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Fostering an Inclusive Leadership Team: A Critical Ethnography of a Learning Support Team for Students with Severe Intellectual Disabilities

by

Laura Rae Mooney

A THESIS

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Abstract

High school principals grapple with how to effectively reform the bureaucratic and social culture of their schools to be more inclusive of students with severe intellectual disabilities while also maintaining high standards of academic excellence for all students. There is a paucity of scholarship examining leadership from within an inclusive learning support team (LST) for high school students with severe intellectual disabilities. The purpose of this study was to describe how a learning support team informs inclusive leadership practice. The researcher studied learning support team members from one Alberta school and district, including a director of learning, a learning support specialist, a high school principal, a learning support teacher, two secondary teachers and two education assistants. The inquiry was guided by this research question: How does a learning support team for high school students with severe intellectual disabilities inform inclusive leadership practice? A critical ethnography approach was taken and involved both observations and interviews, with a systems analysis of the findings informing concepts like teamwork and the distribution of power among the learning support team. The resulting model for fostering an inclusive leadership team provides guidance for school leader teams in similar contexts when including students with severe intellectual disabilities.

Specifically, the model emphasizes the need for a coherent relationship between the classroom, school leadership and district leadership teams so together they can: (1) make curriculum connections for students; (2) provide reflective practice opportunities for staff; (3) integrate teamwork into professional development activities; (4) innovate high school instruction to be more inclusive of this population of students; and (5) develop more inclusive policy directions. Conclusions point to a need for modified curriculum development at the high school level and collaborative professional development among principals, teachers, and education assistants.
Keywords: collaboration, critical ethnography, educational leadership, high school reform, inclusive education, learning support team, severe intellectual disability, teamwork
Acknowledgements

I express my sincere gratitude and appreciation to those who have supported me along the pathway to completion of this thesis.

Thank you, Dr. Eugene Kowch, for sticking with me through all the rough spots and for making me laugh and think and cry and ultimately persevere. I am stronger for having gone through this experience with you.

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Mom and Dad, I am forever grateful to you for your love and support of my life’s journey (and for the countless pep talks and draft readings along the way).

Most importantly, thank you Don, my co-author in life, for your gentle persistence, unshakable love, and stalwart faith. You kept me moving through the gripping pressures of self-doubt in this work. Thanks to you I have finally spread my wings! I need an eternity to properly thank you.
Dedication

To Gregory and Daniel, my precious sons.

May your futures be bright because of the sacrifices we made as a family to complete this work.
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<th>Definition</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CFREB</td>
<td>Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EA</td>
<td>Education Assistant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EHS</td>
<td>Everyday High School (pseudonym)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IB</td>
<td>International Baccalaureate Programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IPP</td>
<td>Individualized Program Plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ISP</td>
<td>Individualized Support Plan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LST</td>
<td>Learning Support Team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LQS</td>
<td>Leadership Quality Standard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RTI</td>
<td>Response to Intervention</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SLQS</td>
<td>Superintendent Leadership Quality Standard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SWOT</td>
<td>Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UDL</td>
<td>Universal Design for Learning</td>
</tr>
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Epigraph

Every man is created equal.

Thomas Jefferson
Chapter One: Introduction

Educational leadership scholars have recognized a need to overhaul the way we think about and lead formal secondary education in response to globalization and greater respect for diverse populations in schools (CEA, 2014; Leithwood et al., 1999; Mulford, 2008). At the turn of the 21st century, Andrews and Lupart (2000) wrote that educational leadership’s dependency on century-old bureaucratic management styles was on a ‘collision course’ with the emerging school reform demands of inclusive education. Specific to Alberta’s education system, Friesen and Jardine (2009) identified Frederick Winslow Taylor as “a central historical figure behind the intransigent assumptions that have served to undermine many attempts at educational reform” (p. 9). According to Wren and Bedeian (2009), Taylor’s model was widely adopted for social programming in humanities fields that stretched beyond its original, materials-production purposes. Indeed, Taylor’s model—intended to promote uninterrupted productivity in an assembly line of adult workers—has permeated the way we educate and manage children and youth so much so, said Friesen and Jardine, that attempts at more student-centred education reform initiatives have had little hope of survival. This is because widespread social acceptance of industrial-era organization and business traditions, such as Taylor’s efficiency model, has created a culture of “extreme devotion to rules and other controls… [and] situations in which past decisions are blindly repeated without appreciation or concern for changed conditions” (Wren & Bedeian, 2009, p. 232).

It should not be surprising, then, that despite repeated calls for and attempts at school reform, we see a largely unchanging education structure— complete with linear, predictable, uniform tasks given by specialized teachers to compliant students who must then memorize and master those tasks—rolling on year after year like a well-oiled machine (Kowch, 2013b).
Notably, within these engrained workplace conditions, students who learn differently than the mainstream are often removed and treated exclusively in a system that professes to be inclusive (Slee, 2011). This research finds a model for leading inclusive learning support teams, presenting alternatives for the Taylor labor specialization model. The remainder of this chapter introduces the research problem, purpose and research question, rationale and significance, researcher perspective and assumptions, and terms of reference used throughout this study.

The Research Problem

High school principals in Alberta and across Canada grapple with how to effectively reform the bureaucratic and social culture of their schools to be more inclusive of students with severe intellectual disabilities while maintaining high standards of academic excellence for all students (Irvine et al., 2010). Alberta scholars have also stressed concern with accepted definitions of inclusive education and inconsistencies with interpretations of special education services that result in exclusionary practices for some students while other students are included (Gilham & Williamson, 2013). Further, some principals have presented a lack of urgency when putting inclusion policies into practice for every student; this is in part because of confusion over how those policies apply (Woodcock & Hardy, 2019). These dilemmas exist internationally and they represent widespread difficulties for learning support teams striving to educate students with severe intellectual disabilities in inclusive education contexts. Definitions for severe intellectual disability, special education, inclusive education and learning support team are found in Table 1.1, Terms of Reference, at the end of this chapter.

Scholars who have compared Alberta’s general and special education systems argue that great strides have been made towards realizing a system that is inclusive of more diverse learners
(Graham & Jahnukainen, 2011; Irvine et al., 2010; Williamson & Field, 2014); yet they agree with Jahnukainen’s (2015) observation that students with “more severe disabilities tend to stay in more separate settings” (p. 61). The same discrepancy exists elsewhere. For example, Jahnukainen (2015) studied inclusive and special education leadership in Alberta and Finland and found that some principals in both high performing education systems had a hard time articulating inclusive education as something that was of good quality and accessible to all students in their schools. Supporting Jahnukainen, Shogren et al. (2015) identified that students with severe intellectual disabilities in the United States were among the largest population of students still without quality access to the general education curriculum. Even with a surplus of adult supports from their learning support teams, students with severe intellectual disabilities were without adequate inclusive education opportunities.

Shogren et al.’s (2015) research represents a growing body of international scholarship that enhances understandings of how to systemically support quality inclusive education for students with severe intellectual disabilities. However, they stressed that leadership “issues related to fidelity of implementation and sustainability in the school context remain vexing” (p. 174). Canadian researchers also recognized challenges with leaders’ fidelity (or loyalty) towards students with disabilities in inclusive education contexts (Irvine et al., 2010).

Irvine et al. (2010), Jahnukainen (2015), and Shogren et al. (2015) all found that some principals were widely accepting of all students in their schools while others maintained that inclusive education was not for all students. Such inconsistencies inevitably affect inclusive education experiences for students with severe intellectual disabilities. Importantly, in order to address a research problem of confusing and inconsistent leadership practices towards high
school students with severe intellectual disabilities, one starts with a purpose and a research question.

**Purpose and Research Question**

The purpose of this study was to describe how a learning support team informs inclusive leadership practice in the context of high school students with severe intellectual disabilities in one school and district in Alberta. Specifically, I aimed to advance theoretical and practical understandings of a learning support team’s inclusive work with students amid bureaucratic and systemic resistance to disability in education by asking this research question: *How does a learning support team for high school students with severe intellectual disabilities inform inclusive leadership practice?* I then designed research using a critical ethnographic approach (Carspecken, 1996) that describes the complex work of members of a secondary school’s learning support team as they focused on including high school students with severe intellectual disabilities. Despite ambiguities surrounding what constitutes equitable education for these students, the impact of inclusive education on business models of education has established respect for diversity as the new ‘normal’ and inclusive schooling as the way of the future (Robinson, 2006, 2010, 2017). Research surrounding this impact provides rationale and significance for the research question and the purpose of this study.

**Rationale and Significance**

Inclusive education is a major topic in Alberta education circles that has culminated in recent discussions of “diversity” over inclusion and incorporated never-before-seen upgrades to policies and procedures (Alberta Education, 2018b, 2018c, 2018d, 2018e). For example, Friesen
and Lock (2010) suggested to Alberta’s college of school superintendents, “we are…living during a time of societal transition” (p. 3) and thus we require new ways of thinking about teaching, learning, and educational leadership. Further, Andrews and Lupart (2015) helped advance inclusive education strategies and “diversity-specific” interventions in the Canadian context but, other than an appendix document focused on classroom strategies that may be used for students with severe disabilities, their work provides little knowledge or guidance for leaders about how these students are being included in education systems. Ainscow et al. (2006) found that new teaching techniques or technologies were not primary indicators of sustainable inclusive practices. They called for inclusive leadership development that would address the “social learning processes within a given workplace that influence people’s actions and, indeed, the thinking that informs these actions” (p. 403). Ainscow’s research helped advance leaders’ understanding of inclusive practice measures with an international perspective of disability populations in schools; yet that research lacked clarity for high school principals seeking to connect broad theories of inclusion with specific practices and contexts, such as the context of students with severe intellectual disabilities attending high schools. In response to this paucity, my research study is directed towards a high school leadership audience so that, by critical ethnographic description and analysis, guidelines are presented for high school leader teams to help include students with severe intellectual disabilities. Educational leadership scholars are also calling for better connections between the theoretical phenomenon of inclusion and its practical implications for principals in their day-to-day decision making responsibilities (Woodcock & Hardy, 2019). Education leaders from Alberta (Friesen et al., 2015; Loreman, 2014), Canada (Friesen, 2009; Levin, 2010), along with
international leaders (OECD, 2006a, 2006b; UNESCO, 2015b) wish to disrupt exclusive cultures of teaching and learning in order to benefit more diverse learners in inclusive settings. The Canadian Education Association (CEA, 2014) has challenged educational leaders to question and change outdated practices that are structurally and culturally exclusive of many students. Internationally, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization has been refining its plea for equitable and inclusive education for all for decades, most recently with its *Education 2030: Incheon Declaration and Framework for Action* (UNESCO, 2015a). This declaration addresses the importance of incorporating learners with disabilities into education reform initiatives. Thus, scholars and world leaders talk of a need for cultural change in educational leadership contexts. This study turns a niche area of that broader and ever-widening conversation into research action aimed at helping high school learning support team leadership include students with severe intellectual disabilities.

**Researcher Perspective and Assumptions**

As an interdisciplinary scholar bridging educational leadership disciplinary thinking with disability studies in education, I was also informed by two central points of reflection and motivation while designing this study. The first was Skrtic’s (1991) philosophical understanding of inclusive education reform as a necessary adhocracy to the questionable efficiency traditions of general and special education. The second was Slee’s (2001) professional and international foresight into what is possible when students with disabilities are driven *from* the margins into more central positions in schools (e.g., by recognizing their potential as learners and as contributors to learning in the broader community).
Given so much literature pointing to the desire for change-oriented leadership in schools, I found kinship in Schein’s (2004) Theory of Organizational Culture and Leadership. Schein differentiates between leaders who are managers of a status quo and leaders who are cultural change-agents. “If one wishes to distinguish leadership from management or administration,” Schein says, “one can argue that leadership creates and changes cultures, while management and administration act within a culture” (Chapter One, Culture and Leadership section, para. 2). This study is emerging from a leadership doctoral program and so, indeed, distinguishing between cultural management (maintaining the status quo) and cultural leadership (changing the status quo) will be important throughout. Thus, definitions for cultural leadership and management are incorporated into the terms of reference, Table 1.1.

**Terms of Reference**

This section clarifies definitions of common terms used throughout the study and their knowledge sources. In alphabetical order the terms of reference specified in Table 1.1 are:

Inclusive Education, Leadership, Learning Support Team (LST), Management, Severe Intellectual Disability and Special Education.

Table 1.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inclusive Education</td>
<td>“All students regardless of differences have their individual educational needs met in the general education classroom and school context.”</td>
<td>(Irvine et al., 2010, p. 71)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership (change agency)</td>
<td>“It is the unique function of leadership to be able to perceive the functional”</td>
<td>Schein (2004)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
and dysfunctional elements of the existing culture and to manage cultural evolution and change in such a way that the group can survive in a changing environment.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Learning Support Team (LST)</th>
<th>“A team that consults and shares information relevant to the individual student’s education and plans special education programming and services as required.”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Management (status quo)</td>
<td>Maintaining “those elements of a group or organization that are most stable and least malleable…. [and are] only partially influenced by leader behavior.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Severe Intellectual Disability</td>
<td>A medical diagnosis of “severe cognitive” or “profound intellectual” disability from birth or early childhood. Students with this diagnosis often require substantially modified instruction, assessment strategies, and learning supports throughout their schooling years to both access the general curriculum and showcase learning progress.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>No longer viewed as “a place in a school building…instead…a set of services that provide academic, behavioral, and social supports within the general education setting.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Chapter One, Summary and Conclusions, para. 4

Standards for Special Education (Alberta Learning, 2004, p. 4)

Schein (2004)

Chapter One, Culture and Leadership, para. 2-3

This is my original definition comprising disability terminology from Alberta Education (2018a) and Vehmas (2015) for a school leadership audience.

(Theoharis et al., 2016, p. 6)
Chapter Summary

Fuzzy definitions of inclusion in a century-old education structure create confusion surrounding students with severe intellectual disabilities in high school learning environments. This confusion is a problem for the field of inclusive education leadership. This research study of a high school learning support team will create knowledge that will enhance leaders’ understanding of the work of a learning support team striving to successfully include students with severe intellectual disabilities amid cultural resistance to disability in education. Understanding the work of the learning support team will help inform leadership practice by clarifying the process of inclusive education for high school students with severe intellectual disabilities in one high school and district in Alberta. Participants’ stories will be told and interpreted through a critical ethnographic research lens to answer the research question, *how does a learning support team for high school students with severe intellectual disabilities inform inclusive leadership practice?*

In the following chapters, I provide a critical literature review of relevant research (Chapter Two), introduce the research design (Chapter Three), highlight the findings (Chapters Four and Five), analyze and discuss the findings (Chapter Six), and summarize implications for practice and for future research (Chapter Seven).
Chapter Two: Literature Review

The first step in the literature review process was to establish search criteria referencing critical elements of the research question along with careful application and contextual grounding from the terms of reference. The full phrase ‘learning support team’ became the primary inclusion criteria, but the articles must also have clearly referenced LSTs in relation to ‘disability’ matters and formal school ‘leadership’ matters in inclusive education. Ravitch and Riggan (2017) cautioned about the importance of rigor and reason over what can become overwhelming convenience sampling when developing a literature review. I focused on the problem of inconsistency when leading inclusive education for students with severe intellectual disabilities. Specifically, I questioned how the work of the inclusive learning support team (LST) was seen by educators to inform high school leadership practices. However, knowledge about disability LSTs in high schools was not readily apparent in literature. Therefore, search criteria were broadened to include LSTs from all K-12 educational contexts and then condensed and interpreted for a high school principalship audience.

With search criteria established, I searched for empirical, English language articles using Google Scholar and eight educationally relevant research databases. In the University of Calgary’s Taylor Family Digital Library these databases were named: Education Research Complete, Academic Search Complete, Academic Search Elite, Canadian Reference Centre, eBook Collection (EBSCOhost), ERIC, Research Starters Education and Teacher Reference Centre. I also reviewed two relevant guidelines for practice currently in use in Alberta schools. The first was Alberta Learning’s (2004) Standards for Special Education. As of completion of this study, this was the most current provincially mandated guide containing specific expectations for educational programming for students with severe intellectual disabilities. The
second was Alberta Education’s (2018b) *Leadership Quality Standard*; this guide supports inclusive leadership practice among school principals and took affect September 1, 2019. This chapter represents a flow of conceptual discovery, critique, and reflection during preparations for implementing a conceptual framework for research. The framework is designed to describe and interpret how learning support teams can or do include high school students with severe intellectual disabilities (Chapter Three).

This literature review is organized into five major section headings that are introduced as follows. First, I offer an account of the evolution of leadership theories and practices that led to my alignment with Schein (2004)—the major theoretical perspective laced throughout this study. Second, I present a brief overview of the historical context of inclusive education. Third, I provide a critique of the relationship between the principal and the team including a review of policies and LST models in practice in K-12 schools. Fourth, I present an exploration of the development of the team. Fifth and sixth, respectively, I lay out investigative arguments related to inclusive responsibilities of the team and dilemmas facing the team. Finally, I offer a brief section on building more inclusive schools. The chapter ends with a summary and critique of the literature and a conceptual framework for research.

**Evolution of Leadership Theories and Practices**

History has us thinking of schools as unchanging mechanical structures under the influences of lone leaders (Kowch, 2013b; Wren & Bedeian, 2009), yet some contemporary leadership scholars think of schools as *complex adaptive systems* of people who are capable of change and of changing systems (Cabrera et al., 2018; Goldstein et al., 2011; Kowch, 2013a). These scholars emphasize the importance of establishing a collective vision and mission for
leadership to help lead people in complex systems (like a high school) toward desired goals like inclusive education for every student (Shogren et al., 2015).

Inclusive instructional leadership is a relatively new concept requiring entirely new forms of thinking than have worked in the past (Robinson, 2017). Robinson’s research finds that there are new instructional leadership theories that must be developed due in part to the increased diversity of students in today’s inclusive schools (Robinson, 2010). Her research points out that how principals and developing school leaders are encouraged to hone their beliefs and values about inclusive education is very often a matter of philosophical debate based on evidence-informed research and personal experience. In these debates and discussions, not everyone progresses along the same path or ends up with the same favourable inclination or leader capabilities towards inclusive education.

Early instructional leadership theorizing focused principals’ attention on directing and correcting teacher instruction, assuming that “the behaviours of teachers” could be managed to improve student learning outcomes (Leithwood et al., 1999, p. 8). This thinking coincided with the traditions of industrial era school management in Western societies (Ravitch & Riggan, 2017). During the epoch where effective schools (Leithwood) thinking emerged, students with severe intellectual disabilities were not part of general education classrooms or schools. This meant that neither traditional school leaders (principals) nor teams of leaders in those schools were engaged with students with severe intellectual disabilities (Andrews & Lupart, 2000).

Education leadership scholars agree that principals share in a collaborative responsibility for school success with teachers, parents, and students (Hallinger & Heck, 2010a, 2010b; Harris, 2008). This means that leadership tasks—like inclusive education policy enactment—could be ‘distributed,’ or shared, among colleagues in a school instead of heaped upon one principal.
(Gronn, 2002). Harris (2013) highlights that increasing the quality of leadership in schools is of paramount importance as we move through the 21st century. Thus becoming a principal is about capability over title and fostering relationships among staff over singular decision-making. In turn, the very process of distributed leadership can allow for genuine collaboration among colleagues, and this can generate new ideas as new branches of leaders emerge (Goldstein et al., 2011; Kowch, 2021). This concept of collaboration and the distribution of power informs this study about learning support teams in an Alberta high school setting.

Also informing this study is Cobb (2015) who has done extensive work summarizing North American research regarding the relationship between special education and principals who are striving to be inclusive of all students. Cobb concludes that targeted professional development at both pre and post service domains would serve principals well in better managing the oft disproportionate attention they give to their roles as special education leaders. I question how I might design research that addresses Cobb’s recommendation on behalf of principals who are searching for support in their inclusive leadership roles.

In my doctoral thesis, I explore how I might add new, evidence-informed research to the field. Schein’s (2004) theory of organizational culture and leadership conveys the importance of integrating oneself into the fabric of an organization before one can begin to understand and critique its cultural milieu. In my study, the cultural milieu is more than what a principal can create alone. It is about an inclusive learning support team for students with severe intellectual disabilities in an Alberta high school. Indeed, this shared or team-oriented leadership thinking shaped my intent for research, such that a large part of the conceptual framework development was guided by this theoretical orientation to Schein, as introduced in Chapter One. Emerging from cultural leadership and Schein’s work, the next section discusses the historical context of
inclusive education and how it interrupts the cultures of both general and special education leadership.

**Historical Context of Inclusive Education**

At the onset of inclusive education reform initiatives in the early 1990s, Skrtic et al. (1996) referred to the standard general and special education systems of that time as an unwitting machine bureaucracy which negatively affected teachers’ ability to think independently and to “adapt their practices to the actual needs of their students” (p. 145). Strong opposition to inclusive education for students with severe intellectual disabilities arose from both general and special education professionals in support of continuing the tradition of the self-contained classroom as the best placement option for these students. For example, Kauffman (1999), a leader in the field of special education, viewed inclusion as an appendage to their working (well-oiled) professional practices and Fuchs and Fuchs (1995) argued that inclusion was a shaky reform initiative that may benefit some students but not others.

More robust inclusion reform initiatives across school districts in recent decades have offered—for the first time in education’s history—the opportunity for researchers to compare inclusive and segregated placement decisions in relation to this population (Carter et al., 2011; Feldman et al., 2016; Kuntz & Carter, 2019). These three studies emphasized the academic and social benefits of peer interactions between students with and without severe intellectual disabilities when they learn within inclusive classrooms. In fact, this dissertation will show results pointing to a real and pressing need for collaborative leadership amongst those who work in (and who support those who work in) inclusive classrooms.
Causton-Theoharis et al. (2011) examined six self-contained, special education classrooms across the United States and found that many of the promises these segregated programs purported to give students were not being realized. Namely, students were not a) receiving behavioural supports; b) accessing a robust, specialized curriculum; c) working in less distracting learning environments; or d) gaining a sense of community in their specialized classes. The results of Causton-Theoharis et al. would make most leaders think inclusive learning was indeed a better option.

In contrast, Theoharis and Causton (2016) completed a case study of a school’s attempt to be more inclusive and found that the school had “overloaded” some regular classes with students with disabilities, calling this approach inclusive. This practice had become so obvious over the years that parents of middleclass families who did not have students with disabilities were writing to the school principal asking for their kids not to be in an “inclusion class” so they could “have a break” (Theoharis & Causton, p. 43). Theoharis and Causton also found disproportionate numbers of black and racially profiled students staying in a self-contained classroom in the same school. Those study results would leave some leaders questioning how to make inclusion more accessible to marginalized students and more equitable overall.

Discrepancies in the literature continue to confuse school leaders about inclusive education for students with severe intellectual disabilities. Due to the varying approaches to inclusive education, school leaders have a lack of clarity regarding what to do, who to work with and how to include this population. While I define inclusive education specifically (Table 1.1), the heart of this study lies in more critical assumptions about inclusive leadership in high schools supporting students with severe intellectual disabilities, teachers and others. In the next section I
consider the literature helping to describe a relationship between members of the learning support team (LST) and the principal (the cultural leader) of a school.

**Relationship Between the Principal and the Learning Support Team (LST)**

Principals face increasing demands to lead *inclusive* special education services in this province (Alberta Education, 2018b). To be successful in this regard, both general and special educators must be supported to learn a new organizational culture that champions inclusive teamwork on behalf of students. Such a cultural shift from separate job roles of the past can be hard to overcome (Skrtic, 1991). Schein (2004) was a catalyst for me when thinking about and critiquing this emergent practice in the Alberta context:

> When we pose the issue of perpetual learning in the context of cultural analysis, we confront a paradox. Culture is a stabilizer, a conservative force, a way of making things meaningful and predictable. Many management consultants and theorists have asserted that “strong” cultures are desirable as a basis for effective and lasting performance. But strong cultures are by definition stable and hard to change. …[I]s it possible to imagine a culture that, by its very nature, is learning oriented, adaptive, and flexible? Can one stabilize perpetual learning and change? What would a culture that favored perpetual learning and flexibility look like? (Schein, Chapter 19, Overview section, para. 2)

Schein’s theory was focused on organizational learning, professional growth and systems change through a leader’s ability to create interest in, and spaces for, new norms to develop. Likewise, the relationship of the LST with a school’s cultural leader should be one of perpetual learning and flexibility over managerial directives. According to Schein, the changed conditions of a school would require both exploration and adoption of new cultural norms on the part of the
team and the principal. Thus, inclusive education is not simply a directive to be implemented by a principal; rather, it requires an exploration and adoption of new cultural norms by everyone involved.

Alberta Learning (2004) mandated the establishment of a ‘learning team’ to consult, plan together and problem-solve on behalf of the students they support; yet this guide did not elaborate on the principal’s relationship with this team other than to review the team’s written recommendations for reporting and funding purposes. With no explicit indication of a principal’s role on the learning support team, many principals remain indifferent to the needs of the team altogether (Irvine et al., 2010).

In Australia, Prosser et al. (2002) found similar policy that determined the LST would “develop a targeted management plan (including social and behavioural interventions) for every student with learning problems resulting from [a disability]” (p. 71). In both this and the Alberta Learning (2004) reference, the leadership approach was more managerial than change-oriented meaning that the interpretation of disability education was left to individual members of LSTs without leadership oversight. This is significant given the traditionally separate policies and practice models found among general and special educators and the desired shift, overall, towards more inclusive leadership among both groups of professionals.

**Policies in Practice**

A guideline for practice is meant to outline policies and procedures for educators. Yet the *Standards for Special Education* (Alberta Learning, 2004), is nearly 20 years old. Given the evolution of inclusive education, I question how these policies and procedures are being
interacted by special and general educators and by school principals in contemporary inclusive schools.

Despite the aging of documents, most scholarly literature is clear or implicit that access to an LST by an exceptional student happens mainly through a disability diagnosis; policies are then put in place for principals in their schools as a way of managing personnel time and budgetary constraints. However, this can be a problem where diagnosis of a severe intellectual disability requires specialists and/or unique needs that cannot be accommodated by the ‘normal’ administrative structures and functions implied in most literature. For example, Prosser et al. (2002) compared special education policy and practices in Australia, the UK, and the United States (US) and concluded by cautioning school leaders that diagnostic policies served to maintain a separate system of supports for more disadvantaged students. Further, they projected that continued improvement in, and dependence on, psychological testing as a predicate for supporting exceptional students would mean “special educators will increasingly be expected to provide interventions” (p. 65). Prosser et al. were concerned that well-meaning psychological advancements would lead to more demand and policy forcing school leader dependence on specialized learning support services in systems that were not set up to support these students inclusively.

Mulholland’s (2017) review of inclusive education policies in New South Wales, Australia provided another example of the need for leadership’s oversight on issues of inclusive teamwork in schools. Mulholland identified that a 2014 policy from the Department of Education and Communities was worded to clarify that the members of the learning support team were to assist the classroom teacher. This policy could be interpreted to mean that the general classroom teacher was not an intrinsic part of the learning support team. Mulholland confirmed this
interpretation by explaining that members of the LST in this study were considered specialist advisors for some students rather than full partners in teaching all students.

Policies supporting continued separation of professional thinking and practices severely constrain a fundamental inclusion reform success theory. Newer theory for service and leadership support comes from the educational psychology and disability studies canon, and it requires a paradigm shift in general and special education practices (Skrtic, 1991) informed by (new) inclusion policy. Mulholland (2017) understood the importance of this paradigm shift: “It is this learning and support team, along with the principal, who are responsible for allocating time and resources” (p. 11). Mulholland’s reflections invoke an image of a principal working alongside an LST made up of general and special educators to allocate appropriate time and resources in an inclusive school. How, then, do these two professional forces work together to curb cultural resistance surrounding students with severe intellectual disabilities in schools striving to be inclusive?

Models in Practice

Schein (2004) helped inform the importance of studying culture within professional practice models as opposed to studying culture as an open-ended abstraction:

We must avoid the superficial models of culture and build on the deeper, more complex anthropological models…. Culture as a concept will be most useful if it helps us to better understand the hidden and complex aspects of life in groups, organizations, and occupations, and we cannot obtain this understanding if we use superficial definitions. (Chapter One, Culture: An Empirically Based Abstraction section, para. 6)
Correspondingly, two K-12 LST models surfaced during the literature review that helped address a professional culture shift towards inclusive education for high school students with severe intellectual disabilities. The first was called Response to Intervention (RTI); the second, a Pyramid of Intervention Approach.

**Response to Intervention (RTI).** McIntosh et al. (2011) studied the growth of RTI in provinces across Canada and championed the model for its shift in special education thinking that has resulted in more students learning successfully in inclusive classrooms. RTI has its roots in a systemic change initiative driven by school psychologists who want to become less purveyors of traditional assessments (i.e., specialized ‘placement police’) and more collaborators of contemporary special education practices that promote inclusion. However, RTI still expects an eventual separation of services for students with the most complex learning support needs, further complicating any hope of refining inclusive education for students with severe intellectual disabilities.

**Pyramid of Intervention Approach.** A second model in practice came from research on a school district in Alberta. Howery et al. (2013) described a three tiered ‘continuum of services’ model for special education interventions designed specifically for use in inclusive schools. Howery’s team offered their Pyramid of Intervention Approach (Figure 2.1) as a “visual reference tool” to assist both general and special education professionals in shifting their thinking from traditionally separate job roles to a shared responsibility for “reaching every learner and creating accessible universally designed learning environments” (p. 295). The visual model places emphasis on school and district-wide supports, referred to as universal interventions, at the instructional level (base of the pyramid) so that teachers are supported to do their best work and students—whether needing disability-related supports or not—are supported
to showcase their best learning in a natural, well-supported instructional environment. Howery et al. acknowledged that there are some students who benefit from small group or targeted teaching and learning interventions (middle level) and others who require intensive and/or individualized approaches to accessing curriculum and showcasing learning (top level).

Figure 2.1 Pyramid of Intervention Model

![Pyramid of Intervention Model](source)

Source: Howery, McClellan and Pederson-Bayus (2013) p. 279. Reprinted with permission (see Appendix A: Copyright Permission).

By universal supports, Howery et al. is referring to the theory and practice of Universal Design for Learning or UDL (Gordon et al., 2014). The success of UDL for students with severe intellectual disabilities depends upon all members of their support team being united with the same approach to teaching and learning inclusively. This unity becomes problematic when, for instance, general and special educators have differences of opinion on how, when, or where to educate these students inclusively. Principals are often called in to mitigate these differences of opinion (Cobb, 2015).
Howery et al.’s (2013) three-tiered pyramid is meant to illustrate the additional supports that students in the upper levels would receive while still accessing UDL in the natural instructional environment. “The greater the focus on enhancing universal and targeted interventions/support the less likely students will require the more intensive form of intervention” (Howery et al., p. 279). However, the separated tiers leave room for interpretation among the traditionally separate professions of general and special education. Further, the inclusive supports necessary in the “intensive/individualized” tier—where most students with severe intellectual disabilities end up—are left ambiguous.

Howery et al. (2013) indicated problems with consistency of implementation across schools in the district. This suggested resistance to inclusion reform and differences in how principals and LSTs were interpreting the model for use in their schools. While the model offered a fresh perspective on making special education supports more inclusive, Howery et al. admitted the model was a theoretical perspective in the early stages of practical testing and welcomed further related research. Inevitably, without greater clarity, the pyramid approach will be deemed unsustainable by those who oppose full inclusion for students who require the more intensive or individualized supports.

This model became a useful tool for me during data collection and analysis and is revisited in the preliminary reconstructive analysis of the learning support team (Chapter Four). A cultural analysis (Carspecken, 1996) of the LST’s work to implement top level supports inclusively for students with severe intellectual disabilities may prove a valuable study for inclusive leadership. Members of the LST working in the “intensive/individualized” tier of Howery et al.’s (2013) model specialize in some skillful inclusive practices and therefore the leadership of these team members becomes an important part of the success of the team. The
linchpin of this kind of study would be the principal’s awareness of, and involvement in, the LST’s implementation process.

**Development of the Team**

Principles from RTI suggest that a principal is responsible for developing the leadership capacity of a school psychologist, as well as other members of an LST, for inclusive intervention purposes (McIntosh et al., 2011). Alberta Education’s (2018b) *Leadership Quality Standard* also supports this conclusion. These guidelines for practice specify leadership competencies for principals. The competency titled “Developing Leadership Capacity” indicates the following:

*A leader provides opportunities for members of the school community to develop leadership capacity and to support others in fulfilling their educational roles.*

Achievement of this competency is demonstrated by indicators such as: … (e) promoting team building and shared leadership among members of the school community. (Alberta Education, 28b, p. 7).

This ‘leadership capacity building’ standard requires principals to be directly involved in the work of LSTs to help ‘promote team building and shared leadership’ in ways that promote inclusive practice.

The extent to which a principal can engage other members of their school community in clear inclusive education practices depends on how informed they are of an LST’s daily inclusive responsibilities and dilemmas. This critique leads directly back to the research question: How does a learning support team for students with severe intellectual disabilities inform inclusive leadership practice?
Responsibilities of the Team

Inclusive education is not always viewed as a top priority for leaders of learning support teams. For example, Pather (2007) attempted to study how the leadership of an LST informed an inclusive education development project in South Africa. Pather’s research was part of a larger international project initiated by Booth and Ainscow in the UK. A fundamental design feature of the larger project was the establishment of LSTs in each school to act as the “school-based team intended to support development at the school level” (p. 633). Pather’s initial intention was to report on the work of the school-based LSTs. However, this research focus suffered from lack of sustainability as leaders from the larger project’s reporting team moved away or got reassigned to other projects in their workplaces. This resulted in a dismantling of the large-scale community partnership project in Pather’s region and became, for Pather, a smaller scale case study in a community high school.

In the smaller study, Pather (2007) recognized further limitations to the design of the large scale study that would have continued to hinder reporting success had its original participants been able to continue. For instance, the community school study revealed that the large-scale project was not viewed by school administration as a wholly inclusive approach for the school. Pather stated, “The work of the LST at Shleni High was seen as having its own agenda which was separate from the general development processes at school” (p. 636). Pather also learned that members of the LST involved in the project had been hand-picked by the principal as “favorites” for the project and were not naturally selected by nature of job roles closely associated with the students in the study. When it came time for Pather to ask questions about the inclusion of those students, the participants involved had limited understanding of their purpose on the LST and could not speak in depth about the inclusive intervention supports in
place for students. Also alarming to Pather was the discovery that this school’s LST had kept “no documented records of their work since its establishment” (p. 365). This meant Pather was “unable to establish exactly what they had accomplished over the last year” (p. 365). Pather’s study found insufficient committed leadership involvement, coupled with a lack of formal documentation from meetings and proceedings. These are important research design considerations that are overcome in my study by designing research that starts with a committed, self-identifying principal who will allow a researcher behind the scenes of individual program planning efforts.

Pather (2007) mentioned plans for a follow-up article showcasing the “reconstitution” of the LST in the same school and foreshadowed that the team eventually became more naturally selected and teacher driven (as opposed to principal orchestrated). Pather (2011) provided a follow up to the original study. As anticipated, it gives evidence and support for a school-wide inclusion reform initiative complete with examples of students being included and some minor mentions of resistance to the process.

Pather (2011) missed an opportunity to track the leadership responsibilities of the LST and school administration as they embarked on a school wide inclusion initiative. Instead, only the end-product—evidence that students with disabilities were being successfully included—was reported. Further, Pather’s (2011) participant sampling revealed that the inclusion projects in South Africa in both 2007 and 2011 were focused primarily on students with physical disabilities and not on other disability populations such as students with severe intellectual disabilities. While Pather (2011) reinforced inclusive education’s benefits (and educational leadership’s general appetite for inclusion), this article reinforced the research problem in my study. Creating and maintaining inclusive education for students with severe intellectual disabilities is not always
an obvious responsibility for principals to manage or lead in their schools; yet making schools more inclusive is the established goal despite ambiguities.

**Leadership Dilemmas Facing the Team**

Inclusive decision making is complex when it involves students with severe intellectual disabilities; still, even skeptical scholars show evidence of a sincere desire to surmount resistance and stay focused on better-educating and inclusively supporting students with severe intellectual disabilities. To illustrate, Head-Dylla (2009) provided a detailed case study of the complex leadership decisions principals must make when balancing multiple agendas, perspectives and philosophies on inclusive education for students with severe intellectual disabilities. Head-Dylla presented the case of inclusion for a student named Bryan. She stressed the need for principals to explore all options and to weigh the cultural agendas being presented from multiple perspectives on the issue.

When the principal in the case went beyond Bryan’s parents—who wanted an inclusive education for Bryan—he found clear support for Bryan’s inclusion from Bryan’s classmates and teachers and from parents of students without disabilities in Bryan’s grade two class. Bryan’s classmates and teachers were focused on Bryan’s positive impact in both the classroom and school community despite periodic challenges. In contrast to these positive assessments, there was a parent group who lobbied heavily to have Bryan relocated out of their school.

Head-Dylla (2009) reported that, internally, the students, teachers and support staff did not blame Bryan for what seemed to them to be extreme sensitivities to something, or someone, in the classroom. The example shared in this study had caused him to bolt away down the hallway. It was clear that Bryan’s support team at the school was committed to helping him.
adjust to surprises and regulate himself with supports; albeit they were all still learning about what those supports needed to be.

The sum of the Head-Dylla research findings is:

1) The principal was unsure his school team could provide the necessary supports Bryan needed and recommended a special (behavioural intervention) school placement.

2) Bryan was moved to that special school mid-year and began exhibiting new and worse behavioural outbursts and was regressing academically.

3) Upon hearing of Bryan’s regressions, the principal had second thoughts about whether he had made the best recommendation and, with the support of his school team, tried to pursue reversing his decision.

4) The parent group who opposed Bryan’s inclusion, upon hearing Bryan may be moved back into their school, threatened to go to the media which caused the principal and the district to have to consult with their lawyers in preparation for defending their decisions. The opposition parents cited “the time devoted to Bryan by teachers and the support team as excessive. They believe dealing with Bryan takes resources away from other children” (Head-Dylla, 2009, p. 43).

The analysis of these findings urges school leaders to pursue possible conclusions and philosophical debates on the issues raised without knowing the outcome of Bryan’s case.

I built on the Head-Dylla work by asking: How was the principal from Head-Dylla (2009) informed—or not—by Bryan’s learning support team? Other questions arose as to how the LST might have been utilized to educate the broader school community and to mitigate oppositional fears surrounding their inclusive work. Given the complexity of the situation, the LST must have consulted with the principal at some point in efforts to determine not only root
causes of Bryan’s challenging behaviour but also how the team could best meet his needs without compromising the needs of other students. What roles did cultural resistance and culture creation have in this case? Indeed, the principal wielded the balance of power despite being somewhat removed from the classroom culture that was created by the teacher, Bryan, his classmates, and Bryan’s supporting education assistants. Despite difficulties and uncertainties related to students with severe intellectual disabilities, similar literature was rich with efforts to overcome dilemmas and foster development of more inclusive schools (Theoharis, 2008; Theoharis & Causton, 2014, 2016).

**Fostering Development of More Inclusive Schools**

Alberta Education (2018b, 2018d, 2018e) has a mandate to “help build more inclusive schools” (Alberta Education, 2018c, n.p.) by streamlining practice and policy documents between teachers, principals, and superintendents. This mandate for inclusion is similar in other school districts, yet how these mandates relate to students with severe intellectual disabilities remains somewhat elusive. Eisenman et al. (2015), as one example, spent five years researching inclusive change initiatives in a US state school district that wanted to develop an inclusive high school. Eisenman et al. stated, “We gained entry to this new public school… through the district superintendent and principal, who were interested in working with the university to support professional development and research” (p. 102). Eisenman et al. reported on a sub-study of the larger inclusive development project. They were focused on the experiences of students with disabilities who were being included in that high school as it underwent the larger-scale cultural change initiative. Referring to a student with a disability who was summarizing their inclusive high school experience, the article title began with “I think I’m reaching my potential” (p. 101).
Eisenman et al. (2015), offered evidence that students with severe intellectual disabilities were not part of their participant sample nor were these students included in the larger inclusive school development project. In their discussion of limitations, Eisenman et al. recalled:

“Although Clearview was not serving students with significant cognitive [i.e., intellectual] disabilities at the time of this study, the district’s decision to create a school with no separate classes was a major shift in their provision of special education services” (p. 103). Eisenman et al. explained that “Students with the most significant cognitive disabilities were served in only one of the district’s schools where they participated in a separate life skills program” (p. 103). This study of the experiences of students in a community school newly developing its inclusive practices is recent (2015), yet school leaders did not have to include students with severe intellectual disabilities because the district still recommended those students be schooled in a separate school with a separate curriculum. I wonder if Head-Dylla’s (2009) example of Bryan’s negative student experience at the specialized school might be comparable to the students in this district’s life skills program. Specifically, what do these students’ opportunities for self-determination look like? Do they think they are reaching their potential?

Eisenman et al. (2015) provided significant reflection and research guidance for producing a high school study focused on inclusion reform with specific reference to students with severe intellectual disabilities. Such a study would necessarily involve the learning support team as representative leaders for the students themselves because these students do not often have the expressive language skills or cognitive awareness that students in Eisenman et al.’s study had.
Summary and Critique of the Literature

Learning support teams (LSTs) are internationally recognized as critical support structures for students with severe intellectual disabilities. They must fundamentally collaborate with the school principal for complex leadership decision-making (Head-Dylla, 2009). The complexities of inclusive school leadership require a principal’s reliance on others especially for intensive and individualized supports in the inclusive classroom (Howery et al., 2013).

From the review, scholarly literature is somewhat silent on who these teams are and how they work together to inform inclusive leadership in high schools. By adopting Howery et al.’s (2013) pyramid approach and focusing primarily on the top tier, “intensive/individualized” supports, I hope to add clarity to confusion surrounding inclusive education for students with severe intellectual disabilities. I will identify who makes up this “top tier” learning support team in a high school and describe their work in such a way that high school principals will understand and benefit. That is, I will look for evidence of a paradigm shift from separate to combined job roles of general and special educators when educating these students in complex inclusive classrooms (Kowch, 2021; Mulholland, 2017). I will explore the potential for leadership among members of the learning support team (Howery et al., 2013; McIntosh et al., 2011). I will observe the team’s ability to identify students’ individual support needs and how they intervene inclusively to realize students’ learning potential (Eisenman et al., 2015; Head-Dylla, 2009; Prosser et al., 2002). I will capture participants’ beliefs and values about inclusive education for students with severe intellectual disabilities (Kowch, 2019). Finally, I will examine the team’s ability to lead inclusive policy and initiate inclusive reform that is supported by a district (Eisenman et al., 2015). Much of this will be accomplished through observations and interviews of members of an inclusive learning support team.
Eisenman et al. (2015) assessed the outcome of pro-inclusive education studies with caution. That is, amid interpretations of inclusion as a worthwhile school and district initiative, inclusion research has not yet adequately addressed what this looks like when students with severe intellectual disabilities are the subject of the inclusion. A counter argument to that general statement, and in respect for the limitations of this literature review, is that there are those, such as Eisenman et al., who have devoted their research careers to studying disability-related inclusion reform in schools. Thus, research evidence for what disability-related inclusion reform looks like, and why it is important, might already be sufficient.

I conducted a search of disability-related LSTs in high school contexts, and found few articles that actually mentioned the LST team enough to indicate they were involved, in an unknown capacity, in supporting students towards realizing their academic potential. Schein (2004) offers a possible explanation for why this might be: “We recognize cultural differences at the ethnic or national level, but find them puzzling at the group, organizational, or occupational level” (Chapter One, What Needs to Be Explained section, para. 2). In sum, the concept of inclusive leadership (or inclusive school change agentry) being informed by a learning support team for students with severe intellectual disabilities remains an under-studied phenomenon.

**Conceptual Framework for the Research**

This section charts the conceptual framework for the research. Table 2.1 compares the research question components next to the theoretical elements found from scholarship that addressed those parts of the research question. This conceptual framework informed the research design (Chapter Three).
Table 2.1

*Conceptual Framework for the Research*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Question Component</th>
<th>Theoretical/Empirical/Policy Recommendations</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A learning support team (How does it work?)</td>
<td>Distributed leadership</td>
<td>Gronn (2002); Harris (2013)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Generative leadership</td>
<td>Goldstein et al. (2011); Kowch (2021)</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>May require a professional paradigm shift</td>
<td>Kowch (2021); Mulholland (2017)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Individual and collective leadership</td>
<td>Head-Dylla (2009); Howery et al. (2013)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Capable of leading inclusive instruction</td>
<td>Robinson (2017)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For students with severe intellectual disabilities</td>
<td>Identify student’s inclusive learning support needs</td>
<td>Howery et al. (2013); McIntosh et al. (2011); Prosser et al. (2002)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provide intensive and individualized inclusive intervention to realize learning potential</td>
<td>Head-Dylla (2009); Howery et al. (2013)</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td>Universal Design for Learning (UDL)</td>
<td>Gordon et al. (2014)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Be proactive in the partnership</td>
<td>Eisenman et al. (2015)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inform inclusive leadership practice</td>
<td>Inform individual beliefs and values through research and theorizing</td>
<td>Kowch (2019)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Initiate whole school reform supported by the district</td>
<td>Eisenman et al. (2015); Pather (2007, 2011)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Lead consultations with school and district personnel, parents, and students  
Inform professional development for principals

Head-Dylla (2009)  
Cobb (2015)

Chapter Summary

The literature review process enhanced my understanding of how learning support teams for students with severe intellectual disabilities were being researched in Alberta, in Canada and internationally. I learned that the work of LSTs was somewhat distanced from formal school leadership and that their primary expectation was to submit reports and recommendations for funding purposes. I also learned there is a desire from some members of LSTs to develop their leadership capacities and that principals rely on leadership within LSTs for successful problem-solving. The resulting conceptual framework for this study frames how I will describe, interpret and analyze leader team inclusion by answering the research question using a critical ethnography research design. The next chapter detailing study design expands on the components of this conceptual framework by expounding on a plan to study a high school learning support team in pursuit of inclusive education for students with severe intellectual disabilities.
Chapter Three: Research Design

This chapter details the research methodology and methods taken to answer the research question and problem through inquiry and analysis. First, my epistemology and ontology are examined, then an overview of the methodology and a rationale for choosing critical ethnography is explained. Next, I outline methods and procedures which introduce the research setting and participants along with their selection criteria and procedures for data collection and analysis. Ethical considerations are also defined in four sections: (1) participant anonymity and confidentiality; (2) degree of risk and ownership of data; (3) reliability and trustworthiness; and (4) the research timeline. The chapter finishes with a discussion of the study’s limitations and delimitations.

Epistemology and Ontology

A researcher’s epistemology and ontology about education and research inform research designs. My epistemology stems from a practical knowledge and interpretation of contemporary critical theory (Crotty, 1998; Freire, 1970). Specifically, I view dialogue between people of opposing worldviews as essential for advancing humanity’s ability to live well together. It is through these problem-posing conversations that individuals of different classes and power differentials are often compelled to realize oppressive forces in society that were once hidden from their consciousness.

A disability studies scholar and a parent of a child with a disability, Ware (2004), states that while critical theory has a long and respected legacy in educational contexts, critical theorists themselves rarely address ‘disability education’ issues in their writing and theorizing. In effort to address this gap in the literature and research in education, Ware favoured a disability
ontology in critical education research. I adopted a disability ontology in my critical research pursuits and interpret this to mean the following: ‘Disabled’ bodies are as much a part of this world as ‘abled’ bodies and academic research, especially inclusive education research, should serve to advance practical understandings of how to ‘enable’ all human bodies to live, work, play and learn together. There is no separate world option available, so our community schools are a good place to start learning how to live well together.

Swedish disability studies in education scholar, Vehmas (2015), has studied the moral and political significance of disability and helped to explicate disability ontology. Vehmas explained disability ontology, in part, as a belief system of persons with severe intellectual disabilities as fully human. I interpret this to mean they are also fully worthy and capable of being students in every aspect of the public schooling experience. In the context of inclusive education then, adopting a disability ontology means that being counted worthy of participation does not depend on intellectual capacity.

Methodology

The research question emphasized a need to describe the work of a team striving to include students with severe intellectual disabilities and how their work informs a principal’s inclusive leadership practice. As a qualitative researcher, I considered all five of Creswell’s (2007) approaches to qualitative research design when choosing an appropriate methodology: (1) narrative inquiry; (2) phenomenology; (3) grounded theory; (4) case study; and (5) ethnography. Having previously ruled out narrative inquiry, grounded theory and case study through the literature review process, I turned to Creswell’s Table 7.1 on pages 120-121 for help in considering phenomenology or ethnography as possible methodologies.
My critical analysis of these methodologies for application in research about LST leaders in the complex context of including students with severe intellectual disabilities meant levering school leader and team descriptions with my own experience in the area, to find the best method for describing team dynamics and leadership. Thus, it was not so much the phenomenon I was interested in describing; it was the experiences of my research participants and how their experiences informed inclusive leadership practice in a school. I anticipated that participants’ understandings about leading inclusive education for high school students with severe intellectual disabilities would vary as widely as their contributions to the team’s work to include students and to inform the school principal. This rationale led me to conclude that ethnography was an appropriate approach to research design because I could tell and interpret their story. However, I needed to do more to ensure that my own unique critical skills and professional experience as a disability advocate and inclusive education consultant could bring deeper levels of description and analysis to such complex phenomena in a school/district.

Creswell (2007) explained that an ethnography draws upon differences in a group’s shared experiences and that ethnographic methods can help researchers better describe, interpret and understand cultural groups that are not well known. According to Creswell:

Ethnography is appropriate if the needs are to describe how a cultural group works and to explore the beliefs, language, behaviors, and issues such as power, resistance, and dominance. The literature may be deficient in actually knowing how the group works because the group is not in the mainstream, people may not be familiar with the group, or its ways are so different that readers may not identify with the group. (p. 70)

The literature review established a paucity of scholarly literature surrounding school leadership of or within ‘this group’ and the readings highlighted many of the peculiarities found in the
culture of schools. It is therefore plausible for me to become “immersed in the day-to-day lives of the people and observe…interview…. [and] study the meaning of behavior, the language, and the interaction among members of the culture-sharing group” (Creswell, 2007, pp. 68-69).

Conducting a traditional ethnography would require a descriptive account of how an LST informs inclusive leadership practice only. I was concerned not only with describing what is, but with discovering “what could be” (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 243). This was the difference between choosing a simple ethnography and critical ethnography, where some of my own experience in the background of the inquiry would help me to gather learning support team member stories and to interpret the leadership ecosystem that is shaping their ability to include high school students with severe intellectual disabilities. This is particularly true, as I was not sure what the team structure, composition and dynamics might be, especially since I was including an inquiry gaze on both district and school personnel who might be found on the LST.

**Critical Ethnography**

Creswell (2007) defined critical ethnography as a “type of ethnography [that] examines cultural systems of power, prestige, privilege, and authority in society. Critical ethnographers study marginalized groups from different classes, races, and genders, with an aim of advocating for the needs of these participants” (p. 241). Reflecting on what is known about LSTs for students with severe intellectual disabilities, from the literature review, LSTs do not yet have a strong research voice nor a known leadership presence in high school education despite evidence of their pivotal importance in facilitating social and academic success for students.

Cohen et al. (2011) explained that critical ethnography sets itself apart from other ethnographic studies in that critical theory is its foundational basis for the interpretation and
analysis of data. Schwandt’s (2015) definition aligns with the theoretical orientation for this study as it supports the need to expose and address cultural practices in organizations that hinder social progress:

   Critical ethnographic studies of social practices and cultural institutions specifically aim to criticize the taken-for-granted social, economic, cultural, and political assumptions and concepts (e.g., family, work, self, agency, power, conflict, race, class, gender) of Western, liberal, middle-class, industrialist, capitalist societies. (Schwandt, 2015, p. 47)

Interestingly, ‘disability’ did not make it into Schwandt’s list of taken-for-granted assumptions and concepts, lending further support for culturally sensitive research in that area. Certainly, I do not wish to criticize anyone or call out well-meaning participants for less-than-ideal cultural practices. Rather, my challenge, as critical ethnographer, was to identify and analyze taken-for-granted assumptions about inclusive education for students with severe intellectual disabilities in ways that surmount antagonistic ‘inclusion’ discourses of both inclusive and special education practices. Thus, the critical ethnographic approach taken here was as a human being seeking to dialogue with other human beings mutually searching for social adherence to basic social justices, such as inclusive high school education for students with severe intellectual disabilities (Freire, 1970; Vehmas, 2015). Yet there were risks involved in adopting this approach.

*Risks of Critical Ethnography*

Carspecken (1996) understood that there are those who view value-laden research as problematic for producing scholarly research, yet appreciated that values form researcher and professional epistemology. Creswell (2007) agreed, saying critical ethnographers are sometimes criticized for openly engaging in “value-laden” research and in “challenging the status quo” (p.
Indeed, my very ontology challenges the status quo of separate education for students with severe intellectual disabilities. It was therefore critical that, as a researcher, I remain open to learning from participants including their struggles and feelings of defeat in achieving full inclusion for students with severe intellectual disabilities.

In response to potential criticism of research such as this, Quantz (1992), argued that any type of research is “inescapably value-laden in that it serves some interests, and that in critical ethnography researchers must expose these interests and move participants towards emancipation and freedom” (pp. 473-474). In my study, the need to emancipate a disability population from educational stigma was obvious; documenting empirical evidence of a learning support team’s work on behalf of that population was the purpose. In the end, it was the team who decided where their values lay; I was merely an observer and reporter, albeit also an interpreter, of their shared experiences.

Schein (2004) successfully undertook similar value-laden research as he looked for factors that resisted positive change initiatives in organizations. He addressed leadership’s responsibilities for creating and shaping pathways through resistance so that organizations could change and improve. Schein counseled leaders to become more aware of their own values and of cultural issues in their organizations:

The bottom line for leaders is that if they do not become conscious of the cultures in which they are embedded, those cultures will manage them. Cultural understanding is desirable for all of us, but it is essential to leaders if they are to lead. (Chapter One, Summary and Conclusions section, para. 5)

Acknowledging values held by myself and study participants is essential for raising consciousness by offering evidence-based study about inconsistencies related to inclusive
education for students with severe intellectual disabilities. Critical ethnography helped to advance new knowledge through new research methods in an understudied area of inclusive school leadership.

**Methods and Procedures**

Schein’s (2004) advice was again helpful in designing and executing the project. He cautioned that a study of culture and leadership in an organization will remain ambiguous in its results without a distinct organizational model to study within. For this study, that organizational model is public education inclusive of an LST found in one district in one Alberta high school.

Cohen et al. (2011) recommended Carspecken (1996) for his theoretical and practical guidance for researchers applying critical ethnographic methodology in educational contexts.

Table 3.1 outlines the five stages of Carspecken’s critical ethnographic inquiry methodology.

Table 3.1

**Five Stages of Data Collection and Analysis**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Dissertation Chapter</th>
<th>Stage Description</th>
<th>Data Type</th>
<th>Instruments and Related Research Activities</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Compiling a monological record</td>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>In field observation and reflection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Preliminary reconstructive analysis</td>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>Researcher interpretation of stage 1 (cultural reconstruction)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Dialogical data collection</td>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>Interviews (via Zoom online synchronous conferencing) with participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Discovering system relations at school and district levels</td>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>Systems analysis: discovering relationships between participants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Using system relations to explain findings</td>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>Explanation of findings; answering the research question</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Carspecken called the first stage, Compiling a Monological Record; the second, Preliminary Reconstructive Analysis; the third, Dialogical Data Collection; the fourth, Discovering System Relations; and the fifth, Using System Relations to Explain Findings. My interpretation of these five stages, in terms of this research project, is explained as part of the research plan covered in this chapter. This research plan received prior approval from the University of Calgary’s Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board (CFREB). All proper names used are pseudonyms.

The report begins with an outline of the research setting and its selection criteria.

**Research Setting and Selection Criteria**

Everyday High School (EHS) was a small, rural Alberta school with a student body of 200 in grades seven through 12. Five education assistants (EAs) and a teaching staff of 14, including the principal and vice principal, were employed at the school. EHS was part of the Fall Meadows School District which, district-wide, did not have separate classes for students with disabilities.

Accessing EHS began with purposeful sampling to identify a school district in Alberta that was reasonably accessible to me (Creswell, 2007). A list of the top three districts was submitted to CFREB with Fall Meadows School District as my first preference. I was successful in establishing consent for research with Fall Meadows School District through a “key informant” (Creswell, 2007). Mr. Magnum was identified as an appropriate key informant via an online search of the district’s website. He was the Director of Learning in charge of the Inclusive Education portfolio for the district. Mr. Magnum put me in touch with the Associate Superintendent: Learning Services, who eventually gave consent for the research to occur. Figure
3.1 describes the process by which contacts were made leading to the establishment of a research setting at EHS.

Figure 3.1 Methods Process for Site Selection

During the ethics review process, a request was made for the researcher to disclose communications with Fall Meadows School District and so all email correspondence between
Mr. Magnum and myself was forwarded to CFREB, including a letter of interest written by Mr. Magnum. CFREB then approved the research study. No formal ethics application was required by Fall Meadows School District.

Mr. Magnum became a study participant ahead of any contact with district principals. He remained instrumental as a key informant through the study’s beginning stages as school districts across Alberta prepared to reopen schools in September 2020 after being closed since March 16, 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. At Mr. Magnum’s request, we waited until late September to send out a call for participants to principals to give them, and their staff, time to adjust to the reopening. In the meantime, he identified five schools which fit the following criteria for site selection:

1. Serve students in grades 7-12 or 10-12.
2. Serve students with severe intellectual disabilities in regular (inclusive) classes.
3. Is located within a reasonable travel distance for the researcher to access.

Following CFREB protocols, all five schools were contacted through a call for participants emailed out by Mr. Magnum (see Appendix B: Call for Participants – Principals). I followed up with all five principals, one of whom was Ms. Penny of Everyday High School (EHS).

**Participants and Selection Criteria**

To be selected to participate in this study, one had to be actively involved in supporting students with severe intellectual disabilities to learn inclusively at either the district or school level. Thus, not all teaching or support staff were eligible to participate, but all were contacted to allow them to come forward voluntarily. In total, eight participants came from four different
perspectives on issues associated with inclusive education for students with severe intellectual disabilities. These perspectives, the participants, and their job descriptions are outlined in Table 3.2.

Table 3.2

The Learning Support Team Composition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional Perspective</th>
<th>Participant (pseudonym)</th>
<th>Job Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>District Leaders</td>
<td>Mr. Magnum</td>
<td>Director of Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mrs. Heartright</td>
<td>Learning Support Specialist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Leaders</td>
<td>Ms. Penny</td>
<td>Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ms. Larch</td>
<td>Learning Support Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary Teachers</td>
<td>Mr. Selton</td>
<td>Jr/Sr. High Science Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ms. Marygold</td>
<td>Jr. High Math Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support Staff</td>
<td>Mrs. Applewood</td>
<td>Education Assistant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mrs. Easter</td>
<td>Education Assistant</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3.2 represents only the Learning Support Team members who volunteered to participate in this study. It is not an exhaustive list of support figures on every student’s learning support team; however, participants confirmed this was a well-rounded representation of who generally is involved at the high school level.

Site participant selection began with high school Principal, Ms. Penny, emailing a CFREB approved recruiting document (see Appendix C: Call for Participants - LST) to all 19 of her teaching and support staff (i.e., 14 teaching staff and five EAs). Of the 19 school staff originally contacted, six chose to participate in the study.
Figure 3.2 Methods Process for Site Participant Selection

Figure 3.2 depicts the emergent process by which these people came to participate in the study, following Mr. Magnum and Ms. Penny who were mentioned earlier.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

I used Carspecken’s (1996) five stage approach to data collection and analysis. Cohen et al. (2011, pp. 244-245) also provided a good overview of Carspecken’s five stages and both sources became reference tools while designing and executing this section of Chapter Three. Carspecken’s five stages of data collection and analysis were not meant to be followed in linear fashion; rather, they took me on a journey back and forth and between stages, as needed, as new
information surfaced, or as new questions emerged. It helps to think of these stages logically as summarized in Table 3.1 (above). I will now explain these critical ethnography stages.

**Stage 1: Compiling a Monological Record.** At this observation stage I was involved, as critical ethnographer, in the collection of observational data on site, at the school, without the input of others. I sought to be as unobtrusive as possible and did not require or expect others to interact with me (see Appendix D: Observation Protocol). Accordingly, not everything observed during Stage 1 was collected as data. Carspecken (1996) explained that it is the researcher’s critical eye and knowledge background that are most important in the creation of the monological record. I employed Schein’s (2004) theoretical observational lens to interpret events that transpired between participating members of the study and to determine when to start and stop observational data collection. Recorded observation sessions averaged between five and fifteen minutes and LST participants did not always know when data was being collected. However, they were aware of when I was onsite to observe them.

I spent five of the 11 days on-site becoming familiar with the look, feel, sounds, movements, and general inclusive culture of the LST, thus creating a primary research record from which to begin critically analyzing the work of the team and their interactions with the principal to support inclusive education for students with severe intellectual disabilities. Carspecken (1996) provided precise instructions for taking different types of field notes during this time. He recommended having two notebooks for “thick and thin data entry.” During thick data entries, I recorded details of events, conversations and interactions of participants as they went about their school days together. These entries included exact words of conversations, facial expressions, body language, time of day, locations and other details about the
environment. Thin data entries were reserved for reflective notetaking or reminders before or after an observed and recorded event.

**Stage 2: Preliminary Reconstructive Analysis.** This was the first level of critical analysis which involved a cultural reconstruction of the research site and participants. It involved my initial interpretations of what was recorded in Stage 1. This interpretive analysis required acute attention to ‘researcher positionality’ in the study (Cohen et al., 2011). My life experiences and background knowledge in the field of inclusive education leadership unavoidably played a role in the interpretation of data. Carspecken (1996) suggested that one way of addressing potentially problematic interpretations was to involve the participants in the very process of that interrogation. This led to the next stage of the study, the interview stage. My own interactive participation in this third stage is why it is called dialogical.

**Stage 3: Dialogical Data Collection.** While Stage 1 data collection was done on site, Stage 3 data collection occurred using Zoom technology. The option of using Zoom for interviews was in place from CFREB ethics approval and became a critical component to this study once my time on site was compromised by COVID-19.

The focus of the interviews was to discuss with participants their individual and collaborative work to support students with severe intellectual disabilities in the school (see Appendix E: Interview Questions). These questions were meant as a guide and catalyst for conversation and often led to other questions and discussion during the interviews.

**Stage 4: Discovering System Relations.** This was the second level of analysis (Carspecken, 1996; Sharp et al., 2018). The intent of Stage 4 was to “relate the group being studied to other factors that impinge on that group, e.g. local community groups, local sites that produce cultural products” (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 245). I asked participants to submit disability-
related professional development resources that they used in their work for analysis. Other points of reference for this stage came from observations of the school and townsite and the interview questions. Based on the surrounding cultural milieu of services, supports, and messaging being presented to participants, I prepared an anonymized summary report of implications and recommendations for the district’s private use as well as this scholarly report.

**Stage 5: Using System Relations to Explain Findings.** The main objective of a critical ethnography is to “make a positive difference to the worlds of the ‘Others’ (the participants)” (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 243). A principal has the explicit responsibility to oversee the success of the team on behalf of the students and to help build the team’s leadership capacity for leading learning inclusively. It became my responsibility to use ethnographic storytelling (Cohen et al., 2011) to accurately and thoroughly showcase the journey of the learning support team as they worked through cultural and systemic influences surrounding students with severe intellectual disabilities.

**Ethical Considerations**

The goal of the study was to understand how the LST for students with severe intellectual disabilities informed inclusive leadership in a school and so this goal was outlined in the informed consent forms sent to participants. What follows is a description of the informed consent process that all participants were made aware of in writing ahead of confirming their written consent to participate. This section is organized using the following subheadings: participant anonymity and confidentiality, degree of risk and ownership of data, reliability and trustworthiness, and the research timeline. The chapter then concludes with a discussion of limitations and delimitations.
Participant Anonymity and Confidentiality

Participants were given opportunity to choose their own pseudonyms or to allow me to choose one for them; all opted for the latter. Through use of Table 3.2, an aggregate report of results was generated to eliminate, or minimize, to the best extent possible, identification of participants, their school and district. However, the collaborative nature of the critical inquiry in a close contextual setting (i.e., a school) meant that most participants knew each other. Participants agreed ahead of time not to hold me responsible for how participants in the study treated others’ potentially revealing comments, questions, and individual contributions. Still, personal thoughts, questions, and experiences shared by participants may lead others outside the confines of this study to recognize participant contributions. These risks were explained in the informed consent process.

Degree of Risk and Ownership of Data

The minimal degree of risk to participants was fully disclosed to them ahead of their signing of informed consent. Participants agreed to be observed as they interacted with other study participants. In their one-to-one interviews, participants were asked to discuss personal assumptions or share personal examples. Nothing observed or asked in interviews was outside of their expected daily routines or job roles. I endeavored to provide safe, comfortable and private environments for interviews. In addition, I attempted to be as discreet as possible while observing on site. The informed consents explained that if a participant withdrew their consent after Stage 1 observations began, I reserved the right to continue the study, to the greatest degree possible, in partnership with the remaining participants. Participants were informed that their
participation was voluntary and they could have withdrawn at any time; however, all participants chose to remain part of the study.

Reliability and Trustworthiness

In an effort to keep language consistent with contemporary qualitative research approaches, Carspecken’s (1996) references to ‘validity checks’ were replaced with the term ‘reliability and trustworthiness’. Both Carspecken and Cohen et al. (2011) provided reflective thoughts for researchers in this regard (see Appendix F: Considerations for Reliability and Trustworthiness). I referenced this list continually during data collection and analysis, but found that step three, using peer debriefing to check for researcher biases, was difficult given that this was a dissertation exercise and not a collaborative research project.

Research Timeline

In 2020, when this research study was undertaken, all K-12 schools in Alberta were closed from March 16th to June 30th and reopened in September under strict regulations for social distancing and enhanced cleaning procedures. The cause was the COVID-19 pandemic and it inevitably affected data collection and analysis. Table 3.3 clarifies how this study was affected and depicts the intended timelines versus the actual timelines for the research activities undertaken at each stage.
Table 3.3

A COVID-19 Research Timeline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stage</th>
<th>Research Action</th>
<th>Intended Timeline</th>
<th>Actual Timeline</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Onsite observations/ reflections</td>
<td>Oct 19-Nov 6, 2020 (15 days, M-F)</td>
<td>Oct 19-Nov 2* and Nov 4**, 2020 (12 days)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Preliminary reconstructive analysis</td>
<td>Nov 9-13, 2020 (5 days)</td>
<td>Nov 3-6, 2020 (4 days)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Interviews (via Zoom)</td>
<td>Nov 16-20, 2020 (5 days)</td>
<td>Nov 9-13, 2020 (5 days)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Systems Analysis (discovery)</td>
<td>Nov 23-Dec 18, 2020 (4 weeks)</td>
<td>Nov 16-Dec 18, 2020 (5 weeks)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Systems Analysis (explanation)</td>
<td>Jan 4-Jan 29, 2021 (4 weeks)</td>
<td>Jan 4-29, 2021 (4 weeks)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* A case of COVID-19 at the school where there was potential close contact with me. The principal asked me to consider the risks and to vacate the site voluntarily to self-isolate. I chose to vacate the site but kept in touch with participants virtually for their interviews.

** Data was also collected using an online Zoom meeting between myself and Ms. Larch. This meeting was supposed to be in person on Nov. 3, but it was rescheduled virtually after the COVID-19 scare at the school.

Limitations and Delimitations

This research having been conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic entailed limited access to the school and posed threats to on-site visits. I did all that was possible with a policy climate of restricted interpersonal contact, school openings and closings, and other conditions to attain good data that tells a story from the LST team perspectives and then to interpret it from my conceptual and experiential base. I am grateful to have had the access that was granted given the
pandemic, health policy restrictions for university researchers, policy restrictions for education and policy restrictions governing access to EHS and Fall Meadows School District. While more on-site time, for example, would have been my preference, the time gained was within policy and the luck offered by shifting pandemic developments (as unpredictable as they were). The result is a strong description of LSTs, suiting the goals for this research very well.

This was a critical ethnographic study where significant time in the field was warranted. However, the start of data collection was delayed due to the district’s COVID-related reopening of schools. At Mr. Magnum’s urgence, my time on-site was adjusted from four weeks to three to accommodate a later start date and give principals more time to settle into their school year. Once in contact with Ms. Penny, a start date of Monday, October 19th, 2020 was agreed upon and the study moved forward with data collection scheduled for three consecutive weeks from that date. During Stage 1 observations, I established strong relationships with participants and succeeded in coordinating dates for Zoom interviews with all participants. The data collected in Stages 1 and 3 were rich in substance and were minimally affected by my early departure from the school.

Two delimitations were put in place. First, I chose to focus data collection in just one school and with just one learning support team. This major delimitation allowed for acute focus on the workings of one team of individuals with similar organizational culture and influences. I could have opened this study up to other learning support teams in other schools, especially as there were participants from the district who were familiar with multiple school teams. However, the scope of the study allowed close connections to develop amongst the participants and I, aiding in a rich and open atmosphere for data collection. A second delimitation was the request for participants to identify as being part of a learning support team; this left out potential voices
who may not have been actively supporting students with severe intellectual disabilities, but who may have provided support in the past. It also left out others who were observers of the LST’s influence in the school. In future studies I may want to grapple with these added perspectives, but in this study, I was interested only in gathering perspectives from active members of a learning support team both to maintain a reasonable scope and to maintain focus on the research question.

Chapter Summary

My critical epistemology about leading learning to serve high school students with severe intellectual disabilities, in concert with a professional disability ontology, emerged from professional practice as an inclusive education consultant. This sets the stage for my choice of critical ethnography as methodology. That is, I was most concerned with identifying and describing what could be (critical ethnography), in a system of education happening in an organization, over describing what is (simple ethnography) in a world that does not yet know much about learning support teams for students with severe intellectual disabilities.

Through a series of emergent communications with Fall Meadows School District and Everyday High School’s teaching and support staff during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, I attained eight study participants, two from the district and six from the school. Amid slightly amended research timelines due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I was able to observe for 12 days at Everyday High School and then conduct interviews with participants over Zoom. Delimitations that helped define the scope of the study included focusing on just one school in the district and asking participants to self-identify as being actively part of a learning support team.
Carspecken’s (1996) critical ethnographic research method proved to be an effective way to describe LST member action, in this instance, where I am able to describe team thinking and knowledge as they lead learning for a high school including students with severe intellectual disabilities. The method is clarified by stage in the context of this study (See Table 3.1). The following chapters in this dissertation are carefully laid out and organized to honour the critical ethnographic method, and to help readers unfamiliar with this method to understand what was found, described, analyzed and interpreted to answer the research question.
Chapter Four: Observations and a Preliminary Reconstructive Analysis

The first part of this chapter contains a summary of my monological record created during Stage 1 observations and reflections (thick and thin data entries). The second part of this chapter contains my preliminary reconstructive analysis of the learning support team. I continue with first person in this chapter because it is my own account—and my own reflection—as critical ethnographer, of what I observed at Everyday High School. Every name mentioned in the findings is a pseudonym.

A Monological Record (Observations)

Following Carspecken’s (1996) Stage 1, I present a summary of my observations that took place at Everyday High School (EHS). While I was focused on adult conversations and interactions between Learning Support Team participants at EHS, there were times when students were in the background of these conversations and interactions, depending on the structure of the classes and school environment I was able to witness. Every effort was made to minimize these student contact instances and to abide by the observational protocol approved by CFREB (see Appendix E). The following five section headings organize the flow of this review of my monological data which does, in fact describe the LST and its context while serving high school students with severe intellectual disabilities: (1) inclusive education environment; (2) formal structure of the team; (3) informal interactions of the team; (4) the learning curve of the learning support teacher; and (5) the principal’s involvement on the team.
Inclusive Education Environment

While I have several years of professional experience in high school settings, there were different and familiar experiences as I observed high school staff and administrative lives during the COVID-19 pandemic. Staff and students at EHS were subdued and almost melancholy. For example, students spent their entire days in their homeroom classrooms, seated in rows and wearing masks whenever they turned to speak to a neighbour or to get up from their desks. Instead of students moving from class to class, teachers moved from class to class which meant teachers were sharing workspaces with other teachers. Yet, the care and relationship between teachers and students, and among administrators was clear and familiar, as was the context of inclusion for students with severe intellectual disabilities in the high school.

Figure 4.1 illustrates an example of how most classrooms were set up with some variation in where teachers’ desks were placed or in the direction students’ desks faced. Students’ desks were spaced as far apart as classroom space would allow to accommodate province-wide social distancing mandates in force at the time. Instead of utilizing lockers in the hallways, students had baskets underneath their desks to hold textbooks and binders, etc. Coats were hung over the backs of chairs making students’ workspaces rather cramped and crowded. The ‘no locker use’ policy was part of COVID-19 health regulations temporarily in place at the school.
A notable difference in this grade nine class were the two desks in the back right corner that were reserved for a student, Grayson, who had a severe intellectual disability, and his education assistant (EA), Mrs. Applewood. Grayson was the subject of discussion in six out of eight of the interviews, hence the need to introduce him and the context of his education here. The placement of his desk in the back corner of the classroom is significant because, in my experience, students with severe intellectual disabilities are often placed along the margins of the classroom further excluding them from full participation. In my observations, this placement was pre-arranged by both the teacher and the EA and would have been the same regardless of COVID-social distancing policies.

Like Grayson, all students with diagnosed disabilities attended general education classes and had their educational needs met, to the greatest extent possible, in those classes. As the interview findings will demonstrate, all study participants were in favour of an inclusive mindset.
and they were doing their best to educate students with severe intellectual disabilities in regular, grade level classes. Three examples of the inclusive education environment at EHS were documented during observations.

The first inclusive education record is that of the class moving ahead on an assignment while Grayson and his EA are not present in class. Grayson was absent from school one day and as a result both he and his EA missed the start of a Science 9 unit on animal adaptations. I inquired with Mr. Selton about Grayson’s work on this assignment. Mr. Selton said, “When Grayson returns he will be doing the same assignment.” I observed, however, that in the next two Science 9 classes (when Grayson was in attendance) he was not given an opportunity to catch up on this assignment.

The second inclusive education record is an example of Grayson and his EA “present” in his Science 9 class but not really participating in the activities of the class. On one occasion, while the class worked on a different assignment, Mrs. Applewood brought an astronomy book to Mr. Selton’s attention who then said, “Oh, cool, we are doing a unit on space in January, but I guess he can do it now.” Mr. Selton and Mrs. Applewood proceeded to work with Grayson to determine which parts of the book he wanted to learn about first. At the end of this class, Mrs. Applewood brought Grayson’s attention to an assessment sheet that had a green happy face, a yellow straight face, and a red sad face on it. They decided together that he would get a “green” for this class.

The third inclusive education record is an example of an unfortunate EA staffing shortage that forced Grayson out of his Science 9 classroom. In this instance Mrs. Easter was away and Mrs. Applewood was responsible for both Grayson and Matthew (a Grade 12 student) at the same time. The result was that both students missed attending their regular classes while they
worked together in the learning resource room on activities that were not part of any curriculum. When Mr. Selton came to check on Mrs. Applewood and Grayson, Grayson asked if he could return to his science class, but Mrs. Applewood explained that they had to stay in the resource room until the bell rang. Grayson did not say anything else. Mr. Selton left and Mrs. Applewood took out another one of the green-yellow-red face pages.

Table 4.1 details these three examples from my research observations. The first record is an observation I had on my own with Mr. Selton; the latter two records are exchanges between Mr. Selton and Mrs. Applewood as they worked together to educate Grayson.

Table 4.1

*Observation: Grayson’s Science 9 Experience*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Record</th>
<th>Day/Date/Time of Data Collection</th>
<th>Thick Data Entry – Research Observations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Day 6</td>
<td>Mrs. Applewood told me a student with a severe intellectual disability (Grayson) broke his ankle at home Friday night and would not be at school today or for much of this week. I followed Mrs. Applewood upstairs to see another student off the bus. He arrived at the Learning Resource classroom prior to Mrs. Applewood. Through observations, I can conclude that this room is sometimes used for students <em>without</em> severe intellectual disabilities to write tests or catch up on work, but it is mainly used as office space for the education assistants (EAs). I sat in on Period 1, Science 9 with Mr. Selton’s permission. Normally Grayson would be there with Mrs. Applewood, but today they were absent. I sat in their designated desks – back, right corner of the classroom. Every student had an assigned desk in a row with their name on it.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The class was starting an “adaptations” project, due Monday, Nov 2\textsuperscript{nd}.

Students were given a worksheet with fill-in-the-blank questions and specifics about the project. I asked Mr. Selton for a copy of this worksheet, which he provided to me.

The question being asked the class was, “How do animals adapt to survive in their environments?”

Students were asked to put on their masks and come forward to sign out a Chrome book.

There were four steps to completing this assignment:

1. Pick an animal of interest
2. Research the habitat
3. Research adaptations – behavioural or physiological
4. Connect the adaptation to a human invention

Mr. Selton walked around classroom and answered questions.

Students kept their jackets and backpacks at their desks.

Students must wear masks when getting up from seats; they can remove them when seated and facing forward.

Mr. Selton gave the class a 10 min warning to end the period: “We’re only going to work for about 10 more minutes, then we’ll get the Chrome books put away.”

I inquired with Mr. Selton about Grayson’s work on this assignment. Mr. Selton said, “When Grayson returns he will be doing the same assignment.”

There is a sign in/out book by the door of the classroom and students write their names and the time they exit/return for washroom breaks. I wonder, Does Grayson use this sign in/out book as well?

Students got out square pieces of cloth and the teacher sprayed the cloth. Students then wiped down their Chrome books inside and out (disinfecting protocols due to COVID-19). They then placed their Chrome books in
a portable carrier that housed what looked like 25 plus Chrome books.

2  Day 8  
Wednesday  
October 28  
Period 1 (8:35-9:50 a.m.)

(22 students in class today)

Grayson and Mrs. Applewood were in class before the bell rang to start class.

Mr. Selton wrote three questions on the board and explained to the students that he would like them to take out a sheet of paper and answer these questions:

What are you feeling?
What do you need?
How do we survive until Christmas?

He explained that teachers in the school were concerned about students’ mental health during COVID and they will be collating these responses from everyone in the school and discussing them in a staff meeting this coming Monday. Students can choose to put their names on the sheets or not.

Mrs. Applewood is not listening to this explanation. She and Grayson are having their own conversation in the corner. She is talking to Grayson about things unrelated to class and is not encouraging him to listen to the teacher. Instead, she brings out a book about space and Grayson begins to flip through it.

As students are quietly filling in their responses, Mrs. Applewood says to Mr. Selton (as he walks around classroom), “Look what Ms. Penny gave us!” Mr. Selton says, “Oh, cool, we are doing a unit on space in January, but I guess he can do it now.” The two have a discussion with Grayson about what three things he would like to learn about space. Mr. Selton writes down what they come up with:

- International space station
- Planets
- Stars

Mr. Selton then asks Grayson what he’d like to learn about first and Grayson picks stars. Mr. Selton then
writes down three things he’d like Grayson to research and be able to tell him about stars:

- What is a shooting star?
- Are all stars the same?
- How is a star made?

Mrs. Applewood listens in on this exercise but does not take any notes.

Mr. Selton exits the classroom to find a chair to elevate Grayson’s broken/casted leg. When he returns, he starts the class working on their assignments, which are focused on the planet earth.

At the end of the class, Mrs. Applewood brought Grayson’s attention to an assessment sheet that had a green happy face, a yellow straight face, and a red sad face on it. They decided together that he would get a “green” for this class.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3 Day 11</th>
<th>Science 9 with Mr. Selton.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Monday</td>
<td>No Grayson or Mrs. Applewood at start of class.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>November 2</td>
<td>8:35 a.m. Bell Work: What are the 3 types of symbiosis? Provide an example of each.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Period 1 (8:35-9:50 a.m.)</td>
<td>Grayson arrived at 8:45 a.m. – wheeled himself into classroom and to his desk. He had a big smile on his face and he got to his desk with minimal interruption. He had his casted leg propped on a rolling knee brace so he could still use one leg to propel himself along. Mrs. Applewood came in about a minute later, appearing out of breath, and asked the whole class, “Did he just get here?” Many students and Mr. Selton nodded, and answered “yes.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mr. Selton begins his lecture on biodiversity as Mrs. Applewood and Grayson converse in the back of the class. Mrs. Applewood is explaining that he needs to get his stuff off and they are going to go next door because she has another student she is looking after. She leads Grayson out of the room at 8:50am, moving chairs and causing a ruckus as they leave.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Mr. Selton appears not to be bothered by it. He says nothing and continues his lecture without missing a beat.

Later, a cell phone notification goes off somewhere in the room and he says immediately, “whoever’s phone that is just silence it please.”

The class continues their discussion about plants and biodiversity:

- Bulbs – onions, potatoes
- Runners – strawberries
- Spores – fungi

At 9:09 a.m., Mr. Selton goes next door to check on Grayson and I follow him. Grayson is working on building electrical circuits with Matthew, who is in grade 12. Mrs. Applewood had organized this activity because there was an EA shortage today and she needed to supervise both of them at once.

After some friendly interaction with Grayson about the circuits, Mr. Selton returns next door to the Science 9 class and I follow.

I observed Mr. Selton give another handout to the class. This one was about the reproduction of plants and animals. He talked the students through the fill-in-the-blank pages and students filled in the answers as he talked.

I left the Science 9 room and came back over to the Learning Resource classroom to observe more of Mrs. Applewood. She looked up at me and shrugged her shoulders when I entered the room. Grayson was drinking a juice box and Matthew was looking at a book while bouncing on an exercise ball.

Mrs. Applewood and Grayson had a disagreement about cleaning up a spill.

Mr. Selton came back in again; Mrs. Applewood explained how Grayson had started “not listening so we had to quit building circuits.” She said Grayson was putting pieces in his mouth.
Grayson asked if he could return to science class with his roller, but Mrs. Applewood explained they had to stay in this room until the bell went. Grayson didn’t say anything else. Mr. Selton left and Mrs. Applewood took out another one of the green-yellow-red face pages. She said, “well, Grayson, I’m going to have to give you a red today because you weren’t listening.” Grayson responded by saying he deserved a green. Mrs. Applewood asked, why do you deserve a green? Tell me why? Convince me.” After some negotiation, Mrs. Applewood said, “ok, green it is. You talked me into it.”

This concludes the section outlining the inclusive education environment. The next section addresses the formal structure of the learning support team at Everyday High School by introducing a chain of command for support and communications.

**Formal Structure of the Team**

Despite unanticipated challenges within the high school including Grayson’s broken leg and staffing shortages during the pandemic, there was an observable formal structure in place to support the “management” of inclusive education at EHS. The EAs reported to both teachers and the Learning Support Teacher. Teachers and the Learning Support Teacher reported to the Principal. The Principal had access to the Associate Superintendent of Learning Services and associated departments, but reported primarily to the Superintendent. A similar hierarchy of interaction existed at the district level. The Learning Support Specialist received information from the school’s Learning Support Teacher and reported to the Director of Learning. The Director of Learning reported to the Associate Superintendent of Learning Services who in turn reported directly to the Superintendent. These school staff and district staff interactions are
illustrated in Figure 4.2. The bolded positions were study participants. During observations I was focused on the school team and how they interacted with each other. I revisit this management structure later during the analysis chapters.

Figure 4.2 Observations of the Hierarchical Management Structure of the Team
Informal Interactions of the Team

I observed that it was the education assistants (EAs) who worked primarily with students with severe intellectual disabilities. Teachers in this study appeared to connect with each student when they had classes with them. I also observed informal interactions between EAs and teachers that often were about what was happening in class that day. These informal interactions were participants’ attempts at planning out class time for students with severe intellectual disabilities. For example, Table 4.2 demonstrates two different days of Foods 30 class observations with Mr. Selton and two different EAs working with Matthew. The first example illustrates how Mr. Selton and Mrs. Easter attempt to plan out what Matthew will do during class time; the second example describes how Mrs. Applewood attempts to fill in for Mrs. Easter in the regular routines of that class time. In both examples there is very little by way of interaction with classmates being facilitated.

Table 4.2

Observation: Matthew’s Foods 30 Experience

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day/Date Time of Data Collection</th>
<th>Thick Data Entry – Research Observations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Day 6</td>
<td>Earlier today (time not recorded) Mrs. Easter approached Mr. Selton in the hallway to ask what the plan was for Foods 30 today. Mr. Selton said, “Students will be working on their Food Truck menus, but Matthew can cook the spaghetti we talked about.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monday October 26 Period 2 (9:55-11:10 a.m.)</td>
<td>In class: Mr. Selton got ingredients for spaghetti out of cupboards and fridge and rationed them out in small bowls on counter (noodles, ground beef, cooking oil, pasta sauce, cheese). He explained to me that normally (pre-COVID) he would have Matthew collect the food items he needed for his menu, but that was not allowed at present. I observed Matthew cook spaghetti and meat sauce, plate his dish, and put cheese on top all virtually unassisted by his EA, Mrs. Easter. He then took his plate and sat at a table near the other students to enjoy his creation. The other students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
were busy working on an assignment that, upon inquiry, I learned Matthew had already completed.

Matthew was new to the school this year (his Grade 12 year). Mrs. Easter explained to me that they were all still getting to know him; he does not speak much verbally and is considered to have a severe intellectual disability, but Foods class is an area he is excelling in. “Someone has obviously spent a lot of time with him in the kitchen,” said Mrs. Easter to me in the hallway as we walked to Foods class together.

Mrs. Easter also explained that she and Mr. Selton “have an agreement.” She will touch base with him ahead of Foods class each day and he will let her know what the class is doing and where they will be (e.g., Mr. Selton’s classroom or the kitchen-classroom). “This gives Mr. Selton and I time to plan what Matthew and I will do during class each day.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day 11</th>
<th>Monday November 2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Period 2 (9:55-11:10 a.m.)</td>
<td>Foods 30 with Mr. Selton and Matthew; Mrs. Appleton was filling in for Mrs. Easter as the EA.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Matthew and Mrs. Applewood checked laundry first thing – there was none to fold as everything was dirty. Matthew put soap in and turned on the washing machine, then left the Foods room to join the rest of the class in Mr. Selton’s room. The class was about to watch a video about food prep and plating. Matthew brought his exercise ball in and replaced the chair at his desk with the ball.

Matthew bounced on the ball constantly but appeared to like being in the class. The other students had book work out at their desks and were busy recording notes about the videos they were watching. No book work or desk work was offered to Matthew.

Matthew and Mrs. Applewood left class at 10:35 a.m. while the video was paused. They went to check on the laundry as students got caught up on their notes about garnishing a dish. Mr. Selton announced that the students “will be focusing on garnishes for the next six weeks.” Mrs. Applewood and Matthew were both out of the room when this announcement was made.

Matthew and Mrs. Applewood return at 10:45 a.m. after switching over the laundry and joined the class for the next video about plating.

As class ended, I followed Matthew and Mrs. Applewood down the hall and up the stairs towards the Learning Resource room. Ms. Penny was coming down the stairs with the flow of students and she pulled me aside to tell me the following important news:
They were in process of sending the Grade 7’s home because they’d received word from Alberta Health Services (AHS) of one student in that class who had tested positive for COVID-19. She said, “I need to let you know in case this changes your plans for being here. You may want to vacate. You have spent time in that classroom correct?” I said, “Yes.” I asked her if she wanted me to leave the school and she said, “Not until we start sending staff home. There’s still a lot we don’t know and we’re waiting on more communications from AHS.” I said I would consider leaving to take strain off of having a researcher on premises. She said “Thank you” and walked away.

Other examples of informal interactions between teachers and EAs were commonplace and part of daily routines at EHS. For example, Ms. Marygold utilized Mrs. Easter to photocopy materials for her class while Mrs. Easter left Breanna, a Grade 7 student with a severe intellectual disability, in Ms. Marygold’s class unattended for that brief period of photocopying time. When Ms. Marygold became frustrated over a failed math lesson she had planned for her class, it was Mrs. Easter she confided in to laugh (and almost cry) together. Further, Mr. Selton trusted Mrs. Applewood to sign out Chromebooks to all the students in the classroom while he answered students’ questions about an assignment one-on-one. In all these interactions, I observed very little in terms of staff getting students with severe intellectual disabilities involved and included in class activities. I also did not observe much in terms of communications with the learning support teacher—the anticipated leader of the group.
The Learning Curve of the Learning Support Teacher

Ms. Larch relied heavily on the mentorship of Mrs. Heartright and others from the district as she learned her new position as Learning Support Teacher. In turn, Mrs. Heartright relied on Ms. Larch for feedback on how things were going at the school in terms of special education needs and how she could better assist the inclusive education process. Table 4.3 demonstrates some of the diversity Ms. Larch was learning to support and the help she was getting from the district. For example, in her half time role as Learning Support Teacher she was responsible not only for students with severe intellectual disabilities, but also for every student with learning difficulties—whether officially diagnosed or not.

Table 4.3

Observation: Ms. Larch’s Learning Curve

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day/Date/Time of Data Collection</th>
<th>Thick Data Entry – Research Observations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Day 10 October 30 Period 3 (12:55-2:10 p.m.)</td>
<td>I met with Ms. Larch, the learning support teacher in her office. She works half time in this role every afternoon, teaching half time in the mornings. She had just had a meeting with Mrs. Heartright and all district LST’s. We talked briefly about what this meeting was about.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- School will be getting grants for mental health and staff training for a mental health curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Support and training of EAs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Service provider referrals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to Ms. Larch, there was a presentation from an SLP (speech and language pathologist) on “how teachers can and should be delivering certain things in their classrooms.” Ms. Larch explained her frustration over the fact that much of the presentation was relevant to elementary and not secondary schools. As she sees things, “by the time kids get to high school, they may still need it but they won’t get it.”
(Thin Data Entry) Ms. Larch and I will meet at 1p.m. next Tuesday to review an LST training video she was given by the district. Mr. Magnum and Mrs. Heartright offer the training together. She is new to her role as LST and new to this school.

We also discussed a question about how COVID-19 is affecting students like Grayson, Matthew, and Breanna. “It’s hard to know for Matthew and Breanna because they are both new to the school this year, so there is no baseline to work from. Both these students have presented better than anticipated, so staff are wondering when the honeymoon stage will wear off.” (E.g., transitions between classes and non-instructional times were flagged, but these potential issues have been removed in the post-COVID school world.)

Ms. Larch told me she met with Mr. Heartright (Mrs. Heartright’s husband) last Friday (Oct 23). He is a district psychologist.

She had a meeting with Mr. Heartright and a Grade 11 student with the student’s parent. Ms. Larch was impressed that the parent acknowledged their own anxiety in the meeting. Mr. Heartright was explaining a concern surrounding the student’s “auditory working memory.” Ms. Larch said to me, “we were just finding this out in Grade 11 but it could have been so valuable in Grade 7.” She shook her head and made a comment about the system being so slow to assess students.

She had another meeting with Mr. Heartright and a different student which was “more challenging.” About this meeting, Ms. Larch explained that, by the test scores alone, the student had almost been classified as having “mental retardation”, but something triggered Mr. Heartright and he recognized that it was a problem with decoding symbols instead. Ms. Larch’s response was, “What, around us, is not a symbol?” She explained to me how impressed she was that the psychologist had identified the core issue of a learning disability so they could help this student get appropriate educational supports.

As Ms. Larch learned of the increased numbers of students with diagnosed disabilities in Alberta’s public school system, she was also learning to understand the diverse responsibilities
of her leadership role. She was not alone as leader of this learning support team. Ms. Penny voluntarily shared that leadership role with her.

The Principal’s Involvement on the Team

During observations, I was invited to sit in on a meeting between Ms. Penny and Ms. Larch as they reviewed individualized program plans (IPPs) and individualized support plans (ISPs) for specific students (the students were not present at this meeting). Report card time was approaching, and they needed to have the IPP/ISPs formally updated and ready to share with parents. Table 4.4 is a snapshot of the monological data collected during this meeting and shows Ms. Penny’s vested interest in, and her support of, the individualized program planning process. In this table we see how involved Principal Penny is in communications with parents and how important her support role is to Ms. Larch, who is new to the entire process of IPP/ISP planning and development.

Table 4.4

Observation: Individualized Program Planning Meeting

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Day/Date/Time of data collection</th>
<th>Thick Data Entry – Research Observations</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Day 7</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Tuesday</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>October 27</strong>&lt;br&gt;<strong>Period 4 (2:20-3:30pm)</strong></td>
<td>Ms. Penny and Ms. Larch are going quickly through all their IPPs and ISPs and discussing which ones each of them will take charge of updating ahead of report card time: &lt;br&gt;Ms. Penny (re: unknown student): “…mom probably won’t engage with the process very much,” &lt;br&gt;- “probably going to be a lot of cross over with his IPP from” old school. &lt;br&gt;Ms. Larch (re: Grayson): “I did not make contact with that family yet.” &lt;br&gt;- Ms. Penny – “I’ve had much contact with Mom. If you’d like I can make a phone call.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ms. Larch – “That would be good. Just to move that along.”

Ms. Larch asked questions about which staff were responsible for signing the IPP. Ms. Penny explained that if teachers were teaching a student that term, their signature should be on the document.

Ms. Penny (re: another unknown student): “Let me take that one on because I think we’re at a place with Mom where she’s not going to participate…..”

Ms. Penny (re: another unknown student): “What I was thinking is that, because she’s already graduated and is only taking one class, …I’ll maybe just review last year’s IPP with her and then send it off to Mom to sign.”

Ms. Penny (re: Matthew, the new Grade 12 student): “For him we are starting a new IPP from scratch”
- Ms. Larch, “life skills, money, math”
- Ms. Penny “I think we called that ‘functional math’ …”

Ms. Larch (re: another unknown student), while staring at her computer screen, “oh hanna, that is a lot of absences!”
- Ms. Penny, “This is another student whose mom is not very responsive…..”
- Ms. Larch, “Is this one of those times where it’s a good idea to sit down with ‘the student’ …?”

Ms. Penny, “if you would like, once we have transition plans in place we can sit down again…”
- “I don’t think we’ll see very many of these parents coming in to sign so we’ll just have to send [the IPPs/ISPs] home”

Ms. Penny says she tracks the coded student files – just so she knows who is doing what.

Ms. Penny says to Ms. Larch: “There has been consistent inconsistency in both of these roles” (referring to the principal and the LST role at this school)

Ms. Penny and Ms. Larch spend time discussing how to create a document for tracking purposes – Ms. Penny says, “…when the question comes around: ‘who are we going to put forward for testing?’ then we have all this information there.”

I ask a question about ISPs/PPPs – how do you differentiate? Is it by adapted/modified? Or by student code? Ms. Penny explains it goes by Alberta Education coding with more severe students using IPPs.
Meeting ends (3:05 p.m.) and I excuse myself as Ms. Penny and Ms. Larch continue sorting through student cumulative paper files. They need to determine what to shred and what to keep as every student file has been moved online in the province.

Aside from formally reporting on IPP/ISPs to the district, Ms. Penny kept herself immersed in the team’s daily work in other ways. For instance, she popped her head into the staff room often. One day she came in and sat down with a group of EAs, conversing with them about their jobs and about their interests outside of the school. After Ms. Penny had left the staffroom, Mrs. Applewood spoke up saying, “Usually they only come in here when they’re seeking us out for some reason. It’s nice that she wants to visit.” In fact, it was through one of these casual conversations with Mrs. Applewood that Ms. Penny learned of Grayson’s subject area needs in science which prompted her to provide the book on astronomy for use in class.

I observed Ms. Penny walking the halls often, entering classrooms and talking to teachers, EAs and students. I watched her use humour to bring smiles to many students’ faces as she passed by them in the hallways. Speaking of Ms. Penny’s leadership in these COVID times, Ms. Larch said to me, “Kudos to her because she is a cool, calm and collected leader. That’s a good thing right now” (Personal Communications, October 30, 2020).

This concludes my summary of the monological record. While inclusive education dilemmas abounded, such as how to involve students with their peers or how to connect them to regular curriculum activities, there were formal and informal structures in place to try to mitigate these dilemmas. There was a steep learning curve for the new learning support team leader, but she received close support from the principal and from district staff. The principal stayed
connected to team members through informal conversations and periodic check-ins. The next section contains a preliminary reconstructive analysis of this observational record.

A Preliminary Reconstructive Analysis of the Learning Support Team

I now move from Carspecken’s (1996) Stage 1 observations into Stage 2, a preliminary reconstructive analysis of the monological record. As I worked to analyze and reconstruct the data I collected in my monological record, I revisited Howery et al.’s (2013) Pyramid of Intervention model (Figure 2.1).

The school team had a directional flow to their work that set apart the EAs, who worked with students in the top tier (Mrs. Easter and Mrs. Applewood), from other teachers and EAs who worked with students with ‘less severe’ disabilities. Mainly, I observed Mrs. Easter and Mrs. Applewood working independently with their students and apart from most others in the school. Ms. Larch was busy trying to learn how to maximize her time in support of a diverse range of students and Ms. Penny was managing and leading an entire school of staff and students. Both Ms. Larch and Ms. Penny were reliant on teachers and EAs to come forward if they had questions or concerns regarding inclusive education for students with severe intellectual disabilities. If there were no questions or concerns from those working with students in this top tier (i.e., students needing intensive/individualized supports), those in leadership positions (Ms. Penny and Ms. Larch) busied themselves with other areas of need in the school. The expectation for EAs and teachers to work independently with these students was not surprising given that students with severe intellectual disabilities constituted a little more than one percent of the school’s student body (three out of 200 students).
As I now interpret Howery et al.’s (2013) model in the context of my study, I see that members of the learning support team working in that top tier were mainly the EAs while they were without formal leadership oversight when I was in the school observing. In other words, the principal and often teachers were absent while EAs were working with students with severe intellectual disabilities. Being without leadership led EAs to pull students out of classes instead of thinking through (with the principal and with teachers) how they might keep students in classes longer and more meaningfully. This marked the beginning of an emergent theme in the data: leading organizational cultural change.

Schein (2004) understood the impact that culture has on staffing behaviour in an organization:

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of culture as a concept is that it points us to phenomena that are below the surface, that are powerful in their impact but invisible and to a considerable degree unconscious. …We can see the behavior that results, but often we cannot see the forces underneath that cause certain kinds of behavior. (Chapter 1, Culture: An Empirically Based Abstraction section, para. 1)

I suspected that more inclusive leadership insights were what EAs wanted—to overcome what appeared as frequent tendencies to remove students from classes—yet observations of these staffing behaviours alone were insufficient evidence. I therefore looked forward to my participant interviews as one way of clarifying some of what I had observed.

Chapter Summary

Participants’ transparency supplied rich data for the monological record and led to key findings in the preliminary reconstructive analysis that became important later. First, I observed
examples of the inclusive education environment at EHS wherein the inclusion of Matthew and Grayson appeared weak overall. Indeed, there were dilemmas over knowing a process for including these students in class learning and how to connect them to curriculum activities. Second, I outlined what looked like the formal management structure of the team and illustrated how being too informal with teaching strategies can entail missed opportunities to include. Further, the “consistent inconsistency of roles,” admitted by Ms. Penny and Ms. Larch, makes it difficult for team members to effectively inform leadership practices. Third, I witnessed the steep learning curve that Ms. Larch was undergoing and the top down, functionalist support from the principal and district in the processes of including students. Fourth, I discovered that EAs working in the top tier of Howery et al.’s (2013) model (eg. Mrs. Easter and Mrs. Applewood) often worked alone and without leadership oversight. These work habits appeared to leave the team fragmented even within the school. Inclusive decision-making for students like Grayson and Matthew seemed a series of informal, isolated activities (often exclusionary) instead of a formal plan of action to include them with peers and with regular curriculum activities. Schein also became a catalyst of thought and analysis during the preliminary reconstructive analysis as I questioned staffing behaviours, like classroom pullouts, and foreshadowed some of what the interviews brought forward.

The next chapter is an overview of the results of the one-on-one interviews. Whereas the observations were limited to participants who were on-site at the school, the interviews were a more robust data collection tool that allowed me to gather perspectives from all eight participants.
Chapter Five: The Interview Findings

In Stage 3 of a critical ethnographic study, as the researcher, I dialogued with participants through a series of one-to-one interviews. The original conceptual framework and the interview instruments derived from those concepts yielded rich descriptive transcripts. Stories from eight people are described in this chapter.

After the review and coding of all interview transcripts, I conducted a thematic analysis. From reading the transcripts after coding, I concluded that these themes are good ‘containers’ for organizing an ethnographic account of the work of the LST in this study.

In Part A of this chapter, I explain how these themes are derived from my own (monological) observation data and the interviews. In Part B, I summarize the findings from deep, semi-structured interviews with all participants, organized by theme.

In Chapter Six, I analyze these themes in a systems analysis of the LST to determine what they are doing, and what they might do in the future (opportunities), for students with severe intellectual disabilities in a similar high school setting. This systems analysis shows opportunities for leaders and participants of LSTs in the future. I then use this systems analysis to make sense of the findings (Carspecken, 1996) and offer a model for navigating inclusive leadership on the LST, a useful guide for future research and theory. Chapter Seven is a discussion of implications for practice, policy and future research.

Part A: Describing the Thematic Analysis

As the researcher, I utilized a combination of NVivo 12 technology and manual coding and theming in a constant comparative method to accomplish the task of synthesizing findings for this report (Cohen et al., 2011). To begin, all forms of collected data were uploaded into
NVivo 12, including 12 typed field note entries (thick and thin data entries from my observations in schools), eight interview transcripts, and four additional resources in the form of two emails from one participant and two professional development resource lists provided by two participants. Each document was then individually coded using NVivo’s software. During the coding process, I listened to the original audio of interviews while reading through the corresponding transcripts in an effort to keep the authenticity of participants’ voices, their cadence, and emphases, clear. Notes and memos were also recorded, allowing me to return to entries later to recall or change original thoughts. Twenty-nine separate NVivo ‘nodes’ were developed from this initial coding exercise. At this stage, my knowledge of NVivo was saturated and I turned, in the interest of time, to manually categorizing the existing codes generated in NVivo.

Creswell (2007) described the process of categorizing data in an ethnographic study as a search for “themes and patterned regularities” (p. 156). From re-listening to the interview audio and re-reading transcripts, I colour-coded entries from interview transcripts that repeated themselves or that corresponded with other participants’ entries. Words and phrases from each interview were copied and pasted into eight separate documents (one for each participant) while keeping copies of the original raw data transcripts intact. I traced what I removed from each transcript by maintaining page numbers and who said what with periodic notations to the audio time stamp. This process resulted in eight colour-coded and analyzed Word documents. At the end of the process there were five colours included in these documents, one colour for each broad theme that had emerged: (1) creativity, (2) on a journey, (3) professional development, (4) innovation, and (5) leadership. I then searched field notes and additional sources provided by
participants for corresponding references to these themes and added fitting entries to the appropriate participant’s analyzed document, maintaining colour-coded theming with each entry.

Needing to pare down the amount of data now analyzed, I underwent a third round of analysis, this time on just the eight colour-coded documents. I created five new Word documents, one for each theme, and studied the eight documents for the most relevant parts representing each theme. Duplication of ideas and excess wording were removed through this process. I was careful to maintain the original context and authenticity of quoted citations or referenced texts. This process culminated in five master-copies of analyzed texts, highlighting themes from all collected data sources.

This last phase of analysis helped refine the themes as I stepped back from these analyzed documents and reviewed what they (the participants) were really saying in their chunks of analyzed text. For example, creativity as a broad theme was refined to more accurately mean working with curriculum; on a journey became emerging praxis; professional development became learning to collaborate as a team; innovation became searching for innovation and leadership became leading organizational culture change. This process of coding and theming also allowed for an ethnographic story to emerge. In the process of constant comparison of data between and among participants’ individual stories, I began to see how to use these themes to tell the participants’ collective story.

**Part B: Describing the Work of the Team—Their Collective Story**

In this section of the chapter, I present the interview findings from Stage 3: Dialogical Data Collection (Carspecken, 1996). I use first person voice in this section of the document, as I was an integral part of the interview process. I include periodic reflections on observations
mixed in with these interview findings because often, during the interviews, participants and I reflected on observations we had made together during Stage 1. In the spirit of ethnography, I share thoughts and experiences from participants who were working together to include students with severe intellectual disabilities into the fabric of Everyday High School (EHS). Here, I aggregate findings where possible, and cite participants periodically.

Five themes helped organize the interview findings in this report of Stage 3: (1) working with curriculum; (2) emerging praxis; (3) learning to collaborate as a team; (4) searching for innovation; and (5) leading organizational culture change.

**Working with Curriculum**

Ms. Marygold drew an imaginary, inverted line in the air and rolled the R’s off her tongue as she spoke: “We’ve got this one [student] maybe that’s classified as special needs, but we’ve also got like arrrrrrrrrr all the way up to here where there’s the gifted students that you’re supposed to be stimulating.” Ms. Marygold was known amongst EHS staff for her hard work in modifying and adapting her lesson plans. “It’s just mind boggling the time that you could spend making perfect programs for each of these groupings of kids in the class.” She gave an example of an extensively modified math program she had prepared for a student with an intellectual disability a few years back only to have her work shunned by the student. She explained, without malice, he simply was not interested in the work she had prepared for him to do in her class and that was a lesson for her. She had to rework some ideas and eventually found something that this student enjoyed doing while the rest of the class worked ahead on grade level math.

As I observed the teamwork within the school, I noticed how creatively teachers and EAs worked to connect students with severe intellectual disabilities to the regular education
curriculum. I asked Mr. Selton about this in his interview. “When it comes to communicating…with the EAs,” said Mr. Selton, “it’s very unstructured, and that doesn’t necessarily have to be a bad thing.” He spoke of their informal, “catch you in the hallway” kind of relationship as one that worked for him. In classes, he was well-connected to the EAs, keeping them informed of the general class lesson plan for the day.

Overall, Ms. Marygold and Mr. Selton were keen to have these students included in their classes but were continually searching for modified curriculum materials and teaching strategies that would help support these students (and them as teachers) to be successful. Ms. Larch, though new in her leadership role this year, was acutely aware it was her responsibility to assist teachers in finding (or creating) the resources they needed. Both EAs in my study pitched in, pulling materials from the old ‘pre-computer-age’ special education files or making new ones themselves. Ms. Penny, the principal, presented the EAs with a book on astronomy and a circuit board game set when she learned of some of Grayson’s interests and “material” needs in science class.

As I reviewed the interview data, it became evident that a major concern about inclusive education for this population of students was connecting them with an appropriately challenging, modified curriculum. Both EAs spoke of working hard to keep these students in classes but were perplexed by not having much for them to do in class. They spoke of how difficult it was to remain in some classes with students who were following separate curriculums. Mrs. Applewood explained, “They’re not learning at the same level as the other students in the classroom….and it’s sometimes challenging for us to get them to…focus on…our task at hand when the other students are doing something totally different.” Mrs. Easter added, “Sometimes our kiddos come in at Grade 2 level and they leave at Grade 2 level. And that’s really hard to put them into a high
school math class let’s say.” Referring to her modified math lessons, Ms. Marygold added, “The kids that we have that are classified as severe…there’s not the opportunity to build something that we can use yearly and it gets better and better and better. It always seems to be off the cuff,” and “Every year you’re creating something different.” Amid these challenges, participants did not mind the need to be creative so long as they found something that worked for the students in their care. Through observation, however, it was clear that not everyone at EHS had that same propensity for getting creative with curriculum.

To summarize this section on working with curriculum, and reflecting again on observational data, it seems that students with severe intellectual disabilities were being removed from classes on account of not having an appropriate curriculum for their EAs and teachers to follow and work from—at least not one that could equitably connect these students to the work of the rest of the class.

**Emerging Praxis**

Even with students with severe intellectual disabilities in regular classes most of the time, I witnessed some participants struggling with what Ms. Larch called:

The push in versus pull out…model…so whether or not students with severe intellectual disabilities should be…include[d] in the classroom or whether or not they should be…you know in their own classroom.

Ms. Larch saw this as “the biggest barrier” to inclusive education and a continuing dilemma among learning support teams that went beyond EHS: “[It] is one that exists…in a variety of schools across Alberta right now.” She was referring to how little we presume competence in students with severe intellectual disabilities enough to keep them fully included right through to
Grade 12. Ms. Larch then cited an example from Grayson’s educational experience, a student who was ‘fully included’ in Grade 9: “While he is still very capable...once he hits Grade 10 it presents...a lot of challenges for teachers to provide modified curriculum. …That being said, that’s also supposed to be where I come in and support them.” Ms. Larch made this comment while speaking of the reluctance of some high school teachers towards educating Grayson inclusively.

In response to dilemmas about inclusive education for students like Grayson, the district learning support specialist, Mrs. Heartright, shared an example from another learning support team in a different school who were wanting to pull a student out of regular classes. She explained:

It’s sad. Because I said about one of our students, ‘So, What, are we quitting now? ...like we’re done? We’re done educating them then?’ And...everyone’s a bit startled by that question. But, that’s the feeling I get when...[the student is] like, five or six years behind in reading and...[teachers] don’t know what else to do. Then they give them busy work.

Like Mrs. Heartright, Ms. Penny expressed the importance of working with staff to bring them along on an emergent pathway towards more inclusive thinking: “We’re still on our journey to developing a common...understanding of inclusion;” and “we’re getting impatient cause we’re near where it should be. …We can’t expect everybody to be moving at the same pace. We can’t expect immediate change. We are working on it.” Ms. Penny also alluded to historical facts about students with severe intellectual disabilities being completely separated from the regular student body when she said:

You know, it wasn’t that long ago, when students with intellectual disabilities were just automatically placed in a...different place. They had special classes or separate
classrooms or separate schools and so, as much as we want everything to get to where we
want it to go immediately, we have to understand how long this journey has been.

She then shared a poignant example of how the convictions of a LST to include (or not) can
affect the self-esteem of a student. Referring again to Grayson, Ms. Penny explained:

When he came to us in Grade 7 the gap was smaller between him and his peers. And then
every year since…the gap has grown. And they [his teachers] have seen how he responds
when the class is working on vastly different things than he’s working on. Uhm, he went
through a period of depression last year. And when we started to explore it, it had a lot to
do with…he could see what all the other kids were doing and he was doing something
totally different. And that was having a negative impact on his mental well-being. And I
think as teachers became more… aware of that they started to recognize how important it
is to ensure that they’re not separating him that much. …It’s how can we do this in a way
where he’s still part of the class?

Although all participants wanted students like Grayson included in regular classes with
their peers, they were puzzled as to how to keep from pulling them out of classes now and then. I
witnessed Grayson being pulled out of classes multiple times during my observation period and
not for behavioural reasons; more often, it was because the class was doing something that the
EA did not feel Grayson could join. As I continued to search the data on this subject, I was
struck by something the Director of Learning, Mr. Magnum, said in his interview that was an
abrupt shift in thinking from everyone else:

At some point down the road, you know, I would love to go away from it being a
…Science 9 classroom…This is a space where we all learn science together whether you
are quote unquote at that Grade 9 level or not. So you’re gonna have students in that class
who are...learning significantly above...and below that Grade 9 curriculum, and really, that Grade 9 curriculum is irrelevant in my mind...it’s about finding those foundational pieces. And...together planning so that those kids that [are] below and above all find their place.

As we finished his interview, Mr. Magnum was sympathetic to those working on the front lines—in classrooms—who struggle to enact the vision he and others from the district were communicating:

I can see, Laura, that...there’s certainly maybe a disconnect...between those beliefs and that vision and having to deal with you know those really complex...situations or...students within our...classroom right. Like I can see how there still is that disconnect, ... but again that’s only going to change through conversations and learning together and trying new things and strong leadership.

I had asked Mr. Magnum directly whether he saw a disconnect between the district’s messaging of inclusive education and what was happening in classrooms and schools. As I walked the halls and spoke with the staff at EHS, I found that teaching and support staff supported one another in their highs and lows and students were well cared for and, for the most part, included.

Not all teaching and support staff were at the same place in their emergent inclusive practices. According to Ms. Marygold, there was a distinct “generational difference in how inclusion is handled.” When I asked her to clarify this in her interview, Ms. Marygold confirmed that younger teachers were more open and ready to welcome students with severe intellectual disabilities into their classes. Although it was not obvious among the participants of this study, the interview data hinted at a culture of hesitancy among some of the other staff in this school, when including students with severe intellectual disabilities in regular high school classes.
Learning to Collaborate as a Team

Regardless of where they were on their professional practice journeys, participants were learning to collaborate as a team of professionals working on behalf of students with severe intellectual disabilities. Notwithstanding, the vision of inclusive education expressed by Mr. Magnum and the district, members of the LST were still learning what it meant to include these students in grades 7-12. For example, no one in my study knew where to find age-appropriate teaching and learning resources and strategies for high school students with severe intellectual disabilities. What they found instead were suggestions geared towards elementary-aged students. One example Mrs. Easter gave was of trying to find educational materials suitable for use with Grayson:

He’s got an older brother, so he understands what’s cool and what’s not cool…. So it’s…not simply a case of well I found this resource and we can photocopy this program and …use it for him. Because, it doesn’t work. …A lot of what is [available]…is too babyish for them.

Mrs. Applewood echoed Mrs. Easter’s comments when she discussed her opportunities for professional development (PD): “I would always love to learn more, but the opportunity isn’t always there. …When we get our PD days, they’re not always geared for what we need. You know it’s more…geared towards the elementary.” Similarly, Mrs. Hearthright expressed empathy towards learning support teams who work tirelessly trying to figure out how to successfully include these students: “It’s well and good to say we’re gonna put this kid in a teacher’s class, but we have to give those teachers tools. We can’t just say make it.”

Mr. Selton had insights into disability-related PD when one cannot find what one is looking for through textbooks or guest speakers or breakout sessions or photocopied materials:
I think the most valuable thing for me in terms of professional development would be having time to meet with, whoever it is. Someone in the [District]… Our behaviour specialist or learning specialist. And have those candid discussions about our specific students. So a PD opportunity for me to go and learn about all students with Down syndrome, interesting. Engaging. Probably useful. But it’s gonna be more beneficial if we have a group of people, all invested in this one kid, to speak of him.

Mrs. Heartright recognized the inherent difficulties in finding time, within the traditional high school regime, to schedule more meetings and to have those meetings be meaningful and productive for staff. Mrs. Heartright stated:

The trouble with high school and you can see why they’re like that. They’re expected to get in x number of days. Through math, whatever. And there’s this much information and they’ve got this much time. And now you’ve got this kid.

She explained that in their school district, they use a ‘Collaborative Response Model’ to bring members of LSTs together regularly; it works quite successfully in elementary schools but has yet to be widely accepted in their high schools largely because of the number of teachers involved. At the time of data collection, Ms. Larch had just scheduled a collaborative response meeting at EHS that was to bring together multiple teachers with school and district leaders on behalf of multiple students who had special education needs. The date was set for after my data collection period ended so I was not privy to the outcome of this meeting, but Ms. Larch’s hope was that teachers would take seriously the opportunity to collaborate on behalf of students. Ms. Larch explained that the meeting was scheduled during a day of district PD time “so they technically have the choice of what they are going to do. Whether or not they wanna collaborate with the other…teachers, or the other LST leads.”
Another clarification that came out of Ms. Larch’s interview was that the EAs would not be involved in the collaborative response meeting: “One of the most unfortunate things about… our EA staff is that there is limited time that we get to connect with them in the same way that we connect with teachers.” Mrs. Heartright agreed, “I’ve had many EAs and some teachers say you know we really need to do this training together because that’s when the rich conversation happens. And I would agree.” She continued, speaking of how critical on-the-job collaboration is for teachers on the subject of inclusive education for students with severe intellectual disabilities: “We aren’t taught in university, unless you’re doing a special ed major. You are not taught what’s gonna happen when these kids show up in your classroom.”

Ms. Penny was also in agreement to having collaborative PD sessions, particularly with other principals:

To me some of the best professional development comes from those discussions and those collaborative sessions because we’re all dealing with similar situations. You know particularly if all the high school administrators get time to talk about these things. We all have students that we’re trying to support. We all have…strategies that have been successful. Strategies that have not. So that…sharing of ideas and how you’re managing your school…I don’t know what’s in the way of that happening, but that would be …something I would like to engage in.

In sum, all participants agreed that collaboration among high school staff and administration (as opposed to elementary staff and administration) serving students with severe intellectual disabilities was lacking in their district.
Searching for Innovation

In reference to inclusive practice for students with severe intellectual disabilities, Mrs. Easter said, “It’s been a long time since, in high school at least, we’ve been introduced to something that is new and innovative.” Mrs. Easter spoke of her experiences being an EA for over 20 years. She witnessed the shift from specialized (self-contained) classrooms to inclusive classrooms and government cutbacks in education which saw massive, province-wide conventions for EAs suddenly come to a halt. Referring to the leadership necessary for her to be successful at her job, Mrs. Easter stated, “If your principal believes that inclusion is…good, and …is beneficial to…not just our special needs kids, but…other kids in the classroom…it’s good. Uhm, if you don't, it’s…that much harder.” Mrs. Applewood added her thoughts about leadership’s role in inclusive innovation: “I think they always need to be looking and…trying to find new ways to get our children engaged…because our society’s changing so rapidly that so is the learning.”

In terms of ‘new and innovative’ ways of engaging students with severe intellectual disabilities, Mrs. Marygold suggested:

What I want is Grade 1, 2, 3 curriculum that grabs and hooks a junior high mind. …on top of that ideally instead of just it being a Grade 1, 2, 3 math, it might be a whole IB program of math, science, social, LA, mashed in at those lower elementary levels, but with a more mature, uhm, overlay.

By “IB,” Mrs. Marygold was referring to the International Baccalaureate Programmes offered to some students in many schools in Alberta and around the world. I had to question her further to understand what she meant. She then explained how the IB program worked differently than
regular curriculum objectives and reiterated her wishes for adapting it for use with students with intellectual disabilities:

It’s not just here’s your science, here’s your social, here’s your math, here’s your LA.
Right it’s more of a here’s a unit and you explore this science, this social, this, right so….

At a mentality for a grade 7, 8, 9 student, or then maybe a 10, 11, 12 student. That focuses on more elementary based concepts. …There’s definitely modified math and stuff for lower elementary, but it’s like, how many ice cream cones do you want? Like, what? You know…so where is the mash up of the two? Mature ideas.

Ms. Marygold was insistent that she had searched for resources like this a couple years back but to no avail. Ms. Marygold noted:

Honestly, and it could exist. I can’t find it if it does. I searched extensively two years ago…and I talked to the social teacher, and the LA teacher about this too. Without going, and creating our own whole program geared towards this kid. There was nothing.

Mr. Selton also believed in doing things differently. He said he sometimes switched places with the EAs so that they were teaching the class while he worked one to one with a student. On another note, he cautioned against “pull-outs” discussed earlier and offered an alternative in support of the collaborative response meetings. Mr. Selton stated:

I don’t think having one of our EAs pull the student out of class is always the best thing to happen for that student. …If we had time to work together, not just myself and an EA but as a whole learning team, to develop an actual plan, and a collaborative plan that we could employ throughout the day, uhm, I think that would be great.

Notably, even as Mr. Selton spoke of his dislike for pullouts, it was his science class that I had observed an EA pull Grayson from.
Ms. Larch agreed with Mr. Selton on the need for more targeted inclusive interventions for some students but noted that bringing the team together—especially the EAs, who worked hourly and often worked other jobs straight after school—was a challenging feat: “If we’re able to set up collaborative response meetings after school,” explained Ms. Larch, “maybe we can look at … asking them to stay, and then compensating them for that. If they’re available. But again, they have other jobs too.” This comment led her to talk more about EAs limited, often part-time scheduling which did not allow for prep periods.

In summarizing this section, I reiterate that participants recognized the importance of collaboration—both within and beyond the team—when searching for innovative ways of teaching students with severe intellectual disabilities in high school learning environments. Although participants recognized that ‘many heads are better than one,’ this thinking still did not translate into tangible opportunities for support and innovation in the inclusive classroom. Teaching and support staff of these students were mainly left on their own.

**Leading Organizational Culture Change**

Despite their need to prepare modified materials, collaborate with teaching staff, and make daily decisions on behalf of students with severe intellectual disabilities, both EAs said they did not see themselves as leaders. Instead, EAs and teachers looked to the principal for leadership.

Principal Penny was well-liked by participants and engaged in the processes of learning and problem solving with the LST. According to school participants, not all principals are as well-informed or interested in their work. The school participants spoke of a turnover in leadership that occurred in their school three years prior and how they were still learning, as a
staffing team, to let go of some of the, now old, ways of doing things—processes that were far less inclusive. Some spoke of their experiences in other schools where inclusive education was not embraced as fully as it was in their current school. All praised their new principal for her open-door policy, for her engaged attendance at meetings, and for her general positive attitude towards including even the difficult-to-include students. These accolades led me to probe more of Ms. Penny’s background in her interview, and to gain a sense of how she thought as leader of her school team. Ms. Penny humbly responded with some reflection on her own leadership skill sets and how she came to develop them:

There can’t be judgement if we’re not all there yet. There just has to be, how can I help? What do you need from me? And then trying to provide those supports. So you’re not hanging anybody out by themselves. … I wish I maybe had [that] when I was ah starting out. When I was a new teacher. … It took some time for me to develop my own understandings around students with intellectual disabilities… What… helped it along [was]… I got more involved in the supported learning. And it was just a matter of reading, studying, observing, growing in my own knowledge.

Ms. Penny also mentioned that she wished principals, in general, had more involvement in the learning support teacher meetings held by the district. These are meetings held between all the learning support teachers in schools and district leaders such as Mrs. Heartright and Mr. Magnum. Ms. Penny commented:

Really, truly for us to be successful, my LST and I have to work in partnership. And if I don’t know what direction they’re being given or the processes and procedures that they’re talking about in those meetings, I feel a little bit disconnected from it. Whereas, if we could attend those meetings together, I think we could be a little bit more effective.
Mrs. Heartright and Mr. Magnum agreed with Ms. Penny’s projections that principal leadership was key to leading organizational culture change. “It’s interesting cause you do see a difference where the schools have the administrators…involved or not,” said Mrs. Heartright. Mr. Magnum added his thoughts saying it was of paramount importance to work with both principals and learning support teachers in a school:

It really does depend on our school leaders. …As much as we continually message our vision and …our foundational beliefs regarding inclusion, unless that message is heard and being acted upon at the school level…we aren’t going to see that consistent alignment. And so really, we have to work with our principals. We have to continue to work with our learning support teachers. They’re the ones that are gonna make that change in their…community. And so, …it takes strong leadership to do that.

Mr. Magnum’s mantra was to bring about a “continual shift in mindset” among leaders of the school district. He mentioned ‘mindset’ eight times while talking with me and all mentions were in reference to change, leadership and innovation that would see the leadership of the school district become less isolated and bureaucratic and more collaborative and student-centered. In sum, leading organizational culture change, searching for innovation, learning to collaborate as a team, engaging in emerging praxis, and working with curriculum were all ways this learning support team informed their principal about inclusive practices, or the lack thereof, in their school.
Chapter Summary

This chapter was an explanation and illustration of the five emerging themes from the interview data. First, I described how creative the LST could be with their modified lesson materials only to have those lesson materials become ‘busy work’ as opposed to purposeful connections to curriculum. Second, I shared how inclusion was an emergent professional practice and staff members were at different stages when teaching or supporting students with severe intellectual disabilities. Third, I detailed the current lack of PD opportunities in this district in support of high school staff teaching students with severe intellectual disabilities. Fourth, I pointed out that teachers and EAs were open to new and innovative suggestions for educating these students inclusively; it was the lack of suggestions and of collaboration with school and district leaders that bothered them. Fifth and finally, I outlined the LST’s feelings about leadership, highlighting that the participants knew, intuitively, how essential it was to have the school administrator involved in an organizational culture change initiative like inclusive education for students with severe intellectual disabilities.

In Chapter Six, I bring together an analysis of the findings generated from both observations and interviews.
Chapter Six: Analysis of the Learning Support Team as a System

Having completed Stages 1, 2, and 3 of a critical ethnography, in this chapter the focus is on Stages 4 and 5. This chapter defines the elements (people and dynamics) of the learning support team (Part A) and contains a system analysis of each theme in action (Part B). These two parts exemplify Carspecken’s (1996) Stage 4: Discovering system relations at school and district levels. Part C, Answering the Research Question, is aligned with Carspecken’s Stage 5: Using system relations to explain findings. This chapter culminates in Part D’s discussion of a model for fostering an inclusive leadership team.

Part A: Defining the Elements of the LST

This section comprises a reorganization of the learning support team as introduced earlier in Table 3.2. It outlines who is involved (study participants) and illustrates where each participant fits in a formal and informal organizational context. Schein (2004) encouraged researchers to be culturally aware of their surroundings, to be “able to perceive and decipher the cultural forces that operate in groups, organizations, and occupations” (Chapter One, Four Brief Examples section, para. 13). During observations, interviews, and then analysis, it became clear that participants tended to work in informal “clusters” that functioned differently during communication and reporting than the formal hierarchical structure originally depicted in Figure 4.2.

In Figure 6.1 (below) each center circle represents an informal team cluster that operates independently within the larger team. The larger, original team is represented by the outer circle. Understanding system theory, we acknowledge that these clusters are influenced by societal, cultural, and workplace pressures which impact their decision-making when working with
students. Importantly, it is the leadership team cluster (principal and learning support teacher) who have direct communication with both the district and the classroom clusters.

Figure 6.1 Informal Clusters and Overlap among the Learning Support Team
What is most striking about this cluster diagram over the hierarchical diagram (Figure 4.2) is that the EA position is elevated to a point of equal professional practice with the teachers, leadership, and district teams. Understanding there are independently functioning parts within a whole team and that there are formal (Figure 4.2) and informal (Figure 6.1) communications at play, is important for the next section which is a systems analysis of the ‘whole’ learning support team.

**Part B: A System Analysis of the LST**

This section is a description of a system analysis focusing on the elements (people and dynamics) of the LST within a school within a district to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) as they do their important work supporting students with severe intellectual disabilities. This basic SWOT analysis is focused on internal factors (strengths and weaknesses) and external factors (opportunities and threats) that influence the LST (Gurel & Tat, 2017). Each of the following five themes were instrumental in this analysis: (1) working with curriculum; (2) emerging praxis; (3) learning to collaborate as a team; (4) searching for innovation; and (5) leading organizational culture change. Under each section heading is a discussion of the SWOT for that theme followed by a summary of the analysis in a corresponding table.

**Working with Curriculum**

“It always seems to be off the cuff…. Every year you’re creating something different” (Ms. Marygold)
Overall, we have seen evidence that the intent of the learning support team when working with curriculum was to simply bring students with and without severe intellectual disabilities together in the same classroom space. This is a start that can lead to rich opportunities to connect students with curriculum goals if proximity to peers and peer interactions are fostered effectively (Feldman et al., 2016). However, we have also seen that without specific curriculum for students with severe intellectual disabilities teachers and EAs are in a constant time-consuming struggle to create lesson plans modified for each moment of learning. Thus, a curriculum is necessary even though the impulse and ethic toward inclusion is strong.

To illustrate these curriculum possibilities in the Alberta context, it is important to introduce Alberta Education’s (2014) *Framework for Student Learning: Competencies for Engaged Thinkers and Ethical Citizens with an Entrepreneurial Spirit*. These competencies are meant to be “embed[ed]… in curriculum… [to] enable educators to develop engaging and relevant learning experiences for Alberta students” (p. 1). In this study, little expectation was placed on students without disabilities to think about their peers with severe intellectual disabilities in a manner that would engage both in meaningful inclusive curricular activities. The expectation for engaging students with severe intellectual disabilities seemed entirely up to teachers and EAs (more so EAs) who were often at a loss for how to proceed.

A strength of the team was their desire to seek out and/or create modified lesson plans for students who needed them. Enthusiasm for teaching was evident and the right team in place. However, developing modified curriculum is time consuming, costly, and somewhat risky (thinking of Ms. Marygold’s failed math lesson) in a school with limited resources for implementing inclusive education. Separate activities also keep students with severe intellectual disabilities from interacting with their peers during class time as they work on separate lesson
plans. Mrs. Easter and Mrs. Applewood recognized there were difficulties including students when lesson planning for their students was vastly different than the mainstream. Instead, one might want to look at the possibility of involving peers more in the process of making curricular connections. Engaging students’ thinking and ethical citizenship in ways that enhance an entrepreneurial spirit of peer support in the classroom. When we think of the purpose of education in this context of contemporary inclusive education, the words of curriculum theorist and educational leader, John Dewey, come to mind: “When preparation is made the controlling end, then the potentialities of the present are sacrificed to a suppositious future. When this happens, the actual preparation for the future is missed or distorted” (Dewey, 1997, p. 49). The kind of preparation being referred to in my study is teaching our students with and without disabilities to live, work, play and learn well together in inclusive classrooms and schools.

The historical background of education for students with severe intellectual disabilities entailed focus on these students learning ‘life skills’ in separate settings rather than curriculum-based concepts along with their peers in inclusive settings (Eisenman et al., 2015). Today, we know that when these students are given the opportunities to access this general education curriculum, with a mode of communication that works for them, they often excel beyond expectations (Cujec & Goddard, 2021). Members of learning support teams who carry this knowledge have a responsibility to break from the separating traditions of the past and pose new opportunities for including these students in academic high school learning environments.

My study finds that in a system that is a cross-district/school collaboration for students with severe intellectual disabilities, lesson-plan level modifications could be better developed within existing curriculum guidelines. This creates an opportunity for school and district leaders (or, perhaps, higher up in the Ministry of Education) to develop modified curriculum resources—
based on existing grade level curriculum scaffolding—and make them available to teachers and EAs. In 2021, after decades of progress towards meaningful inclusive education, students should not be without tangible connections to the current curriculum. Likewise, their learning support teams should not be without modified teaching and assessment tools in these inclusive classrooms.

IPPs may help LSTs understand student’s strengths, weaknesses and learning objectives, but these documents do not help teachers bring the curriculum to students (Alberta Education, 2006). As well, they maintain a separate system of teaching and assessing students who are required to use them. Instead of maintaining separate documents with separate learning objectives, the learning objectives from the general education curriculum could be modified for these students. Likewise, general education assessments could be modified for these students. Reporting and accountability measures could be based on how well LSTs connect students to the general education curriculum instead of how well students meet their IPP goals. Perhaps it is not a whole separate curriculum that is needed here. Perhaps there is only a professional “mindset shift” required for LSTs to bring these students from separate to truly inclusive learning. Table 6.1 summarizes the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats found among the LST members with respect to curriculum.

Table 6.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S.W.O.T.</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strengths</td>
<td>Participants desire to work with modified curriculum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weaknesses</td>
<td>There is no curriculum model for students with severe intellectual disabilities. Activity/lesson planning is left with EAs who do not have teaching experience.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Available modified teaching resources are elementary and not high school relevant.

| Opportunities | Principal could be a stronger leader of inclusive instruction (Robinson, 2017) Alberta Education can work with teachers and EAs to develop modified high school resources to coincide with grade level curriculum scaffolding. |
| Threats        | Students are not reaching their potential while the focus is on ‘busy work.’ Curriculum stays in a century-old delivery model without progressing. |

In summary of this SWOT analysis, a major finding is that EAs were searching for modified activities and lesson plans often in the absence of teacher oversight. Relatedly, the absence of curriculum-led unit and lesson plan guidelines for these students kept them separated from their classmates and disconnected from grade level curriculum scaffolding. These weaknesses may be averted in the future by stronger inclusive instructional leadership training for the principal (Cobb, 2015; Robinson, 2017). Part C of this chapter will revisit this finding and imagine what could be different about working with curriculum, in an ideal world.

**Emerging Praxis**

It’s about finding those foundational pieces. And…together planning so that those kids that [are] below and above all find their place. (Mr. Magnum)

Prosser et al. (2002) accurately predicted that psychological advancements would lead to increased disability diagnosis in schools. Indeed, we are no longer surprised when our high school classrooms contain students who do not read, write or communicate in conventional ways. The presence of EAs in these classrooms makes the teaching structure different than most conventional classrooms and teachers and EAs puzzle over how best to work together.
Scholarly literature provides limited knowledge about how to work together in teams let alone lead these teams amid the complexities of inclusive classrooms (Kowch, 2021). Yet, there is hope on the horizon: A new generation of educational leaders more prepared for the task of inclusive leadership is emerging and will eventually replace those who currently hold fast to segregated traditions of separate education for students with and without disabilities.

Education systems are changing—but our leaders wear the suits of another era and work to maintain a house from the last century - this limits experimentation and the scalability possible through…innovation. With mindsets considering complex adaptive ecologies of education, our new leaders are learning these skills now - will the universities and schools of tomorrow be ready for them? (Kowch, 2021, p. 164)

Thinking of principals as leaders of complex adaptive ecologies of education, they have a responsibility to develop inclusive leadership skills in others such as members of LSTs for students with severe intellectual disabilities. How principals choose to lead inclusive education for these students is part of their emerging (adaptive) praxis. “Little is known about how schools begin the process of transforming their practices to support inclusion and academic, social, and behavioral success for all students” (Shogren et al., 2015, p. 174). This critical ethnography is but one example that adds to the literature on how LSTs can inform inclusive leadership. Much more research is required to understand the emerging praxis of learning support teams, as discussed in the next chapter.

Table 6.2 is a SWOT analysis for Emerging Praxis among the learning support team leaders. Strengths of the SWOT highlight the fact that leaders in this study desired change in how students with severe intellectual disabilities were being taught in inclusive classrooms. Weaknesses point out the nearly non-existent training that teachers and school leaders undergo
regarding inclusive instruction for this population. Opportunities lie in the emerging praxis of new and upcoming principals, teachers and EAs in a system (a school and district) that prepares them to teach high school students with severe intellectual disabilities inclusively. However, a threat to emerging praxis is that developing inclusive values in leaders, teachers and EAs sometimes takes time, persistence, and effort. As indicated in this study, not everyone carries the same inclusive mindset, so students with severe intellectual disabilities—at least in this school—may not be reaching their potential because staff may not know how to get them there.

Table 6.2

**SWOT Analysis for Emerging Praxis among Learning Support Team Leaders**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S.W.O.T.</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strengths</td>
<td>Leaders in this study had a desire to improve inclusive teaching practices for students with severe intellectual disabilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weaknesses</td>
<td>Century-old, segregated teaching and learning practices are hard to change. Teachers are not taught in university or in the field about how to include students with severe intellectual disabilities and principals are not taught how to lead these kinds of LSTs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities</td>
<td>New generations of education leaders will be more prepared to lead high school LSTs for students with severe intellectual disabilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>New generations of teachers and EAs will be more prepared to teach high school students with severe intellectual disabilities inclusively.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>More research targeting disability-specific inclusive leadership teams.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threats</td>
<td>Students with severe intellectual disabilities do not yet have educational needs met.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Leadership adaptation takes time.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A major finding related to emerging praxis is that, regardless of level of education, principals, teachers and EAs can be supported to reflect on their own practices and to learn the latest research about inclusive education. In other words, they can gain experience through theory and practice. For example, to become a principal in Alberta, approved Masters or graduate level coursework is required (Government of Alberta, 2021). Principals in graduate
school need to learn how to develop collaborative teams and how to inclusively educate students with severe intellectual disabilities. Teachers and EAs who do not go to graduate school may not have the same opportunities and therefore require in-service development and training—to be done together. If principals are given the right tools, they can lead this training and help shift professional beliefs and values towards inclusive education so that everyone on the team is ready to work together when students with severe intellectual disabilities show up in schools and classrooms.

Learning to Collaborate as a Team

If we had time to work together, not just myself and an EA but as a whole learning team, to develop an actual plan, and a collaborative plan that we could employ throughout the day, uhm, I think that would be great. (Mr. Selton)

In the findings, the district was relying on a ‘collaborative response model’ to bring together members of learning support teams. However, this model was not yet well implemented in high schools in the district and at EHS staff were about to have their first introduction to this model. Given the skepticism offered by Ms. Larch and Mrs. Heartright surrounding limited staff interest in these meetings, it can be concluded that this model also has problems with fidelity of implementation, much like the pyramid model introduced by Howery et al. (2013). While there is strength in the number of people involved in educating students with severe intellectual disabilities, employing many people means many moving parts of a whole team dynamic. It is the responsibility of the team to look after one another, to strengthen one another in the intricate
work of inclusive school leadership (Pather, 2007). There is missed opportunity to collaborate effectively when these people do not meet regularly to share ideas and offer support to one another.

Other researchers have found that EAs’ insights are of value to teachers given their instrumental role in navigating the inclusive education needs of students with disabilities (Giangreco et al., 2001). There was evidence, in my study, of EAs not being part of teacher professional development days. Further, EAs were not given time for formal planning and preparation in their days. Holding collaborative response meetings without EAs present negates the very concept of a ‘collaborative’ response, even though there may be multiple teachers present. It is perspective that matters and taking another’s perspective can prove valuable when learning to collaborate as a learning support team—or as a unified force for good on behalf of a student.

Participants described professional development sessions that were full of examples for an elementary audience rather than a junior or senior high audience. This lack of emphasis on high school inclusive education is significant because teaching and learning looks and feels different at the high school level. As Mrs. Heartright pointed out, high school teachers are used to teaching solo and covering x number of curriculum concepts within a given time frame. Asking them to pause and collaborate with colleagues, let alone with EAs, about specific students is unprecedented for many. Still, the results, in places where this is done effectively, demonstrate positive learning outcomes for students and greater cohesiveness amongst staff. For example, Ainscow and Sandill (2010) explain what can happen when high school teachers focus their energies on inclusive collaboration:
The presence of children who are not suited to the existing menu of the school can provide some encouragement to explore a more collaborative culture within which teachers support one another in experimenting with new teaching responses. In this way, problem-solving activities gradually become the reality-defining, taken-for-granted functions that are the culture of a school that is more geared to fostering inclusive ways of working. (p. 407)

Table 6.3 (below) contains strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats for Learning to Collaborate as an LST. Participants in my study indicated they wanted more time to meet regularly even though the school day’s limited time for meetings coupled with EAs’ part time or hourly schedules posed real threats to successful collaboration. A real opportunity for success, therefore, lies in this district’s continued support of a collaborative response model that regularly brings principals, teachers, EAs and district leaders together to problem-solve and problem-posses (Freire, 1970; Head-Dylla, 2009) through inclusive education dilemmas. Such actions may mitigate growing crises while generating more inclusive emerging praxis.
Table 6.3

*SWOT Analysis for Learning to Collaborate as a Learning Support Team*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S.W.O.T.</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strengths</td>
<td>Participants want to meet more regularly together.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weaknesses</td>
<td>There is skepticism with something new (i.e., Collaborative Response Model). Using this model is more time consuming in an already taxed time bracket for staff. Lingering COVID-19 effects may deter staff from wanting to try something new. Lack of formal collaboration opportunities with the EAs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities</td>
<td>The successful implementation of a collaborative response model supported by district and province may generate:  - Professional development for EAs.  - Cohesiveness among staff on and off an LST.  - Positive learning outcomes for students.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threats</td>
<td>Currently very limited teamwork happening. Time for meetings.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A major finding related to learning to collaborate as a team was that there was very limited teamwork. EAs simply showed up in classes with their students hoping that class activities would warrant participation of their students. When class activities did not warrant participation, out came the ‘busy work’ (if the EA had something ready) or the EA and the student left the classroom. Meanwhile, district leaders were trying to implement a collaborative response model that they admitted did not work well in high schools. Further, inclusive professional development in this district was broad and teacher focused, leaving out EAs; PD was also primarily elementary focused. These realities, along with how they might be mitigated, are addressed in Part C.
Searching for Innovation

It’s been a long time since, in high school at least, we’ve been introduced to something that is new and innovative. (Mrs. Easter, 2020, p. 12)

Mrs. Applewood noted that high school classroom instruction is changing rapidly as the world evolves; yet, Mrs. Easter acknowledged there has not been much by way of innovation for EAs in the past two decades. The two statements contradict one another. There should be as much innovation of teaching and learning practices for EAs supporting students with severe intellectual disabilities as there are for teachers supporting students in the mainstream if our goal is to include both populations together in schools and classrooms. More evidence exists today, than ever before, of students with severe intellectual disabilities being given a voice and reinforcing their preferences for an inclusive education (Cujec & Goddard, 2021). Perhaps the need for innovation lies not with the classroom team so much as in the hearts and minds of leaders on school leadership and district teams to change the way special and general education are delivered to students (Alberta Education, 2018b, 2018d).

As shown in this study, including high school students with severe intellectual disabilities amid an industrialized system of education is not easy. If thinking were changed to be more proactive with the curriculum, rather than reactive in the classroom, more students could be included overall. The innovation, therefore, means taking the spotlight off students and placing it specifically on the LST. In the SWOT analysis for Searching for Innovation (see Table 6.4), I wonder if a burgeoning desire for change by participants is enough. Is their desire enough to curb
the weaknesses and threats associated with a lack of urgency in making LSTs accountable for connecting students with severe intellectual disabilities to an inclusive curriculum?

Table 6.4

**SWOT Analysis for Searching for Innovation**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S.W.O.T.</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strengths</strong></td>
<td>Burgeoning desire for change in how students with severe intellectual disabilities are taught in inclusive classrooms. There was a realization that classroom instruction is changing as the world changes.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Weaknesses</strong></td>
<td>Classroom focus was on behavioural interventions for students with severe intellectual disabilities rather than on making curriculum connections. Lack of innovation in teaching and learning at the high school level for students with severe intellectual disabilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Opportunities</strong></td>
<td>Technological and communication advancements are giving voice to students and enhancing their learning opportunities. Opportunity to track curriculum connections instead of behavioural interventions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Threats</strong></td>
<td>Leadership not keeping abreast of advancements in curriculum delivery for students with severe intellectual disabilities.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

High school classroom instruction for Grayson focused on behavioural interventions (e.g., red-yellow-green faces) rather than on making curriculum connections. This is a major finding and an important reminder that innovation in teaching and learning—that is responsive to students with severe intellectual disabilities—is required to break through a status quo of exclusionary practices in contemporary high school classrooms.

**Leading Organizational Culture Change**

What…helped it along [was]…I got more involved in the supported learning. And it was just a matter of reading, studying, observing, growing in my own knowledge. (Ms. Penny)
Participants were led by a principal and a district team who were engaged in IPP processes and who genuinely cared about their wellbeing as learning support team members. However, little evidence surfaced that would suggest that inclusive education was a school-wide initiative. Instead, inclusion seemed to follow individual students into the classes they attended. This meant that some teachers, Ms. Marygold and Mr. Selton for instance, were immersed in inclusive practices while other teachers were not. Grade 10 teachers, for example, who did not currently have students with severe intellectual disabilities in their classes, were hesitant to have Grayson join their classes next year, as Ms. Larch pointed out.

There are opportunities for members of the LST to become leaders in the school and to facilitate inclusive thinking throughout the school (Eisenman et al., 2015; Pather, 2011). Until inclusion is approached as a systemic movement within a school, it will remain a compartmentalized, ad hoc adjustment to general education practices that dissipates when the Grayson’s and Matthew’s move on to other grades or classes. Effective collaborative response meetings could be one way of preparing the next grade’s teachers as experienced LSTs lead changes in thinking about disability in these meetings. Inevitably, sustaining inclusive education for students with severe intellectual disabilities, as they move through grade school, requires thinking differently about special education and disability matters (Skrtic, 1991). This can only happen as dialogue is opened between those who have experience working with these students (some/most EAs) and those who do not.

Ms. Penny makes clear that there is, in fact, a direction we are moving in—as a society and as a schooling system—which is towards more inclusive practices. The implied cultural shift suggests that teachers, EAs and principals are embracing inclusive education for students with severe intellectual disabilities. Other researchers have found the same (Shogren et al., 2015).
Exposure and experience among staff will help generate changes in organizational culture as these students become a more intrinsic part of the fabric of schools (Slee, 2011).

Table 6.5 presents the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of Leading Organizational Culture Change in the school and district studied.

Table 6.5

**SWOT Analysis for Leading Organizational Culture Change**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S.W.O.T.</th>
<th>Analysis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strengths</td>
<td>Classroom, leadership, and district teams were in favour of inclusive education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weaknesses</td>
<td>Inclusive education for students with severe intellectual disabilities was not a school-wide initiative. No formal leadership direction from the province to schools regarding inclusive education for students with severe intellectual disabilities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities</td>
<td>Inclusion can be approached as a systemic movement within the school. Opportunity to prepare next grade’s teachers to ensure continuity for the student. Opportunities for EAs to become leaders of inclusive education.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threats</td>
<td>Team continuity is a threat. (i.e., “consistent inconsistency of roles,” p.68). Classroom team does not have the resources (i.e., planning time and modified lesson materials) to do their work.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Currently, there is no formal leadership direction from the province to schools regarding inclusive education for students with severe intellectual disabilities, leaving interpretation of inclusion policies up to districts and principals (Alberta Education, 2018b). This provides further insight into what contributes to a slightly fragmented leadership team as the school principal and the learning support teacher carry out different mandates and report differently (see Figure 4.2). There is a need to integrate the team clusters to distribute, not separate, praxis across the school (see Figure 6.1). There is also a need for policy and professional support at both the district and provincial levels.
I now conclude Part B of this chapter by summarizing the major findings from each of the five SWOT analyses. The first major finding (from Table 6.1) revealed that students with severe intellectual disabilities in this school were not receiving teacher support to connect to the general education curriculum. The second major finding (from Table 6.2) was that reflective practice about inclusive education for students with severe intellectual disabilities was not something that all teachers and EAs were engaged in on the job or in training. The third major finding (from Table 6.3) was that inclusive education PD in the school and district was broad and elementary focused, leaving little room for targeted or integrated teamwork between high school EAs and teachers. A fourth major finding (from Table 6.4) was that high school classroom instruction for these students was focused on behavioural intervention rather than on making curriculum connections. Finally, a fifth finding (from Table 6.5) was a slightly fragmented leadership team—on account of a new learning support teacher three years in a row and no leadership from the province concerning this population of students—which makes it hard to create momentum with respect to inclusive leadership. In summary of Part B, there is a need for policy and professional support at the provincial level to create and maintain consistency with respect to inclusive education leadership practices for supporting students with severe intellectual disabilities.

**Part C: Answering the Research Question**

I asked the research question: How does a learning support team for high school students with severe intellectual disabilities inform inclusive leadership practice? Referring to Carspecken (1996), this section is the final part (Stage 5) of a critical ethnography where a systems analysis yields some sense of necessary future directions for researchers and educators. There are five
subsections that correspond with each of the five themes, only this time the subsections describe, specifically, what the team needs from inclusive leadership practice: (1) curriculum connection; (2) reflective practice; (3) integrated teamwork; (4) inclusive instruction; and (5) policy direction. In each of these subsections, I first answer the research question directly by describing what is happening in terms of leadership on this learning support team for students with severe intellectual disabilities. I then provide a recommendation for what could happen to enhance inclusive leadership on this LST. My description of what is happening (what is) is based on the strengths and weaknesses found in the SWOTs (above). The ‘ideal world scenarios’ (what could be) are based on the opportunities lists.

**A Team in Need of Curriculum Connection**

While the team from my study attempted to modify curriculum, there was little happening by way of inclusive instruction from the principal or the learning support teacher. This led to EAs being left on their own to search for relevant activities and plan lessons. So-called ‘busy work’ was not always teacher-driven and kept students with severe intellectual disabilities separated from mainstream class activities. Grayson and Matthew missed out on opportunities to join their classmates inclusively because their attention was being directed elsewhere (or they were sitting elsewhere) much of the time. Although teachers in this study were open to the concept of inclusive education, they did not know how to support it without generating entirely new and modified lesson plans for these students.

I recommend that Alberta Education, or the Ministry of Education, develop a more inclusive curriculum with these students in mind and that universities build instructional leadership certification for principals around such a curriculum (Government of Alberta, 2021;
Robinson, 2017). Having specific, grade level modifications built into lesson planning guidelines might influence more positive teacher perspectives about disability-related inclusion overall. In an earlier study, I found that teachers exhibited skepticism and apathy when inclusive instruction for students with severe intellectual disabilities was not made tangible for them (Mooney & Lashewicz, 2015). In this current study, Ms. Larch identified that some teachers in Grayson’s upcoming Grade 10 year had similar feelings. With less skepticism and apathy among teachers, principals and learning support teachers would have more room to foster emerging inclusive praxis.

**A Team in Need of Reflective Practice**

I learned through this study that to grow in emerging praxis, principals, teachers and EAs need exposure to inclusive theory and experience with inclusive practices related to students with severe intellectual disabilities. While Principal Penny was supportive and optimistic about inclusive education in her school, she was unable to provide me with tangible resources that she used to motivate and educate her staff. While Mr. Selton and Ms. Marygold were helpful and accommodating, they too failed to provide me with tangible, disability-specific teacher-training resources they were aware of. While Mrs. Easter and Mrs. Applewood were able to talk about modified materials and lesson plans that they had built from scratch, they too fell short of providing tangible examples of disability-related training materials they were given on-the-job. Further, they both expressed sadness over not having had anything new come their way in years. Only the learning support teacher provided me with tangible examples of her training, but upon further examination I found this “inclusion” training to be very broad and unrelated to students with severe intellectual disabilities specifically. Both district leaders were able to give specific
and tangible examples of the (largely elementary-based) disability-related inclusion training that they gave to district personnel, but neither was able to give me examples from their own personal professional development.

I recommend that principals, teachers, and EAs be supported (in their post-secondary training) to reflect on examples of inclusive and non-inclusive high school practices related to students with severe intellectual disabilities. Similar case study scenarios could be offered during in-service training. This informs instructional leadership by making explicit the need for built-in time for leaders, teachers and EAs to reflect on their teaching and leadership practices related to high school students with severe intellectual disabilities. Much like Ms. Penny did, participants and members of similar learning support teams can learn through immersion in current special education matters and by reflecting on their own beliefs and values about inclusion. Still, not everyone is inclined to study and learn. For example, not every teacher or EA aspires to go to grad school and become a principal. How can principals (or learning support teacher-leaders) bring members of learning support teams together for reflective practice? The answer lies in time for integrated teamwork supported by the district.

**A Team in Need of Integrated Teamwork**

Results from my study showed there was fragmented teamwork happening on the LST because of a consistent staffing changeover in the learning support teacher role and a recent changeover in the principalship of the school. The lack of consistency in key leadership positions made it difficult for the principal or the learning support teacher to know the needs of the LST. Without strong leadership guiding them, teachers and EAs thought they were doing a good job including students with severe intellectual disabilities when in reality very little quality inclusion
was happening. The district learning support specialist was disconnected to what was happening in the classroom save for what little was communicated to her third-party from the inexperienced learning support teacher. In essence, the existing hierarchical management structure of the team (Figure 4.2) was not working—not adapting—to the newly complex and changing needs of their teaching environment (Kowch, 2021).

I recommend more integrated opportunities for regular check-ins with the whole team together in the same room (or on the same Zoom conference call). If the whole team is caught up on the latest conversations, concerns, and learning plans for these most challenging students then when one person leaves the team the others are there to fill the gap. The importance of a collaborative response model at the high school level becomes clear here: If LST members are to do their best work for students, they need formal opportunities to dialogue one with another. They need to learn from, and with, each other with an inclusive mindset foremost in conversation. Mr. Selton explained he sometimes switches roles with EAs so that he can work one on one with students. Teachers and EAs could learn to do more of this kind of job-role sharing if professional development sessions incorporated both in attendance together. Thus, there is a need for more integrated teamwork to be carried out at the district-training level so that classroom instruction can proceed more inclusively.

A Team in Need of Inclusive Instruction

Findings showed that inclusive instruction for students with severe intellectual disabilities was not being interpreted correctly. For example, EAs were far more focused on making behavioural interventions happen than on making curriculum connections happen for students. This focus on behavioural intervention (i.e., keeping students quiet and non-disruptive in class)
was due in part to the absence of the teachers in lesson planning for these students. Where lesson planning did show up in data (e.g., during Grayson’s introduction to astronomy) it was done “off the cuff” (p. 81) and had no bearing on what his classmates were currently learning about (see Table 4.1). This was not inclusive instruction.

I recommend a more proactive approach to leading LSTs and developing leader capabilities in LST members (Robinson, 2017). That is, teaching members of the LST to step away from a reactionary behaviour model—which places expectations on students to comply or be reprimanded—and embrace a more proactive and curriculum-responsive model—which places expectations on teachers and/or EAs to comply with (new) curriculum standards for students with severe intellectual disabilities.

My study has established that high school instruction is exclusive of many students and locked in an industrial teaching and leadership paradigm. Friesen and Lock (2010) were also aware of this and urged Alberta Education’s leaders to consider the need for more inclusive instructional practices within existing classroom structures: “From within school structures and processes designed to meet the needs of the industrial past, educational leaders are called upon to invent new learning environments, new education systems to address our contemporary society” (Friesen & Lock, 2010, pp. 3-4). While Friesen and Lock were focused on technological advancements for what they called ‘21st century learners,’ their advice holds true for my study’s definition of inclusive education. Students with severe intellectual disabilities are increasingly a part of 21st century schools (Baio, 2014). Because educational segregation for students with severe intellectual disabilities still exists across the province, inclusive education policies are still mis/interpreted to exclude this group in many schools and classrooms (Gilham & Williamson, 2013).
A Team in Need of Policy Direction

Participants made clear there was no formal leadership direction from the province regarding inclusive education for students with severe intellectual disabilities. While the district had a clear mandate for inclusion, how it was implemented among the classroom team was a matter of individual interpretation. School leaders got involved where IPPs were concerned, but their involvement did not help with daily decision making in the inclusive instructional processes of keeping these students participating in their assigned classes. In short, a lack of leadership at the provincial level has made a mess of interpreting inclusion for students with severe intellectual disabilities in this school.

I recommend the adoption of a newer, more effective model of inclusive leadership in this school and district. While Alberta Education’s (2006) IPP resource outlines how the IPP process should be rolled out for students, it does little to support teachers and EAs who must deliver inclusive instruction. Alberta Education’s (2018b) Leadership Quality Standard provides some direction for principals wishing to develop more inclusive staffing teams, but its position on students with severe intellectual disabilities is unclear. Further, cautioned Prosser et al. (2002) regarding policies in practice, “The mere presence of guidelines does not guarantee implementation” (p. 71). In the absence of clear leadership from the province at this time, the LST in this school and district might want to emphasize the new inclusive leadership model introduced (shortly) in this study.
Summary of Critical Ethnographic Findings

I found that completing the above exercise (describing what is followed by offering recommendations for what could be) helped to identify the five leadership practices that are relevant and timely for fostering an inclusive leadership team among the participants studied. Table 6.6 presents a summary of this critical ethnographic exercise in terms that answer the research question for each theme.

Table 6.6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>What Is Happening</th>
<th>What Could Be</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Working with Curriculum</td>
<td>No modified curriculum model for teachers to follow; EAs are left on their own to search for relevant activities and plan lessons.</td>
<td>CURRICULUM CONNECTION: Alberta Education works with teachers and EAs to develop a more concept-based high school curriculum that can be modified for students with severe intellectual disabilities. EAs are trained to be familiar with and help implement this curriculum in the classroom.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emerging Praxis</td>
<td>Principals, teachers and EAs need experience (theory and practice) with inclusive education for students with severe intellectual disabilities.</td>
<td>REFLECTIVE PRACTICE: Principals, teachers and EAs are given experience in their post-secondary training to develop and become part of proactive inclusive learning support teams.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning to collaborate as a team</td>
<td>Very limited teamwork happening on the LST.</td>
<td>INTEGRATED TEAMWORK: Collaborative response meetings and PD sessions that are relevant for high school teachers/EAs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Searching for Innovation</td>
<td>High school classroom instruction was focused on behavioural intervention rather than on making curriculum connections.</td>
<td>INCLUSIVE INSTRUCTION: Switching from a reactive to a proactive model for including students with severe intellectual disabilities in inclusive classes.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Leading Organizational Culture Change | Currently no leadership direction regarding inclusive education for students with severe intellectual disabilities. | POLICY DIRECTION:
Appl\_\_\_principles from the leadership model found in this study (Figure 6.2) Provide an adaptive space for the team to grow together. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Slightly fragmented leadership team. A need for integrating team clusters to distribute, not separate, praxis across the school.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A need for policy and professional support at the provincial level.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Part D: A Model for Fostering an Inclusive Leadership Team**

This section explores a new model for inclusive education leadership (Figure 6.2) that utilizes the relationship between classroom, leadership and district teams (Figure 6.1) and the five leadership practices that were part of the “ideal” critical ethnographic findings in Table 6.6: (1) curriculum connection, (2) reflective practice, (3) integrated teamwork, (4) inclusive instruction, and (5) policy direction.

The first component of the model consists of the three team clusters of relationships which are now more solidly connected, as they are being led by a leadership team whose strong relationships bridge *both* district and classroom communications. Relationships are important, as the school leadership team holds the balance of power between the classroom and district teams. The ability of a school leadership team to enact support for their inclusive vision and mandate is the linchpin of success for both other team clusters.

The inclusion of the EA in the classroom team is significant as the teacher is no longer alone to discover and manage the inclusive education of the student with a severe intellectual
disability. Just as the principal receives help from the learning support teacher, and the director of learning receives help from the learning support specialist, so too should the teacher (who knows the curriculum) receive help from the EA (who knows the student). Importantly, there may not be any one person who knows how to include the student in every curricular activity; it is the entire learning support team who figures this out together in support of the classroom team.

The second component of the model is the strength of the outer-ring or ecosystem of features that help and influence LST action and development. The outer-ring still represents the collective function of the learning support team, as it did in Figure 6.1, only now their ideal leadership functions are clearly defined. The leadership team is colour-coded to match with reflective practice in the outer ring because the leadership team inevitably drives reflective practices, set by the district, for the classroom team. The classroom team is colour-coded to match with curriculum connection because the classroom team inevitably drives implementation of curriculum. The district team is generally in charge of professional development opportunities for staff; they are colour-coded with integrated teamwork. Inclusive instruction and policy direction stand alone in their colours due to the amount of individual interpretation involved.

The overarching idea behind this model is that an inclusive leadership team for students with severe intellectual disabilities is better able to problem-solve through complexities when they are striving to fulfill all five functions and when their clusters are collaborating regularly through the development and fostering of strong working relationships.
Figure 6.2 A Model for Fostering an Inclusive Leadership Team

- **Curriculum Connection**
  - **Policy Direction**
    - Classroom Team: Teacher & Education Assistant
  - **Leadership Team**
    - Principal & Learning Support Teacher
  - **District Team**
    - Director of Learning & Learning Support Specialist
  - **Inclusive Instruction**
  - **Integrated Teamwork**
  - **Reflective Practice**
Chapter Summary

In Part A, the elements (people and dynamics) of the learning support team were rearranged to show their more informal “clustered” working teams. Here, the lines of informal communication became apparent showing, in Figure 6.1, how the leadership “team” (or cluster) made-up of the school principal and the learning support teacher was of paramount importance. They were responsible for communicating district messages to the classroom team and classroom messages to the district team. Part B was a SWOT analysis using the five major themes derived from data and focusing on the LST’s strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. In Part C, these five themes were again prevalent, but this time in a way that made sense of the findings for a school leadership audience. In the spirit of critical ethnographic storytelling, I built on examples of strengths found (what is) and compared these to an “ideal” opportunity (what could be), for each theme. The result was the development of a model for fostering an inclusive leadership team (Part D). The final chapter elaborates this discussion and identifies questions and pathways to future research.
Chapter Seven: Implications for the Future and a Conclusion

As a society, we have come a long way in preventing what Andrews and Lupart (2000) cautioned was a ‘collision course’ between inclusive and bureaucratic educational thinking. As Ms. Penny described in her interview, students with severe intellectual disabilities were not always an anticipated part of regular education classes and schools. Movement towards equity has been slow, but steady through the decades and learning support teams have evolved with the times.

This chapter addresses recommendations for practice, policy, and further research, stemming from my study, that will help enhance a continual mindset shift from bureaucracy to adhocracy in support of contemporary LSTs for students with severe intellectual disabilities in similar contexts. A conclusion to the study completes this chapter.

Recommendations for Practice

There are three recommendations for practice. First, the LST should strive to connect students to the general education curriculum as much as possible. This can be done by eliminating ‘busy work’ and implementing modified curriculum standards provided by the province or, in the more immediate interim, provided by those closest to the students in question—their EAs. Involving EAs in modifying curriculum means involving them in teacher lesson planning and rethinking the role of EAs as pivotal contributors to the equitable success of students with severe intellectual disabilities. Allocating EA hours sufficient for regular collaborations with their teacher-colleagues is also important. Second, teachers can prioritize their time to collaborate with EAs and the school leadership team can support regular collaborations between this classroom cluster team. Third, reporting and documentation among
the LST could be done more effectively. That is, EAs could keep track of curriculum connections made each day rather than whether a student got a red, green, or yellow happy face. Teachers and/or EAs could report to parents and to principal on what students are learning in class or on how well they are connecting with classmates. The objective here would be to keep LSTs accountable for doing their jobs, not students accountable for being human.

**Recommendations for Policy**

Schein (2004) reminds us that “learning and change cannot be imposed on people. Their involvement and participation is [sic] needed in diagnosing what is going on, in figuring out what to do, and in actually bringing about learning and change” (Chapter 19, Summary and Conclusions section, para. 3). Thus, a specific policy ensuring time and space for collaborative response meetings in this school may be more effective than a broader policy stating that regular inclusive PD will occur. Further, policies that bring intellectual disability advocates to the collaboration table (or any minority group, for that matter), when educational decisions are being made about them, may be more effective in mitigating concerns than creating generic policies that hope to include them. Still, there is much to learn about inclusive LSTs for students with severe intellectual disabilities: how they operate in different contexts, and how educational leadership can help strengthen and support them to be successful in their mandate.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

With further reflection on the major findings and the model proposed, two questions are identified that can be used for further research: (1) What does a modified high school curriculum look like for students with severe intellectual disabilities? (2) What theoretical elements can be
provided to high school principals to ensure they have a better toolbox for disability-related inclusive leadership?

It is my hope that researchers will also want to study more about learning support teams and their leadership dynamics on behalf of students with severe intellectual disabilities. For example, researchers may want to study the leadership structure of schools and districts who support inclusive education initiatives for these students. They may want to study the training and preparation of EAs and teachers who work with these students in inclusive classrooms. They may want to study how a district supports its learning support teams or how a school principal learns to become a more intrinsic part of a learning support team. Researchers may also want to study the theoretical intersections between the fields of disability studies and educational leadership or between curriculum studies and inclusive education. Until then, Schein (2004) is careful to surmise that “cultural understanding and cultural learning starts with self-insight” (Chapter 19, Summary and Conclusions section, para. 4).

Conclusion

I have identified and discussed implications for practice, policy and further research. It is not possible to generalize conclusions from one school’s learning support team. Instead, I have stressed two overarching outcomes that inform inclusive leadership practice for students with severe intellectual disabilities.

First, I recommended taking the spotlight off these students and placing it on modifying curriculum. I urged Alberta Education to develop instructional leadership standards that would support inclusive education but cautioned there would still be a level of individualized supports (i.e., EAs) required for students with severe intellectual disabilities to participate fully in classes.
Howery et al.’s (2013) model assures us that the numbers of students requiring EAs is significantly less when emphasizing universal and targeted curriculum supports at the same time. Had Mrs. Easter and Mrs. Applewood had instructional standards to follow and a curriculum in place, they may not have been as inclined to remove Grayson and Matthew from classes. Had the structures of high school curriculum delivery allowed for collaboration between teachers and EAs, participants may have been able to find more meaningful ways for students with and without severe intellectual disabilities to interact with each other.

Second, I recommended more relational and collaborative professional development for EAs, teachers and principals (Kowch, 2021). As EAs and teachers become familiar with modified curriculum standards they can work together to provide modified lesson planning for students. However, principals must also understand and support this delicate and necessary dynamic. From their interviews, Mrs. Easter and Mrs. Applewood were dedicated to their jobs but were feeling disconnected from the teachers’ classroom planning and struggled to keep abreast of what was happening day to day. This disconnection to the teachers’ agenda made it difficult to know how to include Grayson and Matthew in all the activities of their classes. Were the EAs, teachers and principal more unified in their work together they might have been better equipped to lead inclusive education in their school and mindset shifts among their colleagues.

Darder’s (2017) text, *Reinventing Paulo Freire: A Pedagogy of Love*, is helpful in making my point. Like Darder, I too, have witnessed Freire’s words coming true in my own work over the years:

Freire’s words are truly consistent with what I have personally experienced and observed in the course of my work. Teachers [and in my case EAs] who have answered the call to a liberatory practice of education are, in fact, truly motivated by their passion for learning
and teaching and their love for others. There is an enthusiasm and awakened commitment to the possibilities of education as an emancipatory force. (Darder, 2017, p. 92)

Following Freire and Darder into the realm of contemporary inclusive schooling, we should be able to look to our EAs with the same respect and admiration for their jobs as we do our teachers and administrators.

Herein lies a most difficult challenge that education leaders have in addressing structural and societal problems in public education. Changing how we think of others (like students with severe intellectual disabilities) is not easy. Educators need continual reminders to love these learners as much as they love teaching and learning. In a high school system where grades, looks and behaviour inevitably matter, Freire’s (2005) wisdom holds clout: “

It is impossible to teach without the courage to love, without the courage to try a thousand times before giving up. In short, it is impossible to teach without a forged, invented, and well thought-out capacity to love. (Freire, 2005, p. 5)

I have no doubt that my study participants loved their students with severe intellectual disabilities. I believe that is why they came forward and volunteered their time to try to make a difference. I wonder, as do my participants, what kind of a difference their stories will make?

The model for fostering an inclusive leadership team emphasizes the need for a coherent relationship between classroom, school leadership and district leadership teams so together they can: (1) make curriculum connections for students; (2) provide reflective practice opportunities for staff; (3) integrate teamwork into professional development activities; (4) innovate high school instruction to be more inclusive of this population of students; (5) develop more inclusive policy directions.
Through implementation of the model introduced in this study, it may help school leaders in fostering greater unity on a team that is more cohesive and capable of generating new praxis. It is possible to shift mindsets. It is possible for staff to collaborate more and isolate less in high school environments. Fostering LSTs to become inclusive leadership teams is important so that team members can more effectively lead out in their schools and classrooms and make inclusive education a more seamless and welcomed professional practice.


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APPENDIX A: COPYRIGHT PERMISSION

Hi Laura,

The Canadian Journal of Education grants you the permission to use the diagram as you outlined in your email. The citation format can be found on this page: https://journals.sfu.ca/cje/index.php/cje-rce/article/view/1158 under “How to Cite”.

Best wishes,
Sharon

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APPENDIX B: CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS – PRINCIPALS
APPENDIX C: CALL FOR PARTICIPANTS – LST

DIABILITY INCLUSION—
HOW CAN WE DO BETTER?

Call to Participation: Teaching & Support Staff

Research Problem, Purpose & Question

The rise of disability inclusion in the educational setting has been driven by a variety of factors, including legislation, social movements, and a growing understanding of the importance of inclusivity. However, despite these advancements, there is still much work to be done to ensure that all students have the opportunity to succeed. The purpose of this call for participation is to explore potential research questions related to disability inclusion in educational settings.

Benefits of Participating:

- Increased understanding of disability inclusion practices
- Opportunities for leadership and professional development
- Potential for publication in academic journals

WHO CAN PARTICIPATE?

- General Educators
- Special Educators
- Educational Assistants
- School Psychologists
- Any Staff member willing to do the work!

Participant Expectations:

- Be committed and observant
- Share knowledge of inclusive leadership with peers, internal colleagues
- Be proactive in implementation

What is expected by answering the call:

- Participate in a study and put extra hours into the project
- Answering the call all makes a difference in the world
- You’ll feel great

Thank you for reading! I look forward to hearing from you!

May 5, 2023

The University of Calgary

Call for Participation

Disability Inclusion—
How Can We Do Better?
APPENDIX D: OBSERVATION PROTOCOL

OBSERVATIONAL PROTOCOL

The researcher will be focused on observing the dynamics of leadership between staff and school administration and between general and special educators.

Steps for Observational Data Collection:

1. The researcher will collaborate with consenting participants to shadow each one periodically throughout a pre-determined four-week observation period.
2. All observational data will be collected from consenting adult professionals only.
   a. At no time will data be gathered about students or any other unconsenting individuals.
   b. If a participant interacts with a student the conversation and that interaction are to be ignored in data collection.
   c. Only general information about cultural practices/norms, participant proximity to and participation in general education teaching activities will be collected as data.
3. If some of the LST agree to participate but not others, the following steps will be taken:
   a. Observations will only be conducted in settings where participating members are present.
   b. If a non-participating LST member enters the room during an observation session, the researcher will immediately stop recording and resume only once the non-participant leaves the room.
4. A single recorded observation session will:
   a. commence and cease at the researcher’s discretion;
   b. last between five and 15 minutes at a time; and
   c. involve periodic blind-observations as consented to ahead of time by participants.
5. Participants may not always know when an observation period has started and stopped, but they will know ahead of time that the researcher is there to observe them.
6. Following the four-week observation period, participants will be given a detailed summary of what was observed and will have opportunity to comment and discuss these observations with the researcher.
APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Interview Guide

The following questions were used as a guide in each interview.

Interview Questions

PART ONE – 1-1 interview

1. To start off, I am curious to know what your role is on the learning support team for students with severe intellectual disabilities in your school. What is your job title and how did you come to have this current position in your school?

2. How do you define inclusive education for students with severe intellectual disabilities?

3. Tell me a little of what it is like to be an inclusive educator of students with severe intellectual disabilities. What are some of your favourite memories “on the job”?

4. What positive leadership attributes do you strive to emulate when working on behalf of students with severe intellectual disabilities in your school/district?

5. What cultural barriers related to inclusive education for students with severe intellectual disabilities do you and/or your team find challenging to overcome in your school/district community?

6. What leadership strategies have you found effective, if any, in penetrating your school/district community’s cultural barriers?

7. How do you communicate with your learning support teammates about the barriers, challenges, successes, or innovative ideas you are experiencing in your day-to-day inclusive work?
8. How do you communicate with other colleagues in your school/district (i.e. those not formally part of the learning support team) about the barriers, challenges, successes or innovative ideas you are experiencing in your day-to-day inclusive work?

9. As you look back and compare the start of this school year to now, how would you describe the overall state of inclusive leadership for students with severe intellectual disabilities in your school/district? Please provide examples in your response.

10. Do you feel you have opportunities to explore and develop your inclusive leadership capacity specifically for students with severe intellectual disabilities? Please justify your response with an example.

11. How do you help foster effective links between the special education and academic teaching departments of your school/district?

12. Thinking of your individual contribution to the learning support team at your school/district, how do you help inform senior leadership (i.e. the school principal or your district leaders) about inclusive education challenges, needs, successes, or creative innovations for students with severe intellectual disabilities?

13. What professional development opportunities would you like access to in order to more fully explore and develop your inclusive leadership capacity for students with severe intellectual disabilities?

14. Specifically, in relation to students with severe intellectual disabilities, where do you see the future of inclusive education going in your school/district? Can you please justify your response with an example?

15. Is there anything else you would like to add to our conversation?
PART TWO – Disability Education System Relations

1. Please provide the researcher with tangible examples of (disability-related) inclusive education resources and/or training opportunities you think are of good quality and deserve to be widely utilized in your school and/or district. As noted in your letter of informed consent, this material will not be returned to you and may be referenced in the final report. Please be sure to retain hard copies for yourself. Here are some ideas to get you started:

➢ Teacher resource websites, pamphlets, PD seminars, adapted or modified assessment materials, disability programming brochures from the community, pre-service or in-service training about inclusion you have taken, school and district newsletters, government initiatives, ATA articles, info provided by parents or education assistants, etc.

➢ Please mark which resources/training opportunities have been most helpful for you when working to include students with severe intellectual disabilities.

Provide written justification for your response, such as an example of how you used this resource/training effectively in practice.

________________________________________

________________________________________

________________________________________

________________________________________
2. Please submit an explanation for your overall submission by answering the following question in 50 words or less: How might your submission of disability-education-related materials help inform inclusive leadership practices at your school?
APPENDIX F: CONSIDERATIONS FOR RELIABILITY AND TRUSTWORTHINESS

Considerations for Reliability and Trustworthiness

Sources: Carspecken (1996, p. 141) and Cohen et al. (2011, p. 245)

1. Use interviews and group discussions with the subjects themselves.

2. Conduct member checks on the reconstruction in order to equalize power relations.

3. Use peer debriefing (a peer is asked to review the data to suggest if the researcher is being too selective, e.g. of individuals, of data, of interference) to check biases or absences in reconstructions.

4. Employ prolonged engagement to heighten the researcher’s capacity to assume the insider’s perspective.

5. Use ‘strip analysis’ = checking themes and segments of extracted data with the primary data, for consistency.

6. Use negative case analysis.