

# Inclusive school leadership: Examining the experiences of Canadian school principals in supporting students with special education needs

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**Key words:** special education, school leadership, principal, Canada, critical incidents.

**As school systems strive to support students with special education needs in inclusive schools, there has been a persistent lack of scholarly literature that addresses the ways in which school principals are engaged in this process. This article is a response to this gap and aims to examine the question: What types of experiences do school principals identify as formational in their support of students with special education needs and fostering inclusive schools? Based on the analysis of data collected from 285 school principals from six provinces in Canada, four key themes are identified including: relationships, modelling behaviours, communication and principal isolation and lack of preparation. These themes are examined with consideration for how to support principals' professional leadership in fostering inclusive schools. As a result, this article's significance is in its examination of the experiences of principals and how these influence their leadership practice for supporting students with special education needs and fostering inclusive schools.**

## Introduction

The issue of how to promote inclusive education systems for students with special education needs (SEN) transcends global boundaries. Research aimed at unpacking the concept of inclusive education for students with SEN is abundant. However, much less attention has been given in the scholarly literature to the experiences of school principals in supporting students with SEN. Capturing the nuances of inclusive school leadership is an iterative process deeply manifested in cycles of experience and reflection. Self-reflection can guide school leaders along a transformative continuum of better understanding

themselves (Yamamoto et al., 2014), which in turn may lead to professional growth. This process functions as an opportunity for educational leaders to reflect and identify experiences which inform and sculpt their perception of effective practices. This study uses this conceptual framework to examine the experiences of school principals in supporting inclusion for students with SEN.

There are many constructs informing educational leadership and scholars tend to agree that there are many nuances and complexities in how school leaders influence student experiences in schools (Leithwood et al., 2006). There is also a substantial measure of literature surrounding the importance of inclusion within the classroom and the profitability of inclusion for *all* groups of students (DeLuca, 2013). Yet, research remains largely unexplored on the nexus of how educational leaders support students with SEN in an inclusive school environment. This study provides the opportunity to address this gap to better understand the experiences of school principals in supporting students with SEN in inclusive schools. Through an analysis of questionnaire and interview data collected from 285 Canadian school principals, four key themes were identified: relationships, modelling behaviours, communication and principal isolation and lack of preparation. This study's significance is in its examination of the reflective processes principals engage in and how these influence their leadership practice for supporting students with SEN and fostering inclusive schools.

Two broad areas of literature are particularly relevant to this study: inclusive education specifically with regard to the Canadian context, and school leadership. There is a clear gap *between* these two areas of literature; that is, there is a significant body of literature that speaks to inclusive education and another substantial body of literature on school leadership. What is largely missing in the research literature is how these two areas intersect in an examination of how school principals support students with special education needs in inclusive schools. This is

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important because the work of school principals in regards to special education can be particularly challenging and complex.

#### *Inclusive education in the Canadian context*

For the purposes of this article, inclusion is examined through the lens of school-based special education identifications with the goal of including students with diverse needs in the inclusive classroom environment (Specht et al., 2016). This perspective ‘seeks to address the interactional gap and cultivate a culture of social acceptance amongst all students and teachers in the learning environment’ (DeLuca, 2013, p. 310). The Council of Ministers of Education in Canada define inclusive education as ‘quality education that aims at the full participation of all learners’ (CMEC, 2008, p. 2). This definition aligns with the belief that all students belong and all students can make valued contributions to classrooms and schools (McCrimmon, 2015).

School-based inclusion in Canada includes an increasingly diverse, complex student population, perhaps especially those with special education needs (McCrimmon, 2015). The prevalence of disability in Canada is currently 1 in 5 or 22% for those aged 15 years of age and older (Morris et al., 2018). From a family systems perspective, disability impacts around 25% of Canadians (McColl et al., 2017). Inclusive education has resulted in escalating demands on teaching a range of learners, while attending to the rights of all students and focused on good teaching techniques from classroom teachers applicable to all learners (Tristani and Bassett-Gunter, 2020).

As part of federal efforts to develop legislation aimed at supporting those with disabilities, in June 2018, the Government of Canada tabled the proposed *Accessible Canada Act* which focused on accessibility in federal jurisdictions. The legislation removed barriers to accessibility such as the built environment, employment and transportation. The Act is built on principles such as inclusive design and inherent dignity, and on the foundation of *Canadian Human Rights Act* (Government of Canada, 2018). Although there has been federal legislation to support inclusion, education is a provincial matter in Canada. Thus, there is a wide spectrum of policies that relate to inclusive education. For example, the *Accessible Education for Students with Disabilities* (2018) was a policy developed by the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) because ‘despite a highly regulated and complex education framework designed to address the “special needs” of students, students with disabilities continue to face obstacles in their attempts to access educational services in Ontario’ (OHRC, 2018, p. 4). Legislation is an important foundation but further change is necessary to address the challenges of supporting inclusive schools in Canada.

#### *School leadership, inclusion and learning*

There is limited research on the role of principals in supporting students with SEN in schools. In a meta-analysis

of 19 North American articles ranging from 2001 to 2011 related to special education and school leadership with elementary and secondary school principals, Cobb (2015) noted that the role of the school principal is crucial in both interpreting and implementing policy related to inclusion. Studies by Cobb (2015) and Sider (2017) contend that school principals’ behaviours affect the behaviours of other school staff, the school culture, as well as the delivery of service in the school. In an earlier study exploring the experiences of school principals in creating inclusive schools, Irvine et al., (2010) argue that inclusive education is all about ‘equal access to educational opportunities for all students regardless of physical, intellectual, emotional or learning disability’. (p. 73). Further, for it to be successful, it requires efforts in multiple, overlapping areas such as policy, teacher preparation, professional development, school supports and the commitment of teachers and principals.

Inclusive school leaders need to acquire clear understanding of the lived experiences of all of their students especially those who have traditionally been underserved because of their special education needs or their intersectional identities by the system in place in most schools (Cioè-Peña, 2017). For example, Ryan (2006) refers to some key distinct practices to argue that inclusive school leadership involves ‘advocating for inclusion, educating participants, developing critical consciousness, nurturing dialogue, emphasising student learning and classroom practice, adopting inclusive decision- and policy-making strategies, and incorporating whole school approaches’ (p. 9). This study provides an opportunity to examine how school principals come to understand these experiences in supporting inclusive education.

This study focuses on those experiences that school principals’ report as having a significant bearing on their perception and support of students with special education needs. These type of significant experiences, sometimes known as critical incidents (Hanhimäki & Tirri, 2009; Yamamoto et al., 2014) or disorienting dilemmas (Mezirow and Taylor, 2009), are formational experiences in the leadership development of principals. These experiences may be positive or negative and may be seemingly as a result of mundane events. What is key to these experiences is that they are identified by the participant as having a profound influence through causing some sort of disequilibrium and opportunity for reflection and learning (Yamamoto et al., 2014).

#### **Method**

The following research question directed this study: *What types of experiences do school principals identify as formational in their support of students with special education needs and fostering inclusive schools?* This national Canadian study involved 285 participants, including 275 male and female school principals representing elementary and secondary publicly funded schools, in urban and

rural communities of British Columbia, Alberta, Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick, and Newfoundland and Labrador. Ten other participants included school system leaders responsible for special education services and supports.

### Data collection

In the first phase of data collection, 275 school principals and vice-principals, as well as ten school system leaders, completed a questionnaire to determine the background training and experiences that they have had with students with SEN. The questionnaire also included open-ended questions to identify key experiences that have informed their perspectives on leadership for inclusion. In the second phase of data collection, follow-up semi-structured interviews with a subset of 41 principals took place. To ensure maximum variation sampling, participants were identified by the research team after reviewing questionnaire responses, ensuring that male and female, English- and French-speaking, elementary and secondary settings, and each of the provinces selected for this study was all represented. In the third phase of the study, five system leaders responsible for system-wide special education services were interviewed. Table 1 provides an overview of interview participants.

All interviews were undertaken by a member of the research team in either face-to-face settings or by telephone. These interviews were semi-structured and were approximately 30–45 minutes in length. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and transcriptions were returned to participants to ensure that transcripts accurately represented their responses.

### Data analysis

Interview transcripts were analysed using a key word approach that identified frequently used words and phrases. This analysis was implemented in two steps, each complementary of the other. First, the research team identified key words from the academic literature on inclusive school leadership (e.g., collaboration, support) and examined the transcripts to identify whether these words appeared and the frequency as well as the context

**Table 1: Demographics of interview participants (n = 46)**

Interview Participants	Number of Interview Participants
Principals & Vice-Principals	41
School System Leaders	5
Elementary Schools/Secondary Schools	31/10
English/French	38/8
Number of School Systems Represented	27
Provinces Represented	6

of the words. Second, an emergent approach was utilised, wherein identified words that commonly appeared in the transcripts but had not identified through the academic literature were identified. This dual design, hybrid process (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006), using aspects of both inductive and deductive data analysis, led to the identification of key words which were then clustered to identify overarching themes reflective of the implementation process and identification of barriers and opportunities for successful implementation. Through this content analysis, surface, manifest content and latent, underlining meanings were both examined (Wallen and Fraenkel, 2001). In the reporting of the below themes that emerged, all potentially identifying information was changed.

### Results

In this section, four emergent key themes are presented: relationships (with four distinct groups: students, staff, parents and community), modelling behaviour, communication and teamwork, and issues related to principal isolation, resource allocation and lack of preparation.

#### Relationships

Principals invest significant time on the school site with students, staff, parents/guardians and community agencies to support a wide variety of student needs. One participant captured the importance of relationships by stating, 'Relationships are the foundation of everything I do as a school administrator'. In this section, four sub-themes related to the importance of relationships – those with students, staff, parents/guardians and the broader community – are examined.

*Students.* Participants recognised that in order to support students with special education needs there must be a relationship with those students built on trust. One principal stated, 'It goes back to building that relationship. If a kid trusts you, a kid will tell you, eventually, why they are doing what they are doing'. This response provides insight into how principals perceive that they can most effectively support a student: trust and relationships are important factors in facilitating a student's ability to communicate what they need.

Another participant discussed the importance of 'even showing any kind of kindness ... and that we can't give up on anybody'. Students with SEN may experience bullying and loneliness in their school experience, thus making kindness even more important in their emotional and mental growth. When a student trusts a principal, and when principals are kind to students with SEN, there is an enhanced likelihood of engaging in a healthy relationship with them, thus leading to increased opportunities to access and receive necessary supports.

Relationship building is a long-term process that requires regular interaction. One principal stated, 'You've got to know your students. You've got to know them in their

good states and their not-good states'. Principals noted that negative experiences most often occurred when relationships had not been fostered with students with SEN. Conversely, when principals are engaged with students with SEN in their classrooms, and not just when they are sent to the office, it can nurture healthy relationships. A participant highlighted that this makes students feel like those in leadership are invested in them and that this takes time and persistence: 'You have to take the time to know them. You have to know what are their strengths, what is their need'.

One participant reflected on the change process he had experienced which included a recognition that, early in the principal role, he had focused on management aspects, such as time-tabling and committee work, of the school organisation. The participant indicated that he felt that this had been to the detriment of fostering relationships, particularly with students who appeared to be marginalised in the school community. This had become a higher priority for him as he had gained experience in the principal role. Participants clearly identified the fundamental importance of building relationships with students with SEN before any educational intervention would be successful.

*Staff.* Participants also identified that principals have to foster positive relationships with their teaching and non-teaching staff within the school. One participant stated, 'It's about building relationships and trust with people in your building. It's about working together and being part of a team and including myself as part of that team'. Participants recognised that frontline workers, including teachers and support staff such as resource teachers and paraprofessionals, can carry tremendous responsibilities for the learning experiences of students with SEN. Numerous participants made it clear that they saw support staff as equal partners in the teaching responsibility for students with SEN. As a result, 'It's important to develop a good relationship with the resource group because these are your experts'. Principals indicated that their relationships with teachers and support staff were nurtured by, in many cases, daily or at least weekly meetings.

Participants also recognised that the school staff can feel isolated and vulnerable when working with students with SEN. There can be high levels of anxiety that go with working with students with significant behavioural and learning needs. Participants discussed the importance of supporting their teaching staff when they were feeling tired or anxious. When reflecting on a critical incident that had recently occurred, one principal stated, 'When a staff [member] says they aren't coping with this, we need to be really clear that we are in it together and we find ways to try and support them'. Another stated: 'I say to staff right at the beginning: if you feel like running away, that's when you need to run into my office. When you find that you are withdrawing and you're feeling

overwhelmed, that's when you need to run in, not out'. This principal had experienced a number of incidents over her career where teachers had experienced mental health challenges due to the complex and competing needs of students. Reflecting on these compelling and framing incidents had reinforced the importance of providing support to her staff as her top priority. A third participant said, 'Sometimes it takes a lot of mentoring and support from me when they [teachers] are just exhausted'. These statements provide powerful illustrations of the value that principals have on ensuring that their teaching staff feels supported.

Participants indicated that they experienced many challenges in ensuring that students with SEN, and those who work with them, are supported with the resources they need. However, a clear theme from the data was that principals believed that their staff could effectively support students with SEN. As one participant indicated, 'You want your best staff teaching those students who are most in need. And if you have the right staff, and the right supports in place, that programme is going to flourish'. Principals indicated that they were able to help foster further commitment to inclusive education if their staff felt like they had been supported before, during, and following challenging experiences.

*Parents and Guardians.* Participants discussed the importance of engaging parents (this term will be used but refers to parents and guardians) of students with SEN in positive ways to best address the needs of the child. They stressed the importance of starting things off positively with parents when the child with a SEN first comes to the school. For example, one participant stated that, 'When a parent comes in and registers a child, they seem surprised that we are not starting in conflict; they're surprised that they haven't had to advocate and lobby. They're weary from fighting for things'. By welcoming parents and genuinely articulating a desire to work together to support the child, principals can form an initial positive relationship with the family unit. They can further enhance this relationship by trying to consider the perspective of the parent in issues related to the child. Participants emphasised that this perspective-building is helpful for themselves and also needs to be part of what they help teachers to develop, too.

Participants pragmatically recognised that it is not always possible to have amicable relationships with parents. In describing interactions with parents, such as those which occur in difficult or acrimonious situations, participants stressed the importance of finding common ground with parents. Consistent, ongoing communication is key in these situations as is having a team-based approach. One principal illustrated this by sharing a critical incident she had experienced:

*I was meeting with his mother who really didn't want to meet with us. But when the behaviour support team*

*was in the school and changing up the programming, she became aware that we really were trying. The mother came to see us a few weeks into school, and she was in tears of happiness that she had her son back.*

When principals work diligently with parents, the effect can be powerful. One principal shared a difficult conversation he had recently experienced where, ‘at the end of the conversation, the Dad came around the table and gave me a hug and said “I have never had someone want to include my kid in the school before”’. The principal reflected on this incident not as an occurrence in isolation but as part of a long process of dialogue and engagement with the parent. This process of relationship building often takes a long-term commitment involving nuanced skills. Principals who work persistently to foster relationships with students, staff and parents build intentional and purposeful communities while nurturing the kinds of environments where all community members feel an authentic sense of purpose, a hallmark of inclusive schools.

*Community.* Participants noted that the school community is a broadly defined space that involves internal and external groups. One principal summed it up, ‘You have to have your community have an understanding of where you’re going’. Participants noted that sometimes the school community cannot provide all of the supports that a student with SEN needs so they require an awareness of other community services that may be available. As one participant indicated, ‘I think every child should go to their community school and I also think that every community school should have sufficient support to allow that’. External community members may include mental health agencies, child protection agencies and family counselling services. Principals were also clear that within the school community, support staff such as resource teachers and other professionals including speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists and educational assistants were key to successful inclusion.

#### *Modelling behaviour*

Principals set the example in attitude, language and actions for students, teachers, support staff and parents/guardians. As one participant stated, ‘We can’t expect from our staff what we are not willing to do ourselves’. Participants discussed a range of ways in which they model the type of inclusive education supports they wanted to see reflected in their schools. One of the topics most frequently discussed was the importance of regular visits to classrooms, hallways and playgrounds. As one vice-principal, stated, ‘Both my principal and I have it as an absolute priority that we are in the classrooms every day’. As part of these classroom visits, participants articulated a variety of ways in which they supported students with SEN, including checking in with them to see how they were doing and supporting them in learning

activities. Principals indicated that this type of regular contact with students with SEN, although seemingly innocuous, fostered the type of behaviour they wanted to see adapted by teachers and, eventually, by students.

Principals who had a background in special education expressed strong support for the importance of modelling inclusive behaviours and supports for students and their teachers. One principal stated, ‘My whole background is in special education and I make a point to talk with the teachers who are less familiar [with it], showing them a few techniques to allow them to meet the kids’ needs’. Participants discussed that even if a principal did not have significant experience or training in special education, the most important behaviour to model was simply spending time with students with SEN. One principal indicated that ‘I’ll often have lunch with them. Periodically throughout the day I will be checking in on some of our highest needs students to make sure their day is going alright’. Again, this illustrates what some principals considered critical aspects of inclusive school leadership: regular, everyday interactions in which the principal supported the students with SENs. A powerful statement a principal made expressed the importance of spending time with those who are often marginalised. She stated, ‘I really [work] near the most vulnerable staff and the most vulnerable children. That is where I am, physically, and that’s where I need to be’. As this principal reflected on why she was committed to this, she expressed a long-term professional and personal journey that included an increasing recognition of the challenges that students with SEN faced both in the school and in the community. She indicated that she recognised that teachers watched her interactions with students with SEN and that her modelling had set the direction for others in the school. Modelling this type of support was seen as a key attribute of principals who effectively support inclusive schools.

#### *Communication and teamwork*

Principals invest a lot of time in communicating about a wide variety of issues related to supporting inclusive schools. Communication occurs in formal and informal meetings and consultations with parents, students, staff and community members. Participants indicated that a key part of communication is expressing the importance of valuing everyone’s community participation. Numerous principals stated that they regularly express that ‘everyone is welcome here’ and do this in meetings with parents, teachers and students. Others also indicated that they do not just verbalise such statements but try to live them out through their actions and through the artefacts that can be seen in the school: pictures of all varieties of students, books that reflect diversity, and classroom spaces that do not marginalise students with SEN to the fringes of classroom and school communities.

Participants discussed that communication about inclusion is not always easy and some community members may

not see the value of an inclusive environment. Principals identified challenging incidents that had occurred in which they were questioned about their commitment to inclusion. These sometimes occurred in staff meetings, in hallway conversations with teachers, and in meetings with parents in their offices. A focus on teamwork permeated many of the examples that principals provided in how they responded to these experiences. For example, one principal stated, ‘In this work of building inclusive schools, we need to bring people together to try to work as collaboratively as possible and work together for the student’s success’. Such collaboration needs to include not just the team within the school but also superintendents and external personnel or agencies such as behavioural support teams and medical practitioners.

Working as a team is important to developing an accurate profile of a specific student and to providing the necessary supports on an ongoing basis. For example, academic, social or emotional challenges may be raised at a weekly school-based team meeting where any interventions that need to be implemented are discussed. As well, in schools that have a leadership team of a principal and vice-principal(s), it is important to foster this team approach. One participant stated that ‘We [principal and vice-principal] are in constant communication. We talk about everything’. This principal also discussed the importance of the administrative team supporting each other, particularly in difficulty incidents related to special education. Communication is key to these collaborative efforts to support the success of every student and staff member.

#### *Principal isolation, resource allocation and lack of preparation*

Principals frequently reported that although they are surrounded by people involved with students with SEN, they often work in isolation and without a lot of support. This seems to be particularly the experience of those principals who are the sole administrator in a school. There is a strong indication that the demands of the job, particularly with diverse and pronounced student needs, takes a heavy toll on them. Participants indicated that they are facing increased demand for resources but stagnant or decreased access to these resources. Participants also identified the lack of training and preparation they had in supporting students with SEN in inclusive schools.

When discussing the supports that were available to him, a new principal stated, ‘As a new principal, in a new setting, it very much feels like I am on an island unto myself to make these decisions’. Principals recognise that as the leaders of their schools they are tasked with a significant responsibility; this responsibility can take its toll on principals. One principal encapsulated this feeling in just a few words, ‘It’s exhausting’. Principals also shared that time and experience are significant factors in this regard. With more experience, comes a realisation that

principals are not as isolated or unprepared as they may feel. One principal stated, ‘I have confidence we are going to get through it because I have been through it so many times’ and another stated that, ‘As you’ve done it longer, you feel more comfortable in uncomfortable situations’.

Part of the reason that principals may feel isolated is that they are responsible for resource allocation within their schools. This can sometimes make them feel like they have to make choices between who will get resources or how resources will be distributed. One principal said, ‘We had exhausted all of our resources to support this child and I was at a bit of a loss in terms of what to do next’. Another principal expressed it this way, ‘We inevitably get to the point where we have nothing left to provide from a budget perspective and I don’t know what else to do. There’s a million things that there is not enough of’. The challenge that this under-allocation of resources leads to is additional stress on principals.

Principals indicated that they have had limited professional development specific to fostering inclusive school environments. Many participants commented that the most effective preparation had been in their role as teachers or special education personnel. However, most indicated that they had not received adequate leadership preparation for supporting students with SEN in their principal training programmes or through in-service professional development that had taken place since they became a principal. Most identified some limited legal training they had experienced in their principal qualification programmes but principals were not able to identify training they had received on fostering inclusive school environments. This gap in professional development indicates that more needs to be done to support principals’ knowledge and skills in supporting students with SEN in inclusive schools.

#### **Discussion**

Many principals in this study described specific experiences that had shaped their views of inclusion. These experiences speak to principals’ awareness regarding distinct turning points in their professional journey. Examining these experiences provide a compelling and insightful lens from which to examine the role of principals in supporting students with SEN in inclusive schools.

#### *Principal isolation*

An outcome of this study requiring further exploration is the number of principals who identified isolation as a significant challenge in their work to support inclusive education. The academic literature that speaks to collaborative leadership (e.g., Hargreaves and O’Connor, 2018), does not address the positionality of school principals and how this influences their isolated and isolating work in schools. As multiple participants noted, it is important that they not be ‘islands’ and yet the structure

of schooling often ensures that principals are indeed isolated from other school leaders who share similar experiences and dilemmas. Those involved in school system leadership, as well as those in organisations which represent principals, need to heed this emerging issue as it appears to correspond to increasing rates of mental health concerns that principal's report (Horwood et al., 2019).

The evidence is compelling that effective school leadership is necessary to ensure improved student learning outcomes and equity in schooling (Leithwood et al., 2008). This raises the question of whether principals would be more effective if authentic, supportive and active leadership networks were in place to consistently engage them in collaborative practices? This question is particularly important when considering issues such as inclusive education for which principals need to provide clear and consistent leadership in their schools. Although there is significant body of literature that speaks to the value of professional learning communities and networks (e.g., Carpenter, 2015) more research needs to specifically consider how these professional communities can foster principals' leadership competences particularly when confronting challenging issues. This is particularly important in the area of special education due to the complex and challenging issues often involved. It would be particularly interesting to consider whether collective leadership efficacy is an outcome of these communities, as we have seen for collective teacher efficacy in professional learning networks that focus on teachers (Schwab and Alnahdi, 2020; Voelkel Jr. and Chrispeels, 2017).

#### *Leadership competencies for inclusive schools*

Despite the recurrent theme of isolation that is indicative of the experiences of some principals in the study, there was a pervasive sense of commitment to inclusion and striving to meet the needs of all students on the part of many principals. An experienced principal commented, for instance, that, 'I think in that moment, it really was clear to me, on a really personal level, that one person can make a huge difference'. This comment speaks to the importance of fostering professional competencies for principals in how they can support students with SEN in inclusive schools. The competencies identified in this study include the ability to foster relationships with multiple stakeholders, to model inclusive behaviours, and to develop effective communication mechanisms to support inclusive education. These competencies also align with the effective school leadership literature (e.g., Leithwood et al., 2008) particularly with setting direction, developing people and redesigning the programme (Leithwood et al., 2006). In light of these findings, school systems and organisations representing principals need to take a proactive role in anticipating the experiences of principals and the necessary environments to support students with SEN. These competencies can be fostered through leadership development programmes that explicitly consider special

education due to its increasingly central role and complex nature in schools.

Fostering leadership abilities for inclusion appear to be more easily supported when a principal has previous educational experience working specifically with students with SEN. However, leadership competencies can be supported through professional learning opportunities that are provided by school systems or professional associations that do not focus just on the legal and technical aspects of special education. For example, parental engagement must be fostered to underscore positive, supportive communication, as opposed to any that might be adversarial. The importance of collaboration, partnerships and trust cannot be absent and must be at the centre of school leadership (Ryan, 2006; Wettlaufer and Sider, 2019). In such a collaborative way, the possibility of building a culture of inclusion then exists in the broader community.

Professional development for principals needs to shift from a focus on legal and technical information to a competency model that focuses on knowledge, skills and attitudes. These competencies need to include how to imagine, envision and then foster such inclusive cultures within the realities of school systems, buildings, classrooms and amongst peers using approaches that encompass both minds and hearts. Inclusion needs to penetrate all aspects of schooling, not only for students with SEN, but for all of our complex students who are diverse in many ways (Garcia and Ortiz, 2013). Further, principals need to know – and remember – how inclusion and belonging means much more than an inclusive physical placement of students in a class but also through the development and implementation of individualised programming and support for all students in all domains of development of the whole child, from social connections to academic growth. Principals need to be able to shift between recursive perspectives and practicalities, from advocating for inclusive schools to supporting teachers in their classroom. These intersections need to consider the impact of human dignity and human rights and systemic inequality and oppression (Cioè-Peña, 2017; Kozleski and Choi, 2018; Ryan, 2006). School leadership matters, including an ongoing commitment to developing, leading and even championing, inclusive classrooms and schools (Ryan, 2006). Doing so helps to fulfil the voice and vision of inclusive policies developed at school levels, district levels, provincial levels – and even classroom levels.

It is important to remember that a school leadership journey is not a journey undertaken in isolation – even if it may feel that way at times. Critical experiences rarely occur in a solitary context, but rather these incidents and these journeys are undertaken with a network of essential partners and foundational relationships. These processes build and hold together the structures of inclusion until inclusion is the default setting – the norm (Irvine et al.,

2010). Within the school and broader school system community, fellow champions will no doubt exist, as well as those who resist embracing inclusion. Principals may not be able to shift the mentality of everyone in the school community but they lead by example so that others may see the value of inclusion (Shields, 2010).

### Limitations

This study does have several limitations. First, those who participated in the study were likely interested in and supportive of inclusive education since the study was posited as an exploration of principals' experiences with inclusive education. Thus, those who chose to participate may have felt encouraged to participate because the focus of the study aligned with their own value of inclusive education. Second, the study explores inclusive education during a time where inclusion is widely accepted in Canadian education jurisdictions. Thus, the experiences that principals shared took place in a milieu that is generally supportive of inclusive education. The experiences may have been very different in an alternative context, place or time. Third, the study relies on principals' self-reported perspectives and experiences. These perspectives may not align with the experiences of those who observe and interact with principals in their work. Relatedly, this study does not examine whether the participants' perceptions of inclusion and support for students with SEN are actualised in special education outcomes. Future studies need to explore the experiences of principals considering other data sets including observation of principals in their school contexts. These studies should examine the potential disconnect between what principals say they are doing and their actual practices in schools. Despite, these limitations, the examination of principals' experiences, particularly with critical incidents or challenging situations, presents promising potential as a framework for professional learning.

### Conclusion

The study supports the use of reflection about experiences as a tool for professional reflection and learning for principals. In the work of Yamamoto et al., (2014), they discovered that, 'how the leader made sense of the incident that initially caused disequilibrium, determined if the view of self was altered, solidified or remained fragmented' (p. 177). This framework of altering, solidifying or fragmenting was not the focus of this study but does raise important considerations for future research. Dilemmas that principals shared through this study helped them identify and articulate a shift in, or support for, their conceptualisation of inclusion. Thus, we see significant potential for the examination of critical incidents as a form of transformative learning where these disorienting dilemmas can lead to critical reflection (Mezirow and Taylor, 2009). Further studies could consider critical incidents as a framework for sharing about, reflecting upon, and developing meaning for the work of school principals in a wide variety of areas beyond inclusive education. Principals who

participated in this study shared examples from a range of experiences which have had – and no doubt continue to have – powerful impact on their daily practices. As a result, this study points to how these experiences can act as a framework for professional learning (Dollarhide et al., 2007). School principals' experiences can serve as important framing moments to help them in fostering inclusive schools for students with SEN.

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