Alberta Education's inclusive education system. When asked about their understanding of Alberta Education's inclusive education system, parents varied in their responses; however, many did not know what it was. Out of 98 respondents, 57 parents indicated they did not know while 25 out of 98 said they somewhat knew what it was. Jennifer, a parent participant who was interviewed, noted that after 3 years of being in Canada, she and her family were still trying to "figure certain things out."

We are actually not even from Canada. So I don't even know really how. We've only dealt with this school system for – three years. And we're just kind of thrown in there when we moved up here. So I don't know. We're still trying to figure certain things out about how the schools work here. So have no idea what inclusion or any of that stuff is.

In one of the survey responses, another parent stated,

I have no understanding of Alberta's Education of Inclusive Education. We moved to Alberta in June 2014, my child has been in the education system for less than one year. We have not received any information regarding this topic thru any communication from the school. I may have been discussed in parent council meetings (which I have not yet

attended) or at a student assembly, perhaps it's available on the school/school board website, which I have not explored. (Parent Survey Respondent)

There were several responses similar to the previous two from other parent survey respondents, including one from a parent who had this to say:

I wouldn't know what system is now being labelled Inclusive Education. How would I know if the board or admin have reviewed the Inclusive Education System?

Given responses such as these, it was not a surprise that many staff and parent participants seemed relatively frustrated or confused with what was happening in schools or the district. Reducing frustrations and gaining stakeholder trust by clarifying the work of the province, system, and schools is a necessary and key first step to developing a shared understanding. "The clear and precise use of language is pivotal in creating an environment of trust, mutual respect, and integrity based on meaningful, reflective, and professional dialogues" (Fauske, 2011, p. 15). It is imperative that district and school leaders work towards developing a shared understanding of inclusive education, specifically making clear the changes at the provincial level and the work being done by the district and subsequently schools. Ryan (2006) explained that leaders need to actively promote inclusion. He identified seven strategies to help facilitate a move towards inclusion. Ryan stated that leaders "need to foster a process that allows them to create and communicate a compelling picture of an inclusive future and to persuade others to commit to that future" (p.105). He suggested,

1. *Make inclusion a nonnegotiable reality*
2. *Create cognitive dissonance and discomfort in regard to exclusive practices and a sense of urgency about inclusion*

3. *Share with others the theoretical, ethical, and research-based rationales for inclusive education and leadership*
4. *Trade and bargain-* trade for concessions from others and bargain with individuals who may not be on board
5. *Stall and maneuver-* providing time to plan and resist exclusionary practices
6. *Establish links between educators and disadvantaged groups*
7. *Involve school and community stakeholder groups in formulating objectives for schooling that support all students* (Ryan, 2006 pp. 105–107)

Despite no evidence to suggest a precise definition of inclusive education being discussed with staff and parents, Alberta Education defines inclusion as:

Inclusion is a way of thinking and acting that demonstrates universal acceptance and promotes a sense of belonging for all. Inclusion is not just about learners with special needs. It is an attitude and approach that embraces diversity and learner differences and promotes equal opportunities for all learners in Alberta. Alberta’s education system is built on a values-based approach to accepting responsibility for all children and students. (Alberta Education, 2016b, pg. 1)

Alberta Education identifies the following six principles as being key to achieving its vision for an inclusive education system stating, “These principles can guide and inform value-based and learner-centered decisions related to policies, practices and actions at every level of Alberta’s education system” (2016b, p. 1):

1. Anticipate, value and support diversity and learner differences
2. High expectations for all learners
3. Understand learners’ strengths and needs

4. Reduce barriers within learning environments
5. Capacity building
6. Shared responsibility

At the time of this study, SSD had not begun discussing inclusive education, as it was defined by the province or the impact on the district, with stakeholders. One parent I interviewed did not believe the district or the province was committed to making their intentions clear. She stated,

I don't think that the province or SSD really wants to make their intentions clear. Because it's now becoming a funding game, and no one wants to – I mean, it's a – you know, my sense is that the system is about the adults, and it's not about the kids. And it's about funding, and it's about votes, and it's about elections, and the kids happen to be – and the parents happen to be the pieces that need to get moved around the chessboard to make certain things happen. (Nora)

“Without direction, both in terms of who we are and who we want to be in the future, desired organization change will not occur” (Burke, 2011, p. 282). Leaders need to be clear on the direction they are taking. City et al. (2011) stated that while educators exhibit a set of practices they engage in, what they lack is *shared practices*.

“The basic idea is to put all educators--principals and central office administrators as well as teachers--into a common practice disciplined by protocols and routines and organized around the core functions of schooling in order to create common language, ways of seeing, and a shared practice of improvement. (p. 4)

This notion of a shared practice does not appear to exist in SSD when speaking of inclusive education. However, review of information provided to their staff via an internal

organization webpage revealed that SSD has taken steps to provide staff with information on inclusive education in the province and the district. The fact that many have reported not having a clear understanding and information provided in Finding 1 suggests that SSD will need to find more effective way to develop a shared understanding of Alberta's framework for inclusive education to support a transformational change across the district, within schools, and among its stakeholders; in addition, SSD needs to facilitate the development required to implement inclusive practices through very intentional language and professional development.

Finding 2: Ways to support implementation need to be discussed with stakeholders

With my second research question, I sought to examine whether district and school leaders support the implementation of inclusive education environments. Participants again varied in their responses. Staff discussed and identified various strategies they used to connect with parents and meet the needs of students, while parents generally did not feel there was a plan in place to educate stakeholders about inclusive education. Overall it was not clear how the district or schools were educating staffs or parents about inclusive education and what steps were being taking to ensure consistency in the information being disseminated; however, the school-based staff and the district leader I interviewed identified *personalization of learning* in classrooms and communication with parents through school council and parent-teacher conference as the primary way inclusive education was being supported.

In her discussion of transformative and inclusionary leadership, Fauske (2011) explained that leaders can examine the inclusiveness of their schools by looking at the language of their school. Based on the data I collected, the majority of staff participants I surveyed indicated that they had not been engaged by the system leaders or through meetings at their school about what inclusive education means in Alberta. As previously reported in Chapter 4, 50 out of the 69 staff

respondents indicated that they had not been involved in any meetings or workshops with district administrators about inclusive education, while 40 out of the 69 respondents indicated they had not had any meetings or workshops about inclusive education at their school. Despite the number of people who indicated not knowing or understanding inclusive education, a term most often used by staff participants who indicated knowledge of inclusive education was personalization of learning.

Upon review of SSD's education plan, it was clear through its mission and value statement that the focus and goal of the district was the success and education of all students without exceptions through personalization of learning. A district superintendent defined personalization of learning as "the intentional and responsive practices that centre on developing learning experiences for all students so that they can participate, progress and achieve" (Springfield School District [SSD], personal communication, May 9, 2015). SSD's resource guide for personalized learning further explains, "Personalized learning involves a continuous intentional adjustment of instructional strategies, determined by the evidence gathered through thoughtful formative assessment processes" (SSD, personal communication, May 9, 2015). It is supported by an established learning environment where students and teachers are actively engaged in the teaching and learning process. Students are equally engaged in the assessment process of their learning, taking ownership of their learning and identifying individual interests while developing their strengths as learners.

Given the number of responses that identified personalization of learning as a strategy to support inclusive education, it was clear that SSD has been very intentional in the language they use in supporting student success and moving their work as a district forward. Yvonne indicated that as a district, SSD had not started conversations around inclusive education or using the term

because of where the province had left things, but she explained, “We are very clear in our leadership meetings about the – the importance of each child. If you look at our district strategy, it’s the personalization of learning, and it talks about each child.” Other staff members had this to say when identifying their understanding of inclusive education:

Meeting the needs of all diverse learners in the school settings. Personalized learning.

That all students should be provided with opportunities to best achieve their potential.

The goal is to focus on the strengths of a student and what they can do rather than their limitations. To provide a sense of belonging and acceptance for all students. (Staff

Survey Participant)

My understanding is that that inclusive education aims to create a learning environment that supports collaboration and personalized learning for students where they can be with peers, given opportunities to reach their potential with various supports in place so that meaningful learning is occurring, and where effective communication is taking place between all parties involved in the success of the student. (Staff Survey Participant)

Further review, however, of the strategies and actions outlined by SSD to personalize learning, which included building professional capital and engaging stakeholders, exposed a need for more developed strategies and actions to support the development of inclusive education environments in its schools.

SSD lists several strategies and actions for building professional capital and engaging stakeholders in its education plan. Some of these strategies include building professional capital through collaboration using evidence to support improvement of programs, services, and professional learning; improving district-wide professional development to identify and resolve

problems that exist across the district in an efficient manner; as well as developing SSD's leadership practices to facilitate student success (SSD, personal communication, April 17, 2016).

At the time of this study, SSD did not provide anything to indicate how inclusive practices would be strengthened or how staff members would be or should be included in the decision-making process in the district or its schools. Additionally, there was no indication to the value of parent/caregiver voice in the decision-making process held by SSD or how parents/caregivers or community stakeholders would be educated about what was happening in the district or the field of education. Since collecting data for this study in the winter and spring of 2015, SSD implemented an engagement study in the fall of 2015 that specifically sought to identify how its stakeholders viewed the way they were being engaged by the district and what could be improved. The executive summary to SSD's public engagement study conducted by XYZ Consulting,² provided background on the study and summarized the key findings. Between November and December 2015, 6,500 stakeholder perspectives were gathered, including those of students, members of the Council of School Councils, parents, employees, and a trustee. Data was collected through individual interviews, notes from discussions taken at 14 school council meetings, and two online surveys, one completed by employees and the other by parents, students and the public. The data indicated a need for improvements to be made with regard to how SSD engaged stakeholders as well as tremendous scepticism that any changes would occur. In XYZ Consulting's report, employees said, "We're not really engaging employees. We're just collecting words to support what has already been decided [and] the SSD skews its surveys in order to get a certain type of response and ignores real information that might contradict what the top executives want to hear" (XYZ Consulting, personal communication, June 2, 2016).

² In order to provide anonymity, I have used XYZ Consulting as a pseudonym for the consultant hired by SSD to perform the public engagement study.

Within the report it was also noted, “Many employees indicated that how they are engaged is not of concern. What does concern them is that they are largely unaware of what happens to the feedback they provide and how it impacts decisions” (XYZ Consulting, personal communication, June 2, 2016). Findings also indicated the same concerns were shared by public stakeholders, parents, and students; one parent said, “I think that gathering of info is fine. It’s what is done later that is the issue” (XYZ Consulting, personal communication, June 2, 2016). The lack of transparency when feedback was provided resulted in distrust, which was evident from the engagement study findings.

“One of the ways that leaders can reduce fragmentation and promote coherence is through the process of setting and communicating clear goals” (Robinson, 2011, p. 45). Robinson explained that people will commit to goals when they are able to see the connection between the goal and what they already value. XYZ Consultant’s finding, as well as finding 2 from my study, suggest that leaders at both the schools and the district level need to be more cognizant of the information they are receiving from staff regarding knowledge of district and provincial policies and initiatives, what they are doing with that information, and the amount of transparency they are providing with regard to the decisions that are made. District and school leaders must recognize that leadership’s response and ability to connect to their staff not only serves to build trust but also demonstrate to employees that they are valued. This is important to achieving commitment to inclusive education practices.

With my third research question, I sought to examine the strategies being used to build staff capacity to implement inclusive education. Out of 69 survey participants, 43 indicated they had not been involved in any workshops or meetings on inclusive education. Additionally, as previously reported, Yvonne, a district-levelled staff member, indicated that SSD had not yet

started engaging staff in those conversations. Data I collected also indicated that there were several factors that created obstacles to building staff capacity around inclusive education practices.

Finding 3: Challenges exist to building staff's understanding of inclusive education

With my third research question, I sought to examine the strategies being used to build staff capacity to implement inclusive education. Out of 69 survey participants, 43 indicated they had not been involved in any workshops or meetings on inclusive education. Additionally, as previously reported, Yvonne, a district-levelled staff member, indicated that SSD had not yet started engaging staff in those conversations. Data I collected also indicated that there were several factors that created obstacles to building staff capacity around inclusive education practices. Fullan (2011) identified five elements to building collaborative cultures. He discussed the need to build collaborative cultures as a means for developing strong, effective organizations. Fullan explained that change leaders should consider:

1. Focus: set a small number of core goals
2. Form a guiding coalition
3. Aim for collective capacity building
4. Work on individual capacity building
5. Reap the benefits of collaborative competition. (p. 77)

The third and fourth elements listed helped me to put some of the frustrations reported by staff through survey and interview data into perspective. Staff reported that while there was availability to workshops and professional development on a multitude of topics and access to specialists to aid in developing their skills, many identified numerous challenges to furthering their understanding of inclusive education. Many staff expressed frustrations with the various

challenges they faced though some acknowledged a desire to learn more; they identified time to meet with other professionals, workload, lack of workshops on inclusive education, and class sizes to be some of the bigger challenges.

Given the lack of understanding around inclusive education, I was not at all surprised by the level of frustration experienced by so many teachers and staff. Districts and schools may have the best of intentions, but without an explicitly clear direction and ample support, people are often left feeling overwhelmed, which will no doubt lead to the feelings reported by staff participants. It is imperative that districts and schools consider how they engage their staff and build their capacity. Fullan (2011) explained:

Coordinated, focused organizations are both more efficient and more effective. The reason is that vastly more members of the organization are knowledgeable, skilled, and committed to getting things done, individually and collectively. Because core ideas are pursued collectively, day after day, they generate deeper, consistent practices across the organization. Shared depth of understanding and corresponding skills are the result. (p. 134)

Schlechty (2009) supported this idea of capacity building further, explaining that organizations and schools need to have three general capacities to ensure successful, sustaining systemic changes. These capacities he stated are important in aiding the innovations that are instated. Schlechty posited that districts and schools need to orient themselves to the future, maintain their direction after establishing a clear focus, and be strategic in their reallocation of resources, taking advantage of opportunities, and building towards a new future.

Staff identified several reasons for not developing their understanding of inclusive education, which have a lot to do with the lack of clarity for what is expected of them by SSD.

The capacity of a school, or any organization, to be oriented toward the future depends on the ability of the organization and its leaders to develop a shared understanding of the problems that give rise to the need for change and the ability to communicate a clear vision of the direction that change will entail. (Schlechty, 2009, p. 226)

Schlechty (2009) further argued that leaders need to be able to measure whether the system that is in place has the capacity to support what needs to be done. Based on the data I collected, it did not appear that SSD or school leaders had a plan in place to support building staff capacity to develop a deeper understanding for inclusive education, though it is clear by the information available to staff through SSD's internal website; SSD is aware that information on inclusive education and the districts stance on it is necessary and relevant to the district's work.

There are mixed perspectives among staff members as to what inclusive education means, but I argue that given the availability of documents from SSD about inclusive education and SSD's reasons for inclusive practices, one would think there would be a more consistent and shared understanding of inclusive education as well as an established action plan to develop inclusive practices throughout schools. SSD states clearly on its internal website its "recognition for inclusive work [and further expresses that] being inclusive is not a project or an initiative. It is not *something else*. Rather, it is integral to how we do everything" (SSD internal website).³ In a document prepared in early 2016 regarding inclusive education and system leadership, SSD identified steps to leadership and inclusion for each learner, which included the consideration of the leadership competencies as well as purposeful reflection of their three-year education plan where inclusive learning practice is identified within the plan:

³ As an employee of SSD, I have access to the district's internal website, which is not accessible to the public. For any direct quotes from the website that I have included, I identify the source simply as the SSD internal website.

Personalized Learning

- Extend the design of responsive, inclusive, rigorous and engaging learning tasks that ensure student progress and achievement.

Build Professional Capital

- Strengthen inclusive learning practices. (SSD internal website)

SSD's mission also clearly outlines some inclusive principles stating, "Each student, in keeping with his or her individual abilities and gifts, will complete high school with a foundation of learning necessary to thrive in life, work and continued learning" (SSD internal website).

Schlechty (2009) identified missions as actionable and able to be accomplished; however, based on Schlechty's definition of a mission, SSD does not explicitly identify what inclusive practices would be developed by staff, families, or students to support moving students towards high school completion.

This lack of clarity by SSD where the facilitation of inclusive practices is concerned supports the number of staff members who have different perspectives on inclusive education, the majority of which point towards educating students with special needs. This is what some staff members had to say:

I am waiting to hear more information about details for special education programming with an inclusive model. (Staff Survey Respondent)

We just take it as a given that we have to integrate students with specific challenges into the mainstream class. We know our jobs & we just do it. (Staff Survey Respondent)

I know other colleagues do have conversations about our special needs students, but not inclusive education as a whole theory. (Staff Survey Respondent)

This feedback is similar to what participants in other studies have reported relating inclusive education solely to students with special needs in addition to concerns regarding lack of resources, not enough support, time constraints, and workload (Bhatnagar & Das, 2014; Forlin & Chambers, 2011; Round et al., 2016; Singal, 2008). While teachers generally seem willing to develop a greater understanding of inclusive education and engage in inclusive practices, their apprehension is the result of tremendous concern for workload, class size, and lack of support, primarily because of the perspective held that inclusive education pertains to educating students with special needs in their regular classroom setting.

There is so much workload put on teachers that teachers do not have the time to engage in effective conversations with colleagues. (Staff Survey Respondent)

We are expected to do inclusive education [but] we don't really have all the tools that are needed . . . or the training. (Karen)

Consequently, this lack of confidence and feelings of inadequacies are reinforced by incoherence that currently seems to exist in SSD. Effective schools are coherent learning environments for adults and students (City et al., 2011). Coherence in an organization reflects consistent practice by staff between classrooms and schools within the organization. Clarity around inclusive education would also serve to build staff capacity across the district. "Building lateral capacity means connecting schools within a district—and even more broadly—to develop new ideas, skills, and practices that increase the ability of individuals and organizations to bring about improvements" (Fullan et al., 2004, p. 44). Capacity building is thus essential for everyone in the organization.

Finding 4: Decision-making on students' needs is based on the staff member's role

“For school communities to promote critical consciousness and inclusive communities generally, they need to nurture dialogue” (Ryan, 2006, p. 119). “The school leader can build trust through consistent emphasis of mutually created goals and strategies, keeping the resources and energy of the school and its community efficiently focused” (Fauske, 2011, p. 25). Finding 4 revealed that involvement in the decision-making process was based on the role of the staff member. Out of 88 staff respondents to the survey, 14 were support staff, 58 were teachers, 10 were learning leaders, and only 6 were administration staff. Data showed that 27 out of the 69 respondents said “yes” they felt they were part of the decision-making process while almost an equal 25 participants said “no” they were not, and 17 indicated they were “somewhat” included in the decision-making process. While there were not enough participants in this study to generalize the finding, SSD’s engagement study (Stormy Lake Consulting, 2016) provided a great deal of information regarding staff engagement and their perspectives from a wider sample of staff members.

In SSD’s engagement study, 2,596 responses were collected from staff in an online survey: 1456 of whom were Alberta Teacher Association (ATA) members, 808 Staff Association members, 173 Canadian Union of Public Employee members (CUPE), 106 Exempt employees, 24 Construction and Maintenance Trades Union members, and 29 Missing. When asked about their satisfaction with regard to opportunities to provide feedback to SSD, 44% of employees responded noting they were *very satisfied* or *satisfied*. A closer look at the data revealed that 61% of employees felt they were given opportunities to provide input into decisions within their school, Area office, or service unit; 57% felt their involvement in the decision-making process was encouraged; 47% felt their perspectives were recognized and communicated in the decision-

making process; 37% felt their contributions influenced the decision-making process, and 38% felt they were given opportunities to provide feedback into district-level decisions. What stands out in this data is while a larger percentage of employees acknowledge having the opportunity to participate or be involved in the decision-making process, that number shrinks substantially when asked if they felt their contributions actually influenced the decision-making process. Several comments from employees support this finding that staff feel their voice is undervalued and for some as a result of their role:

School staff need to know that if we take the minutes out of our day to give input that it is a valuable use of our time and that we can actually affect change within the system.

(SSD, Engagement Study – Employee)

Show me that someone is listening to my concerns as a teacher who is marginalized by not having the same rights and benefits as the rest of the staff. When this is achieved then I can say that SSD has shown improvement on how it asks for opinions and feedback on decisions that [a]ffect me and our staff. Thank you for asking for my opinion. (SSD, Engagement Study – Employee)

I find that most requests for feedback and opinions are geared towards teaching staff. I feel that education assistants, as front-line staff working with students, have many things to offer in supporting students in finding their success. (SSD, Engagement Study – Employee)

In the current case study, similar feelings were shared when I asked if staff were included in the decision-making process regarding student needs at their school. Some staff indicated due to their role they felt their voice was undervalued or they were not asked. One staff member responded saying,

Privately with the teacher, in group meetings with the parents and staff. Although, I would add that I do not feel like I am asked or consulted on big decisions. I also do not feel like I am taken seriously enough professionally by my teacher. (Staff Survey Respondent)

Another stated,

My suggestions are received if I offer them, but not sought out. (Staff Survey Respondent)

These statements may reflect some deep issues with trust. Robinson (2011) explained, “In schools with higher levels of trust, teachers experience a stronger sense of professional community and are more willing to innovate and take risks” (p. 34). I would argue that this is true for all staff and necessary for successful transformation of a school or organization.

Civic capacity refers to the ability of business leaders, union leaders, civic leaders, educational leaders, and leader of other significant organizations to work together on behalf of common goals. *Social capital* refers to the presence of trust, norms of reciprocity, feelings of mutualism, and common identity, and community. (Schlechty, 2009, p. 187)

Schlechty (2009) explained that it is important to educate stakeholders as opposed to pushing them aside because they do not understand education. As the district and its schools seek to transform moving towards developing more inclusive practices that meet the needs of all students, they need to recognize the importance of trust as it relates to community building. Leaders “must give priority to building trust among themselves and trust in the organizations they lead” (Schlechty, 2009, p. 202). “Embedded in the notion of trust is the key distinction between the trustee and the truster; that is, those having more or less power (or dependence) in a

particular situation (Louis & Wahlstrom, 2012, p. 31). Staff members need to feel that they are a part of the process. Often the notion of trust and decision-making extends only to the impact they have on teachers, yet it is critical that leaders recognize the role of all stakeholders in developing and facilitating inclusive education practices.

Finding 5: Parent input is not being sought in creating an inclusive environment

My final research question examined the idea of parent engagement, specifically how parents were engaged in the implementation of inclusive education practices and the development of inclusive environments. Interviewed and surveyed participants shared similar responses to how they were engaged by their child's school and the district explaining for the most part their involvement was through school council meetings, parent-teacher interviews, or meetings about any problems their child may have had at school. Parents overwhelmingly reported that they did not have conversations about inclusive education with their child's teacher. Given the data collected from staff regarding their level of understanding about inclusive education and the direction SSD was moving to develop inclusive education practices, this was to be expected. It is difficult to engage in dialogue regarding a topic you have no real grasp of. SSD's engagement study also further supported findings in this area. An employee was noted as saying, "Sometimes we don't have all the information. You can't engage with parents effectively without this kind of information." Finding 5 in the in my study indicates that parents seem to be most reliant on receiving information from the district through school correspondences, during parent-teacher interviews, or from school council regarding changes in education and what specifically is happening at the school level.

Based on the engagement study conducted by SSD in the fall of 2015, some of the feedback that came back addressed the need for a major culture change within the district that

would support better, meaningful engagement and thus results. Employees' and parents' feedback showed concern for not having enough information to be engaged as well as a need for a change in the culture. Finding 5 in this case study suggests a need for a culture change as well. Parents surveyed and interviewed identified that they were engaged in the decision-making process if they were members of school council or if the decision pertained to their own child.

Administration is open to listening to parents at the parent council meetings. (Parent Survey Respondent)

At parent council meetings, there are discussions about challenges that need to be resolved and the principal or assistant principal is there to listen and help resolve student issues. (Parent Survey Respondent)

Schlechty (2009) explained that when schools are run as if they are part of a *service delivery* organization, teachers are viewed as having special expertise and therefore with much authority. Parents are expected to reinforce or guarantee students will do what their teachers and the school expect of them. Parents who reflect this role of a parent Schlechty stated are often viewed as "strong parental support" (2009, p. 89). Schlechty (2009) argued,

In this context, to say that the parent is a partner is equivalent to the claim that doctors sometimes make when they insist that patients are partners. In both cases, to be identified as a *partner* means that one is willing to do what the expert suggests should be done. The "partner", however is not involved in prescribing what *should* be done. (p. 89)

The current status of parents in schools in SSD suggests that parents are perceived by many through this lens, as partners who are expected to support what the experts have said should be done. This notion is not lost on parents who feel unheard and devalued.

Traditional parent involvement for years has been viewed as the time spent by parents volunteering at school, assisting in fundraising efforts, participating on parent councils, or acting as parent chaperones on field trips (Harris & Goodall, 2008; Stelmach, 2004; Lopez et al., 2001). “Within the context of families and schools, a partnership is a relationship involving close cooperation between parties that have clearly specified and joint rights and responsibilities” (Sheridan & Kratochwill, 2007, p. 1). “When parents feel that they have the opportunities, skills and knowledge required to help their children, they are more likely to become engaged” (Leithwood, 2009, p. 9). Parents who indicated not having time or feeling like they were kept at a distance are justified when they cannot connect in the way they would like.

There’s lots of different layers when you get into the upper levels in terms of umm . . . you know you’re just not dealing with a principal and a school secretary and a hand full of teachers. You’re dealing with ah – it’s more of an organization and so there’s quite a disconnect I find between administration and parents. (Marion)

Marion later indicated that she felt many parents did not have the time or they were single parents who could not be available when meetings were held. Karen, a staff participant, echoed the same sentiment when asked about parent engagement saying, “I think parents truly care. I think they’re just too busy.” Another staff member indicated that people who are engaged in the decision-making process should be “specifically chosen. . . . They have to demonstrate an understanding of education, an understanding of how our curriculum is set up” (Olivia). Schlechty (2009) would argue that educators need to be concerned with educating parents and the public so they are better able to make informed decisions regarding education.

A study conducted by Harris and Goodall (2008) to identify the relationship between parent engagement and student achievement showed that there was a direct and beneficial effect

on student behaviour when parents were engaged. Harris and Goodall's research also showed that schools had either a negative or positive effect on parent engagement. Some parents in the study identified a difference in primary versus secondary schools. This concern was also reflected in the current study in a response given by Susan who stated,

I don't feel like my voice is heard at the junior high level – or wanted – at all. Yeah, it's ahh, I don't feel like parents are really part of the process really. – It's kinds of like you just – it's a very ahh daunting process if you are a parent. (Susan)

Weiss et al. (2011) provided recommendations for engaging families and communities stating, "Efforts to integrate family and community engagement in reform should be inclusive" (p. 3). They identified three steps to make this happen:

1. Spend time to understand the challenges from the perspectives of the individuals who are experiencing them so that solutions are co-designed and not imposed upon families and communities.
2. Relate to parents as equal partners in problem solving. Equal partnership does not mean that parents and educators take that same action, but that they have an equal stake in the work and are at the table as partners.
3. Share student performance data with parents to empower them to have meaningful conversations with school staff about what needs to happen to help individual students improve and to help schools create and implement lasting school-wide improvements.

Eight years later, these recommendations are as valid today as they were when they were made. While there are barriers such as language, socioeconomic status, and time that keep

parents from engaging at schools, the impact illustrated by research that parent engagement has on student achievement has been consistent.

Conclusion

I have discussed several themes in this study. The research questions generated five key findings that provide information that may serve to deepen SSD's understanding of its readiness to support Alberta Education's inclusive education framework. First, definitions of inclusive education vary among stakeholders in SSD. Second, SSD needs to improve how it addresses implementation of inclusive education practices with its stakeholders. Third, there have been challenges to building staff's understanding around inclusive education. Fourth, involvement in the decision-making process to meet student needs has been based on the role of staff members. The fifth and final finding revealed that parent input is not being sought to assist in creating inclusive education environments. These findings are significant as they serve to illustrate the varying perspectives regarding inclusive education among stakeholders within SSD and highlight the need for dialogue at the district and school level about how Alberta Education's inclusive education framework will be implemented.

Given the potential for growth as a result of the findings, it should be kept in mind that in this study, I used a purposeful sample, which means I did not recruit participants from the entire school district. Instead, I identified specific groups of participants to take part, including staff limited to administration (district and school), learning leaders, teachers, or support staff working with students with special needs, as well as parents whose children were on IPPs. My intent was to have enough of a sample size across grade levels as well as divisions; however, this was not the outcome. Implications drawn in the study were based on the experiences and feedback of the

sample group. Additionally, sample size within the participant groups varied, which also has an impact on the reliability of the data.

I made several assumptions in this study based on my experience and knowledge as a teacher and an employee of SSD. My first assumption underlying this study was that stakeholders shared the same level of understanding regarding inclusive education. This assumption was based on the fact that the district provides information and documentation about various areas of education and provincial mandates through leadership meetings, professional development, and other stakeholder engagement efforts at the school level so that information is evenly disseminated. This assumption turned out to be false. While SSD does provide access to information about inclusive education, data I collected showed that SSD information sharing has not led to or developed a shared understanding among stakeholders about inclusive education, despite acknowledging the value of inclusive practices. This was illustrated in my first finding uncovered in the study. What SSD needs is a plan for developing that shared understanding about inclusive education among all staff and stakeholders.

The second assumption I made was that district and school leaders work together to implement provincial mandates and engage stakeholders in the education process. I found this assumption to be partially true. Based on the role of staff members, there was evidence to support that there was some level of collaboration between the district and school leaders, though there was still a disconnect between leaders and other stakeholders, specifically with support staff and parents. This was reflected in my second finding in the study.

My third assumption underlying this study was that school staffs engage in professional development and would, therefore, be capable of applying knowledge gained in helping to develop inclusive environments or facilitating inclusive practices. I found this assumption to be

partially true. While some staff indicated no knowledge of inclusive education or the ability to manage, given large class sizes and an overwhelming workload, several staff members identified their understanding of the districts philosophy on personalization of learning and the importance of meeting the needs of all students through differentiated instruction. This notion was reflected in my third finding in the study.

My fourth assumption presumed that provincial resources lead to implementation of inclusive education at the school level, thus stakeholders are equally engaged. I made this assumption based on the premise that school districts are required to adhere to provincial legislation and governance regarding education, and, given the principles behind inclusive education and the values of the SSD, SSD has taken steps to ensure this. I found this assumption to be partially true as evidence shows that the SSD through its Three-Year Education Plan (2014) is committed to creating an inclusive education environment for all, despite any real indication of the steps it will take to facilitate inclusive practices. This was illustrated in my fourth finding uncovered in this study.

My final assumption underlying this study was based on the premise that parents are engaged in conversations around the needs of their child and services provided as well as supports required at their child's school and are consequently part of the decision-making process. I made this assumption based on provincial legislation, mandates, and the Standards for Special Education (Alberta Learning, 2004). I found this assumption to be partially true as evidence suggests that some parents appear to be part of the decision-making process as it applies to their own child. However, an overwhelming number of parents reported not understanding what was happening in education, feeling a disconnect with their child's school, or feeling as if they had no voice. This was illustrated in my fifth finding uncovered in the study.

Summary

In this chapter, I illuminated several key factors necessary for successful implementation of inclusive education within SSD. My purpose in this case study was to examine the readiness of this large urban school district to implement Alberta Education's inclusive education framework. Findings from the study and other documents reveal gaps in what is understood versus what is happening within the district. The analysis and discussion of the research findings suggests that SSD has more work to be done. Evidence in the findings suggest that the district is ready to develop inclusive education environments and facilitate inclusive practices within its schools, as some of the necessary ground work has already been completed. Additionally, it is clear stakeholders are interested and motivated to be engaged participants in the process.

My purpose in this chapter was to provide insights into the five findings I presented in Chapter 4. Reconstruction, analysis, and synthesis of the data create a deeper understanding of the case study presented. The implications of the findings were intended to provide a more holistic understanding of the gaps in the SSD's move towards inclusive education, and hopefully give thought to possible next steps for the district.

CHAPTER 6: SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

At the start of my doctoral journey, I was troubled by the challenges faced by stakeholders to meet the needs of students with disabilities. Given the changes to the education climate, I was curious and concerned as to how districts, specifically mine, would establish inclusive education environments within its schools to address the needs of all students. At the start of my study, there was little evidence to illustrate how educator readiness would impact their ability to meet the learning needs of students with special needs in inclusive environments. Furthermore, it was unclear to what degree staffs and families were being included in the processes needed to support the development of strong inclusive school communities. I, thus, set out to research and answer several questions in hopes of developing a better understanding of what more could be done to support the development of inclusive practices within my school district.

My purpose in this evaluative case study was to examine a large urban school district's readiness to implement Alberta Education's inclusive education framework. I discuss the conclusions and recommendations of the study throughout this chapter, addressing the degree to which the following four factors leading to inclusive education are evident in schools within SSD: (a) a shared understanding of inclusive education, (b) inclusive leadership, (c) capacity building, and (d) parent engagement. My rationale for this study was a need to identify SSD's readiness to implement an inclusive education framework and better understand what steps needed to be taken to support the district's transformation. As a teacher in this district, I am personally motivated by the challenges the SSD faces and the work I can do to support the development of inclusive practices within my school and throughout the district. In the following sections, I discuss the major findings and conclusions drawn from the research as well as provide

an update on SSD's implementation of Alberta Education's inclusive education framework. I follow the discussion by recommendations and a final reflection of my journey conducting this study.

Conclusions

At the time I collected the data for this case study, there was very little evidence to suggest that SSD was discussing the changes at the provincial level from a dual (special and general) education system to a single inclusive education system within its district or with its stakeholders. The following conclusions of the major findings in this case study address the data that I collected and identify several key areas of concern within SSD to implementing Alberta Education's inclusive education framework. Through this study, I sought to answer four questions:

1. To what degree do stakeholders have a shared understanding of inclusive education?
2. How do district and school leaders support the implementation of inclusive education environments?
3. What strategies are being used to build staff capacity to implement inclusive education?
4. In what ways are parents being engaged in the implementation of inclusive education?

My first major finding of the study identified how stakeholders defined inclusive education and whether there was a shared understanding. My second major finding addressed district and school leadership's ability to support implementation of inclusive education environments. My third and fourth major findings focused on the strategies used to build staff capacity and challenges to building staff capacity. My fifth major finding addressed the decision-

making process and whether staff and parents were engaged in the process. My sixth and final major finding addressed how parents were being engaged in implementing inclusive education. In the following conclusions, I reflect the findings and interpretations I presented in Chapters 4 and 5 and support an overall conclusion as to whether SSD is ready to implement Alberta Education's inclusive education framework.

A shared understanding. The first major finding showed that there was a general understanding of inclusive education among stakeholders. It also indicated that stakeholders had varying definitions of inclusive education, mainly pertaining to special education. A couple of conclusions can be drawn from this finding. Stakeholders viewed inclusion and inclusive education as one and the same; there was no evidence of a possible difference. One of the issues at hand is that inclusion is not clearly defined in the research literature. It most often is defined in a variety of ways; thus there is no surprise that stakeholders when asked would also have varying definitions. Ainscow et al. (2006) explained that inclusion definitions can be *descriptive* or *prescriptive*. "A descriptive definition of inclusion reports on the variety of ways 'inclusion' is used in practice, whereas a prescriptive definition indicates the way we intend to use the concept and would like it to be used by others" (p. 14). Both, they stated, are important. Following are six ways of thinking of inclusion (Ainscow et al., 2006):

1. Inclusion as a concern with disabled students and others categorised as 'having special educational needs.'
2. Inclusion as a response to disciplinary exclusion.
3. Inclusion in relation to all groups seen as being vulnerable to exclusion.
4. Inclusion as developing the school for all.
5. Inclusion as 'Education for All.'

6. Inclusion as a principled approach to education and society. (p. 15)

Participants' definitions varied between having to do with students with disabilities and education for all. A conclusion to be drawn from this finding is that there is no shared understanding of inclusive education, as it exists in SSD. Parents and staff members indicated that there were no conversations around inclusive education happening in schools, which leads me to conclude that at the time of this study, there were no attempts being made by the district or schools to develop a shared understanding of inclusive education. As a result, stakeholders are not clear as to how inclusive education is defined by the province and how the district and schools fit into the new inclusive education system.

Supporting implementation of inclusive education. My second major finding identified how the district and school leaders were supporting implementation of inclusive education environments. Staff participants explained that inclusive education environments were supported through personalized learning in classrooms, through parent–teacher interviews, emails, and school council meetings. Thus, various strategies are being used to communicate with parents, but there is no clear evidence as to how staffs are being educated about what inclusive education environments should look or feel like or, more importantly, why developing an inclusive education environment is important. A conclusion to be drawn from this is that communicating day-to-day information is insufficient. There is no clear action plan to support implementation of inclusive education environments throughout the district and its schools. Stakeholders have a definitive understanding of their roles as they relate to one another, but they are not being included in implementing inclusive education environments. This conclusion is based on the lack of evidence around critical discourse regarding inclusive education with staffs and parents.

Challenges to building staff capacity. My third major finding was that there were several challenges to building staff capacity despite the availability of workshops and professional development on various topics as well as access to specialist; I identified several factors that were said to create challenges to developing an understanding for inclusive education and implementation of inclusive education environments, thus building staff capacity to support this transformation. Factors included not enough support, not enough time, and no knowledge of available supports. Staff also indicated there was not enough time to meet with professionals and not enough workshops. Teachers report heavy workloads and that class sizes were too large.

Several conclusions can be drawn from this finding. First, discussions and actions necessary for developing inclusive education environments are not happening. Staff members need to know explicitly what they are working on, how various topics connect, where they can find the necessary support, and that those supports are available. Another conclusion to be drawn is that there is no clarity being provided around what is happening provincially or within SSD around inclusive education or how provincial initiatives connect and support implementation of inclusive education environments. Staff may have the motivation and desire to implement new initiatives but can experience burnout if there are too many initiatives and not a clear explanation of how those initiatives connect to the day-to-day operation of schools or meet the overall vision and mission as set forth by the province and SSD.

Finally, while these factors are challenging and overwhelming, inclusive education is not confined to what is done in the classroom. Some staff members believe inclusive education to be the role of the teacher. They do not have a clear understanding of the work and effort required by stakeholders in developing inclusive education environments. Collaboration and stakeholder engagement is required in order to develop an inclusive education environment. Without this

type of collaboration, successfully reducing the frustrations often reported will be difficult.

Support can come in many forms, and when stakeholders come together to problem solve, many innovative ideas are more likely to come to light.

Shared decision-making. My fourth finding in this study was that involvement in the decision-making process to support meeting student needs seems to be based on designated roles of stakeholders. Parents and school staffs do not feel as if they are a part of the entire decision-making process. As a result, the conclusion I have drawn from this finding is that there is no shared decision-making happening among stakeholders. When people feel left out of the decision-making process, there is no opportunity to build capacity or individual efficacy. Another conclusion to be drawn from this finding is that the district and schools are not employing strategies or effective action plans to support inclusive leadership. Ryan (2006) identified inclusive leadership “not in terms of positions or individuals who perform certain tasks but as a collective process in which everyone is included or fairly represented” (p. 16). He explained that inclusive leadership is based on three key elements: (a) everyone has an opportunity to influence, (b) it is a process that happens over time, and (c) it is meant to meet a specific end, inclusion beyond what happens in classrooms and within the school.

Diverse opportunities to engage parents. My fifth and final finding was that parents were engaged in various ways. Schools use school council meetings, parent–teacher interviews, and individual meetings about a child to connect with parents. Some parents reported feeling as if they were kept at a distance, leaving them feeling undervalued and frustrated. A conclusion to be drawn from this finding is that parents are still left out and included only when an issue pertains to their child, possibly because schools do not know how to lead with parents. Having parents take part in the decision-making is difficult for staff. Often, there is the

perception that parents do not know enough about education to be involved in the process. In order for parents to understand education, school districts and schools' staff need to be willing to educate parents about curriculum and education policies and practice. Another conclusion that can be drawn from this finding is that there are no strategies in place to change the pre-existing culture and perspectives held about parents by schools and their staff. District and school leaders need to support this change in perspective and practice. By creating an environment where parents are a part of the decision-making process, this opens the door for districts and schools to more efficiently and effectively steward their resources. Additionally, it facilitates an environment and atmosphere where parents feel valued, as their voices and the results of their feedback are transparent.

Recommendations

Based on my findings, analysis, and conclusions in this study, I offer 23 recommendations; 18 of these recommendations are intended for district and school leadership to support the development and implementation of inclusive practices. In addition, there are five recommendations for future research within the district and schools.

Recommendations for a shared understanding. Based on the conclusions that there is little or no shared understanding of inclusive education within SSD or its schools and there is no evidence to suggest that the district or schools are working to develop a shared understanding of inclusive education with stakeholders, I recommend that:

1. District and school leaders consider clearly defining inclusive education as the district views it in relation to the province's new inclusive education framework and identify what an inclusive education environment might look like in schools. A clear

- definition of inclusive education will help create continuity across the district and across school communities.
2. District and school leaders consider creating and employing strategies to develop a shared understanding of inclusive education across schools. District and school leaders need to have strategies in place so stakeholders can develop their understanding of inclusive education together.
 3. District and school leaders consider reviewing with staff and parent stakeholders the definition of inclusive education as viewed by the province and how this definition is demonstrated across the district and in schools. Engaging in dialogue about inclusive education creates opportunities for stakeholders to collaborate about what inclusive education in schools might look, sound, and feel like. This dialogue is important to developing inclusive practices between district leaders and school leaders, district leaders and stakeholders, and school leaders and stakeholders.

Recommendations for supporting implementation of inclusive education. Based on the conclusions that there is no clear action plan to support implementation of inclusive education environments throughout the district and its schools, I recommend that:

4. District leaders consider creating and employing persons and strategies to help facilitate the development of inclusive education environments across its schools.
5. School leaders consider establishing stakeholder meetings to facilitate the implementation of inclusive education environments by engaging in meaningful discourse to identify areas of concern and create an action plan for implementation.

6. District and school leaders consider reviewing on an ongoing basis the level of collaboration between stakeholders in supporting district and school implementation and support of inclusive education environments.
7. School leaders consider reviewing on an ongoing basis the opportunities available for staff and parents to engage in the leadership decision-making process that serve to support meeting learner outcomes and meeting the needs of all students.

Recommendations for building staff capacity. Based on the conclusions that there is currently no evidence of discussions or professional development on inclusive education, no evidence of communication about what is happening with inclusive education at the provincial and district level, or evidence of how provincial initiatives connect and support implementation of inclusive education environments with school staffs, I recommend that:

8. District leaders consider the development and implementation of formal training to support the acquisition of inclusive leadership skills among sitting and future school leaders.
9. District leaders consider creating a clear resource accessible through their home page website for information about inclusive education in the district, how provincial initiatives fit into the inclusive education policy, and how the district is working to align with this work.
10. District and school leaders consider developing professional development opportunities for schools' staff to receive formal training related to inclusive education.
11. School leaders consider providing collaborative leadership opportunities to aid and facilitate the development of inclusive leadership skills among their staff.

Based on the conclusion that some staff members view inclusive education as the sole role of the teacher and therefore feel overwhelmed, unsupported, or underused, I recommend that:

12. District leaders consider creating more strategist and/or support staff positions to support the work in schools and facilitate the implementation of inclusive education environments. By doing this, district leaders can help to change the thinking of staff at the school level and encourage collaborative and distributive leadership skills among school-based stakeholders.
13. School leaders consider creating stakeholder groups to support the work being done in classrooms and within other areas of the school, especially at the junior high and high school levels. This will provide opportunities for staff members, regardless of their role, to engage in decision-making discourse as well as begin to tap into community stakeholders as resources.

Recommendations for shared decision-making. Based on the conclusion that there is little evidence to support there is shared decision-making happening among stakeholders nor is there evidence that the district and schools are employing strategies or effective action plans to support inclusive leadership, I recommend that:

14. School leaders consider evaluating class and school characteristics or profiles with staff and discuss how to meet the needs of classes and the school. In addition, create an action plan to support ideas generated by the staff.
15. School leaders consider ongoing assessments of inclusive leadership practices with staff to regularly identify issues or concerns, problem solve, and implement necessary changes.

Recommendations for opportunities to engage parents. Based on the conclusions that some parents feel as if they are kept at a distance and only included when an issue or situation pertains to their child, and there is no evidence to suggest there are strategies in place to change the pre-existing culture and perspectives held about parents by schools and their staffs, I recommend that:

16. District and school leaders consider speaking to parents about their relationships with the district and their child's school to better understand concerns and frustrations held by parents.
17. District and school leaders consider developing and implementing opportunities for parents to be engaged in the decision-making process at the district and school level to meet the needs of all students. In addition, establish points during the year to provide detailed information about what is happening in the field of education at the provincial and district level and how schools are impacted.
18. District and school leaders consider ongoing assessments of inclusive leadership practices with parents to regularly identify issues or concerns, problem solve, and implement necessary changes at both the district and school level.

Recommendations for future research and actions. Based on the limitations and delimitations of this study, I think the following recommendations should be considered for future research:

1. A new study could be conducted to identify problems that exist within schools and across the district minimizing the implementation and development of inclusive education environments. This could be a design-based research study to ensure that stakeholders are part of the process of implementing inclusive education

- environments in schools throughout the district as well to identify how changes to the environment will impact student learning. Including the voices of other stakeholders would lead to stronger results.
2. A comparison and analysis of school environments could be conducted to determine the degree to which inclusive education environments already exist in district schools and differences between them. This will help to identify which schools within the district are already implementing inclusive practices and doing it well. These schools can serve as inclusive education models. A comparison analysis would also serve to identify which schools need support, what areas within the school environment or culture support is needed, and the specific kinds of supports needed.
 3. Several focus groups and individual interviews should be conducted with parents, students, and staff (district–school administration, teachers, support staff) to identify perspectives on the benefits, problems, or concerns regarding inclusive education; this is critical in future studies as I designed my study to include only staff and parents in a randomly selected number of schools from three geographical areas of SSD. Future studies should seek to understand the perspectives of all stakeholders across the district so the study is generalizable, reliable, and valid.
 4. Establish student governments to build student capacity and involve students in the decision-making process; as well establish parent–staff advisory groups to make school–based decisions. These groups should be created to ensure stakeholder voice is included on an ongoing basis during the study.
 5. Ongoing assessments of stakeholder engagement and decisions should occur regularly to identify the impact on student learning and the development of inclusive

practices. In the current study, I sought only to identify whether SSD was ready to implement Alberta Education's inclusive education framework. A future study could seek to identify readiness across the entire district at both the district and the school levels in addition to beginning implementation with stakeholder involvement. It is imperative that stakeholders are a part of the process as this creates transparency and builds trust between SSD and its stakeholders as well as between schools and their stakeholders.

Researcher Reflections

I began this study seeking insight as to whether SSD was ready to implement Alberta Education's inclusive education framework. My journey began from my own personal experiences in addition to what I was witnessing from parents and staff. My immersion in the district and personal frustrations created bias that I struggled with throughout the study. The biggest challenge in conducting this study was having access to participants. Though I was granted permission to conduct the study by the district, school leaders who were my second level of gatekeepers, ultimately provided me access to potential participants. In addition, the size of this study became somewhat overwhelming. If I could conduct a similar study, I would most definitely do so with additional research support, especially that of the district. Perhaps if the district were a partner in the research there might be greater opportunities to engage stakeholders across schools. Leadership helps to set the tone in seeking change.

In carrying out their function as community builders, one of the most important tasks of school boards in a learning organization is to find ways to involve the diverse constituencies in the community in continuous conversations and dialogue about the

schools and the purposes schools should serve in the community, thereby continuously refining the vision that drives the schools. (Schlechty, 2009, p.134)

I hope that this study, despite its delimitations and limitations, will give SSD a bit of insight into the concerns of some stakeholders as they move towards developing inclusive education practices throughout the district so that they might consider conducting another study. Through sharing the findings of my research, I hope to provide insights and understanding that are helpful in other school jurisdictions and also for Alberta Education. When I began this journey, my intentions were to seek answers and inspire change. Over the course of my career, I never believed that my purpose was solely to deliver information. I truly believe teachers are so much more than information bringers; teachers shape minds and they inspire. Teachers advocate for children and families. Teachers can choose to be the catalyst or the barrier to change. At no point does one teacher have all the answers, but together they can do great things.

In the end, I hope that this study will help start conversations between stakeholders about their views on inclusive education. I hope it will provoke some thought and motivate district and school leaders to approach inclusive education truly through an inclusive lens. My knowledge and practice has been enriched through time spent reviewing literature, data and working with participants. I am grateful for the opportunity I was given and what I have learned from this process as a teacher and scholar.

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Appendix A: Parent Survey Participation Email

Dear Parents,

My name is Michelle Dow. I am a teacher with _____, as well as a graduate student in the Graduate Division of Education Research completing a Doctorate of Education in Educational Leadership at the University of Calgary.

I am writing you today to ask for your participation in a research study I am conducting as one of the final requirements of my doctoral program. The focus of my research is assessing a school jurisdiction's readiness to implement Alberta Education's inclusive education system. The purpose of this study is to examine the degree to which the following factors leading to inclusive education are evident in schools: (1) a shared understanding of inclusive education, (2) inclusive leadership, (3.) capacity building, and (4.) parent engagement.

I would like to invite you to participate in this study by completing a short survey. Your participation in this study will be voluntary. The survey should take no more than 10-15 minutes. Each survey begins with a Letter of Recruitment, which I need to provide for Informed Consent. The survey commences after the Informed Consent letter.

PARENT Survey

<https://questionnaire.simplesurvey.com/Engine/Default.aspx?surveyID=3f6b093c-536f-4ddf-8b28-97310eca6328&lang=EN>

Thank you for your support.
Michelle Dow

Appendix B: Staff Survey Participation Email

Dear Staff,

My name is Michelle Dow. I am a teacher with _____, as well as a graduate student in the Graduate Division of Education Research completing a Doctorate of Education in Educational Leadership at the University of Calgary.

I am writing you today to ask for your participation in a research study I am conducting as one of the final requirements of my doctoral program. The focus of my research is assessing a school jurisdiction's readiness to implement Alberta Education's inclusive education system. The purpose of this study is to examine the degree to which the following factors leading to inclusive education are evident in schools: (1) a shared understanding of inclusive education, (2) inclusive leadership, (3.) capacity building, and (4.) parent engagement.

I would like to invite you to participate in this study by completing a short survey. Your participation in this study will be voluntary. The survey should take no more than 10-15 minutes. Each survey begins with a Letter of Recruitment, which I need to provide for Informed Consent. The survey commences after the Informed Consent letter.

STAFF Survey

<https://questionnaire.simplesurvey.com/Engine/Default.aspx?surveyID=437374a3-db07-44f5-be8f-228194fb3309&lang=EN>

Thank you for your support.
Michelle Dow

Appendix C: Parent Survey Questions

1. What is the age of your child?

Choice
4 yrs to 8 yrs
9 yrs to 12 yrs
13 yrs to 15 yrs
16 yrs to 18 yrs

2. What grade is your child in?

Choice
K
1 to 3
4 to 6
7 to 9
10 to 12

3. How many years has your child(ren) been at their school?

4. Do you think your child has learning challenges that requires additional support?

Choice
Yes
No

- a. Have you and your child's teacher been involved in determining those supports?

5. Do you understand Alberta Education's Inclusive Education system?

Choice
Yes
No
Somewhat

6. What is your understanding of Alberta Education's definition of Inclusive Education?

7. Have school district administrators reviewed Alberta's Inclusive Education System and how it will impact schools in the system?

Choice
Yes
No
Somewhat

8. Have school administrators at your child's school reviewed Alberta's Inclusive Education system and how it will impact the school?

Choice
Yes
No
Somewhat

9. Have you engaged in conversations with your child's teacher about inclusive education and the changes to Alberta's education system?

Choice
Yes
No
Somewhat

10. Do you engage in conversations with other parents about inclusive education and Alberta's inclusive Education system?

Choice
Yes
No
Somewhat

11. Do you take part in parent council meetings at your child's school?

Choice
Yes
No

- a. If no, why not?

12. Are parents included in the decision making process with regards to meeting student needs at your child's school?

Choice
Yes
No
Somewhat
Only pertaining to their child
Parents should not be involved in this process.

- a. If yes or somewhat, how? If you believe parents should not be involved, why?

13. Are you a part of the decision making process regarding meeting the needs of your child?

Choice
Yes
No
Somewhat
Parents should not be involved in this process.

- a. If yes or somewhat, how? If you believe parents should not be involved, why?

14. Are parents involved in helping to problem solve potential challenges to inclusive education at your child's school?

Choice
Yes
No
Somewhat
Parents should not be involved in this process.

- a. If yes or somewhat, how? If you believe parents should not be involved, why?

15. How do you think stakeholders should be involved in creating and maintaining an inclusive education environment?

Appendix D: Staff Survey Questions

1. What is your role at your school?

Choice
Support Staff
Teacher
Learning Leader
Administration

2. What division do you work with?

Choice
Div I
Div II
Div III
Div IV

3. How many years have you worked with your Board?

Choice
Less than 5 years
5 to 10 years
10 to 15 years
15 to 20 years
20 or more years

4. How many years have you worked with students with special needs?

Choice
Less than 5 years
5 to 10 years
10 to 15 years
15 to 20 years
20 or more years

5. In what capacity have you worked with students with special needs?

Choice
Special education classroom
Integrated/Mainstream classroom
Whole school setting (i.e. lunchroom, recess, etc...)

6. Do you understand Alberta Education's new Inclusive Education system?

Choice
Yes
No
Somewhat

7. What is your understanding of Alberta Education's definition of Inclusive Education?

8. Have you been involved in meetings or workshops with district administrators about inclusive education?

Choice
Yes
No

9. Have you been involved in meetings or workshops about inclusive education at your school?

Choice
Yes
No

10. Do you engage in conversations with your colleagues about inclusive education?

Choice
Yes
No
Somewhat

- a. If no, why not?

11. Have you attended workshops about inclusive education offered by specialist councils or other organizations for professional development?

Choice
Yes
No

- a. If no, why not?

12. Do you engage in conversations with parents about inclusive education?

Choice
Yes
No
Somewhat

a. If no, why not?

13. Do you engage in conversations about inclusive education with other stakeholders in your school community?

Choice
Yes
No
Somewhat
I am not sure who all stakeholders in our school community are.

a. If no, why not?

14. Are staff at your school included in conversations about implementing Alberta Education's inclusive education system with district leaders?

Choice
Yes
No
Somewhat

a. If yes or somewhat, how?

15. Are you included in the decision-making process regarding student needs at your school?

Choice
Yes
No
Somewhat

a. If yes or somewhat, how?

16. Are you included in the decision-making process regarding meeting the needs of students you work with?

Choice
Yes
No
Somewhat

a. If yes or somewhat, how?

17. Are parents included in the decision-making process regarding meeting the needs of students at your school?

Choice
Yes
No
Somewhat
Only for their child
I do not believe parents should be involved in these decisions

a. If yes or somewhat, how? If you do not believe parents should be involved in these decisions, why not?

18. Are parents included in creating and/or problem solving potential challenges to creating an inclusive education environment at your school?

Choice
Yes
No
Somewhat
Parents should not be involved in this process.

a. If yes or somewhat, how? If you think parents should not be involved, why not?

19. How do you think stakeholders should be involved in creating and implementing an inclusive education environment?

20. What supports do you think are needed to successfully implement and maintain an inclusive education system (as you understand it) in schools?

Appendix E: Consent Form Parent Interviews

**Name of Researcher, Faculty, Department, Telephone & Email:**

Michelle M. Dow, Werklund School of Education, Graduate Division of Educational Research,
[telephone number], [email]

Supervisor:

Dr. Jim Brandon, Graduate Division of Educational Research/Werklund School of Education

Title of Project: *A Case Study Assessing a School Jurisdiction's Readiness to Support Successful Implementation of Inclusive Education*

This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. If you want more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

The University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board and the _____
Research Committee has approved this research study.

Purpose of the Study

The focus of this research is assessing a school jurisdiction's readiness to implement Alberta Education's inclusive education system. The purpose of this study is to examine the degree to which the following factors leading to inclusive education are evident in schools within a large urban school district in Alberta: (1) a shared understanding of inclusive education, (2) inclusive leadership, (3.) capacity building, and (4.) parent engagement.

What Will I Be Asked To Do?

I would like to ask for your participation in being interviewed by me for approximately 45-60 minutes for this study and/or participate in a survey. Your participation in this study will be voluntary. Data for the study will include information gathered from surveys, focus groups, in addition to information collected from individual interviews. You have the right to withdraw

from the study at any time prior to the interview. If you decided to withdraw your comments after the interview, you will also have the right to do this by notifying me in writing of your decision by _____. Information provided by you will then be removed and excluded from the data and results of the study and subsequently destroyed.

Data will be handled in compliance with the University of Calgary's Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants. Interviews will be conducted at a quiet and mutually agreed upon location. All data will be stored on my personal computer, which is password encrypted and locked in a secure location. Participant names will be coded to provide confidentiality. Video and audio recordings will be collected and transferred to my computer and deleted from their original devices. These recordings will be used to assure accuracy in participant responses. Back-ups of recordings and data will also be stored in a secured location at all times. In the event a transcriber is hired for this study, he/she will be required to sign a confidentiality agreement. Data collected for this study will be used in the fulfillment of my doctoral dissertation and may be used in subsequent presentations and/or publications by the large urban school district or myself.

During the focus groups or interviews, participants will be asked to explain their role and/or relationship with the large urban school district and respond to questions regarding their understanding of inclusive education, inclusive leadership, capacity building and parent engagement. At no time will a participant be asked to provide information that would identify them, their child or the school they are associated with.

If a follow up interview is needed, participants will be contacted using the contact information they provided the researcher. Participation in follow up discussions is completely voluntary. Participants may refuse to participate in parts of the study, may decline to answer any and all questions, and may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty prior to _____ by providing a written request to the researcher.

What Type of Personal Information Will Be Collected?

Your name, email address, and phone number will be obtained for the sole purpose of contacting and communicating with you during the course of the study; however, your personal information will not be disclosed to anyone nor will it appear in the study. Your contact information will be stored in a secure location and securely destroyed upon completion of the study.

Should you choose to participate you will only be asked to identify the age of your child and whether he/she has an Individual Program Plan (IPP).

Audio and video recordings will be stored on the researchers password encrypted personal computer in a secured location. The researcher and/or anyone hired for the purpose of transcribing recordings will be the only individual(s) to have access to these recordings. The recordings will not be used publically or shared with anyone else at any time

Are there Risks or Benefits if I Participate?

It will be clear to readers that the participants involved were parents of students in a large urban school district in Alberta. All other information about the participants will be coded to ensure confidentiality. All data collected will be kept in confidence. Participants are free to stop the interview at any time, decline answering any questions or withdraw from the study.

What Happens to the Information I Provide?

In the event a transcriber is hired for this study, he/she will have access to audio and video recordings and will be required to sign a confidentiality agreement. Data collected for this study will be used in the fulfillment of the researcher's doctoral dissertation therefore the researcher's doctoral supervisor will also have access to data collected. Data may also be used in subsequent presentations and/or publications by the large urban school district or myself, excluding all personal information. The researcher will secure participant contact information and only the researcher will have access to information, which personally identifies participants. At no time will personal information be shared with anyone.

Participants, who chose to withdraw from the study after data has been collected, will need to notify the researcher in writing by _____. Information provided by the participant will then be removed and excluded from the study and subsequently destroyed unless it is collected within a group and destroying it would lead to the loss of all data provided by other participants.

Participation is completely voluntary, anonymous and confidential. You are free to discontinue participation at any time during the study. No one except the researcher and her supervisor will be allowed to see or hear any of the answers to the questionnaire or the interview tape. There are no names on the questionnaire. All information will be summarized for any presentation or publication of results. Data will be kept in a locked cabinet only accessible by the researcher and/or her supervisor. Data will be stored for five years on a computer and/or external hard drive at which time it will be permanently erased.

Signatures

Your signature on this form indicates that 1) you understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your participation in this research project, and 2) you agree to participate in the research project.

In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from this research project at any time. You should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Participant's Name: (please print) _____

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's Name: (please print) _____

Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Questions/Concerns

If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research and/or your participation, please contact:

*Michelle M. Dow,
Werklund School of Education/Faculty of Education
[telephone] [email]
and Dr. Jim Brandon [telephone] [email]*

If you have any concerns about the way you've been treated as a participant, please contact an Ethics Resource Officer, Research Services Office, University of Calgary at (403) 210-9863; email cfreb@ucalgary.ca.

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference. The investigator has kept a copy of the consent form.

Appendix F: Consent Form Staff Interview

**Name of Researcher, Faculty, Department, Telephone & Email:**

Michelle M. Dow, Werklund School of Education, Graduate Division of Educational Research,
[telephone], [email]

Supervisor:

Dr. Jim Brandon, Graduate Division of Educational Research/Werklund School of Education

Title of Project:

A Case Study Assessing a School Jurisdiction's Readiness to Support Successful Implementation of Inclusive Education

This consent form, a copy of which has been given to you, is only part of the process of informed consent. If you want more details about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

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Purpose of the Study

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What Will I Be Asked To Do?

I would like to ask for your participation in being interviewed by me for approximately 45-60 minutes for this study and/or participate in a survey. Your participation in this study will be voluntary. Data for the study will include information gathered from surveys, focus groups, in addition to information collected from individual interviews. You have the right to withdraw from the study at any time prior to the interview. If you decided to withdraw your comments after the interview, you will also have the right to do this by notifying me in writing of your

decision by _____. Information provided by you will then be removed and excluded from the data and results of the study and subsequently destroyed.

Data will be handled in compliance with the University of Calgary's Standards for the Protection of Human Research Participants. Interviews will not be conducted on the large urban school district's property but instead at a quiet and mutually agreed upon location. All data will be stored on my personal computer, which is password encrypted and locked in a secure location. Participant names will be coded to provide confidentiality. Video and audio recordings will be collected and transferred to my computer and deleted from their original devices. These recordings will be used to assure accuracy in participant responses. Back-ups of recordings and data will also be stored in a secured location at all times. In the event a transcriber is hired for this study, he/she will be required to sign a confidentiality agreement. Data collected for this study will be used in the fulfillment of my doctoral dissertation and may be used in subsequent presentations and/or publications by the large urban school district or myself.

During the focus groups or interviews, participants will be asked to explain their role and/or relationship with the large urban school district and respond to questions regarding their understanding of inclusive education, inclusive leadership, capacity building and parent engagement. At no time will a participant be asked to provide information that would identify them, the school they are associated with, the children they work with, or their colleagues.

If a follow up interview is needed, participants will be contacted using the contact information they provided the research. Participation in follow up discussions is completely voluntary. Participants may refuse to participate in parts of the study, may decline to answer any and all questions, and may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty prior to _____.

What Type of Personal Information Will Be Collected?

Your name, email address, and phone number will be obtained for the sole purpose of contacting and communicating with you during the course of the study; however, your personal information will not be disclosed to anyone nor will it appear in the study. Your contact information will be stored in a secure location and securely destroyed upon completion of the study.

Should you choose to participate you will only be asked to identify your role within the large urban school district (e.g., teacher, support staff, leadership).

Audio and video recordings will be stored on my password, encrypted personal computer in a secured location. The researcher and/or anyone hired for the purpose of transcribing recordings will be the only individual(s) to have access to these recordings. The recordings will not be used publically or shared with anyone else at any time.

Are there Risks or Benefits if I Participate?

It will be clear to readers that the participants involved were staff from a large urban school district in Alberta. The role of the staff member will also be clear (e.g., teacher, support staff, or leadership). All other information about the participants will be coded to ensure confidentiality. All data collected will be kept in confidence.

Participants are free to stop the interview at any time, decline answering any questions or withdraw from the study. Participation in this study will not have any impact on staff employment.

What Happens to the Information I Provide?

In the event a transcriber is hired for this study, he/she will have access to audio and video recordings and will be required to sign a confidentiality agreement. Data collected for this study will be used in the fulfillment of the researchers doctoral dissertation therefore the researcher's doctoral supervisor will also have access to data collected. Data may also be used in subsequent presentations and/or publications by the large urban school district or myself excluding all personal information. The researcher will secure participant contact information and only the researcher will have access to information, which personally identifies participants. At no time will personal information be shared with anyone.

Participants, who chose to withdraw from the study after data has been collected, will need to notify the researcher in writing by _____. Information provided by the participant will then be removed and excluded from the study and subsequently destroyed unless it is collected within a group and destroying it would lead to the loss of all data provided by other participants.

Participation is completely voluntary, anonymous and confidential. You are free to discontinue participation at any time during the study. No one except the researcher and her supervisor will be allowed to see or hear any of the answers to the questionnaire or the interview tape. There are no names on the questionnaire. Only group information will be summarized for any presentation or publication of results. Questionnaires, audio, and/or visual recordings are kept in a secured location only accessible by the researcher and/or her supervisor. Data will be stored for five years on a computer and/or external hard drive at which time it will be permanently erased.

Signatures

Your signature on this form indicates that 1) you understand to your satisfaction the information provided to you about your participation in this research project, and 2) you agree to participate in the research project.

In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the investigators, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professional responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from this research project at any time. You should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

Participant's Name: (please print) _____

Participant's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher's Name: (please print) _____

Researcher's Signature: _____ Date: _____

Questions/Concerns

If you have any further questions or want clarification regarding this research and/or your participation, please contact:

*Michelle M. Dow,
Werklund School of Education/Faculty of Education
[telephone] [email]
and Dr. Jim Brandon [telephone] [email]*

If you have any concerns about the way you've been treated as a participant, please contact an Ethics Resource Officer, Research Services Office, University of Calgary at (403) 210-9863; email cfreb@ucalgary.ca.

A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference. The investigator has kept a copy of the consent form.

Appendix G: Parent Interview Questions

The purpose of this interview is to identify your understanding of inclusive education and get an understanding of how you have experienced working with your child's school. There are no right or wrong answers. The answers provided and subsequent conversations reflect your perspective. Your participation in this interview is voluntary. This is a safe environment and you are free to stop being a part if you choose. The conversations of the group will be audio taped. [There is no guarantee that your identity will be kept confidential as a result of the number of participants in this group.]

- 1.) What is the age of your child(ren)? Is/are [he/she/they] on an IPP? How old is/are your child(ren)?
- 2.) What is your understanding of inclusive education?
- 3.) What does an inclusive education environment look, feel, and sound like to you?
- 4.) What has your level of involvement been in the decision making process at your child's school?
- 5.) What has been your level of involvement in determining how best to meet the needs of your child in school?
- 6.) How often do parents meet with school staff, administrators, and/or system administrators to discuss the needs of students at your child's school?
- 7.) How often do parents engage in conversations with school staff, administrators, and/or system administrators to better their understanding of education and the changes in the field of education and the provincial level?
- 8.) What are your thoughts about parents and other stakeholders being engaged in the decision making process at the school level to address student outcomes and needs?

Appendix H: Staff Interview Questions

The purpose of this interview is to identify your understanding of inclusive education and get an understanding of your experience working with your school. There are no right or wrong answers. The answers provided reflect your perspective. Your participation in this interview is voluntary. This is a safe environment and you are free to stop the interview if you choose. Your interview will be audio taped. Your identity will be kept confidential.

1. What is your understanding of inclusive education?
2. In what capacity have you or your staff been involved in professional development on inclusive education?
3. What does an inclusive education environment look, feel, and sound like to you?
4. How have you been able to contribute to the decision making process at your school?
5. How have you been involved in determining how to meet the needs of the students with special needs you work with?
6. In what capacity does your staff meet with parents, administrators, and/or district administrators to discuss the needs of students at your child's school?
7. How often does staff at your school engage in conversations with parents to better their understanding of education and the changes in the field of education and at the provincial level?
8. How often do administrators at your school engage in conversations with staff to better their understanding of education and the changes to the field of education at the provincial level?

9. How often do district administrators engage in conversations with staff to better their understanding of education and the changes to the field of education at the provincial level?
10. What are your thoughts about parents and other stakeholders being engaged in the decision making process at the school level to address student outcomes and their needs?
Why?
11. Do you feel your capacity to lead is developed? Why or why not?
12. Do you feel supported and encouraged to be a part of inclusive practices? How or why?

Appendix I: Administration Interview Questions

The purpose of this interview is to identify your understanding of inclusive education. There are no right or wrong answers. The answers provided reflect your perspective. Your participation in this interview is voluntary. This is a safe environment and you are free to stop the interview if you choose. Your interview will be audio taped. Your identity will be kept confidential.

1. How many years have you been in a leadership position?
2. What is your understanding of inclusive education?
3. How does your understanding of inclusive education match the vision of the province?
Of the District?
4. How much professional development has school leadership received about inclusive education?
5. How much professional development has school staff received about inclusive education?
6. What does an inclusive education environment look, feel, and sound like to you?
7. How have staff been able to contribute to the decision making process at the school level?
8. How have parents been able to contribute to the decision making process at the school level?
9. How have staff and parents been engaged in determining how to meet the needs of the students with special needs?
10. How often do staff, parents, administrators, system administrators and/or community members meet to discuss the needs of students and students with special needs? Why or why not?

11. What are your thoughts about all stakeholders being engaged in the decision making process at the school level to address student outcomes and their needs? Why?
12. Do you feel the capacity to lead is developed within stakeholders? Why or why not?