

**DEVELOPING INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS:
SCHOOL LEADERS' PERSPECTIVES ON POLICY TO PRACTICE**

by

Angela Voutier

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Abstract

The implementation of inclusive school practices in the public school system is a priority for educators across Manitoba, Canada, and many parts of the world. However, traditional educational systems often perpetuate privilege for some students while marginalizing others. School leaders frequently work in isolation and face ethical dilemmas and systemic barriers in their efforts to foster inclusion for all students. This qualitative research study, grounded in critical theory, explores the experiences of school leaders as they implement inclusive school policies and practices. Using Collaborative Autoethnography (CAE) methodology and a Think Tank structure, participants engaged in recursive cycles of self-reflection and collaborative discussions to examine and share their personal experiences with inclusion. Through this process, school leaders identified key barriers to inclusion, including inconsistent training, systemic constraints, and inflexible policies. They also highlighted the essential skills required for inclusive leadership, such as communication, advocacy, innovation, and creativity. Additionally, the study revealed effective strategies to support inclusion, including collaborative professional development, mentorship programs, and improved university partnerships for pre-service training. The findings underscore the value of peer-supported reflection and collaborative problem-solving as mechanisms for enhancing teacher efficacy and sustaining inclusive practices.

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This study would never have come to fruition without the participants, and so I express my heartfelt gratitude to the 14 school leaders who engaged in this research with me with enthusiasm, passion, vulnerability, and commitment. It was an enriching learning experience for me, both personally and professionally, to move through this journey with them.

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my family ...

... to my *children*: Olivia, Steven, and Audrey whose unique individual gifts and challenges taught me patience, humility, and unconditional love and commitment. Thanks for all your hugs and reassurance. Thanks for understanding when I was distracted and focused on other children along with you. Thanks for celebrating all the milestones along the way with me and for me when I was too tired to celebrate the small successes. I could not have done this without you.

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**DEVELOPING INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS:
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Chapter One

The purpose of this study was to explore the implementation of inclusive school policies and practices by inviting school leaders in Manitoba to participate in a collaborative autoethnography project that included a Think Tank structure. The Think Tank sessions garnered the participants' efforts to create inclusive schools through the presentation and discussion of their personal and professional reflections and observations.

This introduction outlines my stance as a researcher and my interests and educational path in inclusive school practices that are the foundation of this study. In Chapter Two, I use an immanent critique (Skrtic, 1995) to establish the rationale for this study and examine the existing policies that govern inclusion in Manitoba and the current reality in schools. It is only through continually "researching the development of inclusive practices and the experience and practical reality of inclusive education" (Ekins, 2017, p. 14) that we can actively work towards truly inclusive schools. Chapter Two also summarizes the research on inclusive education, its critical theory underpinnings, and the various ways that school leaders can incorporate ethical, equitable decision making to create inclusive schools. A discussion of appropriate ways to approach collaborative research in schools is also included. The research design for this research project is presented in Chapter Three, the findings in Chapter Four, analysis and discussion of the findings in Chapter Five, and next steps and conclusions are outlined in Chapter Six.

This study provides insight into the successful implementation of inclusive educational practices and provides support and guidance to inclusive school leaders who want to ensure positive, equitable, and effective learning opportunities for all students.

To provide perspective on the origins to this study, it is important for me to outline my values and beliefs as an educator, school principal, and researcher through a brief description of my personal and professional background that brought me to this place and this work. I was born in a small town in New Brunswick; number ten of eleven children. My mother graduated from high school and was a stay-at-home mom, while my dad left school after grade eight and worked as a mechanic for as long as I can remember. He passed away when I was twelve. All eleven children in our family graduated from the same small-town high school, and it was always made clear to us that doing so was an expectation not an option. I always knew I wanted to be a teacher (the first and only in my family), and I went to university directly after high school, receiving my Bachelor of Education from the University of New Brunswick.

The focus of my undergraduate studies prepared me to be a high school English teacher, but I began my teaching career in a Grade Two classroom in Sandy Lake, Ontario; a fly-in reserve, where I was fortunate to receive a teaching position as job prospects in New Brunswick in the Eighties were few and far between. I moved into Grades Seven – Ten classrooms during the three years that followed, and it was here that I met my future husband, a fellow educator from Newfoundland. This start to my career set the stage for more experiences in remote communities in several provinces and as a result, I have taught a variety of subjects and all grades from 1-12 in Ontario, New Brunswick, Northwest Territories (now Nunavut), and Saskatchewan, before moving to Manitoba in 2004.

I began learning more about the unique groups of students that I had in my classrooms while in Sandy Lake by taking additional qualification courses in EAL, Special Education, and Canadian Native Literature through Lakehead University in Thunder Bay, ON. I then focused on raising my own children while teaching so my formal education was put on hold until 2003. It

was then that I started taking courses in Curriculum and Instruction from Acadia University in Nova Scotia. I moved to Brandon in 2004 and transferred my courses to Brandon University with the goal of completing my master's degree in curriculum and instruction. I graduated in 2012 and then enrolled again for a master's degree in educational administration, which I completed in 2017. This was all happening while I transitioned from my role as a classroom teacher to assume the role of principal, which allowed me to consider the learning opportunities available to all students in my school, not just the ones in my classroom.

As a mother, I saw my own three children struggle in a variety of ways while trying to succeed in the public-school system. They have granted me permission to share their struggles as context for this study. My son skipped a year of kindergarten in northern Saskatchewan because he was academically ahead of the other students in his class, but he was also diagnosed with Sensory Integration Dysfunction which made it difficult for him to act in socially appropriate ways in a busy classroom setting, especially when he was a year younger than his peers. Loud noises affected him greatly, and he would physically shut down by holding his hands over his ears and refusing to engage with activities going on at the time.

My oldest daughter, who also has strong academic skills, always struggled to manage her emotions and to interact in socially appropriate ways. She was diagnosed with Asperger's (now autism spectrum disorder) when she was in Grade Six and was more able to find her niche and experience more success in high school. She still struggled with more participatory types of activities, especially Physical Education classes, but excelled in English Language Arts and Fine Arts classes. She continues to struggle with self-regulation and executive functioning in her day-to-day life as an adult.

My youngest daughter was bullied in middle school to the point that she was self-harming and needed social-emotional interventions from her teacher and the school team. She eventually moved to a different school, but the trauma around that critical time in her life affects her today, with ongoing bouts of anxiety and depression. It was difficult for me to accept the fact that I could not do more or advocate harder so that my own children would feel more successful in their classrooms and schools. I felt driven to learn more about how to help other students and their families, especially those with fewer supports and less power and agency than my own children, to feel included, heard, and supported by me as the principal in my school community.

As I continued my studies, it was the completion of my thesis for the second master's degree that grew my curiosity about the diverse groups of students that I had worked with and raised questions for deep self-reflection on the experiences that I had provided for them. As a school leader, I was more deeply aware of the responsibility that educators must have to all our students, regardless of their backgrounds and abilities. I became more critical of traditional educational systems and structures and their perpetuation of privilege for some students and the oppression of marginalized groups within our schools and communities.

It was for this reason that I felt the need to continue learning through a PhD program to help myself grapple with the daily, ethical struggles that I encountered in my role as a school principal; one who believed strongly in the need for inclusive schools, but who also faced challenges in creating an inclusive environment in our current education system. I truly believe that all children can learn and should be given appropriate and engaging learning opportunities as part of a public-school system. Simultaneously, I also appreciate the expanding girth of inclusive philosophy to encompass more diverse groups of needs. These needs are cognitive, academic, behavioural, and social-emotional, which intersect with differences in race, culture, gender,

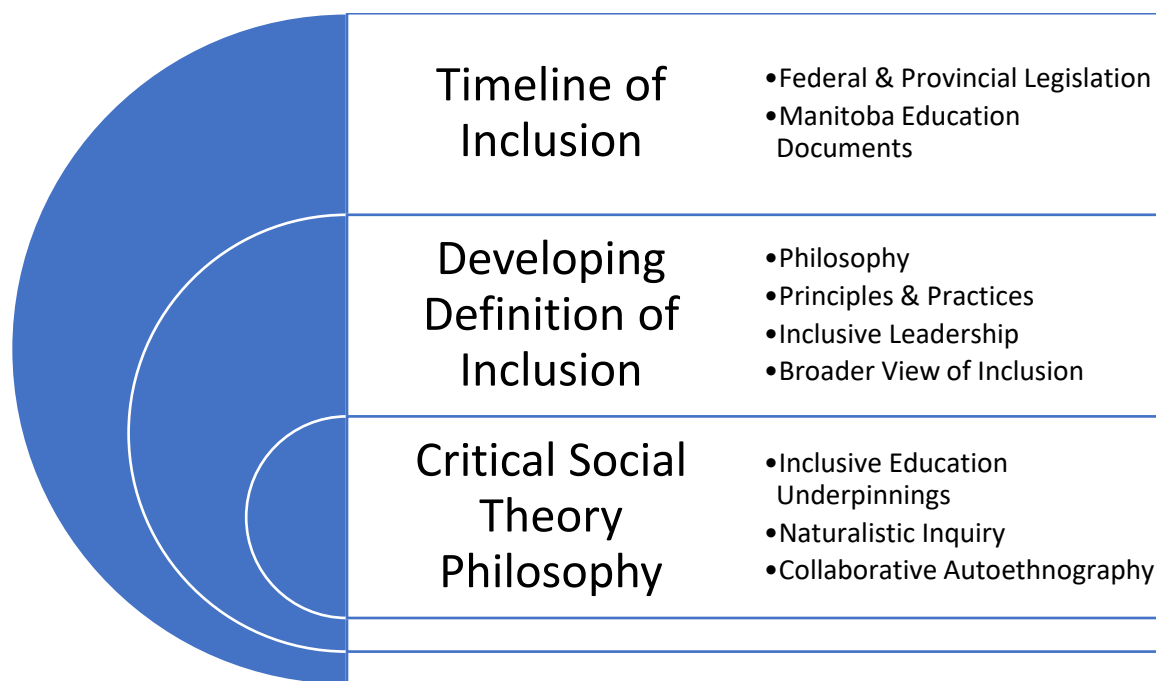
sexuality, and more. I saw my school leader colleagues trying to support classroom teachers in meeting the needs of all these students and their families in a myriad of ways; searching out and providing resources, utilizing intervention programs and training support staff to help respond to identified gaps in learning, and support in other ways as needed. I also know that we often feel like we are failing some of our students of all ages who have disengaged from school for reasons that we cannot always determine. I wanted to work alongside my colleagues to critically examine the effectiveness of our inclusive practices based on the ideals of inclusion, and to learn with and from them about what has worked in their schools and find out how they achieved success. Evaluating the success of inclusion in our Manitoba context and sharing that knowledge with the greater academic community and other jurisdictions was also important to me.

The goal of this study was to provide myself and other school leaders in Manitoba the opportunity to reflect on our inclusive experiences, share them with others, and find collective ways to put the policy and practices on inclusion mandated by Manitoba Education into daily action in our schools with our students. Chapter Two presents research on the many facets of inclusion, including the epistemological and ontological beliefs that underpin inclusion, and the consequent considerations for inclusive practices and inclusive school leadership in Manitoba. Literature pertaining to critical theory as a lens for understanding inclusion is also presented as well as evidence of the appropriateness of collaborative autoethnography (CAE) and the use of Think Tanks as methodological choices for a qualitative study on inclusive leadership.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

Canada is often seen as a world leader in inclusive education within a broader, equitable society, as guaranteed within the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (Government of Canada, 1982; Hutchinson & Specht, 2020). There is little argument worldwide that the values of inclusion, which are grounded in human rights and equity, are what educators need to use as the basis of their policies and practices (Bunch, 2015). Inclusion is still somewhat of a controversial idea, however, and there is ongoing debate about the appropriate structures to provide an inclusive education. It may also be true that using only Western Eurocentric traditional school system organizational routines and structures to respond to students with disabilities and supporting them organizationally by means of special education efforts may be an insufficient response (Michailakis & Reich, 2009). As such, the road to inclusion in Canadian schools is still being built and can be compared to building a plane while you are flying it. Hutchinson and Specht (2020) noted that there is still research to be done and that inclusive educators continue to experience barriers and dilemmas in their efforts to provide an inclusive education for all students. Educators acknowledge and support the principles and policies of inclusion and want to act to be inclusive of diverse groups of students that come through our doors. We cannot, however, wait for all structures to be in place or for everyone to be on board with our efforts, and so must take off on the plane without necessarily having our parachutes with us. This literature review, outlined in Figure 1, includes a timeline of inclusive school efforts, as well as a discussion of definitions, dilemmas, principles, and practices of inclusion, the important role of school leadership for inclusive schools, and the critical theory underpinnings of inclusion.

Figure 1*Literature Review Conceptual & Theoretical Framework*

I also present research that supports the use of collaborative autoethnography as a methodology appropriate for the study of inclusive school leadership.

A Timeline of Inclusion

The western, Eurocentric model of schooling has been in place for over a century and the organizational structures set up at that time are often still visible today. Chronological grade placements, government mandated, grade levelled curricula, lesson plans targeted at and taught to the middle or average students in the class, and teachers seen as the givers of knowledge to the next generation remain features of contemporary education. It is disheartening to realize that in some cases these structures of education and the beliefs and attitudes about education that perpetuated them are still visible today, two and a half decades into the 21st century. Despite globalization and the widespread changes in access to information and services for all citizens with the use of technology, “school remains a place where... intersections [between people with

and without disabilities] are systematically minimized” (Jung, et al., 2019, p. 3). Some students still receive daily instruction, for both academic and social-emotional challenges, in isolation or in other locations outside of the regular classroom away from their peers. Some school practices may result in a disconnect between philosophy and practice caused by the historical belief that disability should be viewed through a medical model that diagnoses and catalogues different impairments (Jung, et al., 2019). As such, there may be minimal interaction between students with a variety of disabilities and those without.

With a few exceptions, someone from 1900 who was magically transported to 2024 would be able to recognize many familiar elements of school. The bells signaling both physical and mental movement from one curricular area to another, as well as desks and chairs in rows, and the teacher lecturing to groups of children of the same age from the front of the room would all be common sights in many educational settings today. One important obvious difference would be the diversity of the students who may be present within that classroom. Historically, students whose needs were vastly different from the average student were excluded from the regular classroom (Loreman et al., 2015) and in many cases, these students received no formal education at all. This was the case in most countries who adopted formal public education systems, including Canada.

A generation ago, in Canadian education systems, many students were excluded from educational experiences altogether. As time progressed, and movement from the early *Exclusion* period of inclusive education to the *Institutionalization* period of the late 19th century (Figure 2) occurred, they were placed in separate schools or classes, away from their peers and often even away from their neighbourhood (Loreman, et. al, 2015). The creation of two systems of education, regular and special education was “one of the most prominent developments (in

education) in the past 50 years” (Loreman, et al., 2015, p. 11) and resulted in the subsequent phases of *Segregation* and the *Categorization* periods of the early 20th century to the 1960s, where public education systems developed to include the special schools and classes for students with disabilities. Criteria and categories based on testing were used to place students. The number of categories of special education needs has grown rapidly, however, and resulted in another “huge, specialized, bureaucratic system of its own” (Lupart, 2009, p. 17) and as a result, “the *One Million Children* report called for Canadian society to stop isolating and segregating children with disabilities from their peers and families” (Towle, 2015, p. 7), signalling the need for change.

Early changes to the dual systems of education began with the idea of *Integration* in the 1970s, and schools began to reduce the amount of time that students were in separate classrooms and programs, as well as offer parents more choices in placement options for their children’s learning needs (Loreman, et al., 2015).

Essentially, these efforts made the special education program expand into more schools and merely perpetuated the separate service and staff support model. The result was special education teachers and educational assistants working with children with special needs in the regular classroom; together yet still apart. Rearranging the components of a flawed dual system was “ineffective in solving the problem” (Loreman, et al., 2015, p. 11) or in improving the educational experiences of students with special needs. *Mainstreaming* into the least restrictive environment was the focus of the 1980s and then the 1990s saw more of an educational merger of the dual programs occur with the *Inclusion* period.

Figure 2

Timeline of Inclusive Education in Canada (used with permission, Andrews et al., 2015)



Period	Key descriptor	Predominant Educational Trend
Early History	Exclusion	Those with disabilities scorned and excluded
1850 - 1900	Institutionalization	Separate residential schools and institutions used
1900 - 1950	Segregation	Public education system development; special schools and classes formed
1950 – 1960s	Categorization	Categories, testing and labeling emphasized
1970s	Integration	Placement alternatives developed
1980s	Mainstreaming	Least restricted environment encouraged
1990s	Inclusion	Educational merger occurred
2000s	Diversity Education	Personalized instruction embraced

Skrtic (1995) called this integrated system of special education “fundamentally flawed” (p. 23) and maintained that “neither it nor its associated practices can be improved incrementally” (p. 23). Citing many researchers from the 1980s, Skrtic called for a “new adaptable system of public education in which students with special needs are taught in general education classrooms” (p. 237) along with their classroom peers. As schools had become more diverse and more special programs were required to address the needs of students, a phenomenon known as *disjointed incrementalism* (Skrtic, 1995, & Falvey et al., 2017) had developed that resulted in many different categories of classes with different eligibility criteria, funding, advocacy groups and scheduling conflicts. To consolidate resources and pull school communities together, a unified system of education was required (Falvey et al., 2017). Loreman, et al., (2015) described this “unified responsive system of education” (p. 14) as one that required a clear

definition of an inclusive philosophy, policies, principles, and practices to ensure effective educational experiences for all students. The call for such a system was advocated for by parents of children with special needs and was echoed by educational leaders in the 21st century who advocated for “the deconstruction of dual systems and the reformation of a unified system of education” (Loreman, et al., 2015, p. 11) that encompasses the “best of both systems” (p. 11). However, there is still a lack of clarity on exactly what such a system should look like which is still clouding a common understanding of inclusive education practices in the new period of *Diversity* education. The historical progression of the educational trends corresponding to each period in the history of inclusion in Canada described above are summarized and illustrated in Figure 2.

Definition of Inclusion

The term inclusion, simplistically defined as “the movement of students from special classes to regular classes” (Brownlee & Feniak, 1998, p. 10) was used in the latter part of the 20th century to describe the merger of the two separate systems of education into one that incorporated the needs of the students with disabilities. There are even more recent definitions that maintain this original view of inclusion. For example, McCrimmon (2015) defined inclusive education as “the process of educating children with disabilities in the regular education classrooms of their neighbourhood schools - the schools they would attend if they did not have a disability-and providing them with the necessary services and support” (p. 234). This definition focuses on students with disabilities only and alludes to the student still being treated differently than regular students.

Andrews et al. (2015) expanded on the traditional notion of inclusion in their definition, “the merger of special and regular education into a unified system requiring adaptive instruction,

consultation, and collaboration to address the special needs of students” (p. 25). This definition incorporates the identification of the need for changes to current practice, the idea of staff working together, as well as the broader term of “special needs” as opposed to disabilities. Special needs can include a variety of learner differences that go beyond diagnosed physical and learning disabilities. Sheehy (2017) maintained that “the notion of inclusive education itself remains ill-defined and contested” and “can differ significantly between countries, with difference existing even within local regions” (p. 61). Ekins (2017) noted that there can even be differing perspectives and definitions within one school setting so it is difficult to provide a definition that will be agreed upon globally and described the concept of inclusion as a complex concept that is over-used and characterized by “conceptual difficulties, slippage, and confusion” (p. 29). Jung et al. (2019) stressed that it is “impossible to untangle disability from race, culture, and economics, and equity cannot be realized if some members of society – and members of school communities - are marginalized and segregated” (p. 3). As a result, a comprehensive, clearly articulated definition and understanding of inclusion seems to be elusive.

Despite varying definitions in the literature, Villa and Thousand (2016) strived to capture the essence of inclusive education when they defined it as “a vision and practice of welcoming, valuing, empowering, and supporting the diverse academic, social/emotional, language and communication learning of all students in shared environments and experiences for the purpose of attaining the desired goals of education” (p. 18). Ainscow (2005) described the move from narrowly defining inclusion “as an approach to serving children with disabilities in general education settings” (p. 109) to a more critical, broad, international definition as “reform that supports and welcomes diversity amongst all learners” (p. 109) and that is based on the belief that “education is a basic human right and the foundation for a more just society” (p. 109). If

public education is indeed public, then it needs to be accessible to all children in society. This broader definition of inclusion that incorporates more than students with physical and learning differences encompasses that equitable belief. It also extends the rights outlined in traditional inclusive legislation and policies to ensure access to education for other marginalized groups as well. This broader definition of inclusion provides the basis for a collective inclusive philosophy for schools.

International and Provincial Legislation Governing Inclusive Education

Inclusive education has been shaped by significant international legislation, which has influenced national and provincial policies in Canada. One of the earliest global efforts to promote educational rights was the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (1966), which recognized the right to education for all children, including those with disabilities. This was followed by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989), which reinforced the need for inclusive education systems that protect the rights and dignity of all learners. A major milestone in this global movement was the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD, 2006), particularly Article 24, which mandated that children with disabilities must have access to inclusive education on an equal basis with others. These documents emphasize the importance of the following factors for true inclusion to occur:

- social integration for the appropriate development of children with disabilities,
- accessibility to all aspects of the environment,
- access to health, education, and to information and communication, and
- the need for human dignity and respect.

As a signatory to these agreements, Canada is obligated to uphold these principles and ensure equitable access to education for all students.

A pivotal document in shaping inclusive education worldwide was the Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), which emphasized that inclusive schools are the most effective way to provide equitable learning experiences for all children. This framework set a global standard for the integration of students with disabilities into mainstream education. However, while these international agreements establish broad principles, they lack detailed implementation strategies for individual countries, leading to inconsistencies in policy execution across different education systems (Slee, 2011). Despite legislative progress, many education systems—including Canada's—still struggle with the transition from policy rhetoric to practical implementation.

Slee (2011) acknowledged these inconsistencies when he referred to inclusion as *neo-special education*, which means that although policies have mandated change, educational practices remain rooted in traditional, medical disability models of special education. Other groups of students remain marginalized by our newly inclusive schools as well; based on poverty, race, gender, sexuality, and the intersection of such factors. As such, “we need to continue to be reflective about both the theory and practice, which are indivisible, of inclusive schooling” (Slee, 2001, p. 121). When considering these recommendations for a local context, Bartlett and Freeze (2019) noted that “inclusive schooling has been broadly interpreted and inconsistently implemented” (p. 94) in the province of Manitoba and so these inconsistencies are seen at the provincial level as well.

The Evolution of Inclusive Education in Manitoba

In Canada, education falls under provincial and territorial jurisdiction, meaning that each province develops its own policies on inclusion (Andrews et al., 2015). Manitoba was an early

adopter of inclusive education, passing legislation in 1966 to guarantee the right of students with intellectual disabilities to attend publicly funded schools (Bélanger & Gourgeon, 2009).

A significant step toward modern inclusive education policies in Manitoba came with the Manitoba Special Education Review (1999), which recommended moving toward a more inclusive model of education. In response, the provincial government introduced Bill 13 – The Public Schools Amendment Act (Appropriate Educational Programming) in 2003, which was formally proclaimed in 2005. This legislation established the legal right of all students to attend their designated neighborhood school in a regular classroom with appropriate supports. It also emphasized:

- access to the full curriculum in regular classes,
- participation in extracurricular and co-curricular activities,
- timely, specialized assessment and intervention,
- the development of individualized education plans (IEPs) as needed, and
- collaborative planning to ensure smooth transitions between programs (Manitoba Education, Training & Youth, 2001).

Despite these advancements, inconsistencies in implementation remain a significant challenge.

The delegation of responsibility for inclusive education to individual school divisions has led to varying interpretations and applications of inclusion policies across Manitoba's 37 school divisions (Bartlett & Freeze, 2019). Moreover, although Manitoba Education has produced numerous supporting documents, such as the K-S4 Education Agenda for Student Success (2002-2006) and the Action Plan for Ethnocultural Equity (2006), many of these initiatives have not been systematically implemented or updated in recent years.

Gaps Between Policy and Practice in Manitoba

The newly revised Manitoba's Standards for Appropriate Educational Programming (2022) reaffirmed the province's commitment to inclusion and also referenced universal design principles (UDL) as the basis for inclusion, outlined the specific obligations of school divisions to provide equitable access to all educational opportunities in a timely manner, and specified a student-specific planning process based on collaboration and meeting the unique needs of individual students. However, there are ongoing barriers to realizing true inclusive education. These include:

- lack of professional learning opportunities for school leaders and teachers on inclusive practices,
- inconsistent application of inclusion policies across different schools and divisions,
- limited systemic supports to ensure that all students receive equitable educational opportunities (Bartlett & Freeze, 2019), and
- outdated or underutilized inclusion support documents that have not been effectively implemented at the school level.

Updated documents need to provide relevant, accessible materials for parents and educators alike to be useful, and there needs to be a cyclical training plan for teachers and school leaders on these documents and how to utilize them in the service of children and their families. These policies and the resulting definitions of inclusion continue to change and grow as society itself does, and educational jurisdictions, specifically school divisions, need to continue to strive to develop inclusive communities that “consciously evolve to meet the changing needs of its members...and to provide meaningful involvement and equal access to the benefits of citizenship” (Manitoba Education, Citizenship, and Youth, 2002, p. 3). It is ultimately the work

of school divisions and schools to use their school improvement plans to “eliminate exclusionary practices from education that are a consequence of attitudes and responses to diversity in relation to race, social class, ethnicity, religion, gender, and attainment as well as in regard to disability” (Messiou et al., 2016, p. 46). This delegation of the responsibility for implementing inclusion to the 37 school divisions in Manitoba has resulted in a lack of consistency in the quality of inclusive education programming for Manitoba children. As Bartlett and Freeze (2019) noted, “it is important to disrupt the systemic and structural special education practices in Manitoba’s schools that marginalize and exclude” (p. 92) diverse groups of students if we are to move forward towards inclusion as opposed to *neo-special education*.

This disconnect between policy and practice reflects broader challenges seen globally, where inclusion is legislated but not always operationalized effectively (Ekins, 2017). As such, further efforts are needed to bridge the gap between legislative mandates and the realities of classroom practice.

There is currently less criticism of inclusive education efforts than those of special education programs, partially because inclusion has become a common word to positively portray efforts against inequity in educational learning experiences for students (Berry, 2011). Educators need to be aware, however, that complacency may cause inclusive education to “become an empty slogan” (Dyson, 1999, p. 49) that only refers to the actual physical place where children are educated instead of referring to the philosophy of inclusion. Slee (2019) also referred to the “ubiquity and resiliency of exclusion as a social and educational phenomenon” (p. 918) and encouraged educators to continue working towards the lofty goal of inclusion while celebrating the small successes along the way. As a province, Manitoba has mandated and

outlined its expectations of inclusion, both as a philosophy and as a place for educating all students as illustrated in provincial legislation.

As noted previously, the *Public Schools Amendment Act (Appropriate Educational Programming)* stated Manitoba's commitment to providing appropriate social and academic programming to enable all students to successfully participate in all aspects of school life. Manitoba also strongly supports the classroom as the best placement for student learning with the statement that, "the first and foremost consideration in the placement of all students is the right to attend the designated catchment school for their residence in a regular classroom with their peers or in a program designated by the school board if the school does not provide it" (Standards for AEP in Manitoba, 2022, p. 8). This document also outlined specific responsibilities of school principals that include timely, specialized assessment as needed, communicating with parents about specialized assessments, and obtaining informed consent as required by the school division. It is less clear if the financial and human resources needed to realize their programming and placement recommendations have been consistently provided.

Bélanger and Gougeon (2009) observed that "in the Manitoba context, inclusion is expressed through the various means used which enable students and their families to participate more fully in their education" (p. 295), and that the idea of inclusion is "strongly rooted in protectionist discourse" (p. 295). Subsequently, there is a sense of security for all stake holders, students, parents, and educators, that the needs of all Manitoban students are being met. McCrimmon (2015) stated, however, that in general, although inclusion in Canada (and Manitoba specifically) is widely adopted, "many Canadian teachers struggle with the application of inclusive principles in their classrooms and find the education of children with exceptional learning needs challenging" (p. 236). I can verify from personal experience as a teacher and as a

school leader that the adequate supports are not always available to students or staff to realize true inclusion. This fact alone causes discrepancies in the quality of educational programming for some students at all levels of the school system and results in damaged relationships with students and their families. Inconsistency in implementation, as well as a lack of support for teachers in terms of training and resources are possible barriers to inclusion.

Inconsistency is visible across grade levels because inclusion at elementary (Kindergarten to Grade Six) schools has gained more traction than at the high school level. For example, Specht et al. (2016), Priestly (2006), and Downing and Peckham-Hardin (2007) maintained that inclusion of students in academic programming becomes increasingly more difficult once students reach high school. Bélanger and Gougeon (2009) found that high school teachers seemed less prepared to work with diverse groups of students in their classrooms and noted that the curriculum programming objectives for students with exceptional needs still “focus more on social inclusion than on academic inclusion” (p. 301). Gheyssens et al. (2020) also noted that “overall, teachers in primary education are better at noticing and reasoning about inclusive teaching practices compared to teachers in secondary education” (p. 8). Another barrier results from discrepancies in the resources available to support inclusion, depending on your geographical location in the province of Manitoba and additionally, there are still “teachers with reservations towards inclusion in today’s pro-inclusionary provincial atmosphere” (Belanger & Gougeon, 2009, p, 301). I have witnessed all these real barriers on numerous occasions in my role as a school leader, from teachers who received students in their classrooms with challenging learning needs.

The differences between the ideals and principles of inclusion and their realization consistently in schools becomes even more pronounced when the discussion becomes national

and international in scope (Ekins, 2017). Despite these differences, the term inclusion is used ubiquitously across jurisdictions and as such, all educators need to constantly reflect on their beliefs and practices as they unfold in daily in their individual contexts based on a common vision and definition of inclusion.

Philosophy of Inclusion

The first step in adopting the policies of inclusion is the adoption of an inclusive philosophy. Villa and Thousand (2016) suggested that educators begin with the “belief that everyone belongs, regardless of need or perceived ability and that all are valued and contributing members of society” (p. 18) This required belief system is echoed in the statement that inclusion includes a “a way of thinking and acting that allows every individual to feel accepted, valued and safe” (Manitoba Education, 2002, p. 3). Put in a slightly different way, Ainscow (2005) suggested that an inclusive philosophy refers to the “presence, participation, and achievement of all students” (p. 118). Interestingly, these descriptions of inclusive philosophies that aptly support education for student learning challenges that are a result of disabilities, are also applicable to other “groups of learners who may be at risk of marginalization, exclusion or underachievement” (Ainscow, 2005, p. 119) for a variety of other reasons. “Equitable learning opportunities for every student, and accountability from educators requires individual and collective commitment” (Falvey et al., 2017, p. 14), which was echoed by Liasidou and Svensson (2012) who noted that “inclusion demands a whole school approach to a culture and ethos that is embedded in shared values and principles” (p. 35). Having common guiding principles that are based on an inclusive philosophy and are used as the basis for daily decision making is key for inclusive schools. It is the role of the school leader to articulate, model, and

support this inclusive philosophy with the teachers for the benefit of all students. This work requires ongoing communication about the philosophy and underlying principles of inclusion.

Principles of Inclusion

There are certain principles and beliefs about inclusion that must be followed by educators who wish to adopt an inclusive philosophy. Gajewski (2017) stated that “Philosophically, inclusion has ethical underpinnings, and it advances ethical principles” (p. 3), and it also relies on “access and equity” (p. 3). The principles of “care, fairness, respect, responsibility, duty, and justice” (p. 3) are thus identified as the foundation for providing access to an equitable education for all students in schools. It is impossible to argue with these principles; although it could be said that these are common, everyday principles that should be used ubiquitously in society and therefore, do not pertain specifically to schools. However, as public schools should be instrumental in preparing children for meaningful participation in society, these principles should be foundational to learning.

Falvey et al. (2017) formulated a set of foundational beliefs and principles that pertain directly to educators and incorporate “shared social justice objectives and increased accountability for the learning of all students” (p. 15). These principles include:

- each student has strengths and needs,
- each student can learn and succeed; each student has unique contributions to offer other learners,
- diversity enriches us all,
- students can overcome risks of failure through involvement in a thoughtful and caring community of educators and learners,

- effective learning results from the collaborative efforts of everyone working to ensure each student's success, and
- supports and services need to 'fit' the student rather than the student needing to "fit" the practice.

In their discussion about what inclusion is and is not, Villa and Thousand (2016) also identified the inclusive principle of "presumed competence" (p. 18), which coincides with the first two principles discussed by Falvey et. al (2017). This concept refers to the belief or principle that all students can learn and have skills and abilities to bring to the table in an equitable classroom. Jung et al. (2019) also echoed the importance of this belief and declared that it is not "an overstatement to say that society would be changed for the better if every school child had the chance to know and learn alongside people with disabilities and see them as peers" (p. 5). Because schools are microcosms of society, the diversity within classrooms is paramount to children's learning about everyone who is part of their communities. Some educational philosophies and principles have traditionally dictated practices that oppress and marginalize many groups within society and have created fear and dehumanization of minority groups, such as those with disabilities and people of colour (Karmiris, 2017). Learning with one another and about one another should be the goal of inclusive practices in today's classrooms.

The beliefs of teachers and their values and principles about inclusion, as well as their belief in their ability to be inclusive, will undoubtedly affect the quality of their teaching practices. Lunde (2020) noted that there are still many teachers in the field who voice that they lack the skills and knowledge to effectively teach the diverse students in their classrooms. Jordan et al. (2010) maintained that understanding the connection between epistemological beliefs and inclusive education is essential for developing effective classroom practices that support

inclusion. Andrews, et al. (2015) also expanded a basic list of inclusive principles for the area of education and identified seven fundamental principles for inclusion that combine effective practices as well. These principles and practices include:

- personalized instruction,
- access, equity, and equality,
- critical thinking,
- home-school connectivity,
- excellent teaching,
- excellent leadership, and
- educational currency, innovation, development, and change (p. 38).

Clearly, teachers need effective, consistent supports from inclusive school leaders to support them in their work. With respect to these principles, there is research on specific examples of evidence-based practices that benefit and facilitate inclusion.

Inclusive Educational Practices

There are significant differences in inclusive practices depending on the country in which children live and even between regions of the same country (Sheehy, 2017). Florian and Black-Hawkins (2011) noted that inclusive pedagogy is ultimately the extension of the type of learning opportunities that are “normally available in the classroom as a way of reducing the need to mark some learners as being different” (p. 14). The broader the range of activities, the more students are naturally accommodated without feeling singled out for having special activities or assignments to complete. It is commonly accepted in the literature on inclusive education that the most effective teaching strategies to improve outcomes for students with disabilities are also effective with students who live in poverty (Howard, Dresser, & Dunklee, 2009, p. 33), as well

as for students deemed academically “at risk, or gifted, [and] also for the allegedly average students” (Villa & Thousand, 2005, p. 97). Most of these effective strategies are rooted in a social constructivist epistemology which sees “knowledge as created, primarily, through social and collaborative activities” (Sheehy, 2017, p. 62), consistent with the provision of rich learning opportunities for all learners in the class.

Social constructivism

Villa and Thousand (2005) advocated for constructivist practices for inclusive education because of the “belief that all students enter school with different knowledge that is influenced by background, experiences, and cultural practice” (p. 99). This fact must be considered by teachers to make learning relevant for all their students. Sheehy (2017) suggested that schools which successfully accommodate diverse groups of learners, do so by focusing on the pedagogy used to deliver curricula, not by focusing on a child’s “individual needs and impairments” (p. 63). One specific way that teachers can do this is through adopting cross-curricular and interdisciplinary planning using a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework (Sheehy, 2017, Villa & Thousand, 2005) and through utilizing other related evidence-based strategies.

Universal Design for Learning and Cross-curricular planning

Trying to adapt existing curricula to meet the needs of all students can be challenging for teachers, especially when there are prescribed materials, methods of delivery, and assessment strategies (Villa & Thousand, 2005). Universal Design for Learning (UDL) “is a concept borrowed from the field of architecture that refers to the creation and design of products and environments in such a way that they can be used without the need for modifications or specialized designs” (Villa & Thousand, 2005, p. 136). UDL in education uses strategies to diversify instruction and assessment of the curriculum during the initial planning stage so that

more students can access the learning and so that there is less need for changes to be made for individual student needs later. The method involves integrating the curricula for different subject areas and making logical connections to students' lives in practical ways to make sure that students are engaged in what they are learning. Relevance is key to promoting engagement and connecting ideas from various curricular areas into thematic, cross-curricular units of study that make all learning more accessible for all students (Katz, 2012). Villa and Thousand (2005) noted that teachers using UDL have access to alternative reading materials, assistive technology, and authentic assessment opportunities with the ultimate goals of "providing students with multiple means of representation, multiple means of engagement, and multiple means of expression" (p. 137). Implementing a UDL approach to planning for inclusive classrooms also requires proactive planning for routines and structures for effective classroom management based on positive behaviour supports. The routines and structures are the foundational keys to other successful inclusive practices. If students continue to experience learning challenges within a flexible, UDL classroom planned for using a UDL framework, there are other strategies that can be implemented to support their success. One such strategy is a Multitiered System of Support (MTSS).

Multitiered System of Support

The Multitiered System of Supports (MTSS) has become a broader term used to refer to a comprehensive support system that strives to meet more student needs within the general classroom environment (Katz, 2012; Villa & Thousand, 2016). "Each year all students begin as general education students, and teachers use evidence-based planning strategies and practices to meet the needs of all learners" (Katz, 2012, p. 138). At Tier 1 of an MTSS system, all students receive proactive, systematic differentiated instruction in curricular areas as well as in social-

emotional learning, and positive behaviour expectations in the classroom, as planned for using UDL. Supports are then added in all areas as needed in Tier 2, either for individual skills or small group needs for short periods of time. If students require more extended periods of time with intensive instruction on essential skills, they will receive Tier 3 support, using a broader school team approach. This system of supports by itself, however, is primarily reactive in that it strives to solve problems in Tier 2 or Tier 3 after they occur, as opposed to looking at our school structure and practices through a more critical lens from the beginning. The goal should be to change Tier 1 classroom and school structures and practices to support more diversity in students' needs.

Gorski and Swalwell (2023) cautioned educators who rely too heavily on the Multi-Tiered System of Support as a model of inclusion to think more deeply about the reasons that the interventions are needed before individualizing educational experiences on a broad scale. They advocate for leaders to “attend to the biases and inequities that are embedded in school and classroom cultures, policies, practices, and systems” (p. 19) so that we are not perpetuating injustices and then trying to fix them. If members of our school communities continue to suffer from various sources of injustice, then we need to look more deeply at the reasons behind that suffering and not just try to address it after the fact.

The three tiers of supports in MTSS are known as Response to Instruction or Intervention (RtI) and is structured to meet the needs of all students' academic, social, and emotional needs in the classroom as much as possible. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is used as a planning template to automatically differentiate instructional content, products, and processes for student differences in the classroom or at the Tier 1 level (Villa & Thousand, 2016, p. 78). The social

emotional planning arm of a MTSS system of student interventions is focused on positive behavioural supports.

Differentiation of Instruction

Differentiation of instruction (DI) is a philosophy of teaching as well as a set of specific practices that teachers use to adapt instruction to meet students' needs and address their differences (Jung, et al., 2019; Villa & Thousand, 2016; Thousand, Udvari-Solner, & Villa, 2017). Teachers differentiate the content (curricular materials), process (instructional strategies), and the product (assessment) based on the information that they have about the students in their classroom. A multitude of learning resources and entry points for accessing the curricular areas are used to maximize individual student growth and success. It is also necessary for teachers to create an inclusive classroom environment that supports differentiation. Heacox (2002) and Tomlinson (2017) identified the following characteristics of a supportive classroom for differentiation:

- promotes acceptance of differences and fosters a safe, welcoming feeling,
- affirms a mutual respect for all students' learning strengths, styles, and rates,
- provides work that is sometimes different but still fair,
- believes that success means different things for different people,
- uses student interests as a key to motivation,
- allows students to work with various people for different purposes,
- makes learning a personal responsibility,
- maintains a pervasive expectation of growth,
- honours everyone's work, and
- promotes independence.

Heacox (2002) described the facilitative and collaborative role of the teacher who differentiates for inclusion whose main responsibilities include “providing and prescribing differentiated learning opportunities, organizing students for learning, and using time flexibly” (p. 11).

Differentiation does take time and effort, so it is beneficial for educators to learn and share their efforts towards differentiation with each other as well, and to plan for programming using a UDL framework so that DI is proactive and not reactive. They can then work together to benefit all students in the school and to efficiently manage resources. Villa and Thousand (2016) stated that “differentiation most easily and naturally occurs when educators collaborate in planning and instruction” (p. 69) to accommodate the learning differences of all students. Proactive planning for students in both academic and social-emotional contexts can be facilitated using a UDL structure that incorporates differentiated instruction strategies and is the core of inclusive classroom teaching.

Positive Behavioural Supports

Students with emotional and behaviour disorders are often unable to actively participate in classroom instruction and learning activities and thus, often have academic deficits (De Lugt, 2007). These behaviours “differ significantly and chronically from socially accepted norms, interfering with the learning of the individual and the class as a whole” (p. 112). Behavioural challenges are also the “single most common reason why individuals with disabilities are removed from school” (p. 112). Villa and Thousand (2016) described positive behavior support (PBS) as a positive, proactive way of dealing with students’ challenging behaviours within the classroom or school, rather than using traditional punitive, exclusionary, and restrictive methods. There is also an expectation for all schools in Manitoba outlined in *Safe and Caring Schools: A Policy Directive Enhancing Proactive Supports to Minimize the Use of Suspension* (2023) to

limit, reduce, and move to phasing out exclusionary practices by engaging in “preventative practices, emphasizing positive and proactive strategies to foster student learning” (MEECL, 2023, p. 14). There is a need for training in other options for dealing with behaviour challenges that will replace the traditional in-school and out-of-school suspensions for school leaders to make this shift in practice.

Villa and Thousand (2016) noted that using traditional disciplinary measures like removal from the classroom or the school or the denial of normal privileges at school can result in negative self-esteem, loss of interpersonal relationships with peers, and negative coping strategies. Positive Behavioural Supports (PBS) attempt to “minimize and prevent behaviours that interfere with learning and interacting with others through the use of positive behavioural approaches” (p. 81). PBS begins with schoolwide expectations that are taught and recognized, and then interventions are planned for those students who require more direct instruction to develop appropriate behaviour management strategies. PBS also helps to maintain the dignity of students and improve their quality of life by “pursuing a lifestyle change” (p. 82). PBS is the behavioural side of a Multi-Tiered System of Support along with the Response to Intervention model and requires a shift in educators’ perceptions about students with behavioural challenges (Villa & Thousand, 2016). Heacox (2002) also stressed the need for the necessity of partnerships with other staff members to collaborate and share insights and resources.

Collaborative school community

Effective inclusive school communities are those that value collaboration and teamwork, not only between students, but also between the staff. Members of the school staff in these communities work with each other, as well as with students and their families, support teachers and clinicians, parents, and community partners (Katz, 2012). Villa and Thousand (2016)

stressed that scheduling time for teachers to plan and teach together is “critical to successful inclusion” (p. 48), and they identified that effective teams ideally include the following members from within and outside of the school:

- those who have the needed expertise to solve the challenge,
- those who have direct experience with the student involved,
- those who are affected by the decision, and
- those who have an interest in and are invited by the person for whom the meeting has been convened (p. 48).

Hutchinson and Specht (2020) identified the importance of collaboration as being the opportunity for teachers to access the expertise and resources of many other individuals to proactively plan and problem solve. No one person has all the answers to questions about unique student needs and so collaborative teams can assist teachers with support in many ways; be it moral support or with specific information and strategies to try. Taking a team approach to problem solving and working together to use each others’ strengths to meet the needs of the student in classrooms is the work of inclusive educators. One specific type of classroom collaboration comes in the form of co-teaching, another effective practice that supports inclusion.

Co-teaching

Co-teaching is an important collaborative approach to promote inclusive practice and to support the learning of students and teachers alike (Freeze, 2015; Katz, 2012; Villa & Thousand, 2016). There are many styles of co-teaching that can be used by teaching partners depending on the strengths of the educators and the students in the classroom, but a simplistic definition of the term is that two or more people share the responsibility for all students assigned to a specific classroom (Villa & Thousand, 2016). This type of arrangement is described by Villa and

Thousand (2016) as *Team co-teaching*, where there is an equitable distribution of planning, teaching, and assessment duties. Other co-teaching approaches include *Supportive co-teaching* (one instructs, one circulates), *Parallel co-teaching* (adults work with different groups in a station or center approach), and *Complementary co-teaching* (co-teacher enhances or adds to instruction). All types of co-teaching are part of Tier 2 in a MTSS as mentioned above.

Co-teaching partnerships usually include the classroom teacher and the school resource teacher but may also include other school personnel, such as a teaching partner, specialists, coaches, teacher librarians, therapists, and most inclusively, even the students themselves (Villa & Thousand, 2016). Regardless of whether the co-teaching relationship is short-term or long-term, or if the roles are equally distributed or roles are alternately assigned, both teachers and students can benefit from the diverse perspectives and approaches that come from a co-teaching situation. The benefit comes from two teachers being able to more effectively address the needs of more students than one teacher and the fact that there are fewer discipline problems in co-teaching classrooms. Collaborative relationships like those created through co-teaching opportunities add to a positive and safe learning environment which is also beneficial to inclusion efforts.

Safe school environment

“Creating learning communities in which students feel a sense of belonging and safety raises academic motivation and aspirations and has a substantial effect on academic achievement” (Specht & Katz, 2015, p. 139). A classroom environment that is welcoming, accessible, and predictable with clear expectations and established norms for interactions (Thousand et al., 2017) is essential to inclusion for all students, because students need to feel connected to their teacher and to their peers. Causton and Theoharis (2014) echoed the

importance of safe classrooms and schools that promote belonging by noting that “all human beings desire friendships, relationships, and academic challenge” (p. 28). This desire can only be met in a safe and caring classroom learning environment. Consequently, the classroom climate is a key component of having students contribute in positive ways to their classroom and school community. Classroom teachers have an obvious, crucial role to play in community building in their own inclusive classrooms through the development of consistent expectations and through ongoing community and team building activities. Inclusive classrooms also do “not have a revolving door of children leaving for specialized instruction” (Causton & Theoharis, 2014, p. 39) because they welcome students of all abilities and backgrounds to learn and grow together. These classrooms are individual sections of a broader, safe school environment that begins with and is supported by inclusive school leadership.

Support from transformational leadership

Inclusive education requires leadership that is transformative and emancipatory (Andrews et al., 2015). Setting and pursuing social justice goals that address the rights of students with disabilities as well as other diverse learners is the role of transformative, inclusive school leaders who are passionate about what they do. These leaders must also inspire others to seek first to understand their students and families and clarify for others how inclusive education is supported by best practices in the school environment (Villa & Thousand, 2016). Building the capacity of the education system to support all learners in inclusive school environments is the necessary role of school leaders who set a vision of inclusion where “all students are welcomed, valued, empowered, and supported in learning academic, social-emotional, language, and communication skills in shared environments and experiences” (Villa & Thousand, 2016, p. 33). These leaders then build consensus with staff by supporting their skill development through

individualized professional learning (Pineda Zapata, 2016). This individualized support and professional development is time consuming but well worth the effort. Staff who feel supported and valued will be more likely to contribute to an overall positive, inclusive school environment.

Transformational leaders also embrace teacher leadership to realize the shared vision of inclusion. Ekins (2017) maintained that “solitary leadership blocks the development of collaborative working necessary” (p. 85) for inclusion and described inclusive leadership instead as “a democratic process involving a number of different people in different ways in a broader process of leadership” (p. 86). Transformational leadership focuses on the ways in which educators can further inclusion within current organizational structures (Ekins, 2017) through focusing on a vision for a better future and a commitment to inclusive school communities. Inclusive leadership, however, is only one of the common characteristics of inclusive schools.

Common Characteristics of Inclusive Practices

Jung et al. (2019) referenced Italian schools to identify some general characteristics of successful inclusive practice. One of the common elements was an open, welcoming environment that engaged students with disabilities and their families without requiring them to advocate for their needs to be met. Ideally, students of all levels of ability have access to inclusive classroom settings, as much as possible; while receiving the supports that they require, such as small group instruction or breaks outside of the classroom setting. Educators in many countries are shocked to know that some students’ only educational experiences are in separate special education classrooms. This is because they see education with peers simply as a human right extended to all children because they are all entitled to those as human beings.

Looking at inclusive practice in another context, Porter and Towell (2017), from New Brunswick and the United Kingdom respectively, developed a pamphlet focused on advancing

inclusive education that outlined ten keys to the transformation needed in educational systems based on a shared vision of inclusion. Starting with the premise of educating all members of society for meaningful participation in that society, the keys include:

- promoting the benefits of inclusion for everyone,
- transformational leadership,
- meaningful partnerships,
- strengthening inclusive pedagogy, and
- prioritising professional development to name a few.

This document also stressed the importance of the mutual commitment and involvement of all levels of education (classroom, school, school division, and government) for transformation to occur.

Another common element of successful inclusive practice is a narrow definition of disability. In countries like Italy, there is a much “wider range [of student ability] that any general education [classroom] is expected to support” (Jung et al., 2019. p. 6). All but two or three percent of students should ultimately have their needs met without having to be diagnosed with a disability or have a label to receive support (Jung, et al., 2019). The smaller number of students identified as having a disability also results in less reliance on paraprofessionals, a common practice on North America.

In more inclusive settings, paraprofessionals work only with students who require “assistance with feeding, toileting, and mobility within and around the school” (Jung et al., 2019, p. 8). Academic instruction is left to the professionals who are trained to provide it, the teachers. The narrower definition of inclusion and the reduced reliance on paraprofessionals subsequently dictates that general educators have a broader sense of “ownership for the learning of all students

in their classroom, including those who, in the United States, might be identified as having multiple or severe disabilities” (p. 7) and be therefore supported by a paraprofessional educational assistant. There is a great deal of collaboration between classroom teachers and resource teachers and guidance counselors who work together to find solutions to meet the needs of all students in the same classroom.

Inclusive settings set the stage for students’ participation in our complex global society. Learning and problem solving alongside their peers of all abilities and backgrounds is exactly what they will have to do outside of the school system. Campbell Jones, Keeny, and Campbell Jones (2020) noted the importance of this coexistence in “social organizations and organizations [that are] comprised of relationships” (p. 21). Students and their families should not be connected to schools in perfunctory, unimportant ways, but treated as “participants in schools and essential to the health of the school community” (p. 21). No one is more important than the other, and everyone has strengths to bring to the learning and needs that can be met by the group as well.

Despite efforts to make our schools more inclusive, there are barriers to true inclusion at the societal, organizational, and school levels, as well as at the interactional and personal levels. Consequently, it is important to act as inclusively as possible with respect to the diverse groups of students in schools today. While all necessary inclusive structures may not be in place, and not everyone will be on board with inclusive efforts, acknowledging those dilemmas and acting to minimize the negative impact of exclusionary practices is the work of equitable educators (Michailakis & Reich, 2009). Adopting a broad definition of inclusion and promoting deep discussions of the philosophy, policies, principles, and practices of inclusion can help educators foster equitable educational communities, and a more just society overall. Kinsella and Senior (2008) stressed the importance of providing educators with time and opportunities for discussion

and consultation on inclusive practices. They also highlighted the need for professional development in skills, knowledge, and expertise that all teachers and school leaders need for schools to be inclusive places for learning.

A Broader View of Inclusion

It is important that all educators recognize that all students within their classrooms have different learning needs, come from different ethnic, racial, and linguistic backgrounds, have diverse personalities, and have a wide variety of family structures and lived experiences. Katz (2012) described the typical classroom as one that is, by definition, diverse. “Diversity is neurological. Diversity is societal. Diversity is human.” (p. 3); and teachers must then understand that seeing their classrooms as diverse is crucial and that creating a learning climate where everyone belongs and feels safe, respected, and valued is their ultimate job. Diversity education moves beyond the historical models of exclusion, segregation, integration, and inclusion to a diversity model that sees everyone as having different perspectives and experiences to bring to the learning environment.

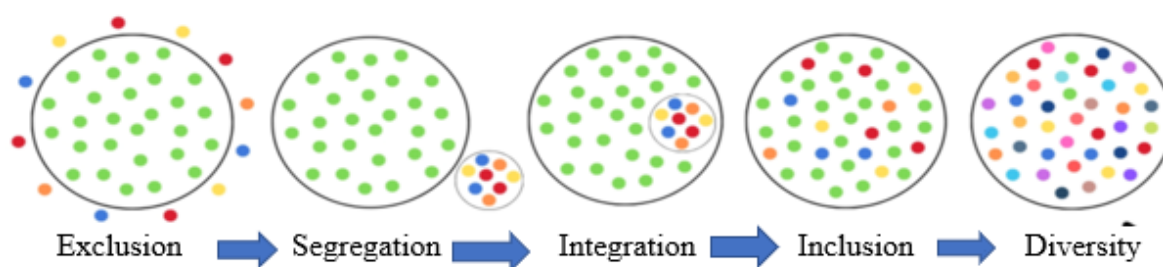
Figure 3 is adapted from Shelley Moore’s (2019) inclusion dot continuum in which exclusion is pictured on the far left and uses green dots to symbolize the homogeneous group of normal children and multi-coloured dots to represent students with disabilities. Moving from left to right, the dots show the stages of segregation, integration, and inclusion, all the while maintaining the green normal dots. In the last circle on the far right of the diagram, there are dots of all colours that clearly show that all students (and staff) are different and valued equally in what is referred to as diversity education, a term used in some of the literature on inclusion since 2000 (Katz, 2012, Andrews & Lupart, 2015).

Truly inclusive education provides diverse and equitable educational experiences for all students and represents a diversity model that adopts a set of general guiding principles like those developed by Stuart et al., (2012) to guide anti-stigma activities. These principles apply to the broader definition of diversity education because they create a sense of common focus and goals between different community partners (educators, social workers, and counselors).

Figure 3

Continuum of inclusion (Adapted from Moore, 2019)

Inclusion Continuum



Using these principles as a starting point to coordinate policies and practices would be beneficial to help provide efficient, coordinated services and supports. The six principles are:

1. put people first,
2. plan for sustainability,
3. focus on activities that change behaviours,
4. target activities to well-defined groups,
5. think big, start small, and
6. build better practices (pp. 47-49).

School teams can be more successful in their programming efforts by putting students and their families first, seeking to understand their lifeworld, and listening to their perspectives on their needs and possible strategies to assist them. Teams must also plan for sustainability in the

implementation of programs and supports. Having a strong team that can build teacher efficacy in inclusive classroom practices reduces the chance of programs and interventions fizzling out when staff changes occur, and people move on. Varied professional development activities can help with sustainability and must be provided at the individual and systemic levels to be successful. They must also be provided to various groups, such as teachers, support teachers, and paraprofessionals, to help change behaviours and practices across the system. Celebrating small successes on the road to wider, organizational change is important and will help to build better practices overall. “Critical reflection, systematic evaluation, and a spirit of inquiry” (Stuart et al., 2012, p. 49) will be beneficial, and best practices should be documented and shared to help to build momentum. Conveniently, the steps for educators that are outlined by the Manitoba Education (2002) to make inclusion for students with disabilities possible are worded in a way that makes them applicable to the diversity education definition for all learners. These steps included:

- foster school and classroom communities where all students, including those with diverse needs and abilities, have a sense of personal belonging and achievement,
- identify and foster practices by which students with a wide range of learning needs can be taught together effectively,
- enhance, through modelling and instruction, student abilities to deal with diversity
- offer students an environment that provides potential for dignified, meaningful relationships,
- provide each student with appropriate supports, including instructional placements, to develop their personal best in a setting that respects their abilities,
- help each student contribute to the classroom and community, and

- develop and maintain competencies for achieving these principles (p. 3).

All these actions are reflected in the best practices of inclusion and represent a diversity education model that “celebrates students’ natural diversity with meaningful student-centred learning” (Falvey et al., 2017, p. 15). More specific support in expanding these actions to be applicable to other challenges with diversity may be warranted, if we are currently seeing inconsistent operationalization of the steps two and a half decades after their introduction.

Change is slow in the field of education, and it has taken a long time to reach the point where educators have sufficient knowledge of the importance of creating classrooms that “socially and academically engage and include all students” (Specht & Katz, 2015, p. 155) and how to act on that knowledge in practical ways. The research on inclusive education provided information on evidence-based, effective practices for professionals who must do better now that they know better, because the well-being of society depends upon it. Jung et al. (2019) stressed that “the widespread experience of inequitable schooling results from a host of institutional and sociocultural factors that require systemic change” (p. 143), and although change begins with individuals who have always made positive impacts on children, individual change efforts are not enough. Issues of inclusion and equity should be at the forefront of the work of educators and the topic of most professional discussions because every student has the right to receive an education from teachers who have high expectations for their success, values them as individuals, and builds on their strengths.

Diversity education expresses the broader view of inclusion that moves from considering only children with disabilities to a model that addresses the learning differences of all students. Ekins (2017) noted that it is important for educators to acknowledge and respect “the complexity of the concept of inclusion and understand[ing] it through a social and emotional lens, rather than

a purely technical, process-driven lens” (p. 135). There is still a global understanding of inclusion as being a set of projects and initiatives which are designed as an educational approach to serve children with disabilities within general education settings (Grimes, 2012, & Messiou, et al., 2016). However, the definition of inclusion is constantly being refined and expanded to change with our globally diverse communities and schools. Keeping up to date on these developments and sharing them with other stakeholders in the school community such as teachers, students, and families is the responsibility of inclusive school leaders who also need ongoing, relevant support and learning to stay current and informed. The principal’s attitudes, approaches, and support of full inclusion of all students is pivotal to enabling or inhibiting the culture and direction of the inclusive school agenda (Bélanger & Gougeon, 2009; Tracy-Bronson, 2020). The importance of inclusive leadership is such that it is a job too large to be assumed by one person however, and so part of inclusive leadership is ensuring that all voices are heard and that everyone in the school community shares the goal of working towards inclusion together.

Inclusive School Leadership

Much of the research in educational leadership has focused on its moral purpose and made it clear that it is the responsibility of school leaders to create communities that make ethical and inclusive behaviour a priority (Cranston, et al., 2006; Lashway, 2006; Vogel, 2012). Despite the dilemmas and barriers faced by leaders attempting to create schools that are more inclusive, doing so is critical, perhaps even at the core of the work of educational leaders at all levels. Sider et al. (2021) noted that “much less attention has been given in the scholarly literature to the experiences of school principals in supporting students with SEN (special education needs)” (p. 233). School leaders need to strive for ethical leadership and to promote high learning levels for

all children in our schools, “not because of legislation or fear of sanctions, but because we have a moral and ethical imperative to do so” (Ontario Principals’ Council, 2012, p. 7), and so we must be willing to examine our current practices and make systemic changes to fulfill the key role that schools play in society, that of educating all children. Gorski and Swalwell (2023) insisted that school leaders devoted to equity and inclusion need “to tap deep wells of fortitude to keep going even when, or especially when, we feel discouraged” (p. 37). We need to be reflective and learn with others about how to examine our school environments and practices for inequities, how to eliminate them, and how to make equity something that is visible and actively cultivated daily.

This self-reflection is a key point of the professional growth needed by school leaders (Sider et al. (2021), who described an “iterative process deeply manifested in cycles of experience and reflection” (p. 233). Definitions of ethical leadership specify that the principal must not only display ethical behaviour personally but also create ethical institutions. School leaders need to know who they are and what they believe if they are to match their words with their actions and walk the talk by displaying such qualities as honesty, loyalty, courage, respect, justice, and grace (Berghofer & Swartz, 2014; Nelson, 2011; Brown & Trevino, 2006). This is not just another approach to leadership to add to our already overflowing plate. It is the plate (Gorski & Swalwell, 2023) and needs to be integral to everything we do as school leaders. Moinina Sengeh (2023) said that “equity is a state, and inclusion is a process to get you toward that state” (p. 180). By creating opportunities that all our students can be present at, participate in, be themselves in our classrooms, schools, and communities where they feel seen, then we are moving towards that desired equitable state along with those around us.

Inclusive school leadership begins with moral leaders and a principal’s first concern should be personal accountability before being concerned with the ethical behaviour of others

(Lashway, 2006). It is also true however, that the behaviours of the school leaders “affect the behaviours of other school staff, the school culture, as well as the delivery of service in the school (Sider et al., 2021, p. 234). Lyons et al., (2016) found in their study of inclusive schools in Saskatchewan that a shared belief and commitment to inclusion can be a key driver to individual and collective successes and that there is power in positivity and optimism.

It is therefore important to note, that Bunch (2014) identified two main parts of moving to a more inclusive educational system. One is the realization that it is a more productive approach to meeting the needs of all our students and the second is the understanding that we are not practicing true inclusion until students are all learning based on academically and socially relevant goals together in regular classrooms. Making inclusion of all students the priority of schools takes intentional inclusive leadership. That means that school leaders need to strive to learn and understand 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” (Sider et al., 2021, p. 234). That requires self-reflection on one’s own positionality as it compares to the students and families being served by unique school communities.

School leaders can create a sense of common focus and shared goals between different community partners to coordinate policies and practices that help provide efficient, coordinated services, and supports. Sider et al., (2021) outlined basic leadership competencies for inclusive school leaders:

- a pervasive sense of commitment to inclusion,
- striving to meet the needs of all students,
- an ability to foster relationships with multiple stakeholders,
- modelling inclusive behaviours, and

- developing effective communication mechanisms to support inclusive education (p. 239).

Other research on effective inclusive leadership practice was examined by DeMatthews et al., (2021) who outlined the qualities of inclusive leaders in a community on the border between the United States and Mexico as being the ability to:

- foster change in support of sustainable inclusive classrooms,
- hire, retain, motivate, and provide professional support to teachers,
- set the direction by ensuring teachers work together to meet students' needs,
- act as an instructional leader and set high expectations, and
- foster teacher leadership and use distributive leadership to manage complex tasks (p. 11-12).

It is important to remember that inclusive school leaders need their own support systems to do the important work of developing and maintaining inclusive schools. Professional learning opportunities that help to build and sustain these inclusive leader competencies is an important step that school divisions and professional organizations need to remember if they want to maximize the effective implementation of inclusive policies and practices. Irvine, et. al (2010) also stressed the importance of professional development opportunities for school leaders along with program support. We can not neglect or underestimate the importance of the professional needs of school leaders if they are to be successful leaders of inclusion.

Unfortunately, there is still a disconnect between the agreed upon philosophies of inclusion and the research-based practices discussed here and “the implementation of these policies and practices in the work that school leaders do in supporting students with special education needs in their school environments” (Sider et al., 2017, p. 4). More realistically, the disconnect is often between what inclusive leaders want to do and what they can do with the

resources available to them. Many students remain the victims of an “inflexible, insensitive education system that methodically (though unintentionally) destroys the self-esteem of students who do not fit the mold” (Falvey et al., 2017, p. 13). These students are the “casualties of exclusion” (p. 13) merely because of differences related to “language, culture, religion, gender, abilities, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, and geographic setting” (p. 13). Thus, a broader definition of inclusion is needed to develop and promote “an inclusive orientation and a set of inclusive practices” (p. 15) that will benefit all members of the school community.

Messiou, et al. (2016) described a broader definition of inclusion as one that includes an educational approach that responds, “to diversity in relation to race, social class, ethnicity, religion, gender, and attainment, as well as with regards to disabilities” (p. 46). Disabilities, oppression, racism, and childhood trauma (all sometimes resulting from different cultural backgrounds) can all affect children’s ability to be successful in educational settings and often manifest as behavioural, social-emotional, psychiatric, and psychological disorders. Critical social theory underpins this broader view of inclusion and can provide help for educators who wish to examine their views and practices to meet the broad needs of their students, advocate for systemic educational reform, and guide a comprehensive approach to true inclusive teaching, learning, and leadership in schools.

Critical Social Theory

Critical theory is used to guide the work of helping professions and views modern society as being set up for the benefit of privileged groups in that society such as males, heterosexual people, rich people, white people, etc., at the expense of other non-privileged groups. The goal of this theory is not only to make changes to society so that disadvantaged groups are not so disadvantaged, but also to transform and reform the society so that all groups have the same

opportunities to have productive and happy lives. Agger (2018) described the goal of critical theory as “a macro theory that examines social structures, institutions, policies, practices, and processes with respect to how they treat all groups in society” (p. 85). Schools are an obvious example of a societal institution that could benefit from such an examination.

Critical theory originated in the 1920s from Marxist philosophy and developed as a radical response to “imperialism, private appropriation of scarce resources and the many constraints on personal initiative” (Held, 1990, p. 13). Critical theorists in the middle of the 20th century emphasized problems and issues in the state, mass culture, and families and criticized capitalism and Soviet socialism. Their writings presented an alternative ideology that proposed a different path for social development. Critical theorists do not all subscribe to a unified theory or set of beliefs however, possibly because it originated in at least two different areas of study. First, it originated at the Frankfurt School of Social Science Research, led by the work of theorists such as Horkheimer, Pollock, Adorno, Fromm, Neumann, and Gurland, and spanning many schools of thought such as philosophy, sociology, social psychology, economics, musicology, psychoanalysis, political science, and law. Second, since 1970, critical theory has been further advanced through the work of Habermas in philosophy and sociology.

As mentioned above, the historical origins of Critical Theory are grounded in the philosophy of Karl Marx who was a Prussian philosopher, political economist, and revolutionary in the 19th century. Marx combined the critique of existing ideologies with the practice of social revolution and maintained that researchers had two goals which were to interpret societal structures and practices and to affect positive social change. As opposed to traditional theory that sought to describe, understand, and explain phenomenon, Critical Theory was a new social theory that critiqued society and advocated for changing it. Thomas (2009) described Critical

Theory as “the cutting edge of social theory” (p. 55) from the 1930s up until the 1960s because of its critique of positivism, which was seen by critical theorists as perpetuating “existing social problems and obstructing social change” (p. 55). Positivist paradigms and, less obviously, the views of interpretivism that sees interpretations of reality as being derived from culture and historical situations, are both dismissed by critical theorists according to Cohen et al., (2011); mainly because they are “essentially technicist, seeking to understand and render more efficient an existing situation, rather than to question or transform it” (p. 32). In the field of education, this means keeping school systemic structures the same, even if they are no longer working for increasingly larger groups of students.

Thomas (2009) described the work of the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School as being concerned with being “revisionists who sought both to understand society and to make it more just” (p. 55). They focused on primarily political and class issues and did not address racism or other forms of discrimination. Building on the work of the Frankfurt School, Thomas (2009) discussed Habermas’ conceptualized critical knowledge as that which “enabled human beings to emancipate themselves from various forms of domination through self-reflection” (p. 55). As a result, his perspective expanded the application of Critical Theory within the social sciences to a wide range of disciplines and approaches that include critical race theory, critical systems theory, feminist theory, postcolonial theory, queer theory, the theory of communicative action, critical social work theory, and neo-Marxist theory.

In general, however, Held (1990) described the change made by critical theorists as the reformation of traditional German idealist concerns with the nature of reason, truth, and beauty by placing history at the centre of their views on society. Using this view of the past, they focused on future possibilities and looked at new ways to move society to rational institutions

that “would ensure a true, free, and just life” (p. 15), while seeking to analyze and expose systemic barriers to this radical change. “Critical theory is explicitly prescriptive and normative, entailing a view about what behaviour in a social democracy should entail” (Cohen et al., 2011, p. 31) and its purpose is not merely to study society’s situations and phenomenon but also to change them to achieve more equality and democratic rights for all its members; emancipating the oppressed and promoting individual freedoms.

Newer theoretical perspectives such as postmodernism and post structuralism extend the understanding of oppression and who is oppressed by examining multiple, overlapping oppressions such as “identity, social location, voice, diversity, borders, anti-essentialism, inclusion, exclusion, and difference”. Baines (2017) also looked at the myriad of ways that oppression “may or may not be sustained and reproduced in everyday life” (p. 10), and Dieronitou (2014) noted that although the goal of critical theory is change and transformation “there appear to be aspects of prediction and control sustained from positivism” (p. 6). These ideas were presented earlier by Cohen et al (2011) who discussed the definition of real knowledge, as described by Habermas (1978), as a combination of three different cognitive components: prediction and control (technical), understanding and interpretation (practical), and emancipation and freedom (emancipatory). Reflecting the post-positive perspective that multiple methods are necessary to identify valid beliefs, the first two components require quantitative research that provides proof of the inequities within systems as well as qualitative research that creates an understanding of the lived experiences of the participants. The third, however, is the goal of critical theory. It encompasses and requires the first two components while going beyond them to institute transformation. The main goal of emancipatory knowledge is the transformative change that results in praxis (Cohen et al, 2011; Lather, 1991) or action that is taken to

emancipate based on personal reflection. This study provided this knowledge and reflective opportunities within a practical research opportunity to school leaders in Manitoba.

The fact that critical practitioners can never truly “understand him or herself outside of relation to the very injustice that he or she recognizes and confronts” (Kuntz, 2015, p. 122) is the basis for engagement in learning opportunities that allow people to confront, challenge, and intervene against oppression. The aim of progressive social change in collaboration with others has its roots in post-structuralism, which sees meaning as being constructed by people with perspectives and discourses. Kuntz (2015) maintained that the strength of social justice-focused, critical, post-structural inquiry is a way of “practicing public – of drawing previously unseen normative processes into the light of place, made visible through relational ways of knowing and coming to know” (p. 123). There are also post-modern aspects to critical theory, because there is a belief that knowledge and truth are socially constructed to serve the interests of specific groups and, as a result, it may not be possible to reach consensus on one definition of reality, especially between oppressed groups and their oppressors. This aspect plays out in schools daily, as people (including school leaders) tend to view school through their own experiences and in the ways that worked for them without concerning themselves with the experiences of others.

The ontological assumption of critical theory is that of critical realism, or the belief that true knowledge and reality in the human world is captured by a broad critical examination (Dieronitou, 2014; Moon & Blackman, 2017) of the multiple realities that are socially constructed by different groups of people. This critical examination should be based on “social, political, cultural, economic, racial, gender, age, and disability values” (Mertens, 2007, p. 216). A summary of the underlying assumptions and theoretical perspectives of critical theory are presented in Figure 4.

Central Elements of Critical Theory

Reflection

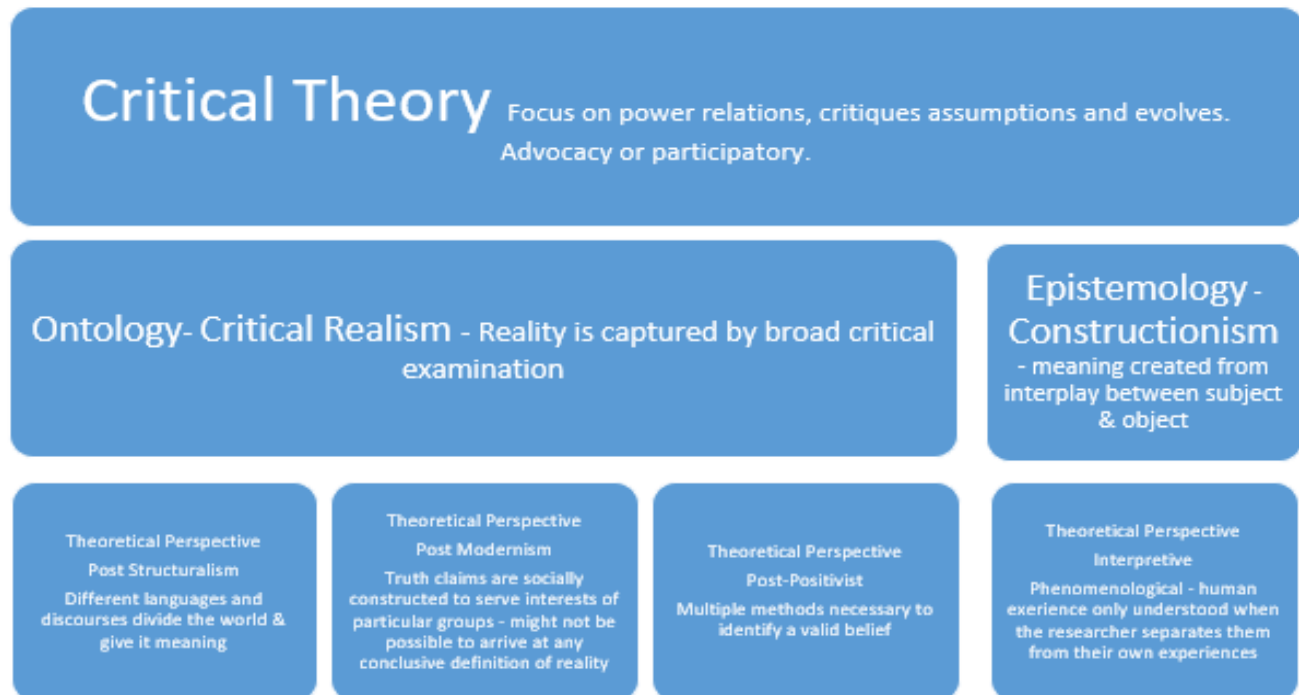
The emancipatory component of Habermas's (1978) viewpoint on knowledge adopts the practice of the ideology critique. It requires practitioners to reflect on their own ideology, as well as the values and practices of the dominant groups in society (Cohen, et al., 2011). That is "the means by which powerful groups promote and legitimate their particular-sectoral-interests at the expense of disempowered groups" (Cohen et al, 2011, p. 33). The concept of reflection was proposed as a central element of Critical Theory by Duffy and Scott (1998) as it is a specific way of engaging in an ideology critique. The German meaning inherent in the word *reflection* is that the self literally flexes backwards so that a person can see themselves in new ways. Duffy and Scott (1998) maintained that this type of emancipatory, purposeful self-reflection is essential to understanding personal experiences and feelings to truly see how we affect the experiences and circumstances of others (p. 185). This understanding is crucial for school leaders because of their influence on the daily operation of the school system

Until educators undergo this self-reflection, they will remain ignorant of the liberating knowledge that it can provide and that will enable them to see our social systems in different ways and to want to make positive change. From the interpretive phenomenological perspective, the human experience of others can only be understood when researchers separate and understand themselves and their own experiences. Ultimately, the practice of self-reflection may lead to praxis as mentioned above; and results in purposeful action that is taken by individuals who are transformed by their reflections to see society in different ways and who want to make positive changes. Once this reflective transformation has taken place, the researcher then needs

to engage in meaningful communication with others about the changes that need to be made. Identifying obstacles to clear communication is the second critical element of Critical Theory.

Communication

The importance of clear communication as a component of critical theory also has its roots in the work of Habermas who placed a “strong emphasis on dialogue and conversations” (Duffy & Scott, 1998, p. 185) for achieving understanding and agreement about critical issues. This type of clear, productive communication can only occur when it is “uncoerced, undistorted, and non-authoritarian in nature” (p. 185). All participants first need to be able to effectively understand each other’s verbal and non-verbal cues and then be able to speak freely without feeling restricted or restrained. By identifying individual biases and positions of privilege and by sharing them openly and transparently, participants can engage in open, unrestricted conversation and dialogue that enables positive problem solving. Habermas (1978) believed that “the outcome of speech should be understanding and agreement...and that if we talk long enough, we can get things straight and arrive at a rational, non-distorted consensus” (p. 185). This open, transparent, and solution-focused dialogue can overcome the miscommunication that can arise because of varying backgrounds and life experiences, and there is a sense of empowerment that comes from the resulting mutual understanding. This effective communication is often stressed as a strength of Critical Theory, however there are also critics of the theory who see things differently (Bowers, 1993; Gibson, 1996; Goodman, 1992; Hughes & Hughes, 1990). However, despite criticism of the dense language of Critical Theory and a lack of practical transferability, it provides a theoretical background for research inquiries into inclusive education. This is especially true for inquiries that call for individual and collaborative reflection and discussion on equitable access to public education.

Figure 4*Critical Theory Assumptions and Perspectives***Critical Theory and Inclusive Education**

The philosophy and principles of inclusive education have the underpinnings of critical theory which is extremely important because “the overall epistemological understanding that teachers bring to their teaching practices may have tremendous implications for how teachers develop their skills and practice as educators” (Jordan et al., 2010, p. 264). Because of their individual backgrounds and experiences and their beliefs about fairness and equity, some teachers may require additional professional learning in the philosophy of inclusion as well as in teaching and learning, knowledge acquisition, and varied instructional practices to embrace an inclusive school culture.

Regardless, the critical theoretical background supports the definition, policies, and practices of inclusive philosophy and can be used as the basis of all efforts to improve the

educational experiences of all students. Liasidou and Antoniou (2015) described the role of critical pedagogy as crucial for professional learning for school leaders who wish to examine and question their practice and ultimately change systems and structures that marginalize large groups of students. “School leaders should acquire critical abilities as well relevant knowledge and thinking skills to analyse the ways in which school procedures and practices privilege or disparage certain groups of students” (p. 352). Dubose and Ormseth (2021) maintained that it is not possible for us to think or read our way out of systemic inequity. We must instead be “actively self-reflective and accountable for our choices and behaviors” (p. 3) and examine our own beliefs, biases, and mindsets while encouraging others to do the same. This is the work of inclusive school leaders from a critical theory perspective. Engaging in this Collaborative Autoethnography (CAE) study on inclusive philosophy and practices will provide school leaders in Manitoba an opportunity to become more thoughtful, knowledgeable, and inclusive leaders by engaging in naturalistic inquiry about their individual contexts and practices related to inclusive education based on the key components of critical theory.

Chapter Three

Methods

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of school leaders in Manitoba interested in building and sustaining inclusive school communities. The participants were Manitoba principals and vice-principals who expressed interest in inclusion and who wanted to participate in a collaborative autoethnography of inclusive school leadership practices. Grounded in critical theory, this qualitative collaborative autoethnography study engaged participants in individual reflections on personal and professional experiences with inclusion, as well as participation in regular, collaborative, Think Tank sessions over a four-month period spanning 2023 and 2024.

Naturalistic Inquiry and Collaborative Autoethnography

Autoethnography (AE) and thus collaborative autoethnography (CAE) is a qualitative research methodological approach that upholds the values of naturalistic inquiry; the idea that reality is multi-faceted and socially constructed and that a focus on the development of a contextualized picture of experiences and settings (Frey, 2018) is necessary for understanding the issue or topic of study. In this study, this qualitative research method involved researchers using their personal experiences and narratives or their biographical information and self-observations as data. Research that focused on observing, describing, and interpreting “the experiences and actions of specific people and groups in societal and cultural groups” (Salkind, 2010, p. 880) was the basis for this CAE research project examining school leaders’ experiences with inclusive education and practices. Naturalistic inquiry is also “used to develop interpretations and local theories that afford deep insights into the human experience” (Salkind, 2010, p. 880), and so school leaders in Manitoba were able to use their own experiences with

inclusive education on a local level to reflect on and evaluate provincial, national, and international inclusive educational developments using a collaborative autoethnography methodology. Blalock and Akehi (2018) stated that “sharing stories, particularly when stories contain shared experiences, can further connect individuals around a commonality” (p. 90). CAE provided school leaders with a way to share their stories about inclusion and support each other in their efforts towards inclusion, while also sharing their localized experiences with the broader education community. Not only were the participants able to share their experiences with their colleagues, but they were also given opportunities to consider their own effect on the critical issue of inclusion by engaging in reflexivity, an ongoing self-awareness about their own influence on their actions (Miyahara & Fukao, 2021). The benefits of the reflexivity are increased even more when done in collaboration with others through CAE, and Dongmei, et.al (2024) suggested that the most benefit for researchers engaging in reflection and reflexivity through CAE comes from sharing their reflections with others.

Autoethnography is not only retelling personal stories but also requires a “carefully organized research design and systematically collected and analyzed data” (Roy & Uekusa, 2020, p. 386). Rather than focusing solely on my own experiences for this study, I chose a Collaborative Autoethnography approach to include other school leaders to obtain a wider, “richer pool of data from multiple sources” (p. 387). Chang et al., (2013) described the collaborative component of CAE as an opportunity for a group of researchers to pool their stories to find commonalities and differences and then wrestle “with these stories to discover the meanings of the stories in relation to their sociocultural contexts” (p. 17). Unlike purely autobiographical writing, AE and CAE use “personal stories as windows to the world” (p. 19),

and the autobiographic data gathered through CAE assisted participants in this study in forming connectivity between themselves and others in their social contexts.

The key components of reflection and communication in critical social theory were also the basis of this qualitative research methodology of autoethnography which “helps people step outside of their immediate constraints to examine their social world through new eyes” (Glowack-Dudka et al., 2005, p. 30). Collaborative autoethnography (CAE) is a powerful way to engage a group of people who are interested and invested in a topic such as inclusive education and is “more likely to lead to pragmatic applications and interventions” (Lapadat, 2017, p. 598) through sharing stories and experiences in search of a path to meaningful change. It is for these reasons that I chose this methodology for my study. Qualitative methods with naturalistic inquiry intent were used to conduct this study. This chapter provides a detailed account of the methodological choices and the methods for data collection.

Research Problem

The literature review for this study resulted in the conclusion that the voices of school leaders in Manitoba need to be heard regarding their experiences with implementing the legislation and policies supporting inclusion. Through my own experience as an elementary school principal for 14 years, I know how challenging it can be to daily build and sustain inclusive practices in schools. I believe that the collective voices of school leaders who believe in inclusion and want to successfully support all students and families offers insightful perspectives on the sociological issues affecting inclusive education in Manitoba. Leaders’ voices are needed even more during this transitional period in Manitoba’s education system involving numerous curricula document renewals and revisions and the sparsely supported implementation of the numerous new provincial documents relating to inclusion:

- Mamahtawisiwin The Wonder We are Born With: An Indigenous Education Policy Framework (MEECL, 2022),
- On the Path to Inclusion in Manitoba's K-12 Education System: Supporting our Diverse Learners in Achieving their Full Potential (MEECL, 2022),
- Standards for Appropriate Educational Programming in Manitoba, Updated (MEECL, 2022),
- Safe and Caring Schools: A Policy Directive and Action Plan to Enhance Student Presence and Engagement (MEECL, 2023), and
- Safe and Caring Schools: A Policy Directive Enhancing Proactive Supports to Minimize the Use of Suspension (MEECL, 2023).

The research problem addressed by this study is that school leaders often work in isolation and experience systemic barriers in the implementation of policies and ethical dilemmas that affect their efforts to create truly inclusive schools.

The Research Questions

The questions guiding the research to address the research problem are as follows:

- How can school leaders overcome identified, systemic barriers to develop and sustain truly inclusive schools?
- What barriers to inclusion do school leaders face?
- How do experiences of race, gender, sexuality, ability, class, education, and/or religion inform approaches to inclusive education?
- What skills, knowledge, dispositions, resources, and tools do school leaders need to create inclusive schools?
- How can working collaboratively positively impact leaders' efforts towards inclusion?

To answer these questions, I recruited school leaders from a variety of school divisions in Manitoba to participate in a process of self-reflection combined with a series of Think Tank sessions to capture their experiences and perspectives on the facilitators and barriers to the creation of inclusive spaces for all members of their school communities. I captured and honoured their contributions using qualitative methods and established opportunities for supportive, interactive discussion groups for school leaders in Manitoba.

To obtain honest perspectives from participants, I reduced the risk of several types of bias. Hoets (2018) identified moderator acceptance bias, social acceptance bias, and dominant respondent bias as barriers to honest participation in activities such as focus groups, which resemble the interactions in Think Tank sessions. My goal was to create a group culture that fostered open, honest responses from the group members. A safe space was crucial for school leaders to share their honest perspectives confidently and thoughtfully.

Moderator acceptance bias.

Even though I was working with other school leaders like me for this project, I had some concerns that there may have been some participants who would tailor their answers to questions based on what they thought I may want to hear. Participants in studies that involve facilitated discussions sometimes offer perspectives or answer questions based on what they believe the moderator wants to hear (Hoets, 2018). It was therefore important for me to establish collegial, trusting relationships with the participants so that the discussions were honest, and interactions were based on trust. I participated in the same activities as the other participants in this collaborative autoethnography study and used that to build a safe, sharing culture in the group. I was open and honest about my own struggles with inclusion and openly asked to learn from the participants as my colleagues and mentors. By modelling reflective personal and professional

observations, I encouraged the other participants to feel safe to share their own honest opinions and observations; both in writing and in the Think Tank sessions.

As Caliva and Scheier (1992) suggested, we must challenge all assumptions to confirm or refute them for the sake of our students and families, and that was the message that was conveyed to participants in this study. Lipton and Wellman (2015) cautioned leaders of collaborative groups to keep aware of interactions and the flow of ideas during group sessions and stressed the importance of “knowing when to withhold their own ideas” (p. 35), and so I was mindful of leaving space for and time for others to initiate discussions and share ideas. They also had good advice for me as the facilitator on joining the participant group as an equal both physically and emotionally. These suggestions included sitting side-by-side (not applicable in our Teams setting) and focusing on common information, problems, and issues. The common reflective activities provided these common experiences for discussion.

Social Acceptance Bias.

In addition to wanting to please the moderator, participants may also be influenced by other members of the collaborative group when they are responding to questions. People will often voice opinions that appear to be socially acceptable to the group, even if those opinions are half-truths or totally false (Hoets, 2018). Most people are unlikely to admit feelings of fear and worry about other cultures or ways of being, let alone articulate their own prejudicial or racial beliefs. Despite inclusion and equity being essential parts of global education agendas, there remains questions about their definitions and implementation and “exclusionary practices and processes continue to be perpetuated through society and education” (Ekins, 2017, p. 2). Participants in this study were encouraged to “critically reconsider who actually benefits from existing education systems, and who it is that remains marginalised” (p. 2). Honest answers to

critical questions about commonly accepted concepts and practices were encouraged of all participants and reflected on through autoethnography processes and individual reflections.

A sense of safety and confidentiality was crucial to obtaining honest perspectives from participants. Participating in the individual reflections and the Think Tank sessions as a fellow researcher along with the other school leader participants helped to reduce the risk of bias in this study. Using a Think Tank structure and meeting agendas, guiding PowerPoint slides, and a discussion protocol helped participants to consolidate, share, and explore individual observations, and reflections allowed all participants to freely share their honest thoughts and feelings in a more private way.

Dominant Respondent Bias.

As often happens in groups, some individuals can dominate interactions, and this might also occur in a Think Tank session. These dominant respondents will want to make sure that their knowledge and expertise are shared first which might influence others' responses. It was important for me to have protocols and firm agendas for the Think Tank sessions so that all respondents could be heard first and receive equal talk time. Lipton and Wellman (2011) outlined numerous "strategies for including all voices, listening to others and being listened to by others" (p. 39). Their specific protocols for facilitating reflective dialogue through which "members seek to understand one another's viewpoints and deeply held assumptions" (p. 39) were helpful in making the most of our limited, precious time during Think Tank sessions. It was especially important and necessary to use strategies such as these "when topics are hot, tempers are high, and time is tight" (p. 39) as inclusive practices and experiences could potentially create such conditions in the Think Tank sessions. As the facilitator of the Think Tank sessions, it was also important to maximize the time for productive conversations that would engage the group

around the topic. Lipton and Wellman (2015, p. 11) noted that “all types of discourse improves when they are carefully structured, and the group applies text-based protocols and graphic tools to surface and organize information and concepts”. I chose the following two protocols to provide structure to the conversations and to minimize distracting anecdotes unrelated to inclusive leadership experiences.

Consensogram.

A consensogram is a vivid, visual display of data generated by the group as bar graphs which creates a focal point for dialogue. The consensogram activity allowed for all group members’ perceptions and beliefs related to an issue or problem to be recorded (Lipton & Wellman, 2011, p. 44) and provided a safe way for participants to explore “deep-seated beliefs, values, and assumptions” (p. 44), while individual viewpoints and increasing awareness of the viewpoints of others. Lipton and Wellman (2011) also noted that this protocol is extremely helpful in “surfacing outlier perspectives that appear distinctly different from the mainstream response” (p. 44). This activity was used at the first Think Tank session and allowed participants to share their initial understanding and thoughts on inclusion. The results were used as the first data set for the study. This activity allowed for individual responses to common questions on sticky notes that were then posted on a group Whiteboard. Questions that juxtapose perspectives were used to create the necessary dynamics for productive discussions. A Google Doc was used to facilitate this protocol in a virtual setting. A list of questions and a sample consensogram Google Doc are provided in Appendix A.

Paraphrase Passport.

This protocol helped to enhance listening, increase shared understanding, and organize dialogue in our newly formed Think Tank groups around the potentially controversial topic of

inclusion (Lipton & Wellman, 2011, p. 51). Shared understanding and balanced participation were facilitated by slowing down the pace of collaborative conversation and by inserting a paraphrase component before additional conversation contributions. Group members were given 1–2 minutes to organize their response to a focused question or topic, followed by shared responses. After the first participant shared, subsequent group members had to insert a paraphrase of the previous speaker before adding to the conversation. This protocol was especially helpful when the conversation during the Think Tank sessions stalled, and a different approach was needed. I believe that using a pre-established protocol to facilitate the Think Tank session discussions helped to maximize the productivity of the group discussions as well as added to the objectivity of the study. It was important however to use the same protocol at each session to minimize the amount of time necessary to teach the protocol.

My Approach to Qualitative Research

Although I wish that my research could be entirely objective, I know that all researchers bring their own set of beliefs, experiences, and ideas to any research project, especially a qualitative, collaborative autoethnography study. I therefore recognize that my own views on inclusive education and my experiences as a teacher and a school principal greatly influenced many aspects of this study, especially because I was a participant in the collaborative autoethnography reflections along with the other participants. Because I am concerned about the trustworthiness of my research, it is important that I share the paradigms and worldviews that influenced my approach to this study (Creswell, 2007) which include naturalistic inquiry, post positivism, a participatory approach, and the importance of narrative inquiry; specifically, collaborative autoethnography.

Naturalistic Inquiry

As mentioned above, I adhere to a naturalistic inquiry approach to research. I believe that is important because it uses sources of descriptive data and the subjective experiences of the participants “to create rich, evocative descriptions and interpretations of social phenomena” (Salkind, 2020, p. 880). School leaders influence the inclusive culture of schools at all levels and so it made sense for me to capture their experiences to better understand the complex idea of inclusion in our increasingly diverse schools.

Post Positivist Approach

I also agree with the post positivist position that inquiry should recognize the “multiple perspectives from participants rather than [seeking] a single reality” (Creswell, 2007, p. 20), and the idea that no study can ever definitively prove the truth of anything but can only assist in assessing the validity of theories (Willis, 2007). This study involved obtaining the perspectives on inclusive education of several school leaders from a variety of school contexts within the province of Manitoba. Not only did the participants share their inclusion perspectives and experiences, but they also shared ideas on how to change and improve the current efforts to build inclusive schools. The participants were active contributors to the research inquiry.

Participatory Approach

As a researcher, I am also influenced by the participatory approach to qualitative research. A main goal of my work is for my research to “contain an action agenda for reform that may change the lives of the participants, the institutions in which they live and work, or even the researchers’ lives” (Creswell, 2007, p. 21). My research questions revolved around the social issues of equity and equality in our schools and the role of school leaders in creating schools that are inclusive for all staff and students. Ultimately, I wanted my research inquiry to be practical,

collaborative, and conducted “with others rather on or to others” (Creswell, 2007, p. 22). The school leaders in this collaborative autoethnography study assisted in finalizing the questions for the Think Tank sessions, collecting the data, and had input into the final report (Creswell, 2007). It was by sharing their personal narratives that the participants in this study helped influence the field of inclusive education. The participants were also given the opportunity to develop and share a personal action plan to further inclusive practices in their own contexts.

Narrative Research

Clandinin and Connelly (2000) maintained that narrative inquiry is an effective method for conducting research with educators and have incorporated this approach in several studies that explored teachers and teacher knowledge. The sharing of our narratives or stories, especially when these “stories contain shared experiences, can further connect individuals around a commonality” (Blalock & Akehi, 2018, p. 90). The goal of this study was to provide an opportunity for school leaders to explore their teaching and leading experiences in inclusion to identify successes, obstacles, and potential innovations through the sharing of stories.

Creswell (2007) maintained that there is no specific way to conduct narrative studies, that instead they “represent an informal collection of topics” (p. 55). He suggested, however, that narrative research is best for capturing the life experiences of a small number of individuals who are “accessible, willing to provide information and distinctiveness for their accomplishments and ordinariness or who shed light on a specific phenomenon or issue being explored” (p. 119). Because I was hoping to gain insight into the ways that school leaders develop and maintain inclusive school environments, a narrative approach to inquiry was appropriate. I was also able to incorporate what Creswell (2007) called *purposeful sampling* of school leaders to develop a collective story of inclusive schools. My network of colleagues in school leadership, both locally

and provincially, assisted me in recruiting school leaders who were interested in inclusion to participate. Participants were required to reflect on and document their narrative or story to share with others. One specific type of qualitative research methodology that upholds and encompasses the values of naturalistic research, a post positive and participatory approach, and narrative research is collaborative autoethnography (CAE).

Collaborative Autoethnography

Brock, et al. (2017) proposed that “by constructing contexts whereby we engage in in-depth reflection, and thoughtful self-critique, we can cultivate new and more equitable and socially just identities” (p. 106). I hoped to create such a context for the participants in this study by using Collaborative Autoethnography (CAE) methods to allow them to use the data from their own life stories of their experiences with inclusion in their own personal “sociocultural contexts in order to gain understanding of society through the unique lens of self” (p. 119). Blalock and Akehi (2018) noted that in their CAE study, that “intentionality in creating spaces for one another to talk plainly about our experiences drew us closer together in friendship and scholarship” (p. 91). They also stressed that CAE is not just about retelling stories, but rather a form to allow participants to “feel moral dilemmas” (p. 93). Brock, et al. (2017) also advocated for CAE to make dialogue “intentional and critical” (p. 101) and suggested that it has the “potential to deepen the process of research between two or more individuals and to invite transformative learning to occur” (p. 101). By using CAE in this study on inclusive school leadership, I used intentional reflection and facilitated discussion focused on similar experiences to provide a pathway to improvement and transformation in leadership for inclusive education in Manitoba. Individual reflection and data gathering efforts by the participants in this study was

supported by regular Think Tank sessions, where the educational professionals responsible for creating inclusive schools came together to share their experiences with others.

Think Tank

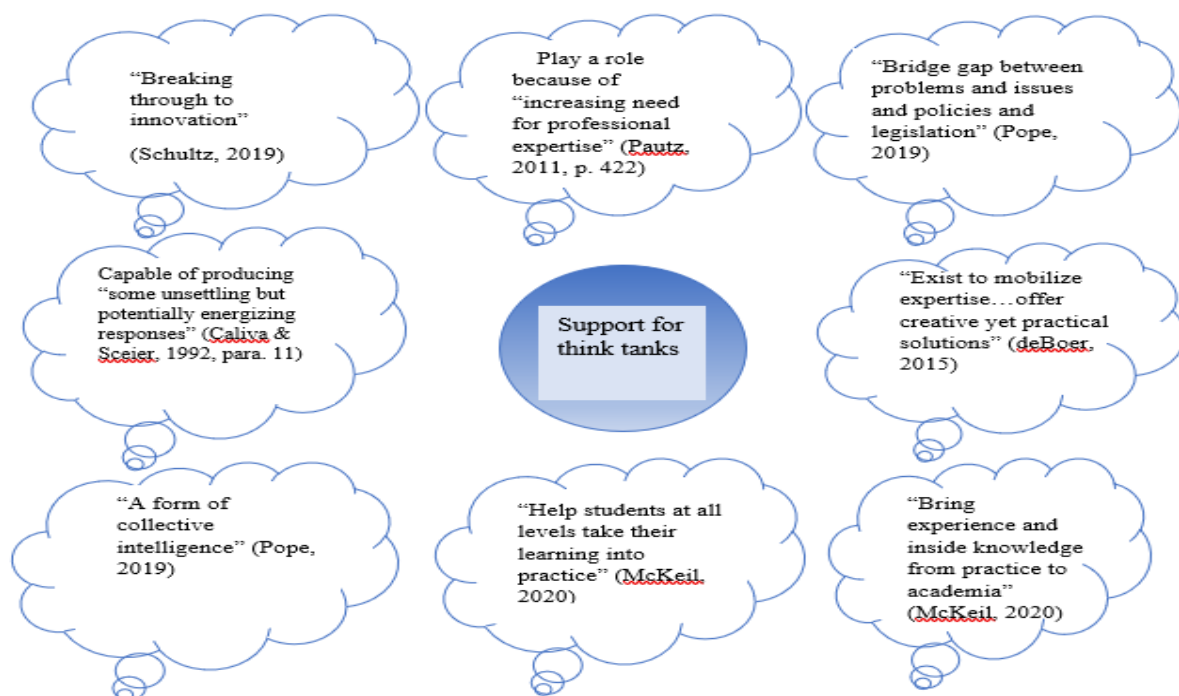
The idea of garnering collective insights about a topic is not new, and I chose a Think Tank group method purposefully because it enabled me to seek out a group of school leaders from across the province to think collectively about their experiences with inclusive education. The use of Think Tanks as a research method has become increasingly more popular (Pautz, 2011), possibly because it allows for scholarly autonomy. Other support for using the Think Tank model is highlighted in Figure 5. By using this method, I hoped to gather a diverse set of shared experiences and successful practices for inclusive education and school leadership that principals and vice-principals have used to support students and staff in their school communities. The goal was for the school leader participants in this study to view themselves as sources of ideas and expertise, evaluators of policies and programs, and authoritative sources of information and opinion, as these are critical components of a Think Tank (Weaver, 1989). Think Tanks have emerged in a variety of professional settings to bring experts together to share ideas and form collaborative groups (Maxwell, 2022) and the virtual Think Tank structure provided a way to facilitate regular, enduring collaboration on a broader geographical scale. As mentioned, I wanted to include participants with an interest in inclusion and Maxwell (2022) described the value of virtual Think Tanks in developing “robust scholarship” (p. 2) by finding collaborators interested in similar topics. The Think Tank sessions also provided a variety of perspectives on the topic of the development of inclusive schools.

Variety of Perspectives

By gathering an autonomous group of school leaders and allowing them to freely share their insights on inclusive education, I gathered new ideas on improving inclusive school leadership and inclusive educational practices. Skrtic (1995) believed that most people who are interested in discussing topics like diversity, disability, and democracy would tend to identify with the structuralist perspective, the pathological perspective, or the interventionist perspective. Freeze (2013) also connected these ways of thinking to the ways that educators view challenges faced by school systems. As described by Freeze (2013), structuralists are people who “believe a pro-active approach to institutional and pedagogical reform grounded in a critical sociology of systems dysfunction due to wrong-headed beliefs, policies, provisions, and practices” (p.9).

Figure 5

Support for Think Tanks



Those who adopt the pathological perspective believe that the inability to succeed in the current school setting is the result of deficits within the student and that educators “who adopt this perspective believe in a re-active, institution-strengthening approach” (p. 10). Finally, Freeze (2013) described interventionists as those who hold the assumption that “whatever the problem or opportunity, a properly researched, designed, and implemented intervention will make things better” (p. 8). It was my hope to have participants who bring a variety of these perspectives to the Think Tank sessions in this study.

It was important however, for me to have realistic expectations for the group of participants. Caliva and Scheier (1992) cautioned:

Unrealistic exceptions can poison any process, especially Think Tanks. From prior Think Tank participants, the following are some reasonable, expected outcomes: General mental challenge, consciousness raising, shift in focus/new approaches/fresh perspectives, creative ideas, new and better questions and problem statements, support and understanding of colleagues, catharsis/ventilation, renewal, and rededication (para. 59).

The school leader participants in this study had the opportunity to share insights and initiatives with the group, so the participants benefitted from the collective knowledge as does the broader educational community through knowledge mobilization of the results of the study.

I believe that there are many reasons that a Collaborative Autoethnography study with regular Think Tank sessions effectively bridged the personal experiences and strategies of individuals and the broader academic work of inclusive education. Primarily, I believe that the combination of CAE and the Think Tank method are appropriate methods for this qualitative research study, that align well with naturalistic research and narrative inquiry because they allowed me to capture the life experiences of school leaders. Second, I hoped that both CAE and

the Think Tank sessions were convenient for school leaders with diverse experiences who were available and willing to participate, especially given the online component of the Think Tank sessions. Third, using a Think Tank structure enabled me to gather their stories compiled during their individual reflections and contextualize them, an important component of narrative inquiry. “This embrace of cultural interpretation distinguishes autoethnography from other autobiographic or self-narrative writing” (Vryan, 2006, p. 21). In fact, “cultural studies with CAE conceptualize the term *culture* as a dynamic and comprehensive construct, emphasizing inclusivity rather than exclusivity” (Dahal & Luitel, 2023, p.4), and so therefore, the CAE structure was an appropriate methodology to allow school leaders interested in the inclusive culture of their schools to engage in the necessary reflection and reflexivity about their work and their daily actions towards inclusion described by Miyahara and Fukao (2021). It was an effective qualitative research method that provided insights into the inclusive work of school leaders in Manitoba.

Trustworthiness

Whereas quantitative research uses validity and reliability as standards to assess the accuracy of a study’s results, qualitative data is considered less generalizable, while still providing insights into the life events and experiences of the participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). Lincoln and Guba (1985) established specific criteria for evaluating the trustworthiness of qualitative research, including credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Credibility of the results of this study were addressed using research strategies such journaling and reflection, member checking the data with all participants, and thick description of the Think Tank sessions. My own reflections as a fellow school leader participating in the Think Tank sessions along with the participants in this study were shared throughout the research process.

Dependability was achieved through a clearly presented audit trail that documented the Think Tank sessions for the study. This process also addressed confirmability, as did the reflexive journaling component of the study and member checking of the data. The transferability of the study results was assessed based on the purposeful sampling for this study as well as in detailed, thick description of the inclusive experiences of the participant school leaders (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Although the results of this study may not be generalizable across different educational contexts, they are transferable because other school leaders will be able to use the thick description and audit trail to ascertain for themselves if the experiences of the participants are “sufficiently similar to their own for the outcomes to be applied” (Stringer, 2014, p. 94).

One way to compensate for bias in qualitative research inquiry and for imperfect data-gathering techniques is the use of triangulation (Sagor, 1992). Triangulation, which “involves collecting multiple sources of data for every phenomenon or issue being studied” (p. 43), improved the quality of the findings from this study on inclusive school leadership. The data involved in CAE is “decidedly subjective and personal” (Blalock & Akehi, 2018, p. 94), but engaging in CAE with a group of professionals in similar contexts provided me with “fresh perspectives from others” (Vryan, 2006, p. 21) who questioned my presumptions about inclusion. One of the main characteristics of CAE is that it relies on diverse types of data (Blalock & Akehi, 2018, p. 94) which is beneficial to achieving triangulation. Sagor (1992) maintained that when “multiple measures yield the same results, it can increase confidence in the results” (p. 45). Thematic observations gleaned from the data is representative of diverse viewpoints.

Triangulation is a widely accepted way to improve the analysis and interpretation of findings from various qualitative studies (Hales, 2010), and I suggest that CAE provides a type

of *investigator triangulation* to ensure better validity. Hales (2010) defined investigator triangulation as:

The use of more than one investigator, interviewer, observer, researcher, or data analyst in a study. The ability to confirm findings across investigators, without prior discussion or collaboration between them, can significantly enhance the credibility of the findings. Investigator triangulation is particularly important for decreasing bias in gathering, reporting, and/or analyzing data (p.15).

CAE provided me with fellow investigators and researchers with whom I could compare and contrast my assumptions, viewpoints, and perspectives. Triangulation is a key component of addressing the trustworthiness criteria credibility, dependability, and confirmability.

Procedures

Upon receiving approval from my advisor and my PHD dissertation proposal examining committee, I sought approval by the REB ethical review board at the University of Manitoba. Once ethics approval was received, I then began to recruit school leaders for my study. I approached all school divisions in Manitoba (See Appendix B) to recruit participants from across the province. I also approached the Council of School Leaders (COSL) to share information about my study with principal and vice-principal colleagues across the province and seek participation from them. To broaden the perspectives obtained for this study, I also contacted the Manitoba First Nations Education Resource Centre (MFNERC) for a list of principals and vice-principals in First Nations Schools in Manitoba and permission to contact them to participate in this study as well. School leaders from independent schools in Manitoba were also approached as potential participants. Only principals and vice-principals were invited to participate in this study, not superintendents or other educational leaders. I was seeking data on the successes and

challenges in the development and implementation of inclusive policies at the school level, and so school level leaders were the most appropriate participants. All principals and vice-principals were invited to participate.

Once I received approval from some school divisions and COSL, I then proceeded with contacting principals and vice principals by email (Appendix C and D). Attached to the email I attached a recruitment flyer and included a letter outlining the nature of the study (Appendix E). School leaders who agreed to participate signed a consent form (Appendix E) as well as an Oath of Confidentiality (Appendix F) to protect the confidentiality of the other participants. Participation in the study was optional, which was made clear to all potential participants, and any school leaders who were interested in participating or who wanted more information on the study were invited to contact me. My goal was to recruit between 12 - 20 school leader participants from a variety of school contexts and experience backgrounds to participate in this study. Initially, I had 17 participants indicate interest in the study and sign the consent form. Three participants withdrew for personal commitment reasons during the first month of the study and before contributing to the data collection, and so there were 14 participants committed to participation in the research project.

Participants

Although all the school leader participants in this study (n=14) were currently in an administrative role in a Manitoba school, their backgrounds and experience varied in many ways (see Figure 6). Eleven of the participants were female and three were male. Eight of the participants were school leaders in an urban setting and six were leaders in rural school divisions. Nine participants were school leaders in elementary level schools and four were currently working in high school settings. The range in experience as a school leader varied dramatically

with two participants having less than five years' experience, six participants in the five-to-ten-year range, four in the 11-to-20-year range, and one participant had over 20 years' experience in school leadership. In addition to these varied characteristics, it was interesting to note that three of the participants had experience leading in French Immersion schools, and three of them also had been leaders in schools that were chosen to host specialized programs for students with learning difficulties. There was no demographic information gathered on participants' educational backgrounds before the onset of the study.

A limitation in this participant set was the lack of ethnic diversity, since all but one of the participants were Caucasian. One of the female participants self-identified as Metis. Further, there were only three male participants as opposed to eleven females. Both factors are recognized as having a potential influence on how participants perceived dilemmas and engaged in the research.

Figure 6

Participant Information

Gender	Provincial Location	School Level	School Language Program	Experience in School Leadership (years)
Male (3)	Urban (8)	Elementary (9)	English (11)	Less than 5 (2)
Female (11)	Rural (6)	High School (4)	French Immersion (3)	5 to 10 (7)
		K-12 School (1)		11 to 20 (4)
				20 plus (1)

Most participants had between five and ten years of administrative experience, which may speak to the motivation for professional development at this career stage. It should be noted that the schools in which participants worked varied greatly in demographics, ranging from affluent to low socio-economic status, culturally homogeneous to culturally heterogeneous, and location within the province, covering five different school divisions in both urban and rural settings.

Another recruitment consideration of this study was the time commitment required from participants which was a minimum of nine hours. This is consistent with a challenge outlined in Griffiths' (1998) description of her project: "a central feature of the method was the intention of developing sustained dialogue in spite of having chosen to work with some of the busiest people I know ... sustained dialogue is particularly difficult if it has to be fitted into already overcrowded professional lives" (p. 23). It was therefore important for me to honour these worries in the scheduling of all stages of the research. Participants were assured that the Think Tank sessions would be concise, focused, and limited in number to maintain their engagement and commitment. The timeframe of the data collection was limited to a four-month period as arranged according to mutually convenient and agreed-upon times by the participants. Sometimes, participants were late joining the sessions because they were distracted by a situation which they had been dealing right before scheduled meeting and principals who were absent from these sessions and reported unanticipated work-related events or situations that conflicted with the dates after they had been set.

Data Collection

After receiving responses from the interested participants, I emailed them all with a schedule of the Think Tank dates and the calendar invitation links for the virtual Think Tank sessions using Microsoft Teams. Upon receiving feedback from the participants about scheduling

conflicts regarding the day of the week, I decided that having only one option for each Think Tank session was not sufficient. In addition, Caliva and Scheier (1992, para. 32) noted that: “the “ideal” Think Tank allows time for the participants to become acquainted, adequate time for in depth discussion, and wrap-up time”.

Participants were invited to participate in four Think Tank sessions that were two hours in length and were all held virtually. Each Think Tank session involved participants choosing at least one reflection activity to complete that they could share with me and that formed a common basis for the conversations in the Think Tanks. The first Think Tank choices were three reflective questions, the second Think Tank session had a choice of four personal reflection options, the third Think Tank had a choice of four professional context observations and reflections, and finally the last Think Tank provided a goal setting and action plan reflection. A field notes template was provided to participants in case they wanted to make additional comments about their school contexts and events. I also took field notes during the Think Tank sessions.

I made the decision to offer two options for each Think Tank session that would be held during the same week so that participants could join either one that fit with their personal schedule and accommodate for other commitments. This was done to maximize the number of participants who would be able to contribute to this study. All the participants were pleased to have an option of dates and appreciated the flexibility. The Think Tank sessions were held in November and December 2023 and in January and February 2024. The virtual sessions were recorded and transcribed. All 14 participants were present for at least part one of each of the monthly Think Tank sessions.

The data collection process for CAE studies can involve the use of methods typical of qualitative research inquiry such as observations and other sources of descriptive data (Salkind, 2010). The goal of the data collection for this study was to get participants to “mine data from [their] own life stories (Brock, et al., 2017, p. 119) in their sociocultural context of inclusive school leadership in order “to gain understanding of society through the unique lens of self” (p. 119). The data collection structure for this study involved a cyclical process of gathering information from participants, analyzing it to identify themes, revisiting those themes with the participants while exploring additional questions, and reflecting on individual contexts, then repeating the process for each phase of the study over the four-month period (Figure 7).

As suggested by Blalock and Akehi, (2018), diverse types of data for this study included autobiographical stories and narratives in field note journal responses (Appendix F) along with the potential collection of photographs, other written material, personal documents, observations, and artifacts shared by the participants, as well as transcripts of the Think Tank conversations.

In each session, participants were given a choice of several reflection activities to use to think about their personal and professional experiences with diversity and inclusion and to prepare for the Think Tank conversations. Table 1 provides an outline of the Think Tank sessions, outlines the types of data that was collected throughout this study, and summarizes the corresponding triangulated data source options for participants. It is also important that several data collection methods were used over the course of the study to achieve data triangulation (Mills, 2011). The research questions for this study, along with their corresponding data collection method are also listed in Table 1 along with the data triangulation plan.

Table 1*Think Tank Session Prompts and Data Collection*

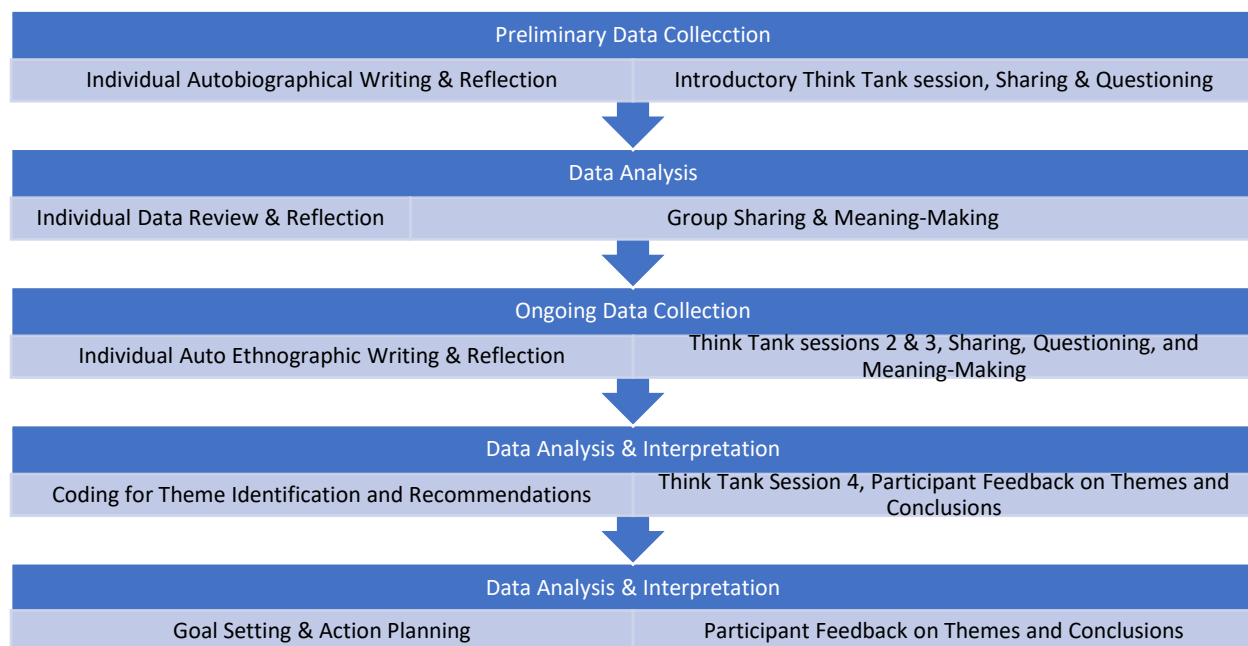
Study Phase	Research Questions	Triangulated Data Sources
Phase 1 - Introductory – Think Tank #1 Define Think Tank sessions Role of Facilitator Dos & Don'ts for Participants Field Journal Structure Schedule	How do experiences of race, gender, sexuality, ability, class, education, religion inform approaches to inclusive education?	1. Consensogram responses 2. Think Tank #1 Transcript (Conversation) 3. Field Notes (Personal Memory/Reflection)
Phase 2 - Personal Reflections - Think Tank #2 Personal Reflection Discussion on connection of personal backgrounds to work in inclusion	How do experiences of race, gender, sexuality, ability, class, education, religion inform approaches to inclusive education? What skills, knowledge dispositions, and tools do school leaders need to create inclusive schools?	1. Personal Memory/Reflection Activities Diversity Lifeline (Campbell Jones, Keeny, Campbell Jones, 2020, p. 116). Building a Cultural Profile (Ontario Principals' Council, 2012, pp. 140-141). Stalking our Stories #1 (Ontario Principals' Council, 2012, p. 139). Culture Gram (Chang, 2007). 2. Field Notes (Self-Observations Self-Analysis/Reflection) 3. Think Tank #2 Transcript (Conversation)
Phase 3 - School Community Reflections – Think Tank #3 Reflections/Observations and Discussion on connection of individual contexts to work in inclusion	What skills, knowledge dispositions, and tools do school leaders need to create inclusive schools? What are the barriers to inclusive school leadership experiences by school leaders? How can school leaders overcome systemic barriers to develop and sustain truly inclusive schools?	1. School Community Reflection Activities Stalking our Stories #2 (Ontario Principals' Council, 2012, p. 139). Workplace Cultural Proficiency Scale (Ontario Principals' Council, 2012, pp. 137-138). Inclusive education Checklist Assessments # 1 & 3 (Villa & Thousand, 2016, pp. 24-27 & pp. 35-38). Equity Walk (Ontario Principals' Council, 2012, p. 124) 1. Field Notes (Self-Observations Self-Analysis/Reflection) 2. Think Tank #3 Transcript (Conversation)
Phase 4 – Action Planning & Goal Setting – Think Tank #4 Reflections/Observations Goal Setting & Next Steps	What are the barriers to inclusive school leadership experiences by school leaders? How can school leaders overcome systemic barriers to develop and sustain truly inclusive schools?	1. Goal Setting Activities (Self-Analysis/Reflection) Action Plan Template (Jung, et. al, 2019, pp. 138-141)

	How can working collaboratively positively impact leaders' efforts towards inclusion?	Prepping for Difficult Conversations (Campbell Jones, Keeny, Campbell Jones, 2020, p. 113) 2. Field Notes (Self-Observations Self-Analysis/Reflection) 3. Think Tank #4 Transcript (Conversation)
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Adapted from Chang, H., Ngunjiri, F. W., & Hernandez, K. C. (2013).

Figure 7

Data Collection & Analysis Structure



(Adapted from Ngunjiri, Hernandez, & Chang, 2010)

Ultimately, the data collection process involved group discussion, individual reflection, and researcher analysis and was duplicated in each of the collaborative Think Tank sessions. The total data set for the study consisted of 29 documents including five action plans and eight transcripts from the Think Tank sessions.

Think Tank Session #1

The first Think Tank session was primarily an introduction to the study that included a discussion of roles and responsibilities, the setting of group expectations including

confidentiality, and a finalization of the schedule for the Think Tank sessions. I also provided several introductory questions to activate the participants' thinking about inclusion. Using a Consensogram protocol in a Google doc, participants responded to the following questions on a scale of one to ten (Figure 8).

1. To what degree do you feel that building a diverse and inclusive school environment is important to student success?
2. How important do you feel it is that school leaders value diversity and inclusion?
3. How competent do you feel that you have the skills to develop an inclusive school environment?

Participants were also asked to consider and discuss areas of inclusion that they had questions about and challenges with along with successes they have had. The second question asked what they wanted to take away from this research study/professional learning opportunity. The transcript of the Think Tank session conversation and the consensogram responses for the first three questions made up the data sources for this first stage of the research.

Ontario Principals' Council (2012, p. x)) stressed that "no matter where principals are on the continuum of understanding and actively engaging" in creating more inclusive schools, they require foundational information and activities for increasing personal awareness of equity issues and to help them question how our schools can better serve all students and families. As there was a range of experience in school leadership experiences among the participants in this study, I used a variety activities and forms to assist participants in developing this foundation and in compiling their individual data. The responses to these activities were submitted to the researcher as data sources for the study and took a maximum of 30 minutes to complete.

Figure 8*Consensogram Example***Consensogram**

On a scale from 1 -10, indicate to what degree you feel equipped to develop an inclusive school? Write your initials in the appropriate column. (Note: initials have been changed to participant numbers)

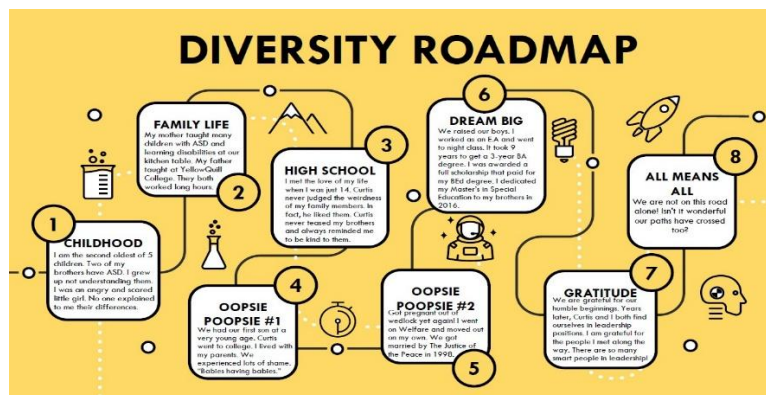
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
					5	10	Me		
					6	3	2		
						4	14		
						9	13		
						7	8		
						1	11		
						12			

The individual personal reflection options were presented to participants, and they were asked to choose one to complete prior to Think Tank #2. These options included four different frameworks for reflection on their personal backgrounds as they related to various aspects of diversity. These activities are listed and described below.

Diversity Lifeline

This Personal Reflection/Memory activity asked participants to recall events in their life in which they experienced or realized differences in relation to factors of diversity such as ability level, race, family structure, sexual orientation, economic class, and religion. Participants made a diversity timeline to tell their story and shared during Think Tank session two, followed by a reflection on the process (Campbell Jones, Keeny, & Campbell Jones, 2020, p. 116).

A sample of a Diversity Timeline is shown in Figure 9.

Figure 9***Sample Diversity Timeline*****Building a Cultural Profile**

Like the Diversity Timeline above and the Culture Gram below, the Cultural Profile template asked participants to identify their personal location, relationships, and experiences with various components of cultural identity. These components are class, gender, race, ethnicity, age, language, religion, and physical context (Ontario Principals' Council, 2012, pp. 140-141). Participants were asked to note when they are a member of dominant groups and how this affected their identity and influenced them as a person and an educator. Like the other activities, the Cultural Profile was meant to help participants examine their personal story, interrogate the impact on daily practice, and to develop a "critical consciousness in challenging our own expectations and assumptions" (p. 47).

An example cultural profile is provided in Figure 10.

Question prompts were used for reflection and sharing during Think Tank Two sessions such as:

- What was it like to reflect on your life as it relates to equity?
- What are some of the moments that struck you as important?
- What are you learning about yourself and your response to difference?

- How might this learning influence your future interactions around inclusion and equity with stakeholders? (p. 117).

Stalking our Stories # 1 and #2

The Stalking our Stories templates were provided in Think Tanks two and three for journal reflection prompts that allowed participants to “unearth, unravel, understand, and unfold” (Ontario Principals’ Council, 2012, p. 139) personal experiences with being marginalized as well as with marginalizing others. The activity focused on the marginalization of students and their families, both on a personal level and from an organizational level in our schools.

Most educators can look back at a time when we were part of oppression in implementing Eurocentric curricula, recommending programs and services based on assumptions about abilities or social class and expecting from students that from different demographic group. It is valuable to examine our experiences so that we become more aware of forms of inadvertent oppression and be more open to seeing things from alternate viewpoints. A sample of Stalking our Stories is presented in Figure 11, adapted from the hand written submission.

Culture Gram

A culture Gram was another self-reflection option used in Think Tank two and is a web type chart on which auto ethnographers provide a visual display of their multi-faceted identity including details about their nationality, ethnicity, race, language, gender, religion, socio-economic class, and other interests (Chang, 2007). It is like the Cultural Profile above, just in a more visual presentation, which is shown in adapted form from the hand-drawn original in Figure 12. Participants were encouraged to complete at least one of these activities after the first Think Tank to share with fellow participants during Think Tank two and to submit their responses as data for the study.

Figure 10.*Sample Cultural Profile*

<i>Component of Cultural Identity</i>	<i>My Location/Experience</i>	<i>Influences on Me</i>
<i>Class</i>	<i>Middle class, upper middle class</i>	<i>I am thinking that education level can fit in this area, and it is important to remember that parents come with different education levels, and I need to keep this in mind when working through issues with them.</i>
<i>Gender/Orientation</i>	<i>straight female</i>	<i>this is not something that is at the forefront of my identity, I am very open and accepting of every gender, preference, orientation, etc.</i>
<i>Race & Ethnicity</i>	<i>Canadian, Polish Heritage</i>	<i>the population at our school is predominantly white Canadians, and I see those students with different backgrounds as an opportunity to learn more about different backgrounds</i>
<i>Age</i>	<i>37</i>	<i>I feel like I am young enough (at heart, ha) to relate to our high school population, and I have young kids which helps me relate to our early years population. I consider myself a combination of “old school” as a teacher, but I also take a more holistic approach when working with kids.</i>
<i>Language</i>	<i>English</i>	<i>from a personal perspective I do wish I had more knowledge of different languages.</i>
<i>Religion</i>	<i>Not religious</i>	<i>I openly invite students to feel their own spirituality or practice their own beliefs as they pertain to their actions, or their self-regulation.</i>
<i>Physical Context</i>		<i>I am able bodied and athletic, and I believe in the power of exercise, sport, and athletics in increasing students’ overall health.</i>

Think Tank Session #2

The second Think Tank session began with a reminder of our norms and expectations and the explanation of the Paraphrase Passport discussion protocol to collect all voices in the data.

The data collection for Think Tank session #2 included the transcript of the conversation connecting their personal reflections to the research question: *How do experiences of race, gender, sexuality, ability, class, education, and/or religion inform approaches to inclusive*

education? Participants were able to participate in any or all aspects of the research as they were able, and the submission of their personal reflections added to the data set from this session.

I also introduced four new reflection activities for participants to use to examine their individual school contexts for Think Tank Session #3. Unlike the activities above, the following resources allowed us to move from exploring ourselves to examining the system we work within. Looking closely at our structures, routines, and physical environments help us to identify barriers to inclusion and areas of improvement to meeting our goals of inclusive educational experiences for all students.

Workplace Cultural Proficiency Scale

This assessment tool provided participants with a way to evaluate the cultural responsiveness of their schools to diverse groups of students in their school communities. The chart provides explanations and examples of cultural responses from destructiveness to proficiency. Ontario Principals' Council, (2012, p. 79) suggested that this is "essential self-reflection in order for individuals to explore their personal beliefs and grow from analyzing their practices" (Ontario Principals' Council, 2012, pp. 137-138). Our school culture deserves serious attention in our efforts towards inclusion and we to examine and monitor barriers to student learning and evidence of an equitable learning environment.

Inclusive Education Checklist Assessments # 1 and #3

These inclusive practice checklists (Villa & Thousand, 2016, pp. 24-38) were another assessment tool for participants to use to assess their personal knowledge of inclusion and their current administrative practices that support inclusion.

Figure 11.*Sample Stalking our Stories Activity*

Stalking Our Stories, Knowing Ourselves #2

In Search of “Self”	Have you or your school marginalized others? <u>Yes I have.</u>
Unearth	Think of a situation when you or you school marginalized others. <u>I asked all the tall men on staff to line up for pictures.</u>
Unravel	On what basis did you intentionally or inadvertently, marginalize someone else? <u>I made an assumption that all male staff were taller than female staff – basis of gender/size/sexual orientation</u>
Understand	Why might you have acted in this way? <u>Unintentionally beliefs about gender</u>
Unfold – reconsidered attitudes, responses, & Behaviors	How have your attitudes & responses changed? <u>I will adapt my language to be gender neutral – tallest staff</u>

Participants used these results to analyze and reflect on ways that we articulate and build “consensus for an inclusive vision of all students being welcomed, valued, empowered, and supported” (p. 33) in our school communities (Figure 12). Participants chose these checklists over the Workplace Proficiency Scale described above.

Think Tank Session #3

The third Think Tank session began with a reminder of our norms and expectations and of the Paraphrase Passport discussion protocol to collect all voices in the data. The data collection for Think Tank session #3 included the transcript of the conversation connecting personal reflections on individual school contexts to the research questions:

- *What skills, knowledge, dispositions, and tools do school leaders need to create inclusive school?*

- *What barriers to inclusive school leadership are experienced by school leaders?*
- *How can working collaboratively positively impact efforts towards inclusion?*

Figure 12

Sample of Culture Gram

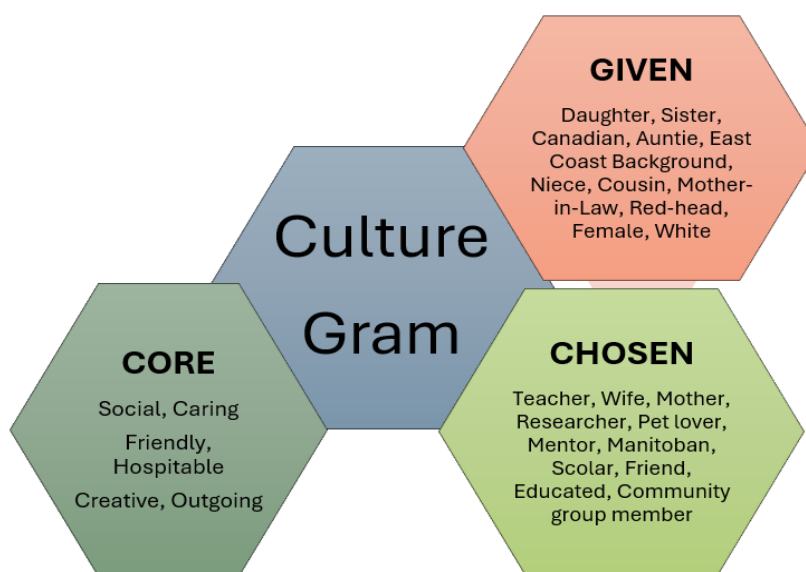


Figure 13

Inclusive Education Checklist Excerpt

Rating (0 – 4)	Indicator of Understanding What Inclusion Is And What It Is Not
	activities as their non-disabled peers. (Note: The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004 defines the general education curriculum as the sum total of all experiences, inclusive of co-curricular activities, made available to non-disabled students.)
2	6. <i>Person-first language</i> is used when describing students. When describing a student, <i>ability</i> is emphasized (e.g., "uses a communication device" rather than "unable to speak"); and the person is put first, before the disability (e.g., "a child with Down syndrome" rather than the "Down's student"). We do not refer to students by categorical labels or program name (e.g., special class students, sped kids, Center kid, ELLs).
2	7. Staff (educators, administrators, paraeducators) <i>presume competence</i> for all students, especially students with difficulties in communicating and those with significant disabilities. (Please see the <i>Inclusive Education Is Presumed Competence</i> section in the preceding narrative for the meaning of presumed competence as used in this indicator.)
2	8. General education teachers are provided with and use specific information regarding each student's <i>strengths</i> (e.g., learning styles, Multiple Intelligences, hobbies, interests) and <i>needs</i> (e.g., academic, social-emotional, language) in order to facilitate

depends on the staff member (rating 2-3)

depends on the staff member (rating 2-3)

depends on the staff member (rating 2-3)

Participants were able to participate in any or all aspects of the research as they were able, and the submission of their personal reflections added to the data set from this session. Following the activities above, the following resources allowed us to move from exploring ourselves to examining the system we work within. Looking closely at our structures, routines, and physical environments helped participants to identify barriers to inclusion and areas of improvement to meeting our goals of inclusive educational experiences for all students.

Equity Walk

Like the Workplace Proficiency Scale and the Inclusive Education checklists above, the Equity Walk template gave structure to school leader observations about efforts towards equity and inclusion in their schools. The components for observation include:

- public spaces,
- classrooms,
- resources and curriculum,
- differentiated instruction,
- assessment and evaluation,
- parent and community involvement,
- professional learning teams,
- school improvement plan, and
- co-instructional activities.

Participants completed observations for self-analysis and reflection (Ontario Principals' Council, 2012, p. 124). The matrix provided specific questions to ask ourselves about equity within our schools and gave specific examples of things to look for to show evidence of equity based on the

different components listed above. There was also a section to record comments and questions to use to further learning conversations in the Think Tank sessions (Figure 13).

Figure 14

Equity Walk Excerpt

Equity Component	Question	Evidence to Look For	Comments to promote professional learning & other observations
Public Spaces	What evidence of equity is demonstrated in our school's public spaces? Evidence of inclusive education? Equity in resource rooms? <u>Library?</u> <u>Hallways?</u>	• Key messages • Pictures/posters • Warm/welcoming atmosphere, foyer, other? • Other languages visual?	-welcome signs with languages of <u>all</u> of our students at the front doors -all main signage has been changed to French to support our Immersion philosophy -lobby has a nice couch with table -in the lobby a sign stating French is for all -a tv in lobby showing all the exciting activities that have taken place over the course of the school year
Classroom Learning Environment	How is your classroom (including the gym and music room) inclusive and reflective of individual learning profiles? What evidence is there of culturally relevant & responsive teaching & learning? Is student work visible from ALL students? What evidence do you see of differentiated instruction?	• Cuing systems • Anchor charts • Seating arrangements • Assistive technology? • Supplementary resources for struggling learners • Student creativity in displayed work (Not all the same) • Incentive Programs are accessible for ALL students	-visuals are seen regularly around the school, on lanyards, on classroom walls, lockers, <u>etc.</u> -<u>Seating arrangement</u> are inclusive with diverse groupings -laptops/<u>ipads</u> made available to all students, used as a tool for writing for those diagnosed with dyslexia or other learning disabilities -fidgets made available -flexible seating made available -classroom posters on seven teachings, calls to action, Black History Month -Student work is made visible in most classrooms, older classrooms can improve on this -differentiated instruction takes place in some classrooms-need to improve on this

Action Plan Template

This template was provided to participants to prepare for last Think Tank session so that they could discuss and ask questions of their fellow participants to identify and plan for their next steps in furthering inclusion in their individual contexts. This step in the research study was extremely important to identify next steps on a broader scale for inclusive practices in the province of Manitoba (Jung et al., 2019, pp. 138-141). The focus was on Step 4 of the Action Plan which examines steps for moving from our current reality with inclusion in our schools and identifies the resources needed to further our work towards inclusion and equity. An excerpt from one action plan is shown in Figure 14. Results of the individual Action Plans were consolidated, and themes shared in the results section of the study.

Figure 15*Action Plan Excerpt***Step 1: Identify Data-Based Strengths: Current Level of Inclusive Practices**

System Component	What are our strengths?	What can we build upon?
Curriculum	- IEPs for individual goals - adaptation for access	<i>- more co-teaching key - own steps - continued PD/conversations about inclusive practices (ELL+inclusion)</i>
Instruction	- differentiation - social-emotional	
Professional Development	- modeling PD (ELL+inclusion) - individual practice	
Organizational Design	- PLCs, ELLs, cascading - SSs, 504, 30 minutes	
Collaboration/Communication Between Special Education and General Education	- push-in resources - model - consultation support - observation, follow-up - IES (inclusion, support services) - not yet a team - school leader involvement	

Step 2: Consider Data-Based Implications: Possibilities and Challenges of Inclusion

System Component	What are the possibilities?	What are the challenges?
Curriculum	- diversity in instruction - student voice input - growth mindset	<i>- need to have more student input, interests, voice - outcomes-based instruction + assess most - more PD for ELLs - need for resources + funds - more training for teachers & well - more communication between departments in the division w/ school staff - more inclusive philosophy for students with needs in teach immersion</i>
Instruction	- PD from inclusive ELLs (some already)	
Professional Development	- PD from inclusive ELLs (some already)	
Organizational Design	- division-wide PD - common understanding	
Collaboration/Communication Between Special Education and General Education	- more regular dialogue and brainstorming together	

Difficult Conversations

Difficult but necessary conversations are often necessary for school leaders who wish to advance equity and inclusion in school communities. This activity provided step-by-step instructions to participants about how to engage in such discussions and questions to reflect on after the conversation (Campbell Jones et al., 2020, p. 113). This activity was used by participants as part the Action Plan Template below if necessary or provided as a resource for future application by participants.

The individual data provided by participants in their reflection submissions was combined with “cooperative data collection (Think Tank discussion transcripts) which is a key to CAE” (Ngunjiri et al., 2010, p. 6). It is important in any ethnographic study that data is collected on an ongoing basis and that data collection and analysis happen simultaneously (Bloomberg &

Volpe, 2019). As mentioned, all participants chose at least one of the individual reflection activities to complete before each Think Tank session (see Table 1 above) which was analyzed by the researcher as individual data.

Think Tank #4

The fourth Think Tank session began with a quick reminder of our norms and expectations and of the Paraphrase Passport discussion protocol to collect all voices in the data. The data collection for Think Tank session #4 included the transcript of the conversation connecting participants' reflections on individual school contexts to the research questions:

- *What skills, knowledge, dispositions, and tools do school leaders need to create inclusive school?*
- *What barriers to inclusive school leadership are experienced by school leaders?*
- *How can working collaboratively positively impact efforts towards inclusion?*

Participants also discussed aspects of their school communities that they considered strengths and those that required attention and changes. These conversations led to the discussion of the Action Plan template and the Difficult Conversations template that the participants had considered for their goal setting and next steps planning. These action plans were submitted after the final Think Tank as data sources as well.

It was important that all participants share as part of their agreement to participate in the study however, participants were always given the option of not sharing publicly in the think sessions if they so choose. The combination of individual (participant submissions) and collaborative data (Think Tank transcripts) is characteristic of the concurrent model of CAE, where auto ethnographers “independently collect autobiographic data, and [then] gather to share and review their stories and probe each to extract further data” (Ngunjiri et al., 2010, p. 7). The

sharing with and the probing of others was an essential part of the collaborative process and allowed participants to come to insights beyond their own perspectives. The richness of the conversations increased as the participants' energy and passion about inclusion were revealed and many questions and solutions regarding inclusive practices were raised.

I acted as the facilitator and moderator of the Think Tank sessions, beginning with an introduction in Think Tank #1 to the Think Tank structure and its benefits and by clarifying my role as the facilitator, which included sharing my own personal reflections as a fellow school leader. As part of this general overview and introduction, I reviewed the Oath of Confidentiality and stressed the importance of a culture of "trust, support, sharing, flexibility and tolerance" as recommended for Think Tank success by Caliva and Scheier (1992, para. 52). Other aspects of the Think Tank sessions and my role as the researcher in this CAE study are as follows.

1. I facilitated the participants introducing themselves as resources to for the study and as seekers of knowledge and support in specific areas.
2. I discussed, reiterated, and clarified expectations.
3. I presented and revisited the research questions related to the group discussions to help keep the group focused. This was especially necessary when conversation stalled.
4. I contributed to the conversations and completed the same reflection activities as a participant in the study.
5. Along with all other participants, I shared personal stories of barriers faced and solutions implemented that were responded to and built upon by the group.

As described above, the collaborative element for this study was facilitated using monthly Think Tank sessions (approximately two hours in duration) during the study that provided regular

opportunities for participants to share and question their individual perspectives and experiences with the other participants. All Think Tank sessions were held using a virtual platform (UM Microsoft Teams), recorded, and transcribed. At the beginning of each Think Tank session, I encouraged introductions if there were different group members present, thanked everyone for being present, and reminded everyone of the importance of being supportive, tolerant and confidential participants. I also reviewed the discussion protocol, *Paraphrase Passport*, to be used for keeping the conversation moving. In addition, I reviewed the pertinent research questions relevant to the topic of the reflection for that session to further focus the group discussion. Figure 7 above illustrates the individual and group data collection structure, which involved a reflexive process of individual reflection on inclusive beliefs and practices which was submitted to the researcher as individual data and collaborative sharing and problem solving in Think Tank sessions which were recorded and transcribed as data as well.

All individual participant data was stored in numbered individual participant folders on my One Drive that is password protected and cannot be lost or damaged. The Think Tank sessions were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed with the full knowledge of the participants and stored on my One Drive. The recordings and transcripts were accompanied by detailed written notes of the participants' responses taken by the researcher that were collected to analyze themes in their perceptions, self-evaluations, and opinions of the issues discussed. As mentioned above, there were a total of eight transcripts, and 29 documents submitted that made up the data set for the study. Five participants chose to create an action plan to address areas of inclusion in their school contexts. All participants were provided a written summary of the results of the study to give final feedback, as noted on the consent form. All audio recordings and transcripts will be stored for two years electronically on the researcher's password protected laptop on One Drive

Think Tank sessions with all hard copies shared at group sessions shredded in an industrial shredder.

Although participants in this study signed an oath of confidentiality, there is always the slight risk that the identity of a fellow participant may be disclosed. This was a risk for participants. The direct benefits of participation in this study were the opportunity to reflect on individual practices and the possibility that their participation might contribute to a greater understanding of inclusive leadership practices that can be shared with other school leaders, locally, nationally, and internationally. The names of the participants are not used in any documentation of this study and all identifying information regarding their schools and school divisions will be kept out of any documents for distribution.

All information will be kept strictly confidential. All participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time for any reason without any consequences up to the final data collection date, one week following the final Think Tank session.

Data Analysis

Using reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clark, 2006), data analysis for this study began immediately following the first Think Tank session and continued throughout the four phases. The RTA process includes various phases of analysis:

1. familiarize yourself with the data,
2. generating initial codes,
3. searching for themes,
4. reviewing themes,
5. defining and naming themes, and
6. producing the report.

After each Think Tank session, I compiled all the recordings, transcripts and notes from the session and organized individual participant submissions into folders to comprise the data set for the first phase of the study. I used the generated transcripts from Microsoft Teams and then reviewed the audio recordings of the Think Tank sessions and my personal notes taken during the sessions to ensure the accuracy of the printed transcripts. I also removed all identifying information and ensured that only randomly assigned participant numbers were used in the transcripts and in the reflection submission folders. No names were typed into the final transcripts.

To gain a macro view of the data, I familiarized myself with the data more thoroughly by reading and re-reading all the transcribed data to identify key ideas discussed by the group. This process helped me develop a preliminary list of topics from the data to use as initial codes. I then reviewed these initial codes by examining the submitted reflection activities and extending and expanding on the initial list of ideas. This process included Phase 1 and 2 of Braun and Clark's RTA process.

Proceeding to Phase 3 of thematic analysis, I began my micro view examination of the data by segmenting, categorizing, and regrouping the information to identify and code points made by the participants that were relevant to the research questions. Ideas were merged and divided into categories as necessary throughout this process. Using semantic coding, the actual words that participants had said or written (Byrne, 2021), common ideas were coded in the data sources using different coloured highlighters and shorthand notes and were then cut and pasted into separate documents on my computer. All the identified codes were organized into themes and sub-themes from the voices of the study participants using a structured codebook including coding and theme development tables developed for each of the research questions (Appendix

H). Through this process, I identified codes and themes that captured important points related to the research questions.

The thematic analysis process was repeated after each phase of the research study, preparing and examining the transcription data from each Think Tank session and examining all reflections and field notes that were submitted by the participants. Each of the four phases of the study generated its own data set, which were combined to form the data corpus (Braun & Clark, 2006, 78) for the entire study. The coding process and theme identification adjustments and expansion were made along the way after reflecting on the cumulative data sets collected, as required by Phase 4 of RTA. Taking a macro and micro review of the data helped me to familiarize myself with the data from the participants on an ongoing basis and reacquainted me with my own personal data in relation to others to help gain relational perspectives. This part of the process involved latent coding, which required a “more creative and active role” (Byrne, 2021, 1397) from me as a CAE researcher. I purposely chose to examine and analyze the data personally as opposed to using a coding software program so that I would be able to engage more deeply and intimately with the data myself. Initially, I used an inductive analysis approach to identify codes from the data sets from each session, but later deductively analyzed the study data to confirm or refute the theoretical framework research on inclusive school leadership.

Relationships within individual data as well as themes between participants were identified from re-reading the transcripts again and assigning Think Tank group quotations to the themes and sub-themes. I examined each of the supplemental documents completed and submitted by the participants in preparation for the Think Tank sessions using a document summary form (sample in Appendix I) that included identifying key words and concepts and documenting connections to the emergent themes from the transcriptions (Bloomberg & Volpe,

2019, p. 389). The process of memo-ing was important part of this process for me as it allowed me to track ideas that came to me while reading the transcripts, notes, and other data as it helped me separate the data between past and present information from the personal reflections and the Think Tank conversation transcripts. I used memo-ing at all points throughout the analysis process as recommended by Hesse-Biber and Leavy (2011) which helped to incorporate my own experiences with inclusion as part of this CAE study. I also examined how many of the participants made specific reference to each of the themes and used those numbers to generate summative numbers illustrating the prevalence of the themes (Appendix J). I did this purposefully because I thought that it would help to situate the reader by offering a sense of spread or variation in the data. Also, I thought that it would enhance transparency and analytic credibility by making visible links between the data from the transcripts and reflections and the themes that I identified. The numbers used were simple percentages to show the number of references to a particular theme. It is also important to note that some of the important conclusions were identified as significant even though they were voiced by a fewer number of participants.

I identified themes from the participants' voices and themes from the literature review were also reaffirmed by the participants. Original themes were identified from the accumulated data and documented with examples of outlying and unique quotes that did not quite fit with common themes. Finally, I completed a thematic chart for each theme that included key words, an overview, individual participant quotes that supported the theme. Defining and naming themes was Stage 5 in RTA in which Brown and Clark (2006) suggested to organize the themes in coherent by combining them with supporting narrative.

A completed road map of the findings (Figure 17) helped summarize my interpretations, which I used to share the findings with the participants. To further reduce the risk that I based my findings upon my own biases, I conducted a “member check” with participants from the study by sending each participant a summary of the four themes identified from the study. Participants were informed prior to the conclusion of the study that this might be a possibility. Simon (2011) described member checking as “the process of verifying information with the targeted group” (p. 1). This process provided the opportunity for the participants to correct any errors made by me in the interpretation of the data. I also made sure to discuss the effects of the member checking when discussing the validity of the data in the Chapter Five. As previously mentioned, investigator triangulation is an important aspect of qualitative research that uses a collaborative research methodology like CAE (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2019). I achieved investigator triangulation by providing the themes from the data analysis to the participants to examine and asking for their feedback and input before the final report. The information was in a shared link sent to participants who had one week to provide feedback to the researcher. I had a response from one participant only who voiced agreement with the themes I had identified. This participant did ask to prioritize the theme of training and mentorship programs for teachers at all levels including school leaders.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

As explained in Chapter Three, I conducted a qualitative study using a collaborative autoethnography methodology that explored the experiences of Manitoba school leaders interested in inclusive schools through their participation in a series of Think Tank sessions to examine their inclusive practices. The purpose of this study was to capture the voices of school leaders to learn more about the barriers that they may have faced in developing and maintaining inclusive school environments and to explore the successful approaches that have had positive impact on the leaders' efforts towards inclusion. The study was meant to address the challenges faced by school leaders in the province of Manitoba in building and sustaining inclusive schools on a daily basis. The research questions guiding the study were:

- *How can school leaders overcome identified, systemic barriers to develop and sustain truly inclusive schools?*
- *What barriers to inclusion do school leaders face?*
- *How do experiences of race, gender, sexuality, ability, class, education, and/or religion inform school leaders' approaches to inclusive education?*
- *What skills, knowledge, dispositions, resources, and tools do school leaders need to create inclusive schools?*
- *How can working collaboratively positively impact leaders' efforts towards inclusion?*

Ultimately, 14 principals and vice principals agreed to take part in this study along with me, including leader representation from rural and urban divisions, elementary and high schools, as well as male and female school leaders with a wide range of administrative experience (Refer to Figure 5 in Chapter Three). During the initial Think Tank session, all participants verbally

answered the questions from the introductory Censogram because some were unable to access the link. Most of them voiced that they agreed to participate in the study because they wanted to learn more about inclusion and to determine if leaders across the province were dealing with some of the barriers to inclusion that they were encountering in their work.

In this chapter, I consolidate the themes and the related key findings that were the result of data analysis from the four Think Tank sessions and from the various reflection activities that were submitted by some participants, who had the option to engage in any or all parts of the research process as they felt comfortable or able. As aforementioned, an overview of the themes and their connection to the research questions is provided in Appendix J. These themes were chosen because they surfaced repeatedly throughout the study and member checking was completed by providing participants with a summary of the themes and giving them the opportunity to give feedback. The one participant respondent agreed that the identified themes were prominent in the discussions that occurred during the Think Tank sessions. As appropriate in a collaborative autoethnography, I also incorporate my own personal observations and insights on the themes, based on my personal experience and education as a school principal for the last 14 years at three different elementary schools in Manitoba. I elaborate on these observations in Chapter Five when analyzing and discussing the findings and drawing conclusions. The key findings in this chapter are presented around the following four interrelated themes taken from the submitted reflection activities and the Think Tank sessions as they relate to the research questions. The study themes are summarized below (Figure 16).

1. Building Capacity through Professional Learning is Key to Inclusion
2. Communication, Advocacy, & Relationship Building are important skills for inclusive skill leaders to possess and cultivate to further their work in inclusion.

3. Collaboration plays a crucial role in inclusive schooling.
4. There are ongoing barriers to inclusion in Manitoba schools.

Figure 16

Themes from the Research



The themes and the related findings of this qualitative autoethnography study address the research problem of school leaders' concerns around their efforts to create inclusive schools.

Thematic analysis of participant responses revealed several key themes, iterated below, essential to understanding the development and sustainability of inclusive schools.

1. **Building Capacity:** 86% of participants stressed that regular professional development and mentorship programs are crucial for fostering inclusive practices. Collaboration with school and community teams enhances expertise and implementation.
2. **Collaboration as a Necessity:** 93% of participants overwhelmingly stressed that inclusion cannot be achieved in isolation. Empowering and educating stakeholders through collaboration was viewed as one of the most effective strategies.
3. **Communication and Related Skills:** Participants suggested that successful inclusive leadership requires communication skills (100%) which includes a combination of advocacy (64%) and relationship building (86%) to enable leaders to navigate challenges and promote inclusive practices. Modelling and fostering creativity and innovation are also desirable skills (57%). Effective advocacy, open communication, and difficult conversations were seen as vital in articulating and achieving inclusive education goals by 93% of participants.
4. **Overcoming Barriers:** Leaders expressed frustration over barriers to inclusion including a lack of training (86%), unsupported top-down decisions, and outdated infrastructure (71%) which hindered their efforts toward inclusion.

These themes highlight the complexity of inclusive school leadership and emphasize the need for ongoing professional development, systemic support, and collaborative efforts. A detailed overview of the research questions and the frequency of emergent themes references is provided in Appendix J. Phase 6 of the thematic analysis process required taking the themes and using my own perspective and experiences as fellow participant to summarize and present the story told by school leaders about inclusive schools. I made interpretations based on the themes and organized

them into findings and outcomes of the study and provided thoughts about moving from findings to actions (Appendix K).

One key theme that emerged from the study was *Building Capacity* which included the need for professional learning in inclusive practices at all levels. Participants overwhelmingly highlighted the lack of sufficient professional development and mentorship opportunities that could help to equip educators with the skills needed to support diverse learners effectively. Challenges to teacher capacity are listed below.

1. **Inadequate Training for New Teachers:** Many new teachers entering Manitoba schools lack sufficient preparation in inclusive education, with undergraduate programs not providing enough coursework or experience in supporting students with diverse learning needs.
2. **Misunderstanding of Inclusion:** Staff members often have varying interpretations of what inclusion means, leading to inconsistent implementation of inclusive practices.
3. **Lack of Formalized Mentorship:** Participants emphasized the importance of mentorship programs to assist new staff in overcoming challenges and implementing inclusive education effectively.
4. **Lack of Government Support for Training:** Unlike in the past, Manitoba Education no longer provides consistent professional development (PD) to accompany new supporting curricula documents, leading to fragmented implementation across school divisions.
5. **Harnessing Internal Expertise:** Schools need to leverage experienced educators as teacher leaders to mentor colleagues and share best practices in inclusive education.

Participants voiced strong concerns regarding the existing gaps in professional learning and development emphasizing the need for systemic improvements and raised several key questions for all school leaders to address.

1. How can school leaders advocate for consistent training and support from the department of education and school divisions?
2. How can all staff develop a shared understanding of inclusion and work collectively towards inclusive practices?
3. What resources and professional development strategies can best support educators in implementing inclusion?
4. How can school leaders support each other in maintaining and sustaining inclusive practices?

This analysis underscores the critical need for a systemic approach to professional learning and capacity-building in inclusive education, ensuring that all educators are well-equipped to support diverse student needs.

Secondly, *Collaboration* emerged as a critical factor in fostering inclusive schools. Effective inclusion requires strong partnerships among educators, school leaders, families, and community organizations. Participants emphasized that teamwork and shared problem-solving are essential for overcoming challenges and ensuring that all students have equitable access to education. They also identified important, specific aspects of collaboration:

1. Building trust with families through meaningful relationships helps create a more inclusive school culture. Schools that actively involve families in decision-making and classroom activities see stronger support for inclusive education.

2. Collaboration among educators and leaders means working alongside other school leaders, teachers, and support staff to foster innovation, knowledge-sharing, and professional growth, leading to more inclusive school environments.
3. Empowerment through teamwork contributes to inclusion which is most successful when students and staff feel supported and empowered. Collaborative problem-solving strengthens confidence and efficacy in educators.
4. The need for structured collaboration is needed for educators who require dedicated time and space to collaborate, observe best practices, and share strategies for inclusion.

Participants highlighted the importance of collective learning and shared leadership and raised questions to move forward such as:

1. How can school leaders create opportunities for collaboration to support inclusion and what structures need to be in place to allow teachers and staff to work together consistently?
2. How can mentorship programs support staff in developing collaborative inclusive teaching practices?
3. How can school leaders engage colleagues who may be resistant to inclusive education?
4. What strategies can strengthen partnerships with families and community organizations?

This analysis underscores that inclusion cannot be achieved in isolation. A strong culture of collaboration provides the foundation for meaningful and sustainable inclusive education.

The third theme identified through analysis was the importance of *Communication and other related Skills* for inclusive leadership. Inclusive school leaders play a critical role in advocating for social justice and fostering environments where all students feel welcomed, valued, and supported. Effective communication and the ability to navigate difficult

conversations are essential skills for leaders striving to create inclusive schools. Participants emphasized that clear, empathetic, and proactive communication is necessary to challenge exclusive practices, support families, and build a shared vision of inclusion. They also identified potential challenges to overcome in this area.

1. Developing and communicating an inclusive vision may be challenging however, school leaders must clearly articulate their philosophy of inclusion and address exclusive practices to foster a truly inclusive school culture.
2. Leaders must be equipped to engage in and navigate complex discussions with staff, parents, and the broader school community, particularly on issues such as race, gender identity, and special education.
3. School leaders must provide meaningful communication to families because ensuring that all families receive regular, clear, and accessible information is key to fostering trust and collaboration. Schools must consider the diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds of their communities.

Participants highlighted the significance of communication as a tool for advocacy and relationship-building and raised several key questions for school leaders:

1. How can school leaders communicate more effectively about inclusive education to all stakeholders?
2. What training opportunities can help school leaders develop skills in managing difficult conversations?
3. What resources are available for school leaders facing adversarial school communities?

This analysis reinforces that communication is a foundational element of inclusive leadership.

School leaders must be proactive in advocating for inclusion, engaging in courageous

conversations, and ensuring that all members of the school community are informed and supported in creating a truly inclusive environment.

Communication to support relationship building is necessary because sustaining inclusive school environments requires strong relationships based on trust, empathy, and understanding. Participants emphasized that personal experiences, social backgrounds, and systemic factors—such as race, gender, ability, class, and religion—significantly influence how school leaders approach inclusion. Effective leaders prioritize relationship-building with students, staff, families, and the broader community to create a culture of belonging. Participants identified key aspects of relationship building for school leaders to consider:

1. It is important to harness the power of connection with students who are more likely to thrive when educators take the time to know them personally—their interests, strengths, and challenges—ensuring they feel valued and supported.
2. Building trust by engaging families, especially those from marginalized or immigrant backgrounds, requires intentional effort and patience. Trust must be earned over time, and inclusive school leaders must create welcoming spaces for all families.
3. School leaders must address systemic mistrust as many families and communities have historical reasons to distrust educational institutions. School leaders must work to repair relationships, acknowledge past harm, and actively include families in decision-making.
4. Many participants noted that their own backgrounds—including experiences with social justice, equity, and personal challenges—have shaped their inclusive leadership styles. However, leaders who do not share common experiences with their school communities must find ways to develop cultural competence and empathy to build strong relationships.

Participants highlighted the deep impact of relationships in creating inclusive schools and raised several key questions for school leaders:

1. How can school leaders build relationships with families from different cultural and social backgrounds?
2. How can trust be fostered with marginalized communities that have historically been excluded from the education system?
3. What logistical barriers need to be addressed to support relationship-building efforts?
4. How can schools better involve families in decision-making processes and school activities?
5. In what ways can students be given a greater voice in shaping their learning experiences?

This analysis underscores that relationships are at the heart of inclusive education. School leaders must invest in trust-building efforts, foster empathy among staff, and create a school culture where every student and family feels heard, valued, and included.

Overcoming Barriers is another theme that was identified by the participants in this study. While progress has been made in developing inclusive schools, significant barriers remain that hinder the full implementation of inclusive education. School leaders in this study expressed frustration with systemic obstacles, a lack of shared understanding of inclusion, and inadequate support structures. Many felt isolated in decision-making and overwhelmed by the complexities of navigating these challenges without sufficient resources or guidance. They also identified specific barriers that need to be considered for more inclusive schools to be realized.

1. Systemic barriers such as training, lack of communication across the system, outdated infrastructure, and financial constraints are faced by school leaders in Manitoba

2. There is an inconsistent understanding of inclusion and a lack of shared philosophy among educators, staff, and policymakers leads to confusion about what inclusion truly means and how it should be implemented.
3. There are geographical disparities that create barriers to inclusion vary depending on location, with some rural schools struggling with resources and accessibility, while urban schools face high levels of student diversity and complex needs.
4. Inflexible policies, outdated educational models, and systemic inequities—such as funding gaps, transportation issues, and inaccessible buildings—create further obstacles to achieving meaningful inclusion.

Participants expressed deep concerns about the structural and systemic nature of these barriers because government policies often fail to provide adequate support for implementation, resulting in fragmented approaches across schools and divisions. As a result, many schools struggle with increasing numbers of students with complex needs, including EAL learners, students with disabilities, and those requiring behavioral support, without the necessary resources.

They also raised several key questions for school leaders and policymakers:

1. What steps can be taken to establish a shared and practical definition of inclusion across all schools?
2. How can systemic barriers—such as outdated infrastructure, financial constraints, and policy inconsistencies—be addressed to support inclusive education?
3. What strategies can help bridge the gap between government initiatives and on-the-ground implementation in schools?
4. How can school leaders work collaboratively to ensure equitable access to inclusion, regardless of geographical location?

This analysis highlighted the need for systemic change, stronger communication, and greater investment in training and infrastructure to create a truly inclusive education system. Without addressing these barriers, inclusion remains an aspirational goal rather than a fully realized practice.

Study Themes

Theme 1 - Building Capacity through Training is Key

One of the most prevalent themes from the study was the lack of professional learning and experience in inclusion for all levels of staff. In fact, most participants (12 of 14 [86%]) identified a lack of training on inclusion for all staff as the biggest barrier to inclusive classrooms and schools. From their perspective, this lack of training included the development of a common understanding of what inclusion means in practice, especially in different school contexts. Professional learning that helped to establish a common inclusive philosophy was seen as a necessary first step for all staff members, school leaders included, who would then be able to facilitate learning for their staff on this topic. Participant 3, a vice principal in her first administrator role in an urban English elementary school spoke about her experience in struggling with the lack of a shared philosophy. She shared that many “Educators are not understanding what inclusivity mean. And then when you get into like all means all what? Well, what does that really mean? And so everybody has their own ideas and everybody feels like they have their own role within that”. Another veteran principal in an urban French Immersion school, Participant 1, expressed his frustration about the direction from the province and the school division that all students need to be in the classroom for their academic programming. The “all or nothing” idea of inclusion was confusing for him because of his experience, and he shared this with the other participants in one of the Think Tank sessions. He said,

Inclusion doesn't mean that every child in a classroom inclusion is what's best for that particular child, and the whole idea of pushing everybody into a room and fully integrated that doesn't work even in the mainstream. The education system doesn't necessarily address everybody's learning style and everybody's needs. So, we're compounding it even more when we say this is going to be our only model of inclusion. Another experienced principal in a rural French Immersion elementary school, Participant 2, expressed her barriers with an inconsistent definition of inclusion when applied to some individual students and programs.

So it's all French immersion in our school and I have one classroom that's a standalone English classroom, which is a junior Life Skills program, and it's remained at this new school because there was just no space for it anywhere else. Regardless of whether we were single track or dual track or whatever it is, we have some kids that just cannot be in a regular classroom.

In addition to the lack of clarity on what inclusion looks like in practice, the participants also identified insufficient and inconsistent training for all levels of teachers and other school staff as the main barrier to inclusion. Participant 1, who has over twenty years of experience and currently leads a large elementary French Immersion school said,

I find the biggest challenge is training, the lack of training for all staff, so teachers haven't been trained on how to work with children with different needs. There's a lot of training missing. The universities aren't offering these courses necessarily. When you graduate in the current program is a two-year program after degree. So you have two years to try and cover everything and they focus basically on the core subject areas, but you're not getting all the stuff you need. So we're still in the same boat we were when we

graduated, where we didn't really get a lot of these types of courses you learned on the job. And so, it's a system thing.

His opinion was echoed by another urban French Immersion principal with less than five years experience. Participant 5 articulated one of her biggest challenges to be “basically helping and training the staff in dealing with the diversity that we have.” Another experienced female vice-principal in an urban English elementary school agreed with when she said, “My biggest concern is how we train. What can we do for our teachers and staff training them to feel more comfortable and competent?” Another female urban school leader in an urban elementary school, Participant 3, said, “I'm not just talking about tools as far as like hands on like actual product tools. I just don't think that everybody has the capacity of knowledge and training when they're working with some of our higher needs' kids.” The same concern was shared by yet another urban elementary school vice-principal, Participant 4, who noted that “It's not only for like new teachers, sub teachers, it's even some teachers that have been in it for such a long time and it's the shift is happening.”

Two rural female principals expanded on the lack of training to school leaders in several areas. Participant 2 said that

We've gotta home in on learning for new leaders in how to converse with parents on inclusive practices like that is huge, how to have difficult conversations. There really needs to be some sort of consistency so that, umm, we have proper training is in place to help leaders develop. Everyone has the same problems, not enough staff, not enough trained staff, not enough training for new leaders. And so there's a real deficit, a real, real fragmented training programs happening in the province.

Participant 7 specified that there is training needed around new support documents developed by the province when she commented “Well, I think you know the government is doing an amazing job at pumping out these fabulous documents. The Mamahtawisiwin document then all these inclusive of Ed document, all these different documents, but we don't have anybody who's training us on these things.”

Other concerns about training were voiced by an experienced male principal in an urban elementary school who questioned the group about the training and education for preservice teachers coming into the system. Participant 10 asked,

How do we speak to the universities and get that across to them because we just have had this same talk as our new graduates are coming out with the you know they're very, very strong teachers, very well versed in the core and what not. But the diversity in the classrooms that we're seeing today is, you know, they're not prepared for a classroom that might have four or five autistic children in there.

This concern about pre-service teacher training was also voiced by a newer vice-principal in an urban elementary school, Participant 12 who said, “When you have pre-service teachers coming in when you have young teachers coming in, they're not getting a whole lot of credit hours within Inclusive Ed.”

Theme 2 – Important Skills for Inclusive School Leaders

Participants in this study discussed many different examples of skills, knowledge, and dispositions necessary that school leaders need to have or to develop to create an inclusive school community. Many participants (12 of 14 [86%]) commented on the connection between their experiences with diversity and their training and experience to their approach to inclusive leadership. All participants (14 of 14 [100%]) expressed the importance of school leaders' ability

to build relationships and to be effective communicators when it comes to maintaining an inclusive school community. It was commonly agreed upon that developing an inclusive philosophy that is communicated clearly, regularly, and consistently to all members of the school community may be foundational to all other inclusive leadership practices. School leaders need to speak up to address exclusive practices is necessary, and most participants (13 of 14 [93%]) identified communication and advocacy skills and relationship building as the two major skills that school leaders need daily to meet this goal. In addition to these two essential skills, over half of the participants (9 of 14 [64%]) maintained that the creativity and innovation of school leaders is key to overcoming barriers to inclusion.

Communication & Advocacy Skills

The broader the experiences, the more empathetic and open leaders were to meet the diverse needs of students and families. One of the participants spoke about the importance of the communication skills that she had developed throughout her career and how that had helped her as a school leader. Participant 2 referred to the importance of her past experiences in building communication skills when she said

I found I took my background in guidance and counselling and I'm so thankful for those experiences. I was a guidance counselor from K through 12, but certainly my experiences with senior years kids really impact a lot of my work while those like listening skills and just really advocacy skills, I think really helped. Also, conflict mediation resolution right and crucial conversations. I think the listening like listening with empathy, I think that's really from an empathetic point of view. I think that's really been critical for me.

Just remaining neutral and hearing both sides I think has been really important.

The experience with listening to and conversing with others about various aspects of inclusion was also noted as important by another experienced vice principal in an urban elementary school, Participant 4, when she spoke about racial comments made by students to each other. She used conversations with her biracial son as an example and explained how speaking with him about racial issues helped her have similar conversations with students and families.

There have been many conversations with him, you know, other people don't see that as a joke like he he's seeing it as him and his buddy are joking back and forth about and they feel like they can because they're talking about their own races but the conversation looks different with children that are white he would be deeply offended if someone came back at him with umm a joke about him being Asian if they were white, am I making sense? So it it's become difficult. I feel like it's been difficult conversations because there is, there are some, umm, kids who almost feel like it's acceptable, you know, to make jokes about each other's race as long as they are another race, if that makes sense.

Other participants spoke about the same need regarding communication and advocacy sexuality and gender identity. Two male school leaders stressed the need to effectively communicate and to advocate for student and staff rights in this area in addition to the rights of students. One experienced rural high school principal, Participant 8, spoke about the importance of consistent communication due to community concerns around a transgender substitute teacher. He said, "It's made us feel collectively as administrators and the Division office feel a bit gross because you know these outdated and ignorant perspectives, but like we are not going to let these people make our employees even our casual employees, feel uncomfortable." Another experienced urban principal in an elementary school, Participant 10, described similar experiences with a staff member's change in gender identity and the importance of

communication in this situation. He said, “We had those parents that were questioning and now they wanted, you know, their children out of that class based on the, you know, the teachers’ coming out and those were difficult conversation to have with those parents, but we worked through it and for the most part it went well”. A female leader of an urban French Immersion elementary school spoke also spoke about communicating with parental concerns around Pride Week and the importance of being able to have empathetic conversations.

Some of the conversations I had with parents was because it was pride week and there were more conversations around people's gender identity or and there were some parents that called said, OK, you know, we're not anti anything, but we're just not prepared to have these conversations with our kids yet. So you know, they're asking for, you know, where they're admitting, I guess that they don't feel comfortable having those conversations or maybe don't know where to start.

This same school leader also expanded this need to communicate further to include our staff as well as parents and families. She said,

So it was just again also not just working with how you communicate with the parents, but communicating with the teachers to know that, you know, if there are any conversations that they feel uncomfortable with or any parents have an approach him to tone that they you know, are hesitant, to deal with then, you know, I've got their back and they can contact me and let me take on those conversations.

Other aspects of communication were also talked about by the participants such as a female elementary school vice principal, Participant 3, who stressed speaking up as an advocate because she is “in a position of, you know, leadership and always wanting to make sure that I'm supporting the students and the people that didn't have a voice”. Another rural vice principal,

Participant 6, also stressed another important aspect of communicating which includes talking with others about student progress with her comment “Communication is key! Following plans, checking in with everyone that works with the students’ needs to be a priority for school leaders” and still another urban vice principal, Participant 4, pointed out the need for ongoing communication with new families, especially those newcomer families. She said,

I thought about this a little bit with like, especially our EAL families that come midway or the start of a year, and I think like if I was to walk into a school where I didn't speak the language, what would I need to feel good on that first day? It is something that I thought I think that comes to from like meeting with kids even like in the counsellor role, when they're feeling lonely for their home country and just thinking about what we could do the minute they walk in.

All these aspects of effective communication are the basis to the skill of positive relationship building that was also highlighted by the study participants. Clearly articulating an inclusive philosophy that aligns with our daily practices, conversations, and interactions can slowly build trust, understanding, and positive relationships across the school community. Participant 8 noted the importance of divisional support for this work.

Relationship Building

Ongoing communication about a shared inclusive philosophy is the basis for developing strong relationships with all members of a school community, and although this is important for all schools, 4 participants maintained that it is even more important for more specific contexts. Participant 7, a rural K-12 school principal stressed the importance of this skill with her comment

Being inclusive and having an inclusive school community is really hard work, and you know it comes down to community and it comes down to relationships. It comes down to you know for me it's been building relationships with community and with groups of people that have really been hurt.

Another urban female high school principal, Participant 9, noted that “True inclusion includes the families and that is hard in this system that has caused high levels of mistrust for so many of our families. Leaders need to work hard on culture and make sure everyone is rowing in the same direction”, and another urban elementary principal, Participant 13, cautioned school leaders to “To step back and give them that opportunity to build the trust and see where you know what information will eventually help”.

Participant 2, a rural elementary principal specified another contextual consideration for relationship building with her call to school leaders to

Build trust in our immigrant population and just show interest. Like I show an interest in their food, have them come in to present to your class. And I think that has helped us in just bridging that and that takes a lot of work and it's not easy and I know that in different contexts and different schools its' different scenarios. I recognize that too, but I think investing hard with families will allow the school to be much more inclusive. I really believe that.

There were also specific references by several participants to building relationships with students themselves. One urban vice principal of an elementary school, Participant 4, described the importance of making those connections when she said

So I just wanted to add that little bit about the relationship and the trust. it's about the student themselves and what they need at that time as opposed to making them fit into

something that they're not able to. What does this student need right now? Like what do they need? No matter what area it is, you make that connection with them, they will eventually regulate quicker. Not saying that it'll be perfect, but umm that connection matters. So if they know that they've connected with one person, that really gets to know them, you know what their middle name is, what their interests are, how they learn, what are their strengths and challenges. Kids can tell if they really care.

Another urban vice-principal, Participant 3, echoed this statement when she noted that “It's about the student themselves and what they need at that time as opposed to making them fit into something that they're not able to. I always go back to, you know what, what does this student need right now”? The importance of relationship building applies to all members of the school community as noted by an urban high school principal, Participant 9, who advised school leaders to “Make emotional deposits with all you interact with and be committed to relationship building”. These strong relationships were discussed by the participants as being the basis to many of the strategies that have been helpful in overcoming the barriers to inclusion. These strong relationships are the foundation for safe places for creativity and innovation that are needed to develop engaging educational programs and experiences for all students.

Innovation & Creativity

The idea of innovation and creativity in programs and approaches for inclusive education were the focus of discussion by several participants in this study (8 of 14 [57%]) as part of a broader discussion of collaboration. These participants stressed the idea that educators need to prioritize a focus on using internal resources by learning and teaching along side of their colleagues and sharing new ideas and strategies so that everyone feels supported in included in the learning community, both students and staff alike. By maximizing our effective use of

expertise and school-based resources, we can perhaps reduce our need to rely on external resources that may not be always readily available. One female school leader in a rural K-12 school, Participant 7, spoke about the importance of innovation when she said'

Yeah, but for me, it's creativity and innovation. I'm always looking like I always have the policy. Here's the policy. And then I'm always looking at what I have. Who do I have? What special skills do I have? You know in my building and how do I take all of those things and use them to work within that policy, to skew it and change it and be innovative to meet the needs of the kids in the building, right. And so sometimes I do the ask for forgiveness later, but yeah, but I think thinking I think as leaders we need to be empowered to take risks.

Another female high school principal in a rural division, Participant 12, built on this comment by advocating for leaders to encourage their staff to take risks to be more creative and innovative as well. She discussed the importance of "Giving people tasks and letting them run with it is important for developing teacher efficacy and autonomy". She also included students in this call for support because it is "important to involve students in planning as much as they are able". Another male principal in an urban elementary school, Participant 1, also advocated for tapping into the creative problem-solving abilities of those around him with his comment

More brains are better than one, and I've, you know, ever since I opened this school up four years ago, I just take the problems to the to the staff and I say here's our problem. And you give me some ideas what we and I find that we brainstorm when we come up with better solutions, when more people are tackling it.

Throughout the Think Tank sessions, participants spoke in generalities that all members of the school community need to be supported to explore new ways of learning together, which included looking outside of the school walls themselves.

Seeking out innovative and creative ideas outside of the school was suggested by a female vice-principal in an urban elementary school when she described her school's efforts around "engaging the community and so we're engaging different organizations, you know like Huddle and Friendship Centre and all the different community pieces that maybe we can somehow bring so that we can support this kid". The ability to look outside the box was very important to these school leaders.

Theme 3 - Collaboration is Key to an Inclusive School

Most participants in this study (13 of 14 [93%]) identified collaboration as key to maintaining an inclusive school environment. The collaboration discussed included strengthening partnerships between teachers and school teams, with families, and with community partners to educate and empower each other in meeting the challenges in inclusive education as noted by most participants (11 of 14 [79 %]). The importance of collaboration was stressed by Participant 7, a rural K-12 principal, who said "I don't know how you create an inclusive space without collaboration. That's just, that's just how I operate". The collaboration discussed was between many different groups of education partners and stakeholders including school leaders, teachers and school teams, other educational colleagues, students and their families, and community partners. This study itself was identified as a collaborative opportunity for the participants as articulated in the first Think Tank session.

Collaboration Between School Leaders. Participant 2, a female principal of a rural elementary school, said that she wanted to participate in the study because “I always like hearing from leaders on their strategies, so I think I think probably to be able to take away in an innovative way of being more inclusive and then bringing it back home”, while Participant 3, a female vice-principal in an urban elementary school echoed

I'm really just looking forward to networking and hearing other people and talk and discuss inclusivity. So I think it's an important an important step in education and I think just having those discussions and knowing what people are doing to include children and what programming looks like across the province is important.

The importance of school leader collaboration was stressed by Participant 2 with her comment “I think collaboration and hearing from others and sharing with other school leaders certainly help, school tours like you know how you do that through CAP (Canadian Association of Principals) or you know you visit schools that can help us with school leadership”. Participant 3, a female vice-principal in an urban elementary school, commented on the Think Tank conversations by saying

I think these conversations are just amazing, but that would be great to bring to like our principal group meeting, so that everybody kind of has the same framework of understanding of not just inclusion for one or for one group, but inclusion for all.

And what does that mean?

The importance of working with other school leaders was articulated by Participant 9, an urban high school female principal, who said “Working with other school leaders can help surface our gifts and if we share our stories and put our heads together, that creates power that strengthens our efforts. We can stand with greater confidence when confronting situations we encounter”.

Although working with other leaders towards inclusion was seen as important, the participants also discussed the value of collaborating with other school staff.

Collaboration with Teachers and School Teams. Participant 1, a male principal in an urban French Immersion elementary school described his approach to collaborating with teachers in his context as follows.

When more people are tackling it than when I try to solve it by myself or with the vice principal or something like that. So the more of these kinds of situations come up, the more we can have conversations with more people that are involved, the better. I think our solutions are going to be. So to me it's collaboration that is the key to solving a lot of this because one person, that's hard to sit there when they come to you as the principal and they're here's the situation. I need help. I need this and I need that and sometimes yeah, you might have experience with that that you can give to, but sometimes you don't. And so you need to get more input and more people on having involved in the conversation to problem solve.

Participant 4, a female vice-principal at an urban elementary school also talked about the importance of collaborating with teachers on decisions involving inclusive practice.

When I think about when we look at, say, inclusion of students, maybe in our buildings with our most difficult needs, it's really hard work and for them (the teachers). And sometimes when they're coming to us for an answer like we have the same education experience with students say, with those diverse needs, and so putting it back on them and saying OK, let's talk about it. I don't know what we're gonna do, but we've gotta do it to kind of together.

And I think that this is really important when it comes to supporting some of that

inclusive work in our classrooms. And maybe then we see a shift in the way it looks or someone coming to you the next time for more help or more if you've kind of involved them in that process of, I don't know what are we gonna do, as opposed to telling them this is what you're going to do it? I think that we see a bigger shift in in problem solving around inclusion by involving them.

In addition to involving staff in decision making, there were also several participants who voiced the value in having all staff engage in collaborative learning opportunities. Participant 1, a male principal in an urban elementary school, described his efforts to build capacity of the staff.

We talk a lot in in education about building capacity, right. And we have so many people spread out who have these great skills. Those people, how do we have them help us with all of our learners, and I'm talking adults with all of our adult learners in our buildings and providing those opportunities for them to become leaders for them to share, for us, to observe them and send other staff members to observe. We organized small groups and eventually got into larger groups, sharing and hearing each other speak, providing ideas to that person as to how they might deal with that scenario and strategies they might use to address the needs of those particular children. And we found it quite powerful and the Staff really found powerful. What was great about it was that your role disappeared in that didn't matter if you were an EA or teacher, everybody was in the same boat. So it was all about sharing. So it didn't matter what your experience level was, you had something to contribute and now we're trying to harvest all of this information. We collected all of their ideas, and now we're trying to put it, put it into a package of strategies that might be more successful for this type of learner or for this type of behavior so that we can have something within the school to help.

He also spoke about the importance of involving school team staff in supporting others in more formal settings.

It's a system thing. The whole system has to come together and prepare us better for all.

It's just a matter of identifying them and how do we make them leaders in this area and share their knowledge with others through observation, through leading conversations, PD, whatever it is, we have the human resources, they're out there.

Another female principal in a rural K-12 school echoed this sentiment about the importance of building capacity when she said, “So I'm always looking for ways to create opportunities for mentorship and sustainability. You've empowered somebody you know because you see something in them, and you know they can. And that comes from working collaboratively, because that gives them that confidence, right?” Participants also discussed another part of building capacity in the form of school visits to observe and learn about different contexts and strategies. Participant 10, a male principal of an urban elementary school said,

So I guess what I feel in this perspective what I need or what I think our staff needs is maybe just even an opportunity to go and experience different buildings. I often say you know the staff that are struggling after I've been in four or five different buildings. I guess now and if you change your window, you're looking out of it. It makes a big difference because you know what we're seeing is problems. We need to do a better job or I need to do a better job of having our teachers be able to go and observe in other classrooms and maybe in other buildings.

In addition to school staff collaborating on their efforts towards an inclusive school community, the participants also discussed ways of working with others outside of the school building, first with families and then with broader community.

Collaborating with Families. The participants in this study discussed the work of collaborating with families about student programming and also around the development of an inclusive school community as being essential for inclusive school leaders. Participant 1, a male principal in an urban elementary school, spoke about his efforts to involve the parents of his elementary French Immersion students when he said

We have to look at what's best for the child and work together with the family, and it's all about that communication with the family and where you know what is best for that particular situation for that particular child. So it's a lot of the working together working collaboratively to really meet what are the needs of this child and how do we address it. Participant 2, a female principal in an urban elementary school, built on these comments when she stressed the importance of partnerships with families.

One thing that's I think helped me with inclusion is like a really work hard on partnerships with families, especially now more than ever is building that trust in our immigrant population. And I think that is really helped us is just bridging that and that takes a lot of work and it's not easy and I know there are different contexts in schools, it's different scenarios. I recognize that too, but I think investing hard with families will allow the school to be much more inclusive. I really believe that.

In addition to consulting with and involving parents in their child's programming and in the life of the school, Participant 4, a female vice-principal in an urban elementary school, suggested that collaborating with parents should include the sharing of information around different topics surrounding an inclusive school community. She said,

I do think there is work to be done and I'm not even sure how that looks in terms of educating our parents about various topics and it is something is as simple as, you know,

like a pamphlet or an information night or something just highlighting some key topics that we're seeing in our schools and inviting them in to learn about it with us. I mean, unfortunately, probably what we'll find is a lot of the people that come and show up are the ones with an open mind and value inclusive environments and so on. Perhaps the ones that we wish would come won't, but I guess it could be a step in, you know, an idea.

This idea was applauded by Participant 5, a female principal participant in an urban French Immersion elementary school who said, "I think that you're right, we do have to reach out to those who are more reluctant to come in or might not have an open mind yet. Might be the missing link in our whole inclusivity piece." There were also several participants who suggested different community partnerships that would be helpful in the suggestions for educational opportunities for the parent community as well as other collaborative suggestions that have assisted them in their inclusive efforts.

Collaborating with Community Partners. Participants in this study described many positive examples of community partners that have assisted them in developing an inclusive school community. Participant 3, a female vice-principal in an urban elementary school, spoke about her school's efforts when she said, "We are engaging the community and so we're engaging different youth centred organizations and all the different community pieces so that maybe we can somehow bring so that we can support this kid". Participant 12, a female principal of a rural high school, added that "Collaboration that has worked for us includes partnering with community organizations – SWIS workers, Literacy Centre, Manitoba First Nations Police Cadets helped out with Walking School Bus, and PATH/MAP programming". Inclusive school leaders need to seek out all resources to support inclusion whenever possible. These collaborative efforts towards inclusion were a large part of the strategies proposed by the

participants to overcome the barriers discussed earlier and included partnering with the universities to provide more learning about inclusive practices for undergraduate students, utilizing additional human resources to support the work, seeking out additional learning experiences for themselves and others in inclusion, and building capacity and sustainability through mentorship opportunities. Collaboration in different forms was part of the inclusion action plans developed by some of the participants.

Theme 4 - Existing Barriers to Inclusion in Manitoba Schools

Despite ongoing progress made towards developing inclusive schools and the observed pockets of successful and innovative programs supporting students, school leaders in this study voiced concerns about the number of barriers that prevent them from exploring and developing more inclusive programs and supports for students with diverse needs. Many of the participants (12 of 14 [86%]) voiced frustration about the lack of communication and support between different levels of the educational system and described how they feel isolated and alone in making decisions about how to address the barriers and how to advocate for students and families. This lack of communication included the lack of training and guidance from the province for school leaders in developing an inclusive philosophy and the consistent implementation of inclusive education documents. More specific system barriers related to communication between levels of the system that were identified by many participants (10 of 14 [71%]). Conversation centred around the lack of guidance at the provincial and even the divisional level regarding the operationalization of inclusion and seen by participants as a system issue. Participant 1, an experienced principal in an urban French Immersion elementary school spoke of his frustration with the new support documents created by the province when he said

But anyway, just because you create a document doesn't mean the government trains in it and this is what I would say to them. They become very popular at creating documents by providing absolutely no training or PD of any consequence to support these documents like they used to do once upon a time.

Another rural French Immersion principal, Participant 2, echoed this sentiment when speaking about her work on a provincial committee related to the new Standards for Appropriate Education document. She said,

So here we're meeting trying to tell leaders across the province of what are the standards, but yet the people guiding these groups that were department of people didn't actually know how to answer their questions. So it's really unreal and I think my biggest takeaway from that group was, uh, that the province doesn't really know what they want to say about inclusion.

All leaders in this study identified several barriers to their daily work in inclusion which included this inconsistent training and experience for themselves and other members of their staff and systemic barriers that included outdated infrastructure, a lack of resources, and policies that are inequitable or unsupported.

Systemic Barriers

In addition to the identified barriers in training for school staff on inclusion and inclusive practices, participants (8 of 14 [57%]) in this study also identified systemic barriers to inclusion.

Participant 9, a female principal in an urban high school setting, noted

I think we have made progress with inclusion as a system and there are pockets of inclusive teachers and practice, but school is still a traditional system that serves a certain kind of learner – those who are easy to teach, easy to connect to based on personal

experiences. There is also a high level of mistrust for many of our families of multiple systems in society. True inclusion includes the families and that is hard in this system. Participant 7, an experienced female principal in a rural K-12 school, agreed with this systemic barrier when she described “trying to fit a new way of doing things, you know, post COVID new generations of kids, new social media issues, all those things. But we're trying to fit it into an old way of old system. Our system has not moved or changed or adjusted to anything we need and that's a big barrier for sure”. She also echoed the frustration with communication with her statement that “Top-down type of decisions are being made without consulting with individual schools to say, how would this impact you?” and gave a specific example of this type of decision when she spoke about inequitable policies as a barrier, specifically her division’s new policy for electronic student fee payments. She said, “They have now put a colonial system in because many of our families do not have credit cards, they'll never own a credit card, and some of that comes down from the Indian Act. They can't get a credit card. Some of them can't pay like it's just economically, it's not feasible for them.”

Participant 7 was also one of the participants who specifically mentioned barriers that were related to infrastructure when she said

Our building is not even accessible. You know I have a an elder who would come into the school and do work in a wheelchair, but she cannot fit through the doors because our school has been built in 1966 and nothing's been changed since. And you know, it's an infrastructure issue. I've got stairs coming one way, stairs coming the other way, and the one ramp we have is not in good shape. So just really simple things that we don't think about on a day-to-day basis become barriers for us to have an inclusive space.

Participant 3, a female vice-principal in a rural elementary school prioritized infrastructure barriers as well when speaking about a recent student services program provincial review done at her school. The reviewers commented on changes that needed to be made for inclusion that were related to infrastructure and out of the school's immediate control which was frustrating for the school team. She said,

So like one of the things that they were most concerned about was that the portable. So we have two portables and they were concerned that they didn't have bathrooms inside the portable. So we have a grooming room, but within that grooming room we also have like a sensory space. So they didn't appreciate that either. We have, like we have curtains in the grooming room because it's the only space we have. It's a combined space, but for sensory programming, that was something that they were not impressed with. And it's not something like not all of our students have sensory programming in that space, but it's the only space we do have designated for, for sensory diet and programming. And so for the most part, we have as many students participating in sensory programming or body breaks in the classroom, but they were not happy that it was within the same vicinity as a toilet.

This inadequate infrastructure system, inequitable policies, and other necessary systemic supports such as transportation, were identified as barriers by two urban school leaders in the same division. Participant 3, a female vice-principal in an urban elementary school, noted that

For us a bit of a barrier is transportation because our parents are... we have a large catchment, and our parents have issues with transportation access. Yeah, other ways of transportation to, to and from school and to other community events. So all of our events are free. So what we can put on is never a fundraising event.

Participant 11, a female principal in an urban elementary school, described her frustration in her statement

A barrier is transportation like I have one student who gets his sister to another school, takes her to kindergarten and then he comes to our school. But he's away a lot, so I'm like, and I think he's school of choice, but I think I'm gonna try to advocate for him to get bussing because he does have some unique needs and has some adaptive programming right now. But they are very strict about who gets bussed.

The lack of equity in these areas are perhaps embedded in another barrier of inadequate resources.

Inadequate Resources

Finally, there was a great deal of discussion between the participants in the Think Tank sessions about systemic policies and expectations and how they are outdated inflexible and not resourced appropriately to be inclusive of all students and staff. Some participants (10 of 14 {71%}) of participants referenced a lack of resources when speaking about unsupported decisions and directives and identified a lack of support for their inclusive efforts when discussing systemic barriers. Participant 10, a principal in an urban elementary school commented on the problems with fundraising for “extras” in his school when he said

I definitely noticed in the last four years even the change in in the demographics but and the amount of money that people have, right, like the people in our first year even I know when we were raising money for our playground, I mean all that money, yeah, we were trying to generate you know funds for that. But even within four years, like people are still coming out for things like family movie night, or they've done a couple of family dances and stuff, but they just don't seem to have the money. So that that's where I

propose. Well, let's make it free so everyone can come. But then where does the money for the playground come from.

Participant 2, a female principal in a rural elementary school, talked about financial barriers related to supports for inclusion and financial barriers in her statement about fragmented policy implementation.

The other standards or the other standardization that needs to happen is that whole Jordan's Principle stuff. So the equity and the confusion across the province from division to division is insanity. And so there's inequity and it's a tool that could help with inclusive practice, but there's so many barriers to accessing the funding.

Participant 9, a female principal in an urban high school, described inadequate resources to support the crucial work needed in her urban high school in creating a sense of belonging and inclusion. She called for adequate funding for “Low stakes events like bannock and chili, board game events organized to avoid negative first interactions – positive open house events and other experiences. These activities often do not qualify for reimbursement through existing school budget lines. Systemic barriers to organizing these activities can be detrimental to culture and we need to be supported divisionally.

While discussing the existing barriers to inclusion, the participants in this study also identified several skills, types of knowledge, and dispositions that inclusive school leaders need to help make their school more inclusive spaces and other strategies to support inclusion.

Strategies to Overcome Barriers to Inclusion

In answering the research question, “*How can school leaders overcome identified, systemic barriers to develop and sustain truly inclusive schools?*” the participants in this study focused on collaboration as mentioned above. They described the most effective strategies as

being those that involved collaborating with other institutions such as the universities, Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, and mentors within schools and school divisions, to continuously expand learning for all staff through building their capacity and focusing on the sustainability of the system.

Improved Communication with Universities about Pre-Service Teacher Training

Many school leaders in this study were adamant that new teachers coming into the schools need to have more undergraduate work on inclusive philosophy and practices to be prepared for the wide variety of student needs in today's classrooms. Participant 1, a male principal of an urban French Immersion school noted that, "it's a system thing. The whole system has to come together and prepare us better for all". Part of the system that he was referring to is the post-secondary institutions training our teachers of tomorrow.

Participant 2, a female principal of a rural French Immersion elementary school, stressed the need for communication between the faculties of education in the province communicating with school divisions more effectively, especially with school leaders.

Deans need to get together and really, truly listen to school leaders. That's really what needs to happen. But we know universities are businesses. They wanna make money, right? And so and they have to find the right profs to teach the courses too, right. Which is very difficult. But unfortunately, I think not everyone's getting together and working together to really talk about what really needs to happen.

A rural school principal at an elementary school, Participant 12, also advocated for more inclusive education training for undergraduates and said that "There should be a minor in Inclusive Education at the EY/MY level. The amount of training that preservice teachers get in inclusive education needs to be increased. Focus on that instead of curriculum". In addition to

improving the communication between the education faculties in universities and the school divisions, the participants in this study also saw value in more consistent training on new documents produced by Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning for school leaders and currently practicing teachers.

Provincial Training in Inclusion

The important inclusive philosophy and strategies that are included in the new provincial documents need to be effectively communicated to all educators in a timely and systemic way. Participant 1, a male principal in an urban French Immersion elementary school noted that “there's no consistency across Manitoba because how your division might decide to interpret is different from mine, which is different from this one over here”. Inequity in divisional resources to provide training on new initiatives was pointed out by Participant 7, a female principal in a K-12 school who said that although she was appreciative of the new documents being developed, she felt as though school leaders were “Doing the job of the government (document training), we're doing the job like, and I sound like I'm whiny and that's not who I am. But we're not appropriately trained to deal with that”. Many participants thought consistent training for all staff about the philosophy and practices in these documents would alleviate a lot of the misunderstanding about the definition of inclusion and how it looks on a daily basis. Participant 3, a female vice-principal in an urban elementary school said noted “There's so much disjunct between like, support staff and not understanding what the terminology (about inclusion) means”. Learning opportunities that clarified philosophy and understanding for all staff, potentially through mentorship programs was another solution proposed by the participants. Training for school leaders in this area was seen by participants to be the basis for ongoing school-based training and support for teachers and support staff in their schools.

Improved Teacher Training

The importance of regular, recurrent professional development and training in inclusion for all staff was identified by most participants (12 of 14 {86%}) as being necessary for successful inclusion. One example of such a program discussed by the participants as being beneficial to provide “on the job” training and support for new staff, particularly in inclusion, to help overcome challenges as they arise was mentorship programs. Participant 2, a female principal in a rural elementary school, stated that “We (school divisions) have to do a lot of work with our rookie admin to help them, you know, like what are the things they are lacking and have supports for them”. She also noted that she feels that “Probably one of the best things that I've been doing as a school leader is mentorship because I feel like so many rookie teachers are coming in ill equipped.” Participant 7, a female principal in a rural K-12 school, agreed with a process that supports learning on inclusion through mentoring with her suggestion that “Veteran teachers and new staff plus EAs – all need appropriate and ongoing training in inclusive practices. Regular onboarding of new staff will help provide ongoing learning for all levels of staff”. Participant 6, a female principal in a rural high school, described mentorship as a way of “Empowering and encouraging other people to know they can do it, right? So I'm always looking for ways to create opportunities for mentorship and sustainability”. Discussion around these types of programs led to participants also suggesting that all strategies need to be a collaborative effort on the part of all school staff if a school is to be truly inclusive.

Participants were asked at the last Think Tank session to think about their reflections and discussions throughout the study and draft a plan to incorporate into their own inclusive practice moving forward.

Take Action

The final individual reflection activity for the participants in this study was to develop a personal action plan to enable them to act on the new knowledge and ideas that resulted from their participation in this collaborative auto ethnography study. These were not considered as data per se for the study, but more of interest in the next steps being taken by the participants based on their involvement in the study. Over half of the participants (8 of 14 [57%]) shared their personal action plan for improving the level of inclusion in their contexts, most of which focused on strengthening teacher and staff capacity through the facilitation of focused and ongoing professional learning.

There were six participants who specifically noted that prioritizing professional learning on inclusive philosophy (presuming competence and accepting personal responsibility for student programming) was important and foundational to other inclusive efforts. School leaders in French Immersion contexts and high school settings noted these topics specifically. Seven participants identified other specific areas for professional development in inclusive practices in their reflections on inclusive administrative practice checklists and the school equity walk. They reported professional development in inclusive practices such as Universal Design for Learning (UDL), differentiated instruction (DI), co-teaching, and assistive technology (AT) as being priority areas for PD so that staff have common skill sets and a common language to use for planning. They also used these individual reflections to note that there are still teachers in some contexts who will use a lack of resources or personnel to argue against student inclusion in classrooms and school activities, which cycles back to needed training in a shared inclusive school philosophy as well. Three participants made detailed plans to access additional resources from their divisions to support their plan for increased professional learning and more consistent

collaboration with each other and with other school and divisional specialists, consistent with the findings on prioritizing internal resources and building capacity. Another component of the action plans for three participants was consulting with school and divisional staff to find ways to remove financial and transportation barriers that keep all students from participating in co-curricular and extra-curricular activities.

Two other key actions of note that are outside of these categories were establishing a formalized mentorship program proposed by Participant 2, a female principal in a rural elementary school, who has many new staff members (connected to the need for training support), and the prioritization of an enhanced accessible nutrition program for all students in an urban elementary school proposed by Participant 11, a female principal in an urban elementary school, as a way to provide equity in resources. (Note: this plan was suggested prior to the announcement of the provincial school nutrition program in Manitoba schools.)

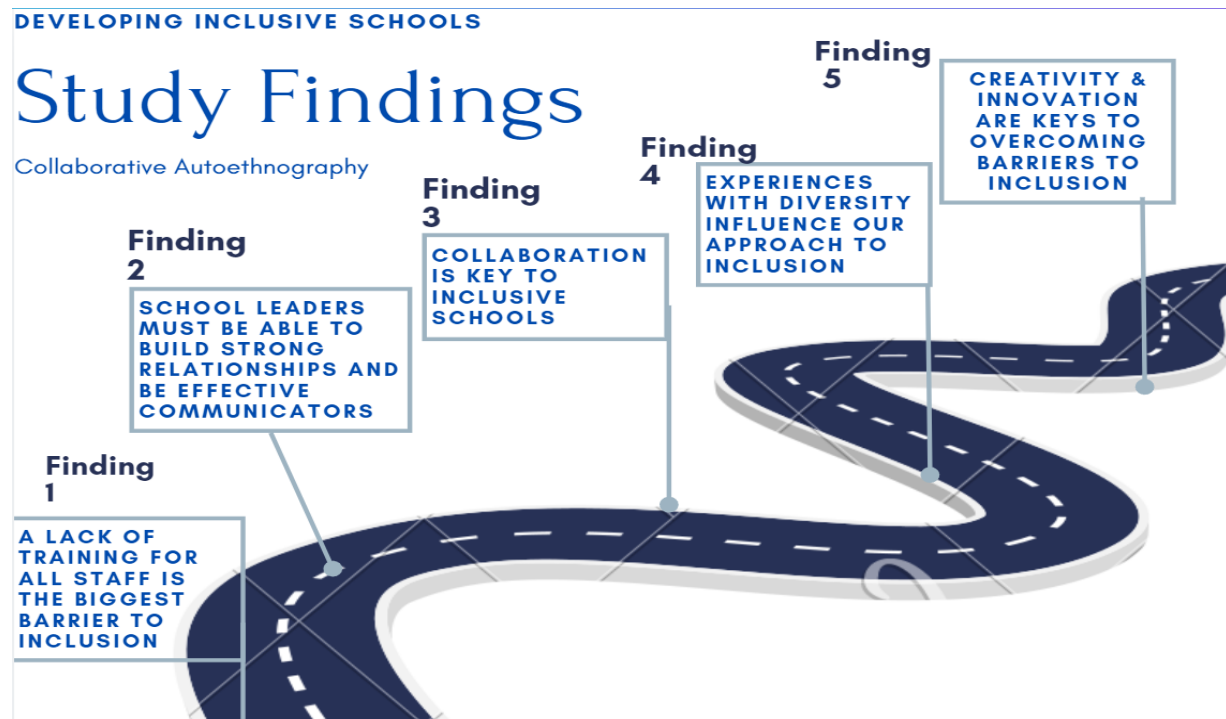
Summary of Findings

The above discussion of the themes and the relevant participant responses supporting each one resulted in key findings for this study. These findings were developed in relation to the research questions, listed in Appendix K, and are summarized below in Figure 9. Finding #1 addressed the second research question that asked what barriers to inclusion do school leaders face. Secondly, Finding #2 is relevant to the fourth research question that asked what skills, knowledge, dispositions, resources, and tools are needed for inclusive school leaders, while Finding #3 answered the fifth research question about the benefits of working collaboratively to further progress towards inclusive school environments. Of equal importance, Finding #4 addressed the second research question regarding the relevance of school leaders' personal experiences of race, gender, sexuality, ability, class, education, and/or religion to their work in

inclusion. Finally, Finding #5 summarized answers to the question of ways that school leaders can overcome barriers to inclusion and create more inclusive school communities.

Figure 17

Roadmap of Findings



In conclusion, participants in this study were able to contribute data to answer the research questions regarding the development of inclusive schools in a Manitoba context. Many of them also made individual action plans based on our work together in this study to move inclusive practices forward in their individual contexts.

Chapter Five

Analysis, Interpretation, and Discussion of Findings

The purpose of this collaborative autoethnography study was to explore the experiences of school leaders in Manitoba in developing an inclusive school community. It was hoped that hearing about the barriers to inclusion that were faced by school leaders and also about the successful implementation of inclusive policies and practices would provide valuable feedback and guidance to other school leaders, school divisions, and other stakeholders about the reality of inclusive practice in schools across the province.

This research study used qualitative inquiry to collect data from four Think Tank sessions and supporting data from individual reflection activities completed by the participants, who included fourteen principals and vice principals from five different school divisions across Manitoba. The data were coded, analyzed, and organized, first by identifying themes and sub themes, then by research question, and finally connected to the conceptual and theoretical framework described in Chapter Two.

This chapter will present an integrated picture of the lessons learned from this research project, both from the review of the literature and from the Think Tank sessions and participant reflections and from the literature review. As noted by Bloomberg and Volpe (2019), the findings of any study “should not be taken at face value” (p. 281), and so I will initially present my process for interpreting the findings from this study through the development of analytical categories. These categories are directly related to my research questions and the findings presented in Chapter Four. After discussing the resulting analytical categories, I make connections between my personal experience as a school leader, the literature presented in Chapter Two, and the study findings using narrative description and visual representation.

Finally, I discuss the value and limitations of the findings and the research methodology in furthering an understanding of inclusive school leadership and describe the contributions of this study to the knowledge in the field of inclusive education.

Analytical Category Development

It is important to not take findings from any qualitative study at face value, especially a study that is conducted with only one specific group of people. Considering this however, the findings of this study support the opinion of Hutchinson and Specht (2020) that educators (in this case, school leaders) continue to experience ethical dilemmas and barriers to their work in inclusion; now four years later, specifically in the Manitoba context. The participants also identified that there is a cloudy, unclear understanding of what inclusion looks like in practice in Manitoba, which was discussed by Loreman, et. al (2015) and noted in Chapter Two. Almost a decade later, school leaders in Manitoba are still uncertain about what inclusion looks like in practice considering the barriers and are seeking help and supports for their work. Much of the research discussed in Chapter Two is reflected in the more recent results of this study, including the fact that educational practices remain rooted in traditional models for including students with diverse needs (Slee, 2011), the “difficulties operationalizing inclusion” discussed by Bartlett and Freeze (2019), and the varying interpretations and priority actions of inclusion presented by Ekins (2017). Given the consistent findings from this study, the analysis of the results is an important aspect to continuing to make progress in our inclusive efforts.

Taking the time to analyze results can help to think about the findings in different ways and look for other explanations of the data. For me to develop analytical categories, I returned to the road map of findings presented in Chapter Four. I examined the data again, re-reading the words of the participants, and attempting to identify reasons to explain their observations and

determine possible explanations and solutions as needed. By reorganizing the thoughts portrayed in the findings, I developed three analytical categories to use for my analysis and discussion of the results:

- recognition of the lack of training and experience in inclusion,
- closing the gap between knowledge and practice, and
- leveraging supports to overcome barriers.

The Analytical Category Development Process outline for all categories is provided in Appendix K. As noted in Chapter Four, one of the most prominent findings from this study was that school leaders identified an inconsistent understanding of the definition and philosophy of inclusion, and a lack of training in practices of inclusion for all staff as perhaps the biggest barrier to inclusive classrooms and schools. They included themselves in this observation as well, noting that this lack of consistent understanding and training has led to confusing and inconsistent definitions of inclusion and caused gaps in the implementation of inclusive policies and practices across Manitoba. They identified the need for professional learning opportunities for all staff that incorporated opportunities to examine and reflect on their own biases that affect inclusion, develop a shared inclusive philosophy, and learn about inclusive practices as a priority to move their staff forward.

Analytical Category 1: Recognition of the Lack of Training and Experience in Inclusion

One of the research questions in this study set out to identify and explore ways that school leaders in Manitoba overcome any barriers that they encounter to inclusion. This question assumed that are barriers to inclusion in schools and that principals and vice-principals who are invested in creating more inclusive spaces for their students and families would be interested in participating in this professional learning and research opportunity. This question evolved from

my own 14 years experience as a school leader in elementary schools. Throughout my time in this role, I grappled with ethical decision-making many times because the decisions I wanted to make in support of students and their families often contradicted some school division policies that governed my daily work and decision making. I also often felt that although I was perhaps making a difference for individual students, I was not making much progress in changing the educational experiences of all students in my school, let alone furthering the cause of inclusion divisionally or on a broader scale.

This fact should not have been surprising to me because our schools are a microcosm of society that is full of inequities, and Gorski and Swalwell (2022) suggested that “it’s probably impossible for a school to be fully equitable when it sits in a society brimming over with inequities or when it is full of people socialized in that society” (p. 27). While acknowledging that there are many improvements in inclusion and that there are pockets of successful inclusive practices being implemented across the province, participants in this study also easily identified existing barriers to inclusion. The most prominent of these was an overall understanding of what inclusion means in practice and a lack of training for teachers, support staff, and even themselves in understanding inclusion and in implementing inclusive practices to meet all students’ needs.

It is not unusual for different stakeholder groups in education to blame other groups of individuals for problems within the system. Parents often blame teachers for the lack of their children’s success, teachers blame parents and school administration for a lack of support, principals look up and down as well, blaming both teachers and senior administration for a lack of the supports needed for student learning and successful program implementation. In this study, principals and vice-principals identified a lack of training provided by the faculties of education as the cause of early-career teacher frustration and the lack of consistent programming

for diverse student needs. It does not seem reasonable, however, to say that the universities are solely responsible for the success of all new teachers or new school leaders coming into the system. In fact, some new teacher and school leaders are succeeding in effectively addressing the array of needs in their classrooms and schools at the beginning of their career. It is therefore important to examine some of the other reasons for this observation. The lack of training and professional learning identified was not limited to new teachers but was also seen to be a contributing factor for more experienced, veteran teachers as well.

While analyzing these findings, I asked myself the following questions. Is it the responsibility of school divisions to provide ongoing training for teachers around inclusion, or is the onus on teachers to seek out the professional development that they need to effectively do their jobs? How do principals and vice-principals know that this is the cause of teachers' struggles to meet student needs? Is there proof of this? Are the teachers articulating this concern to their school administration and are principals seeking for supports that they are unable to access? Do school leaders have all the details around the rationale for course choices in post-secondary education programs? Is this just their perception? Some possible answers to these questions are found in the existing literature.

As noted in Chapter Two, McCrimmon (2015) noted a barrier to inclusion is the fact that teachers in Canada do struggle with the implementation of inclusive practices. Regardless, Reimer (2014) found that the successes that have been realized in inclusion in response to provincial and federal legislation and school division policies is mostly due to teachers believing that inclusion is the right thing to do. The teachers in that study indicated a "hope that their school administrations would collaborate with them and help make all school policies transcend into day-to-day practices" (p. 161). This collaborative approach to learning about and improving

inclusive practices was also prioritized as an essential inclusive practice by the school leaders in this study as well. This commonality caused me then to ask myself if there is a lack of communication then, between teachers and school leaders about the need for training in inclusion? As a result of these findings and the subsequent questions that arose for me, I looked for more research on the educational programs for educators on inclusion. There are possibly other explanations and things to consider before making broad statements about the quality and quantity of inclusive training provided to education professionals, including program design for pre-service teachers in faculties of education and the personal experiences and characteristics of individuals within these programs and as well as those educators currently in the field.

Undergraduate Education Program Design.

The primary purpose of higher education is to foster critical thinking and expose students in all faculties to philosophical and theoretical concepts in their fields. Participants in this study discussed the importance of providing students in teacher education programs with opportunities to learn about and critically explore topics that will allow them to develop inclusive practices based on a philosophy of equity and social justice. As noted by Gilham and Tompkins (2016) “there is little in the Canadian educational context that explicitly attempts to interrupt or trouble the ableist assumptions built into discussions about inclusion” (p. 11). Educating new teachers to be critical of the system that they are entering will help to move from the practice of inclusion of others into an existing system to changing the system to function on an understanding that diversity and difference benefits and strengthens society.

Because of all the varied contexts and scenarios that could potentially be part of a unique class of students or a school environment, it is unlikely that course work alone can fully prepare undergraduate students in teacher preparation programs or school leaders in graduate programs

for the experiences of educating all students in all classrooms in all schools. However, Parekh (2022) noted that from an American perspective, “teacher education often omits attention to more justice-centred approaches to education that have the potential to support disabled students throughout their schooling” (p. 114). there may be room then, for changes and improvements in the design of undergraduate education programs. Students also learn by doing, which is provided through experience in their program practicums. Again, it is unlikely all teachers will gain experience during their practicums to fully prepare them for all scenarios. Parekh (2022) advocated for all educators to achieve a broad understanding of disability and other aspects of diversity during their practicums because it is critical to developing and maintaining meaningful relationships with students and their families. This point would suggest that pre-service teachers should experience a wide range of diversity to provide them with as much practical experience as possible. Participants in the study noted this as well when discussing mentor teachers in the system, and the importance of pairing pre-service teachers with good role models who can provide crucial training through role modelling. The importance of proper mentorship and teacher preparation is important for teachers and school leaders alike.

Weaving the philosophy of diversity into all aspects of undergraduate teacher programs is key. The participants in this study viewed the reflection opportunities from the CAE methodology as an example of “a first, necessary step in social justice work” (Gilham & Tompkins, 2016, p. 11). As mentioned above, it is not possible to teach new teachers everything they will need to know to teach, but we can help them develop a philosophy that will help to use good judgement when making instructional decisions for students. This good judgement will then help them from making “hasty generalizations that fuel reductionist decision making in which student challenges are seen exclusively as the work of special education” (Gilham &

Tompkins, 2016, p. 16) and from “othering students as abnormal, or special, or exceptional” (p. 16). This critical theory approach to inclusive education was presented as part of the theoretical framework for this study outlined in Chapter 2. Because inclusion is difficult and ongoing work for all educators, regardless of the stage of their career, the participants in this study stressed the importance for regular professional learning in this area to support teachers in their ability to support students and their families in equitable ways. They referenced teachers’ lack of efficacy in using an inclusive philosophy and practices when dealing with challenges in their classrooms, especially when those challenges involved student behaviour.

In the case of school leaders, most new leaders will have received no practical experience in their new context prior to assuming the role. It is also true that the requirements for school leader appointments vary greatly across the province of Manitoba, and not all divisions require their principals to have a master’s degree or a school leader certificate through the Manitoba Education Certification branch. In fact, “there is no mandatory provincial requirement to complete a Certificate in School Leadership before accepting an administrative leadership position. Any prerequisite for this provincial specialist certificate prior to accepting or holding a leadership position is determined at the discretion of a school division or other employing authority” (MEECL, 2024, p. 4). It is no surprise then, that there is inconsistency across the province in the required experience and training for school leaders, not only in inclusive practice, but in all areas as well.

Lunde (2020) concluded after a review of the literature on inclusive school leadership in Canada that improvements are needed “in the special education components of teacher education programs, just as they are in educational leadership programs” (p. 61). However, in addition to the formal training received by all educators and considering the lack of same in others, some of

the onus must be on the individual to identify areas of their own need and gaps in their knowledge, and then to seek out training and supports in those areas. Personal past experiences and characteristics play a big role in this. The participants in the study frequently commented on their gratitude for their individual backgrounds and career experiences and training in preparing them for their role in administration.

Personal Experiences and Characteristics.

Everyone comes to their professional role with their own individual personal backgrounds and characteristics. Depending on personal experiences with diversity, educators may be more or less comfortable and confident in meeting the diverse needs of students and families. Parekh (2022) noted that all students in education programs arrive “with their own understanding of disability, often formed by their own school, family, and community experiences” (p. 113). There are also personal idiosyncrasies that come into play for teachers such as motivation, personal biases, and other psychological and personal factors and challenges. Some students may not be sufficiently motivated to take more courses that address different areas of diversity and inclusions because they lack understanding of the importance of this foundational learning.

Most participants in this study indicated that their personal experiences with race, gender, sexuality, ability, social class, education, geographical location, and religion directly influenced their approach to inclusive education. They also spoke about the benefit of past formal learning in their careers as being beneficial to them in their efforts towards inclusive leadership, especially those leaders who had graduate work in the areas of guidance counseling and inclusive education. These findings are consistent with the research (Sider et al., 2017) and ring true from my own experience too. My experiences working in Indigenous communities and in five

different provinces combined with my graduate studies provided me with invaluable experiences and insight into working with many diverse groups of students and their families.

All these experiences and learning opportunities help to develop our own definition and understanding of inclusion and could account for the observation of participants in this study that an inconsistent definition is foundational to the inconsistent implementation of inclusive practices across Manitoba. This finding is supported in the literature with Sheehy's (2016) assertion that there is an "ill-defined and contested definition of inclusion" (p. 6) even in certain regions like Manitoba. Ekins (2017) and Jung et. al (2019) echoed the confusion caused by the complexity of a globally understood definition of inclusion, which is why there needs to be structured learning for school leaders in this area.

The research also advocated for support systems for school leaders in the form of effective training and professional learning opportunities so that they can expand their own personal experiences by learning from students, their families, and their colleagues to make their schools more inclusive (Berghofer & Swartz, 2014; Nelson, 2011; Sider et al., 2017). In the Manitoba context, there were specific actions outlined by Manitoba Education (2006) for developing a sense of belonging in schools which included developing a common strategy to increase diversity in teacher education programs and a professional learning series on inclusive schools and teaching for teachers and administrators. If this happened at the time, it has ceased to be of benefit nearly 20 years later, now and the school leaders in this study specifically called for the same type of ongoing supports to help realize inclusive efforts across the province. There is now a newly developed framework for school leaders in Manitoba (MEECL, 2024) that will hopefully guide and support principals and vice-principals in their professional learning growth plans in all areas, but specifically in inclusion. Part of those learning plans could include a self-

reflection component so that teachers and school leader could then seek out other supports and professional learning as needed. There needs to be a systematic plan for the implementation of this document so that there is consistent support for school leaders across the province.

Knowing yourself as a person and identifying your core beliefs and values are an important part of leading others in inclusive school initiatives. If we are lacking understanding of and shared experiences with members of our school communities, then we need to find ways to connect, learn, and listen to their stories so we can empathize and advocate for their needs. The participants recommended a variety of ways to engage with this learning, from actively reaching out to their respective school communities for guidance and information to enrolling in professional learning opportunities provided by different community partners and pursuing graduate work to further their learning as well. The sharing opportunity provided by this study was one such opportunity. One participant even suggested that *this opportunity (the research reflections and discussions) needs to expand to every school and everybody's interpretation of what these words (inclusion, diversity) actually mean, because I think a lot of people when they hear inclusion, they're thinking about a specific group only and not thinking of everybody that's present in front of us (Participant 1).*

School leaders need the support of their colleagues provided through opportunities to discuss important issues and practices, and to learn from each other so that there is a consistent understanding of inclusion and its implementation. We will then be able to model the way for the same practices and learning opportunities for our staff.

In summary, it has been argued in the foregoing that the lack of confidence and ability to engage in inclusive practices effectively to benefit all students in today's classrooms cannot be totally attributed to a lack of support from post-secondary programs in the education faculties.

Because the intent of education programs is to provide a broader theoretical foundation to education and because pre-service teachers, like practicing teachers, all have different backgrounds and experiences, there are several possible reasons that all teachers and school leaders need varying degrees of support to create inclusive classroom spaces. All educators need to take stock of their available personal skills and resources and take steps to augment and improve them to close any gaps between their knowledge and skills and the needs of their current context of practice. Expanding one's understanding and experiences in a variety of areas as new and currently practicing educators is necessary and is also one way to address the gap between knowledge and inclusive practice.

Analytical Category 2: Closing the Gap Between Knowledge and Practice

As noted previously, participants in this study acknowledged the benefits of their personal backgrounds and their training before becoming a school leader as being a key part of their success in fostering inclusive environments. School leaders who had completed graduate work in the areas of inclusion and counseling specifically voiced that learning in these areas had provided them with invaluable skills to use in their roles as school leaders. They also acknowledged that they still need ongoing training and support in new provincial documents along with help with facilitating effective professional learning opportunities for their staff to successfully do their jobs. Principals and vice-principals seemed to feel that they have incomplete and inadequate knowledge of the divisional policies, provincial documents, and legislation that govern their work. These points raised the following questions for me. Why is that? Do graduate course not always provide a foundational knowledge of the government documents school leaders need to make daily decisions effectively? If school leaders are not in the financial position to take graduate courses, how do they acquire the knowledge and supports

that they need? What supports are in place for school leaders who do not have the formal education in a graduate program before assuming an administrative role?

Some of the possible answers to these questions proposed by the participants in this study included ongoing professional learning in areas of need and formalized mentorship programs to support school leaders and other staff groups in their daily work throughout their careers. Sider et al. (2017) discussed informal mentoring “that they had received from peer principals, from consultants, or from school board psychologists in supporting their abilities in special education” (p. 12) as being helpful to their daily work in inclusion. It appears however, that there is a need for a more formalized approach in an accessible mentorship program for aspiring and newly appointed school leaders in Manitoba that provides them with key understandings and strategies to use when assuming the role of school leader. Several participants in this study commented on informal mentorship that they had sought out on an individual basis as being an important part of their support system as a school leader.

It is also important that school leaders establish and maintain a network of colleagues to call upon when needing support with their work and decision making. This network can and should include fellow school leaders through formalized mentorship programs as suggested in the findings in Chapter Four and can also include support from teacher leadership as noted in the literature review in Chapter Two. School leaders can not and should not embark on the inclusion journey alone. It requires a commitment and consistent focus from the entire school community that is based on the goal of more equitable educational systems and communities and overcoming ongoing systemic barriers. Moinina Sengeh (2023) noted that exclusion still occurs and can “emanate from government policies, the infrastructure designs of government, society or religion, or our collective silence in the face of systemic inequities” (p 132). It is up to us as

educational leaders in our schools and communities to do all we can to remove the barriers that we identify so that all children can safely access appropriate educational experiences in school. This demanding work requires the consistent support of school teams and the prioritization of utilizing internal resources to support inclusion.

The research on Multi-tiered Systems of Support and collaborative school communities (Hutchinson & Specht, 2020; Katz, 2012; Villa & Thousand, 2016) supports this goal of relying on expertise within school communities to problem solve and move further along the journey toward truly inclusive school communities. Porter and Towell (2017) also advocated for meaningful partnerships for inclusion and Kinsella and Senior (2008) maintained that scheduled collaboration was necessary because of the positive impact that it can have on inclusion. Participants in this study prioritized collaboration as well with comments such as, “it may be impossible to be inclusive without collaboration” (Participant 7) and “we can not leave collaboration to chance” (Participant 9). We all need to take full advantage of the supports and resources that we have is we are to realize the goal of inclusion.

In summary, it is important for all educators to realize that our learning about diversity and different ways of knowing and doing is ongoing and needs to continue throughout our careers in education. Continuing to seek out opportunities to learn from our students and their families and about ourselves and how we exist in the world and interact with others is crucial if we want to lead the way to a more inclusive society through education. Collaboration with others and an ongoing commitment to professional learning and growth can help to assist us in bridging the gap between our own experience and areas of need in our current practice. These processes can also us to identify our skills and our personal systems of support to help overcome ongoing barriers at all levels to our inclusive efforts.

Analytical Category 3: Leveraging Skills and Supports to Overcome Barriers

Regardless of the reasons or the organizations responsible, principals and vice-principals are feeling unprepared to deal with issues arising from their efforts in inclusion. The perception of participants in this study was that, in the absence of formal help through graduate course work or organized professional development through their school divisions, they had to rely on themselves and their colleagues to understand and implement inclusive education policies and practices in their individual school contexts. Considering this perception, it is not surprising that participants in this study identified their own personal attributes and the support of their colleagues as primary supports for their work in inclusion. As aforementioned, the other supports reported to be beneficial was the ability to communicate effectively, engaging in difficult conversations, using advocacy skills, and building strong relationships building and supportive partnerships across the school community to facilitate productive collaboration towards inclusion.

Personal Attributes and Philosophy.

Personal experiences and backgrounds that are foundational and supportive of an inclusive philosophy of education were seen by the participants to be important supports for school leaders to use to support their own work in inclusion as well as the work of their colleagues. This finding provides a Manitoba context for the work of Jordan et al. (2010) discussed in Chapter Two regarding the importance of the epistemological understandings that educators bring to their work. It also builds on the work of Sider et al. (2017) with principals in Ontario. It is important for school leaders to critically analyze their own experiences, and skill sets to be able to acquire the relevant knowledge and skills they are missing to enable them to be more equitable. However, they also need to acknowledge that their teachers are in the same

position of having their own needs for additional training in teaching, knowledge, and inclusive practices. As discussed in Chapter Two, Liasidou and Antoniou (2015) suggested that using activities based in critical pedagogy in a professional learning context, like those completed by the participants in this study, are beneficial to developing skills that leaders can use to build teacher capacity and leverage internal resources. These activities are supports to help themselves and their staff to develop the critical abilities needed to make changes to further inclusion in their own contexts and in the system as a whole. This includes providing input to their respective school divisions, Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning, and the Education faculties at the universities in Manitoba as well.

Participants in this study greatly wanted to use their positions as school leaders to partner with universities' faculties of education as well as with the department of education to advocate for more training in inclusive education practices and on policy implementation. This desire for inclusive advocacy work was supported by Gorski and Swalwell (2023) who said that "part of our equity responsibility is to be responsive to the bias and inequity that exist outside our spheres of influence" (p. 162). This finding is situated in the Critical Theory element this study highlighted in Chapter Two and connected to the need for improved communication to ensure more widespread inclusive practices.

Duffy and Scott (1998) described the strong emphasis on dialogue and communication proposed by Habermas (1978) which was also seen by the participants in this study as being key to a shared understanding of inclusion and described as the basis for our work as school leaders. The big question raised by the study participants was if all parties involved share a common understanding of what inclusion is in practice in Manitoba schools. They questioned if all institutions (government, universities, school divisions) are rowing in the same direction of

establishing common understanding and providing the necessary supports to the staff who are trying their best to establish inclusive learning communities. They also identified the skills of communicating through critical conversations and advocating for change as a way to leverage their influence and to procure the necessary supports for their work. These skills were seen to be so important because they pave the way to the building and development of stronger relationships across the school community. Two of the main skills to strengthen and use to maximize the implementation of inclusive practices were effective communication skills and building strong relationships.

Effective Communicator.

Participants in this study stressed the skill of effective communication as being a huge benefit for developing and maintaining an inclusive school community. Several participants gave examples of the difficult conversations that they had with students, parents, staff members, colleagues, and community members in which they had to advocate for equity and justify their decisions that they had made through an inclusive school lens. Winters (2020) described the importance of having these inclusive conversations because they reflect and model an inclusive philosophy and help school leaders to articulate their vision and to advocate for support. The first inclusive conversation needs to be with ourselves, and as school leaders we need to “critically self-reflect, to acknowledge what you don’t know, and to embrace a willingness to learn” (p. 5). This study was seen by participants as an opportunity to do this in the company of others for support. Winters (2020) also encouraged school leaders to engage staff in inclusive conversations because they help to “bring employees from all backgrounds together to listen and act with empathy and build trust” (p. 14) and “to create safe and trusting spaces for employees to have complex, and sometimes difficult discussions about diversity and inclusion topics” (p. 14).

Learning to talk about our differences is crucial if we want to achieve inclusion in schools and communities. Talking together also leads to building stronger relationships across the school community as well. Participants in this study identified training in this area as a need because of its importance to their daily work. Several also highlighted these crucial conversations as highlights of their successes in inclusion because they helped to surface inequitable practices in school and educate others about the importance of an inclusive school community.

Building Strong Relationships.

The importance of building strong relationship was discussed frequently by the participants in this study and by Sider et al. (2017) in their study of principals and their experiences with special needs students in an Ontario context. Like the principals in that study, participants in this CAE Think Tank study with Manitoba school leaders also discussed the relational barrier of parental and community perceptions of inclusion. They also noted challenges in establishing beneficial, supportive relationships with different groups of parents who may have had negative experiences with schools and systemic barriers in the past. Although this was clearly identified as a significant challenge, the participants also stressed that inclusion means that not only students feel welcome and visible in our schools but that their families feel that way also. Partnerships with parents were described by the participants as foundational for successful learning experiences for children, as were other key relationships with other members of a collaborative school community.

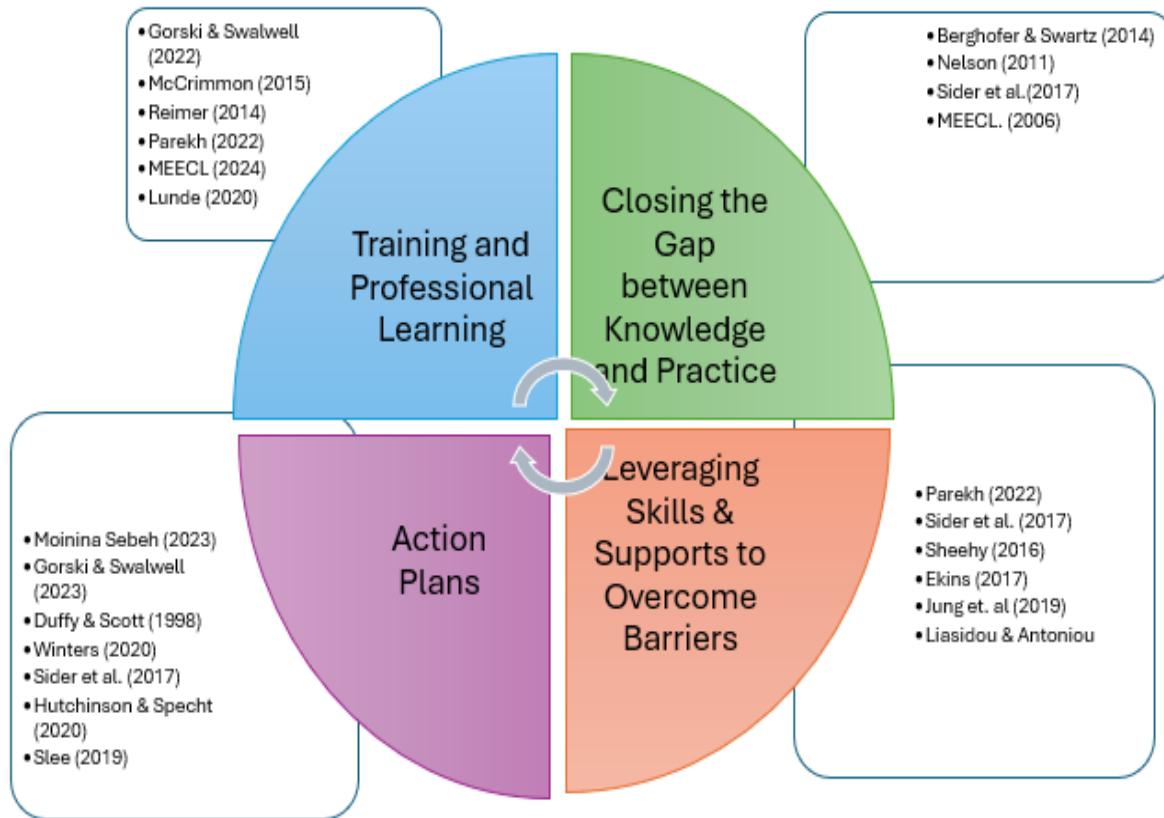
In Chapter Two, Heacox (2002) described the benefits of partnerships between staff members to support student learning and Hutchinson and Specht (2020) saw benefits in the sharing of expertise and resources. Participants in this study acknowledged that their own personal efforts towards inclusion are inadequate to the development of an inclusive school

community and that positive relationships built with many partners are crucial to realize inclusive schools. They also discussed the importance of building strong relationships with the school team because otherwise programs and initiatives that have merit can fizzle out and lose momentum with inevitable staffing changes. Fostering relationships with multiple stakeholders and developing effective communication systems to support inclusion were identified by Sider et. al (2021) in Chapter Two as being basic leadership competencies for inclusive school leaders and certainly singled out by the participants in this study as essential skills and knowledge to do our work. Developing and honing these skills, knowledge, and competencies were part of the action plans developed by many of the participants as the culminating activity for this study.

Most of the participants in this study followed the advice presented by Slee (2019) in Chapter Two by developing action plans that would enable them to move on from this study and continue to work towards the goal of inclusion. A common element in all action plans submitted was a focus on professional learning for staff members on the key elements of inclusion surfaced through the participants' experiences throughout the study. The ultimate goal of this action is an increase in teacher efficacy and to prioritize training for support staff who work closely with our most vulnerable students, because they need to feel "*confident and competent*" (Participant 4) to do their jobs. One of the specific topics for professional learning that was identified by school leaders was first and foremost the development of a common understanding and philosophy inclusion so that their staff are all rowing in the same direction. There was unanimous agreement that all staff do not share a common understanding about what inclusion really means and the philosophy that goes with that definition, or a shared vision for what that looks like in practice. Other topics to focus on for learning included Universal Design for planning for inclusion, the use of assistive technology and augmented communication systems, and difficult conversation

skills. There were other goals within the action plans of some participants outside of professional learning. These included collaborating with staff to identify ways to incorporate more student voice into learning and other school events, advocating for additional financial resources to facilitate collaboration among all staff members, removing other systemic barriers to full participation in school events such as nutritional, financial and transportation barriers for families. My hope is that the participants have put those plans into action and have been able to continue their work and celebrate small successes along the way. The connections drawn from the study including the participant data and the literature reviewed is summarized in Figure 18.

In summary, the literature on inclusive practices and supports for inclusion identified the importance of school leaders developing and using key skills and available supports to keep working towards inclusive schools. Taking the time to personally inventory our personal skills and resources, then seeking out necessary training and potential partnerships to develop and nurture them are necessary steps for inclusive school leaders to take, if they want to make positive changes to the educational experiences for all children. Because we are trying to change these experiences for children within a system that has yet to achieve a truly inclusive “unified system of education” (Loreman, et. al, 2015, p. 11) described in Chapter Two, we must work on our learning and expertise in partnerships with others to realize as much progress as possible while continuing to advocate for systemic change. We cannot rest while groups of students are still marginalized by traditional educational systems and entrenched beliefs about who belongs in schools.

Figure 18*Results Discussion Visual*

As mentioned however, it is important to take a close look at the limitations of this study when interpreting these findings, along with highlighting the value that it contributes to the research in inclusion and inclusive school leadership.

Discussion of Value and Limitations of Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of school leaders in Manitoba in developing inclusive schools. By inviting them to participate in Think Tank sessions, I hoped to capture their voices and collaborate with them to understand how to develop and maintain inclusive school communities more effectively. Now that I have conducted the research,

presented the findings, and analyzed them in juxtaposition with the literature presented in Chapter Two, I will discuss the value of the study in contributing to gaps in the literature and research about inclusion and in addressing the problem of school leaders' addressing the barriers they face in this work. Secondly, I will discuss some of the limitations of the study and then, I will provide recommendations for school leaders, faculties of education, and the different levels of the school system. Ultimately, I want the valuable results of this study to be used by others to improve communication about inclusion to expand practices in inclusion, and to improve the educational experiences of all students. Finally, I recommend several potential areas for future research.

Value and Benefits of the Study

This study makes a unique contribution to the field of inclusive education by demonstrating the effectiveness of a Collaborative Autoethnography (CAE) methodology combined with a Think Tank structure in supporting school leaders' professional learning and reflection on inclusive practices. While previous research on inclusion has primarily relied on questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and literature reviews, this study provides a new, interactive approach that allowed school leaders to engage in peer-supported critical reflection and collaborative problem-solving (Chang et al., 2016).

A key contribution of this study is the development of actionable strategies for overcoming teacher hesitancy toward inclusive education described by Belanger and Gourgéon (2009). Presuming that the possible causes of these reservations could be because of a lack of knowledge and training to facilitate more consistent implementation, school leaders wanted to help their teachers gain a better understanding of inclusion and build their efficacy to expand inclusive practices across grades and departments. Many of the proposed professional learning

sessions in the study followed the advice of Villa and Thousand (2016) described in Chapter Two which suggested beginning with the foundational beliefs and a broader definition of inclusion. The plans discussed and submitted by the participants were based on some of the guiding principles of Stuart et al., (2012) described in Chapter Two such as putting people first, planning for sustainability, building better practices, and thinking big, starting small. The participants outlined their plans to take the strengths of their staff into account and to move everyone collectively onward towards inclusion. Many participants incorporated some of the activities from the study into their plans. By focusing on professional learning plans tailored to school contexts, the study highlights the importance of shared leadership in fostering inclusive practices, and research suggests that collaborative learning among professionals leads to sustained improvements in practice and policy implementation (Hargreaves & O'Connor, 2018). Additionally, this study underscores the emotional and social benefits of collaborative professional learning, as participants reported feeling supported, gaining fresh perspectives, and strengthening their commitment to inclusion, aligning with findings from Brookfield (2017) on the role of critical reflection in professional growth.

As a fellow participant I want to stress the value of the Collaborative Autoethnography methodology of this study to the participants. The study provided school principals and vice-principals the opportunity to explore and understand their own personal experiences with inclusion “as they are embedded within a pedagogical culture” (Dongmei, et. al, 2024, p. 5), or in the company of their school leader colleagues. Not only were the participants in this study supported in developing beneficial critical reflection about their work, but they were also able to maximize the benefits and value of the reflection by being involved with others in their field. The group was able to help each other add clarity to their vision and definition of inclusion, and

they benefitted from the “social-emotional values of CAE” (p. 5) by developing a sense of community with others that they perceived as “a safe and respectful space for participants with similar interests and experiences” (p. 5). One of the participants noted that participating in this study with other principals from across the province was a way for her to “*gain fresh perspectives from others to inspire and motivate me because you need ways to uplift yourself, otherwise the fatigue is too much*” (Participant 2). Another male principal voiced that experiences like those in this study “*should be expanded to every school to help everybody’s interpretation of what these words (inclusion, diversity) actually mean*” (Participant 1). Participant 3 also advocated for expanding the learning when she said, “*I think these conversations are just amazing and would be a great thing to bring to our divisional leadership team meetings so that everybody has the same framework of understanding of not just inclusion for one group but inclusion for all*”. This study methodology was an example of the benefits of collaborative learning identified as an essential component of inclusive practice in this study.

I think that elements of this methodology would be a good starting point for school divisions and other institutions to consider when planning learning opportunities for their staff. I also think that part of the success of this study was that we as participants had “control of our own stories, largely because we had established, as a starting point, how we would communicate” (Hislop et al., 2023, p.87). Although we all had diverse narratives, we found it easy to express vulnerability and ask questions about our own experiences and practices with inclusion. There were many times throughout the Think Tank sessions when the participants questioned each other about comments that they had made or programs that they had tried and interacted spontaneously to collaborate and learn from each other about inclusion.

One such incident occurred when one rural female principal was talking about her efforts to bring parents into the school to help educate others. Another male, urban principal (Participant 10) asked her to elaborate on that and give specific examples because her comments resonated with him. This was her response.

One of the best things that I have done and that's really helped shape me as a leader and helped her staff, is bringing parents in. So, an example I could give you their as last year I had a boy in our school, who's living with Down syndrome. So that family comes in every year and talks about world Down syndrome Day and talks about all the things their child can do. And I loved that that was the way she presented, and he was like, so proud to be sitting beside his mom. And then we always had the mismatch sock day to support that. I'll bring parents in to talk to our new teachers because they're so lacking that so it's quite common. Then opening day, I had brought in two indigenous parents in to talk to are all of our teachers about their families? So just how they grew up, one of the parents had grown up through foster care. So, I thought it was quite a fitting story, and the other parent had adopted a child. And so just that personal connection is what I think helped shift teacher practice the most (Participant 2).

Another example of the genuine, practical interactions between participants occurred between a female principal (Participant 11) and female vice-principal (Participant 3), both from urban school divisions. One participant was sharing the types of professional learning involving different modules that her school had coordinated for their support staff to help them to provide more appropriate supports for students. The other participant replied, “OK, I wanna take you up on this, we tried this at the start of the year but it’s hard to get clinicians to do the presentations because they are so busy. The online modules would definitely help with that, I want it!”

(Participant 11). Although there were different groupings of participants in attendance at each of the Think Tank sessions, the conversations and sharing about personal struggles and successes with inclusion flowed smoothly and participants readily questioned each other and followed the agreed upon conversation protocol to build on what others had said.

This study resulted in the development of actionable strategies for assisting school leaders in helping to increase teacher efficacy in inclusive educational practices. By focusing on professional learning plans tailored to school contexts, the study highlights the importance of shared leadership in fostering inclusive practices. Additionally, it underscores the emotional and social benefits of collaborative professional learning, as participants reported feeling supported, gaining fresh perspectives, and strengthening their commitment to inclusion.

The Think Tank structure incorporated in this CAE study on inclusion is also an innovative addition to the research in this field, especially in examining inclusion from the perspective of school leaders. Most research on inclusion worldwide has relied on traditional methodologies such as surveys and focus groups (Lieberman & Miller, 2016). Additionally, even among studies on inclusion in Canada (Irvine et al., 2010; Lunde, 2020; Lyons et al., 2016; Morvan & Smith, 2020; Nuytten, 2020; Sider et al., 2021; Sider et al., 2017), few have included perspectives from Manitoba, and none have used a CAE methodology or a Think Tank structure to explore the experiences of school leaders. As Ravitch and Riggan (2017) emphasize, research is a collective and cumulative enterprise, and this study contributes to the generativity of scholarly work in inclusive education by building on past research while offering new insights.

CAE as a Means of Promoting and Sustaining Change

CAE serves as a catalyst for cultural and systemic change by promoting a culture of reflective practice among school leaders (Brookfield, 2017). By engaging in structured and

collaborative reflection, school leaders develop a shared vision for inclusion, an approach that research has shown to be critical for sustained educational reform (Fullan, 2006, 2014).

Moreover, CAE moves beyond traditional professional development, which is often one-time and passive, by embedding learning into real-world, school-based experiences (Timperley et al., 2007).

The Think Tank model, as employed in this study, offers a scalable and transferable framework for professional learning. Wenger et al. (2002) describe Communities of Practice (CoP) as essential for knowledge sharing and sustainability, reinforcing the value of Think Tanks in fostering ongoing dialogue and collaborative problem-solving. School leaders, as agents of change, play a crucial role in guiding teachers toward inclusive practices by supporting peer accountability and collective learning, as emphasized by Fullan (2014). For CAE and Think Tanks to have a lasting impact, they must be embedded within institutional policies and professional development structures. Research indicates that job-embedded professional learning leads to more sustainable improvements than standalone training (Timperley et al., 2007). Therefore, educational institutions and policymakers should consider formalizing these collaborative structures to ensure that inclusive education remains a sustained priority.

Significance and Transferability of Findings

This study's findings have broad implications beyond the immediate participant group. The methodology offers a replicable model for professional learning in diverse educational settings. By allowing school leaders to control their narratives and engage in deep, meaningful discussions, the CAE approach can be adapted for various contexts where fostering collaborative, reflective leadership is a priority.

Ultimately, this study not only fills a gap in Canadian research—particularly in Manitoba—but also offers a practical, research-informed model for school divisions seeking to enhance inclusive education. The findings can be applied beyond Manitoba, informing national and international discussions on how school leaders can drive sustainable, equity-focused change in education systems (Sider et al., 2021). As Sider et. al (2021) noted, more attention needs to be paid to the experiences of school leaders with implementing inclusive practices and supporting students with diverse learning needs because they play a critical role in implementing inclusive practices, and structured, ongoing collaboration is key to ensuring that inclusion efforts are effective and enduring. This study pays particular attention to this aspect of school leadership.

Limitations of this Study

There are several limitations to my study that need to be identified. First, I might have chosen to explore within my literature review and with the school leader participants more underlying systemic barriers to inclusion in our schools. Although I provided a general historical overview of inclusion, provided examples of the philosophy and guiding principles for developing an inclusive school, and reviewed some general literature concerning effective inclusive practices, inclusive school leadership, and a broader definition of inclusion, I did not delve more deeply into these important factors within my literature review. Participants in the Think Tank sessions touched upon many barriers to inclusion and provided suggestions for overcoming these barriers, however the conversations could have explored in greater depths about the causes of these struggles. Most of the successful strategies discussed by the participants were more individual in scope, benefitting only individual students or small targeted groups of students, and were not focused on broader, systemic changes that alter and improve society so that all people have the same opportunities for happy and productive lives. Perhaps the

combination of a more substantial review of the literature concerning these topics and a more concerted effort on my part to direct questions on these topics to the Think Tank might have shed more light on these areas.

Another limitation lies in the number of participants and the number of school divisions represented by this study. While I was extremely grateful for the volunteer participants who agreed to be part of this study, I would have found it interesting and informative to have had more representation from a wider range of school leaders, especially in more northerly regions of the province. While I think that the participants in the study were able to provide me with an incredible abundance of data, linking together school leaders from more than five school divisions might have obtained different perspectives.

Due to circumstances beyond my control, all participants were unable to attend the Think Tank sessions together on one scheduled evening per session. As a result, I was unable to gather all of the participants into one large group and develop a larger collective of ideas at once. The combination of participants in each Think Tank session was different each time however, and the smaller group sizes allowed for more intimate conversations. Participants were still often able to gain different perspectives from a variety of different colleagues and were very open to sharing their experiences with inclusion, regardless of the group they joined. I was grateful that the participants worked around their very busy schedules as school leaders to make at least one of the two options for each Think Tank session work so that they could contribute to the conversation and the data for the study. I made sure that I introduced myself and the process to each Think Tank in a similar manner, stating the purpose, process, and guidelines at the commencement of each Think Tank (so all members were certain to receive consistent information), and I provided the guiding questions, and the slides used to guide each Think Tank

discussion to the participants so there was consistency for all, regardless of which session they attended.

Finally, it is possible that it would have been beneficial to have gathered all the participants together, after the Think Tank sessions were finished and the results analyzed, to discuss the themes from the study and to discuss the success of their action plans and get feedback from their colleagues. As I promised the group that their participation was only required for the Think Tank sessions, I did not feel comfortable asking the participants to meet again after the transcripts were completed and the other data compiled. Additionally, most participants expressed to me how especially busy they were at the time of the study. Given the full schedules of the participants, I thought that the most reasonable option was to email everyone separately and ask for their insights and reactions to the themes. Although this process allowed participants to provide feedback, physically meeting as a group one last time might have been beneficial and given the participants time to share their action plans goals and get feedback from their colleagues on next steps. The results of this study provide the foundation for recommendations for additional research in the field of inclusive education which are discussed in Chapter Six along with concluding comments and thoughts.

CHAPTER 6

Recommendations and Conclusions

The purpose of this Collaborative Autoethnography study was to explore the experiences around inclusion with a sample of school leaders in Manitoba schools. The conclusions from this study follow the research questions and the findings and therefore address four main areas.

1. More professional learning and training is needed in inclusion for pre-service teachers and educators in the field.
2. Leveraging the skills, knowledge, and resources necessary to develop and maintain inclusive school communities is a way of overcoming systemic barriers.
3. Establishing collaborative partnerships with other members of the school community to facilitate and support inclusion is another way to strengthen prioritize internal resources to support conclusion.
4. Ongoing professional learning and action planning is necessary to maintain stamina in the work of realizing inclusion in schools.

This study provided a small glimpse into what school leaders across Manitoba do to develop and foster an inclusive school environment in their context. After completing this study, several recommendations emerged for school leader preparation and training, pre-service teacher education, school divisions, the department of education and future research.

Recommendations

This study provided some insight into the barriers faced by school leaders in Manitoba in their efforts to develop and maintain inclusive school communities and the skills, knowledge, and strategies that have helped them to overcome some of these barriers. After completing this study, several recommendations emerged for current and aspiring school leaders, faculties of

education, the school system at all levels (Manitoba Education, school divisions, schools), and for future research.

Recommendations for current and aspiring school leaders

The recommendations for current and aspiring school leaders interested in developing inclusive schools were clearly articulated by the participants of this study. As a result, I recommend that all school leaders personally examine their own backgrounds and experiences, both personal and professional, to help them to identify their biases towards their students, families, and staff. This work will also assist them in adopting a broad view of inclusion that encompasses all learning differences and backgrounds of students which is so important. I would also like to recommend that these leaders seek out mentorship and collaborative relationships with other school leaders and to actively work together towards making positive changes in the area of inclusion. Finally, I would also strongly advocate for ongoing training and professional learning in the various aspects of inclusion and in having difficult conversations and advocating about inclusive topics. Participants in this study stressed that this ongoing learning and professional development is crucial to the work of inclusive school leaders.

Recommendations for Faculties of Education

Based on the findings of this study and some of the literature reviewed in Chapter Two, I recommend that universities take a critical approach to programs and place more time and emphasis on teaching teacher candidates more proactive ways to develop and maintain inclusive classrooms. At each of the Think Tank sessions, participants stressed the importance of teachers being knowledgeable and prepared for the diverse needs of students in classrooms, including those with learning differences, gender differences, and widely different cultural and linguistic backgrounds. It is also recommended that graduate programs in educational administration

include training in inclusive philosophy and practices along with an overview of the legislation and various provincial and divisional documents that direct and support inclusive schools. As this theme repeatedly presented itself in the study, it seems reasonable to offer this recommendation and also to suggest that inclusive philosophy and professional learning is inserted early and often into future teacher and school leader training programs.

Recommendations for School Divisions and Schools

Regarding teacher professional learning and development, I recommend that schools and school divisions place more time and emphasis on training teachers on research-based inclusive practices. I believe that the participants in this study provided many excellent examples of how to support teachers in their efforts in developing inclusive classrooms and provided evidence of their effectiveness in engaging all students in meaningful learning experiences along with their peers. Their colleagues in the schools might benefit greatly from hearing these ideas and collectively learning new ways to achieve successful and meaningful inclusive environments. Some of the specific gaps in inclusive practices are Universal Design for Learning, Differentiated Instruction including the effective use of Assistive Technology, co-teaching, positive, student- centred classroom engagement strategies, and reflective teaching. I would also recommend that school leaders and school divisions offer this training in a series of recursive professional learning sessions so that new staff are consistently provided with the same learning opportunities and supported in their work to include all students. It is also recommended that school divisions develop a consistent training and mentorship program for their new school leaders so that they receive necessary and important training in inclusive philosophy and the implementation of the policies and procedures that govern their work around inclusion.

It is also recommended that school divisions and/or schools develop formalized mentorship programs for all levels of staff. Support staff, teachers, and school leaders can all benefit from a mentor for support, especially at the beginning of their appointment to a new position. Having a critical person to share ideas with and to ask for direction and advice will help foster the crucial element of collaboration within an inclusive school community.

It became apparent in this study that all school divisions in Manitoba do not provide their teachers with scheduled time to regularly collaborate. Therefore, I also recommend that schools and school divisions seek intentional ways to more consistently allow teachers to meet in small and large groups to share information about students, successful teaching strategies, and concerns and ask for help with challenges. These meetings would ideally be facilitated by school team members and be solution focused so that the time is spent exploring actionable steps to support student learning.

Recommendation for Manitoba Education

Now that Manitoba Education and Early Childhood Learning have updated their support documents to broaden their definition of inclusion to encompass students who need support for their learning for many reasons, I recommend that the Province of Manitoba consider reviewing their dissemination of these support documents. The participants in this study indicated that there was a strong need for more training by the province on new documents for them and for staff to ensure a common understanding of what inclusion means in Manitoba. They also asked for clarification on how the department will support the implementation of inclusive practices consistently across the province.

Further to this point, I recommend that the Province of Manitoba investigate the establishment of broader funding criteria for students who are experiencing difficulties in

engaging in classroom environments. As I stated earlier, there have been great strides made in recognizing, promoting, and funding equitable education as an essential human right for those with special, diagnosed needs; but the school leaders in these Think Tank sessions questioned whether similar efforts were being made to assist students who struggle with attendance, suffer from trauma, have behaviour difficulties unrelated to disability, or need extra support because they are newcomers and speak another language.

Recommendations for Further Research

At the conclusion of this study, I identified several areas to focus on in future research. Considering that this study involved school leaders from only five of the 37 school divisions in Manitoba, further research could be done to involve more participants from other school divisions, especially in the north, to get a broader range of perspectives on inclusion and to surface the barriers experienced to its implementation.

Although the virtual platform effectively facilitated participation from several different areas of the province during the winter months, it would be interesting to engage in similar Think Tank sessions in person. It might even be possible to conduct several sessions in a day or during a weekend *retreat* type format of professional learning for school leaders on inclusion to encourage and foster more intimate, honest conversations on inclusive experiences and practices. Additionally, it might be interesting to conduct the sessions with more homogeneous groups of leaders based on school size, student demographics, grade levels, etc.

I would also like to conduct similar research that gathers perspectives and experiences with inclusion with other stakeholder groups such as superintendents, policy makers, classroom teachers, resource teachers, educational assistants, students, and parents. The combination of sessions with mixed groups of participants could be a possibility as well. Gaining information

from all these groups would provide valuable insights into the reality of the implementation of inclusive practices in Manitoba schools.

Thinking about the methodology of the research related to the topic of inclusion has also prompted me to explore other research methods that elevate the experiences and voices of the participants. The power of individual stories can not be underestimated if we want to understand each others' lived experiences and learn from others to move forward in a better way. It is only possible to dismantle exclusionary practices by involving students, educators, and families; gaining their perspectives and hearing their stories through their engagement with similar activities as those used in this study. I would like to explore other methodologies that are based in narrative inquiry to lift up marginalized voices and that will help all groups to adopt a critical vision of inclusion that challenges the systemic barriers in schools and society.

As we come to the close of this study, it is important for me to pause and reflect on the journey that I have taken along with the participants. My hope is that it has been a beneficial support to hard working, diligent school leaders who are champions for inclusion, and advocate daily for their students and families. I hope that you are inspired and renewed in your commitment to inclusion and feel encouraged to continue and to mentor and support others who wish to take up the fight with you. From the inception of this study, I have wanted to learn from and with my school leader colleagues and to improve the educational experiences of the students, not only in my school but across the province and further afield as well. I want to commend all inclusive leaders who Moinina Segeh (2023, p. 145) calls those who “choose to pursue big dreams and suffer the consequences rather than narrow their ambitions in an effort to get along”. This work is not easy but inclusive leaders do it anyway. This project was a collaborative effort among us and was greatly enhanced by the insights and feedback of the principals and vice-

principals who willingly gave their precious time to share their experiences with me and each other. My biggest hope is that inclusion is less elusive than it was before and that although the work is taxing and never-ending, we continue to believe that it is worth it. Our students and their families are worth it. A more just and equitable school community and society is worth it. I am sincerely grateful for all I have learned from all of you as a principal, as a researcher, as a professor, and as a fellow human being.

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Appendix A

Consensogram Questions and Form

1. To what degree do you feel that building a diverse and inclusive school environment is important for student success?
2. How important do you feel it is that school leaders value diversity and inclusion?
3. How competent do you feel that you have the skills to develop an inclusive school environment?
4. What do you think are the 3 most important indicators of an inclusive school environment?
5. What do you think are the top 3 barriers to developing an inclusive school environment?

Consensogram

Read the following, and put your first initial in the column that you most agree with:

To what degree do you feel that building a diverse and inclusive school environment is important for student success?

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Appendix B**Letter to Superintendents and other organizations**

Faculty of Education

Dear Superintendent/COSL Chairperson/MFNERC Executive Director

I am a PhD candidate at University of Manitoba in the Faculty of Education (Inclusive Education), and I am very interested in exploring the experiences and perceptions of school leaders on inclusive education in Manitoba. This letter is to request your permission to contact principals and vice-principals in your organization to obtain a small group of participants for my dissertation study. This study focuses on the successful implementation of inclusive policies and practices through inclusive school leadership and is my dissertation project to complete my doctorate. My supervisor is Dr. Rick Freeze.

As principals, we face the important task of supporting our staff in providing appropriate, meaningful educational experiences for all students. This study will give participants the opportunity to reflect on their own experiences to provide insight to others into the successful implementation of inclusive educational practices. It will also provide support and guidance to inclusive school leaders who want to ensure positive, equitable, effective learning opportunities for all students.

The 4 Think Tank sessions will be approximately 2 hours each in length and occur over a 3-month period in a virtual setting outside of the school day. All responses will remain

confidential. To ensure minimal risk to the participant, names will not appear on the transcript of the sessions, nor will it appear anywhere in the written report. No names of schools or school divisions will be included in the final report or directly disclosed. There is a chance that they may be indirectly disclosed if participants waive their rights to anonymity. Results of the study will be made available upon request. Participation is voluntary and school leaders can withdraw at any time. The success of this study depends a great deal on the participants' input so your approval of this data collection will be greatly appreciated. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me at I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely, Angela Voutier

Appendix C**Recruitment Flyer****University
of Manitoba****Attention Inclusive School leaders**

Join in a Professional Learning Research Opportunity focused on creating inclusive schools.

You will have the opportunity to interact and share with colleagues from across the province during four 2 hour think-tank sessions where we will explore our challenges and successes implementing inclusive practices in our schools.

To indicate interest or for more information, please contact Angela Voutier, PHD candidate at the University of Manitoba

- e-mail: voutiera@myumanitoba.ca
- Phone: 204-724-2929

**University
of Manitoba**

Appendix D

Letter to Participants Outlining Study



Faculty of Education

Dear [Participant]

Recently, you received an email inviting you to participate in a study titled “Developing Inclusive Schools: School Leaders’ Perspectives on Policy to Practice”. I am contacting you to confirm that you are interested in participating in this study, and to give you the opportunity to ask any questions you may have. I thought it may be beneficial to provide you with some more information about the study and what participation will look like.

1. The information you provide will be used to better understand the experiences of school leaders in the province of Manitoba in the implementation of inclusive school practices and will likely be used in published papers and presentations by the researcher. The study will examine experiences with implementing a broader view of inclusion that responds to diversity in relation to race, social class, ethnicity, religion, gender, and attainment as well as in regard to disability.

2. Your confidentiality will be preserved, and information will not be used in a way that could identify you as a participant. Your employer will not be informed about your participation.

All participants will agree to maintain the confidentiality of other participants. You can also withdraw from the study without consequence at any time.

3. Participation in the study will involve sharing personal reflections in 4, 2 hour long Think Tank sessions that will be recorded. The sessions will be held using Teams and facilitated by me as the Primary Investigator.

4. There are minimal risks anticipated from your participation in the study; however, you may experience some discomfort as you recall any of your personal experiences in providing equitable educational experiences for all students. There may also be some risk of an inadvertent breach of confidentiality such as another person witnessing the sessions. I plan to conduct the Think Tank sessions either in the evenings or on the weekends before fall.

If you are willing to participate, please contact me at your earliest convenience to discuss the details further.

Sincerely,

Angela Voutier

Dr. Rick Freeze

Appendix E



Faculty of Education

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMATION AND CONSENT FORM**Think Tank Sessions**

Research Project Title: Developing Inclusive Schools: School Leaders' Perspectives on Policy to Practice

Principal Investigator and contact information: Angela Voutier

Research/Thesis Advisor and contact information: [Dr. Rick Freeze](#)

This consent form, a copy of which will be left with you for your records and reference, is only part of the process for informed consent. It should give you the basic idea of what the research is about and what your participation will involve. If you would like more detail about something mentioned here, or information not included here, you should feel free to ask. Please take the time to read this carefully and to understand any accompanying information.

You are being asked to participate in a research study involving Think Tank sessions. Please take your time to review this consent form and discuss any questions you may have with the investigator, your friends, colleagues, and family before you make your decision. This consent form may contain words that you do not understand. Please ask the investigator to explain any words or information that you do not clearly understand. Before agreeing to participate in this research, I strongly encourage you to read the following explanation of this study. This statement describes the purpose and procedures of the study. Also described is your right to withdraw from this study at any time. This study will be conducted once approval is received from the Research Ethics Board at the University of Manitoba, Fort Garry campus.

Purpose of this Study

This research study is being conducted to study the experiences of school leaders in Manitoba in implementing inclusive policies and practices to provide equitable learning experiences for all students.

Participants

Participants in this study must all be school leaders in Manitoba. As many school leaders as possible will be asked to participate with the hope of having 12-20 participants.

Study Procedures

This Collaborative Autoethnography study is designed to examine the experiences of school leaders in Manitoba in implementing inclusive policies and practices to provide equitable learning experiences for all students in their school community. This study is important because it will provide current and local information that can be used to provide support for school leaders to successfully implement inclusive education in their contexts, resulting in more effective educational programming for a large, growing diverse student population in Manitoba.

Participation in this study involves 3 personal reflections on inclusive practices (maximum of thirty minutes each) and engaging in 4 virtual Think Tank sessions which will be approximately 2 hours in duration. The personal reflections will be verbally shared in the Think Tank sessions and submitted through email to the PI as data for the study. The total time commitment for participation in the study is a maximum of 10 hours.

- The sessions will be facilitated, recorded, and transcribed by the researcher. Although recording will include audio and video on Teams, only the audio recordings will be saved and transcribed by the PI.
- At the start of each session, everyone will be asked to respect the privacy of the other group members. All participants will be asked not to disclose anything said within the context of the discussion, but it is important to understand that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed.

The group will be asked some questions relating to your experience with inclusive policies and practices. These questions will help us to better understand the current level of inclusion in the province of Manitoba.

Risks and Discomforts

There are no anticipated physical risks to participants. Focus group members will be asked to keep the information provided in the groups confidential; however, a potential risk that might exist for some would be that information about you might be discussed outside the group by other participants and be traced back to you.

Another potential risk might include emotions and feelings of sadness when asked reflecting on personal experiences with certain students or feelings of fear of reprisal from senior administration about any negative experiences described.

The principal investigator (PI) will establish and review group norms at the beginning of each of the Think Tank sessions. These will include the necessity for a safe environment to share personal experiences and practices with inclusion. Participants can use pseudonyms in the display names in Teams and can also turn their cameras on and off as necessary during the sessions. The PI will monitor the Think Tank sessions closely to ensure that participants are feeling safe and comfortable during the sharing sessions. She will encourage the use of the private chat feature in ZOOM if participants feel uncomfortable or unsafe at any point. They may use this to communicate their need to leave the session or to notify the PI of what the problem was so that she can provide the necessary supports. If participants were being disrespectful to each other or became confrontational during the Think Tank sessions, the session could be stopped, or the offending person muted or removed from the meeting by the facilitator.

The PI has Mental Health First Aid training and will use the resources at her disposal to provide support to participants who may be experiencing difficulty discussing the topics brought up in the group discussions. The Mental Health support resources through the Manitoba Teachers' Society would be an example of a resource (Humanicare). An Oath of Confidentiality is included on this consent form where participants agree to keep all information shared by their fellow participants confidential. It is important that all participants share as part of their agreement to participate in the study however, participants will always have the option of not sharing publicly at any point or on particular topics if they so choose.

Benefits

The anticipated benefits of participation are the opportunity to discuss feelings, perceptions, and concerns related to inclusive education in a professional learning community with your colleagues. You will also be able to contribute to the understanding and decision making about

your effect on their diverse student populations. Another benefit is the information that will be gained to help students and their families in the future.

Confidentiality

- The information gathered during this study will remain confidential in secure premises during this project.
- Only the researcher and her advisor will have access to the study data and information. There will not be any identifying names on the data transcripts; they will be coded and the key to the code will be kept locked away separate from the information.
- Your names and any other identifying details will never be revealed in any publication of the results of the study. The audio recordings will be electronically stored with password protection and deleted along with the transcriptions destroyed after two years.
- All records will be kept in a locked secure area and only those persons identified will have access to these records. If any of your research records need to be copied to any of the above, your name and all identifying information will be removed. No information revealing any personal information such as your name, address or telephone number will be shared.
- The collection and access to personal information will be in compliance with provincial and federal privacy legislations.
- The results of the research will be published on Mspace, in the form of a research paper and may be published in a professional journal, a resource for school leaders, or presented at professional meetings. It may also be published in book form. The

knowledge obtained from the study will be of great value in guiding educational leaders to be more effective in the provision and development of inclusive educational practices.

Permission to Quote

We may wish to quote your words directly in reports and publications resulting from this. With regards to being quoted, please check yes or no for each of the following statements:

Researchers may publish documents that contain quotations by me under the following conditions:	
☐ Yes ☐ No	I agree to be quoted directly (my name is used). Please indicate if you have a choice on how your name and gender is expressed.
☐ Yes ☐ No	I agree to be quoted directly if my name is not published (I remain anonymous) and general descriptors such as male/female, elementary/high school, or principal/vice principal are used.
☐ Yes ☐ No	I agree to be quoted directly if a self-selected made-up name (pseudonym) is used.

Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal without Prejudice

Participation in this study is voluntary; refusal to participate will involve no penalty. You are free to withdraw consent and discontinue participation at any time without prejudice or penalty. The desire to withdraw can be communicated at any time up to a week following the end of the last Think Tank session (Anticipated date August 2023) to the PI through email. The participant will need to indicate if they wish to withdraw all data from the study, or just from further participation and contributions. All data will be destroyed/deleted as directed by the participant. You are also free to refuse to answer any question that may be asked of you.

Further Questions and Follow up

You are welcome to ask the researcher any questions that occur to you during the sessions and all participants will have the option to receive a written summary of the results of the study to give final feedback. If requested a final copy of the study will be provided.

I will share a limited time link to an electronic file outlining the emergent themes from the data analysis with the participants to examine and ask for feedback and input before the final report. The information will be in a shared link sent to participants who will have 1 week to provide feedback to the researcher. If I have not heard from you within that time, I will assume that you are in agreement with the information outlined in the final report. The approximate date of delivery will be 2 months following the end of the last Think Tank session, approximately 11/23.

If you have further questions once the sessions are completed, you are encouraged to contact the researcher using the contact information given below.

Your signature on this form indicates that you have understood to your satisfaction the information regarding participation in the research project and agree to participate as a subject. In no way does this waive your legal rights nor release the researchers, sponsors, or involved institutions from their legal and professionally responsibilities. You are free to withdraw from the study at any time, and/or refrain from answering any questions you prefer to omit, without prejudice or consequences. Your continued should be as informed as your initial consent, so you should feel free to ask for clarification or new information throughout your participation.

The University of Manitoba may look at your research records to see that the research is being done in a safe and proper way.

This research has been approved by the Research Ethics Board at the University of Manitoba, Fort Garry Campus. If you have concerns or complaints about this project you may contact any of the above-named persons or the Human Ethics Officer at 204-474-7122 or HumanEthics@umanitoba.ca. A copy of this consent form has been given to you to keep for your records and reference.

Consent Signatures:

Participant Signature: _____ Date: _____

Researcher Signature: _____ Date: _____

Appendix F

Think Tank Members Oath of Confidentiality

**Research Project Title: DEVELOPING INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS: SCHOOL LEADERS’
PERSEPCTIVES ON POLICY TO PRACTICE**

I, _____, am a participant involved in the research project entitled
**“DEVELOPING INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS: SCHOOL LEADERS’ PERSEPCTIVES ON
 POLICY TO PRACTICE”** (the “Research Project”). In connect with the Research Project I
 hereby agree as follows:

- I will respect the right to privacy and confidentiality of all participants in this • Research Project.
- I will keep all the research information shared with me, including but not limited to recordings, transcripts, data, research results, data files, inventions, (hereinafter the “Research Information”) secure and confidential and will not disclose or share the Research Information with anyone outside the research team.

_____	_____	_____
Participant (Print Name)	Signature	Date

To receive a completed copy of the research study results, please write your address clearly below, or provide an email address if you would prefer.

Mailing address:

Email address

Researcher Contact Information: Angela Voutier

Appendix G
Field Note Template

Date/Location/ Participants: Activity: Length of Observation:
Description/Interpretive Summary (Write a summary of the event including analytical description, such as this was a good example of an inclusive or exclusive practice....)
Narrative/Reflective Comments (More detailed narrative about your thoughts about what is occurring, how does this connect with thoughts and observations you have had)
Questions/Things to follow up on with the Think Tank team

Appendix H

Coding and Theme Development 1

Research Question #1 How can school leaders overcome systemic barriers to develop and sustain truly inclusive schools?		
Theme 1: Creativity & Innovation	Theme 2: Mentorship & Developing Teacher Efficacy	Theme 3: Collaborating with Other Stakeholders
Codes: 1.TR – Taking Risks 2.INN - Innovations	Codes: 1.MEN - Mentorship 2.EMP - Empower 3.COL – Collaboration 4.PLA - Planning	Codes: 1. PAR - Partnerships 2. COL - Collaboration 3. OR – Outreach 4. LIS – Listening 5. EF – Effective Communication 6. CUL – Cultural Connections

Coding and Theme Development 2

Research Question #2 How do experiences of race, gender, sexuality, ability, class, education, and/or religion inform approaches to inclusive education?		
Theme 1: Background experiences influence inclusive leadership	Theme 2: Develops Empathy and other skills	Theme 3: Connecting With Others
Codes: 1.REF - Reflection is crucial 2.LE – Learning Experiences 3.PE – Personal Experiences 4. E to H – Experience to Help others 5.INF – Influence 6.TR - Training	Codes: 1.EM – Empathy 2.EMP - Empowering 3.ADV – Advocacy 4.TR – Training 5.QU - Qualities	Codes: 1.EC – Effective Communication 2.P to P – Policy to Practice

These experiences lead to more inclusive thinking and practices which then need to be imparted to all school leaders with the mentioned mentorship and/or training for leaders that may not have the same background. All systems need to foster an inclusive philosophy.

Coding and Theme Development 3

Research Question #3 What are the barriers to inclusive school leadership experienced by school leaders?		
Theme: Lack of training and knowledge at all levels	Theme 2: Unsupported top-down decisions	Theme 3: Outdated Systemic Structures
Codes: 1.TR - Training 2.DEF – Def. of Inclusion 3.EXP – Experiences 4.MIN - Mindset	Codes: 1.POL - Policies 2.FIN – Financial Barriers 3.SB – Student Behaviour 4.DIV – Diversity 5.SP – Specialized Programming	Codes: 1.SB – Systemic Barriers 2.CUL – Cultural Barriers 3.IB – Infrastructure Barriers 4. COM – Community

Coding and Theme Development 4

Research Question #4 What skills, knowledge, dispositions, and tools do school leaders need to create inclusive schools?		
Theme: The leader as an advocate	Theme 2: Relationship Builder	Theme 3: Effective Communicator
Codes: 1.TA – Take Action 2.LO – Legal Obligation	Codes: 1.QU - Qualities 2.COM - Community 3.REL - Relationships	Codes: 1.EM - Empathy 2.EC – Effective Communication 3.GR – Grounded in Beliefs 4. POL - Policies

Coding and Theme Development 5

Research Question #5 How can working collaboratively positively impact leaders' efforts towards inclusion?		
Theme: Collaboration is Necessary for Inclusion	Theme 2: Encouraging, empowering and educating	Theme 3: Helps to educate & Change Perspectives
Codes: 1.OR – Outreach Community services & partnerships Parental expertise	Codes: 1.EMP – Empower - School team supported learning for other staff 2.TR – Training - Learning from others & hearing innovations is empowering and uplifting	Codes: 1. Change the window you are looking out of 2. Learning about other approaches that are happening elsewhere 3.

Appendix I

Document Review Sample

Appendix Q. Template for Document Summary FormName or Type of Document: Field Note Journal - Part 2/Part 13Document No.: #2Date Received: Nov/23

Date of Document: _____

Event or Contact With Which Document Is Associated: _____

☒ Descriptive☐ Evaluative☐ Other _____

Page #	Keywords/Concepts	Comments: Relationship to Research Questions
	<u>Alternative Planning</u>	<u>Collaboration / Training for staff</u>

Brief Summary of Contents:

Music lesson - Student with Autism -

Significance or Purpose of Document:

Importance of School Team Support
Teachers don't know what to do.

Is There Anything Contradictory About Document?

☐ Yes☒ No

Salient Questions/Issues to Consider:

Teachers are not prepared well enough in some
cases to work with students with complex needs.

Additional Comments/Reflections/Issues:

Student engagement needs to be acknowledged
and built upon. Strength based reporting

Appendix J

Overview of Research Questions and Emergent Themes

Research Question	Theme	Summary Description	Research Participants
RQ 1 - How can school leaders overcome systemic barriers to develop and sustain truly inclusive schools?	1.Mentorship and Training	The importance of regular, recurrent professional development & training in inclusion for ALL staff was identified by participants as being necessary for successful inclusion. Creative & innovative programs involving many levels of collaboration, specifically mentorship programs were discussed. Collaboration with school and community teams were seen as key to providing expertise.	1, 2,3,4,5,6,7,10,11,12,13,14 12/14 = 86%
	2.Collaboration		1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13 / 13/14 = 93%
	3.Creativity & Innovation		1,2,3,4,6,7,10,11 8/14 = 57%
RQ2 - How do experiences of race, gender, sexuality, ability, class, education, and/or religion inform approaches to inclusive education?	1.Relationship Building – Building Empathy	Our background experiences influence our approach to inclusive leadership and make us more empathetic to students and families.	2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13 12/14 = 86%
	2.Advocacy & Communication		1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13/ 13/14 = 93%
RQ3 - What are the barriers to inclusive school leadership experienced by school leaders?	1.Lack of Training	Participants voiced frustration about the lack of communication between levels of the education system and other systemic barriers to their inclusion efforts.	1, 2,3,4,5,6,7,10,11,12,13,14 12/14 = 86%
	2.Unsupported top-down decisions/directives		1,2,3,4,7,8,9,10,11,13/ 10/14 = 71%
	3.Outdated systems/infrastructure		1,3,7,8,9,10,11,13/ 8/14 = 57%
RQ4 - What skills, knowledge, dispositions, and tools do school leaders need to create inclusive schools?	1.Advocacy	Participants spoke at length of the importance of having difficult conversations and communicating effectively to clearly articulate goals for inclusion and to advocate for students, Empathetic listening and relationship building were stressed.	1,2,3,4,5,8,9,10,11 9/14 = 64%
	2.Relationship Building		1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13,14 14/14 = 100%
	3.Effective Communicator		
RQ5 - How can working collaboratively positively impact leaders' efforts towards inclusion?	1.Necessary for Inclusion	Participants stressed the importance of collaboration, going so far as to say that inclusion is impossible without collaboration. It was identified as one of the most effective strategies to overcome barriers to inclusion.	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13 13/14 = 93%
	2.Empowering & educating		1,2,3,4,5,6,7,9,10,11,14 11/14 = 79%

Appendix K

Thematic Chart #1

Theme 1 – Build Capacity and Provide Training in Inclusive Practices at all Levels Question: How can school leaders overcome systemic barriers to develop and sustain truly inclusive schools? Key Words: Professional Learning, Mentorship, Training
Overview Porter and Towell (2017) developed a pamphlet focused on advancing inclusive education that outlined ten keys to the transformation needed in educational systems based on a shared vision of inclusion. Starting with the premise of educating all members of society for meaningful participation in that society, the keys include promoting the benefits of inclusion for everyone, transformational leadership, meaningful partnerships, strengthening inclusive pedagogy, and prioritising professional development. Kinsella and Senior (2008) also stressed the need for professional development in skills, knowledge and expertise that all teachers need for schools to be inclusive places of learning. The importance of regular, recurrent professional development and training in inclusion for all staff and teachers at all career levels was identified by the participants in this study as an extremely important element of successful inclusion.
Findings/Outcomes 1. New teachers entering schools in Manitoba have not had enough training and experiences in their undergraduate program on teaching students with a wide variety of learning needs. 2. There is a great deal of misunderstanding for all staff about what is meant by inclusion, and who it is for as well as a lack of training on how to work with children with various learning needs. 3. Mentorship programs for all positions are helpful to provide help and support for new staff in inclusion and overcoming challenges as they arise. 4. Manitoba Education needs to provide training and PD to support new documents like they used to do because there is currently no consistency across Manitoba. 5. Building capacity by harnessing the expertise in our schools and divisions is key and empowers those closest to us to work together towards inclusion.
Participant Perspectives <i>I find the biggest challenge is training, lack of training for all staff, so Teachers haven't been trained on how to work with children with different needs. (Participant 1)</i> <i>My biggest concern is how we train.</i> <i>What can we do for our teachers and staff training them to feel more comfortable and competent? (Participant 4)</i>

I think one of our big challenges is basically helping the staff in dealing with the diversity that we have (Participant 5)

We talk a lot in in education about building capacity, right.

And we have so many people spread out who have these great skills. How do we harness that? Those people, how do we have them help us?

With all of our learners, and I'm talking adults with all of our adult learners in our buildings and providing those opportunities for them to become leaders for them to share, for us, to observe them and send other staff members to observe. (Participant 1)

There's so much disjunct between like, support staff and not understanding what the terminology means. Even our EDUCATORS, not understanding what does inclusivity mean?

And then when you get into like all means all what? Well, what does that really mean?

And so everybody has their own ideas and everybody feels like they have their own role within that. (Participant 3)

We have to do a lot of work with our rookie admin to help them, you know like what are the things we've gotta hone in on new for new leaders is how to converse with parents on inclusive practices like that is a huge how to have difficult conversations. There really needs to be some sort of consistency so that, umm, we have proper training is in place to help leaders develop. (Participant 2)

next step should be let's look to lift up those teachers who are teacher leaders, recognize them, maybe pay them some sort of honorarium.

Something, because if we don't have those teacher leaders, we're gonna be in big trouble very soon. (Participant 2)

Everyone has the same problems, not enough staff, not enough trained staff, not enough train, new leaders.

And so there's a real deficit, a real, real fragmented training programs happening in the province. (Participant 2)

I come from a background of working in, you know, variety of schools.

So I feel I have a lot of experience working within that, but I don't know that I'm skilled enough yet at helping pass that knowledge on and supporting the teachers.

Professional learning for our staff over the last few years is has taken a turn.

I felt prior to the last two or three years we had time to bring in more, you know, outside supports on our own, whether it be in the indigenous or EAL or whether it be in students with EXCEPTIONALITIES and bringing in professionals to help with that.

And now with our shift to really focusing on just literacy and numeracy, I haven't found the time to bring in and support those people.

(Participant 10)

There's a lot of training missing. The universities aren't offering these courses necessarily.

When you graduate in the current program is a two year program after degree. So you have two years to try and cover everything and they focus basically on the core subject areas, but

you're not getting all the stuff you need.

So we're still in the same boat we were when we graduated, where we didn't really get a lot of these types of courses you learned on the job.

And so it's a system thing. (Participant 1)

How do we speak to the universities and get that across to them because we just have had this same talk as our new graduates are coming out with the you know they're very, very strong teachers, very well versed in the core and whatnot.

But the diversity in the classrooms that we're seeing today is, you know, they're not prepared for a classroom that might have four or five autistic children in there. (Participant 10)

Probably one of the best things that I've been doing as a school leader is mentorship because I feel like so many rookie teachers are coming in ill equipped (Participant 2)

Assistive tech has come a long way, but as far as all of the tools, I don't think that and it could be tools in terms of teacher knowledge and support staff tools.

I'm not just talking about tools as far as like hands on like actual product tools.

I just don't think that everybody has the capacity of knowledge and training when they're working with some of our higher needs kids (Participant 13)

"What we're working towards is that capacity building within our resource team.

So we're looking at like training teach training.

We're looking at different training for our paraprofessionals."

"But when it comes to disability culture and it comes to people who are self advocating for their own ability, there are two different ways that we can explain that.

So again, we have that framework, we get that we know that but not our teachers do.

And so like we were saying, Angela, like when you have pre service teachers coming in when you have young teachers coming in, they're not getting a whole lot of credit hours within inclusive Ed". (Participant 3)

It's not only for like new teachers, sub teachers, it's for everyone like.

I think that even some teachers that have been in it for such a long time are it's the shift is happening. I'm seeing more of a shift, but it's like resource.

Like more or starting to work with their students like all kids. (Participant 13)

They (the government) have become very popular at creating documents by providing absolutely no training or PD of any consequence to support these documents like they used to do Once Upon a time. And so there's no consistency across Manitoba because how your division might decide to interpret as different from mine, which is different from this one over here.

(Participant 1)

So this opportunity needs to expand to every school and everybody's interpretation of what these words actually mean, because I think your slide you refer to that's coming up a lot of people when they hear inclusion or they they're thinking about a specific group only and not

thinking of everybody that's present in front of us.

And how are we being equitable for every single person? (Participant 1)

There should be a minor in Inclusive Education at the EY/MY level. The amount of training that preservice teachers get in inclusive education needs to be increased. Focus on that instead of curriculum. (Participant 12)

Veteran teachers and new staff plus EAs – all need appropriate and ongoing training in inclusive practices. Regular onboarding of new staff. (Participant 6)

Give people tasks and let them run with it. Developing teacher efficacy and autonomy. (Participant 12)

We're not trained or equipped to deal with the changes we're actually we're trying to fit.

Uh, we're trying to fit a new way of doing things, you know, post COVID new generations of kids, new social media issues, all those things.

But we're trying to fit it into an old way of old system.

Our system has not moved or changed or adjusted to anything we need and that's a big barrier for sure. (Participant 7)

empowering and encouraging other people to know they can do it, right?

So I'm always looking for ways to create opportunities for mentorship and sustainability. (Participant 7)

Moving From Findings to Action

Key questions include:

1. How can principals advocate with the department of education and school divisions for consistent training and support on inclusive education policies and practices?
2. What is meant by the term inclusion and how do we get all of staff moving in the same direction?
3. What resources and processes can we use to provide training and professional development for all of our staff?
4. How can school leaders support each other to implement and maintain inclusive practices in our schools?
5. How can we ensure that our schools are inclusive to our unique, respective school communities?

Thematic Chart #2

Theme 2 – Collaboration is Key for Inclusion Question: How can working collaboratively positively impact leaders' efforts towards inclusion? Key Words: Collaboration, Partnerships, Innovation, Empowerment
Overview Effective inclusive school communities are those that value collaboration and teamwork, not only between students, but also between the staff. Members of the school staff in these communities work with each other, as well as with students and their families, support teachers and clinicians, parents, and community partners (Katz, 2012). Villa and Thousand (2016) stressed that scheduling time for teachers to plan and teach together is “critical to successful inclusion” (p. 48). Hutchinson and Specht (2020) identified the importance of collaboration as being the opportunity for teachers to access the expertise and resources of many other individuals to proactively plan and problem solve. No one person has all the answers to questions about unique student needs and so collaborative teams can assist teachers with support in many ways; be it moral support or with specific information and strategies to try. Taking a team approach to problem solving and working together to use each other's strengths to meet the needs of the student in classrooms is the work of inclusive educators. Kinsella and Senior (2008) also stressed the importance of providing educators with time and opportunities for discussion and consultation on inclusive practices. The participants in this study reaffirmed the importance of collaboration as described in the research and identified it as one of the most effective practices to overcoming barriers to inclusion.
Findings/Outcomes 1. Developing trusting and empathetic relationships with families makes our schools much more inclusive. School leaders who had reached out to involve families as part of the school team reported success in developing a more inclusive school culture. 2. Partnerships and collaboration with other school leaders as well as members of the school teams helps principals and vice-principals to develop and maintain more inclusive schools. Learning from and with other professionals helps school leaders provides necessary training for staff, educational opportunities for our students and their families, and new ideas for successful programs and practices. 3. Collaboration helps to empower students and staff to support inclusive practices. Building efficacy in members of the school community is key for inclusion. 4. Educators need to learn and teach along with others so that they feel supported in their efforts in providing learning opportunities for all students.
Participant Perspectives <i>I always like hearing from leaders on their strategies, so I think I think probably to be able to take away in an innovative way of being more inclusive and then bringing it back home.</i> (Participant 2)

I just would like to hear different ideas and different approaches to meeting (Participant 13)

I'm really just looking forward to networking and hearing other people and talk and discuss inclusivity. So I think it's an important an important step in education and I think just having those discussions and knowing what people are doing to include children and what programming looks like across the province. (Participant 3)

On the other hand, I kind of when I was doing one of the activities, I felt like I wanted to share and I wanted to share because umm, I hope that some of my experiences can help others. (Participant 3)

When I'm talking with families and things, I guess I like to, you know, get to know them a bit in feet, feel out what their what their situation is and how much are they really wanting to share with us. And sometimes it's a slower process than what we want. You know, maybe what we necessarily need off the hop, but sometimes we have to step back and give them that opportunity to build the trust and see where you know what information will eventually help. Getting them in and working with them and finding them resources and help. (Participant 13)

One thing that's I think helped me with inclusion is like a really work hard on partnerships with families, especially now more than ever is building that trust in our immigrant population.

And just showing interest like I show interested in their in their food, have them come and present to your class.

And I think that is really helped us is just bridging that and that takes a lot of work and it's not easy and I and different contexts are different schools, it's different, it's different scenarios.

I recognize that too, but I think investing hard with families will allow the school to be much more inclusive. I really believe that. (Participant 2).

I kind of feel like I need sometimes fresh ideas from different divisions to inspiring me and motivate me.

So that's one outlet for me that I you know because you need you need ways to uplift yourself. Otherwise, the fatigue is just too much. (Participant 2)

What I would like to take away from this opportunity is to just that outside of the box thinking as far as inclusivity of all. And then if there's, they're probably, I don't know. I don't know if there's any other solutions (Participant 11)

it's been a pretty united front and like we had actually, we had our workplace safety and health meeting today and the reason why I was late as we were wrapping that up at Division office in the afternoon was around psychological health and safety, which is a big component of that. And yeah, like this this collective responsibility from our admin team across the

division to protect this person. You know, because it's like we owe a larger duty of care. You know, to make sure this person feels comfortable, is protected at school. (Participant 8)

I do think there is work to be done and I'm not even sure how that looks in terms of educating our parents about various topics and it is something as simple as, you know, like a pamphlet or an information night or something just highlighting some key topics that we're seeing in our schools and inviting them in to learn about it.

I mean, unfortunately, probably what we'll find is a lot of the people that come and show up are the ones with an open mind and value inclusive environments and so on.

Perhaps the ones that we wish would come won't, but I guess it could be a step in, you know, an idea.-(Participant 4)

I think that you're right, we do have to reach out to those who are more reluctant to come in or might not have an open mind yet. Might be the missing link in our whole inclusivity piece. (Participant 5)

So I guess what I feel in this perspective what I need or what I think our staff needs is maybe just even an opportunity to go and experience different buildings.

I often say you know the staff that are struggling after I've been in four or five different buildings. I guess now and if you change your window, you're looking out of it.

It makes a big difference because you know what we're seeing is problems. (Participant 10)

We talk a lot in in education about building capacity, right.

And we have so many people spread out who have these great skills. Those people, how do we have them help us? With all of our learners, and I'm talking adults with all of our adult learners in our buildings and providing those opportunities for them to become leaders for them to share, for us, to observe them and send other staff members to observe. (Participant 1)

in small groups and eventually got into larger groups, sharing and hearing each other speak, providing ideas to that person as to how they might deal with that scenario and strategies they might use to address the needs of those particular children.

And we found it quite powerful and the Staff really found powerful.

What was great about it was that your role disappeared in that didn't matter if you were an EA or teacher, everybody was in the same boat.

So it was all about sharing. (Participant 1)

So it didn't matter what your experience level was, you had something to contribute and now we're trying to harvest all of this information.

We collected all of their ideas, and now we're trying to put it, put it into a package of strategies that might be more successful for this type of learner or for this type of behavior so that we can have something within the school to help.

(Participant 1)

I think collaboration and hearing from others and sharing with other school leaders certainly could, could help school tours like you know how you do that through CAP or you

know you visit school schools that that can help us school leadership. (Participant 2)

And I think One of the best things that I have done and that's really helped shape me as a leader and helped her staff, is bringing parents in. So when you bring in families as spokespeople, I think that really contributes uh to breaking down barriers and helping shape school leaders understanding. (Participant 2)

We need to do a better job or I need to do a better job of having our teachers be able to go and observe in other classrooms, maybe in other buildings. (Participant 10)

it's a system thing.

The whole system has to come together and prepare us better for all.

All of this and what it looks like, but I really agree with the whole. It's just a matter of identifying them and how do we make them leaders in this area and share their knowledge with others through observation, through leading conversations, PD, whatever it is, we have the human resources, they're out there. (Participant 1)

I think the hope is that the Deans can get together and there is, like I just discussed this in our leadership team meeting, the Deans need to get together and really, truly listen to school leaders. That's really what needs to happen. Unfortunately, I think not everyone's getting together and working together to really talk about what really needs to happen. (Participant 2)

The professional learning and the you know, the RTI stuff and you know we were we were tackling that kind of head on and you know looking at multi tiered intervention, you know strategies for supporting all the students and I feel we've kind of gone away from that and I think that's where we need to get back to you at least in my school so. (Participant 10)

We have to look at what's best for the child and work together with the family, and it's all about that communication with the family and where you know what is best for that particular situation for that particular child. So it's a lot of the working together working collaboratively to really meet what are the needs of this child and how do we address it. (Participant 1)

But we went more developmentally and so try to include them that way and that was communicated through the, I guess, the Guardian, the agency as well as, you know, our student services coordinator here. So we had, we had lots of conversations around there, but ultimately we agreed that that would be the best placement for them. (Participant 10)

That that actually that word Ally is so like it's so empowering too. Right.

And so the work that I'm doing with Berkeley is allyship.

And so looking at the Allyship, and I thought, OK, so that that term and in itself also to me it's like now we can start looking at again breaking through the barriers with bringing people together with an allyship (Participant 3)

We are engaging the community and so we're engaging different, you know like huddle and friendship centre and all the different community pieces that maybe we can somehow bring so that we can support this kid (Participant 3)

I think these conversations are just amazing, but that would be great to bring to like a DLT, so that everybody kind of has the same framework of understanding of not just inclusion for one or for one group, but inclusion for all.

And what does that mean?-(Participant 3)

More brains are better than one, and I've, you know, ever since I opened this school up four years ago.

I just take the problems to the to the staff and I say here's our problem.

And you give me some ideas what we and I find that we brainstorm when we come up with better solutions, when more people are tackling it.

Then when I try to solve it by myself or with the vice principal or something like that.

So the more these kinds of situations come up, the more we can have conversations with more people that are involved, the better. I think our solutions are going to be so to me it collaborations. The key to solving a lot of this because one person that's hard to sit there when they come to you as the principal and they're here's the situation.

I need help.

I need this and I need that and sometimes yeah, you might have experience with that that you can give to, but sometimes you don't.

And so you need to get more input and more people on having involved in the conversation to problem solve. (Participant 1)

I really like that point about involving the staff like, especially when I think about when we look at, say, inclusion of students, maybe in our buildings with our most difficult needs, it's really hard work and for them.

And sometimes when they're coming to us for an answer like we have the same.

Education experience with students say, with those diverse needs, and so putting it back on.

OK, let's talk about like I don't know.

I don't know what we're gonna do, but we've gotta do it to kind of together.

And I think that the is really important when it comes to supporting some of that inclusive work in our classrooms. And maybe then we see a shift in the way it looks or someone coming to you the next time for more help or more if you've kind of involved them in that process of, I don't know what are we gonna do as opposed to telling them this is what you're going to do it? I think they'll we could see a bigger shift in in problem solving around inclusion- (Participant 4)

But if you walk away and I can go to a principals meeting for a day and everybody's confident in managing the day without you there, then I think you've done a good job. And I think that comes from working collaboratively and that comes from, umm, empowering and encouraging other people to know they can do it, right?

So I'm always looking for ways to create opportunities for mentorship and sustainability. you've empowered somebody you know because you see something in them and you know they can.

And that comes from working collaboratively, because that gives them that confidence, right? (Participant 7)

So I don't know how you create an inclusive space without collaboration. That's just, that's just how I operate right now.-(Participant 7)

I think they need to know you're there, but they that you also can do it, you're not enabling them or micromanaging them, right? And that comes from setting a stage of collaboration. (Participant 7)

Giving people tasks and letting them run with it. Developing teacher efficacy and autonomy. Involving students in planning as they are able. Building community and being open to their interests. All ways collaboration helps to build inclusion. (Participant 6)

Collaboration that has worked for us includes partnering with community organizations – SWIS workers, Portage Literacy Centre, Manitoba First Nations Police Cadets helped out with Walking School Bus. PATH/MAP programming (Participant 12)

Don't leave collaboration to chance. Use mentorship programs, identify the gifts of staff and love who shows up and what they bring to the table. Shine a light on them and empower them. (Participant 9)

Working with other school leaders can help surface our gifts and if we share our stories and put our heads together, that creates power that strengthens our efforts. We can stand with greater confidence when confronting situations we encounter. (Participant 9)

We need a strong system of support based on RTI and MTSS. Leaders must be present in student support team meetings and intervention team meetings (Participant 9)

Moving From Findings to Action

Key questions include:

1. How do school leaders seek out collaborative opportunities with each other to support the work of inclusion?
2. What structures need to be in place to provide regular collaboration time for teachers and support staff in schools?
3. How would mentorship programs work in supporting all staff in developing an maintaining inclusive learning opportunities for all students?
4. How do we collaborate with teachers and others who are less open to the importance of inclusive educational environments?
5. How do we facilitate collaboration with parents and other key partners in our school communities?

6. How can collaboration help to empower and encourage staff to continue their efforts towards inclusion?

Thematic Chart #3

Theme 3 – Communication & Advocacy

Question: What skills, knowledge, dispositions, and tools do school leaders need to create inclusive schools?

Key Words: Difficult Conversations, Communication, Sharing, Speaking up

Overview

Setting and pursuing social justice goals that address the rights of students with disabilities as well as other diverse learners is the role of transformative, inclusive school leaders who are passionate about what they do. These leaders must also inspire others to seek first to understand their students and families and clarifying for others how inclusive education is supported by best practices in the school environment (Villa & Thousand, 2016). Building the capacity of the education system to support all learners in inclusive school environments is the necessary role of school leaders who set a vision of inclusion where “all students are welcomed, valued, empowered, and supported in learning academic, social-emotional, language, and communication skills in shared environments and experiences” (Villa & Thousand, 2016, p. 33). Participants in this study spoke at length about the importance of having difficult conversations with staff and other members of the school community around inclusion. The ability to be an effective communicator who listens with empathy but is clear about their goal of building an inclusive school culture was highlighted as crucial skills for inclusive school leaders.

Findings/Outcomes

1. Developing an inclusive philosophy that is communicated clearly to all members of the school community and speaking up to address exclusive practices is a necessary skill for leaders to create an inclusive school culture.
2. Regular and appropriate communication needs to be provided to all students and their families in ways that are meaningful and supportive.

Participant Perspectives

There have been many conversations with, you know, other people don't see that as a joke like he he's seeing it as him and his buddy are joking back and forth about and they feel like they can because they're talking about their own races but the conversation looks different with children that are white he would be deeply offended if someone came back at him with umm a joke about him being Asian. If they were white, is that am I making sense?

So it it's become difficult. I feel like it's been difficult conversations because there is, there are some, umm, kids who almost feel like it's acceptable, you know, to make jokes about each other's race as long as they are another race, if that makes sense. (Participant 4)

it's just been pretty it's made us feel collectively as administrators and the Division office feel a bit Gross because you know these outdated and ignorant perspectives like we are not going to let these people make our employees even our casual employees, feel uncomfortable. (Participant 8)

So it was just again also not just working with the you know communicate with the parents, but communicating with the teachers to know that, you know, if there are any conversations that they feel uncomfortable with or any parents have an approach him to tone that they you know, are hesitant, to deal with then, you know, I've got their back they can contact me and let me take on those conversations. (Participant 5)

Yeah, we, we had those parents that were questioning and now they wanted, you know, their children out of that class and have based on the, you know, the teachers. You know, coming out and that was difficult conversation to have with those parents, but we worked through it and for the most part it went well. (Participant 10)

some of the conversations I had with parents is because it was pride week and there were more conversations around people's gender identity or and there were some parents that called said, OK, you know, we're not anti anything, but we're just not prepared to have these conversations with our kids yet. So you know, they're asking for, you know, where they're admitting.

I guess that they don't feel comfortable having those conversations or maybe don't know where to start. Around conversations around, you know what? (Participant 5)

So having brothers on the spectrum and understanding their struggles and they have no idea that I'm in a position of, you know, leadership and always wanting to make sure that I'm supporting the students and the people that didn't have a voice. (Participant 3)

I found I took my background, my taught but I was guidance and counselling and I'm so thankful for those experiences. I was a guidance counselor from K through 12, but certainly my experiences with senior years kids really impact a lot of my while those like listening skills and just really advocacy skills, I think really helped. Also, Conflict mediation resolution right and crucial conversations (Participant 2)

So I think inclusion like we've got it, we have to do a lot of work with our rookie admin to help them, you know like what are the things we've gotta hone in on new for new leaders is how to converse with parents on inclusive practices like that is a huge how to have difficult conversations. (Participant 2)

Communication is key – following plans, checking in with everyone that works with the students. (Participant 6)

Having hard conversations was trained in all of that.

Having crucial conversations, a lot of those, umm, a lot of practical things out of the out of that literature I've been doing. (Participant 7)

I think the listening like listening with empathy, I think that's really from an empathetic point of view. I think that's really been critical for me.

Just remaining neutral and hearing both sides I think has been really important. (Participant 2)

I thought about this a little bit with like, especially our EAL families that come midway or the start of a year, and I think like if I was to walk into a school where I didn't speak the language, what would I need to feel good on that first day?

So I often think about like you know how we welcome to kinder packages.

Maybe we need, like welcome to BSD packages like a picture of the school in there, like depending on the age of the kids like.

It's just something so that they just a little piece of ohh this is neat like a almost like a welcome to school. A package or something just to like the map of the school and maybe some pictures of staff. Or like I don't know, but it is something that I thought I think that comes to from like meeting with kids even like in the counsellor role, when they're feeling lonely for their home country and just thinking about what could we do with the minute they walk in.-(Participant 4)

Moving From Findings to Action

Key questions include:

1. How can school leaders communicate more effectively with all members of the school community about inclusive philosophy and practices?
2. What kind of training opportunities are available to assist and support school leaders in having difficult conversations? How can we ensure that all school leaders have this important skill to advocate for students and families?
3. What kinds of professional learning and can supplement and support personal and professional experiences that support school leaders in developing inclusive schools?
4. What supports are available to school leaders who are struggling with adversarial school communities?

Thematic Chart #4

Theme 4– Inclusion is Built on Relationships

Question: What skills, knowledge, dispositions, and tools do school leaders need to create inclusive schools?

Key Words: Partnerships, Community, Trust, Empathy

Overview Disabilities, oppression, racism, and childhood trauma as well as other background experiences can all affect children’s ability to be successful in educational settings and often manifest as behavioural, social-emotional, psychiatric, and psychological disorders. They also affect the adults working in education as well and as such, need to be considered when working with students and families. Critical social theory underpins this broader view of inclusion and can provide help for educators who wish to examine their views and practices to meet the broad needs of their students, while guiding a comprehensive approach to true inclusive teaching, learning, and leadership in schools.

Findings/Outcomes

Most participants in this study agreed that personal background and experiences in diversity helped school leaders to approach students and their families with empathy and to build strong relationships with all members of their school community.

Participant Perspectives

it's about the student themselves and what they need at that time as opposed to making them fit into something that they're not able to.

So is she and she kind of always went back to, you know what, what does this student need right now? Like what do they need? (Participant 4)

No matter what area it is, you make that connection with them, they will eventually regulate quicker. Not saying that it'll be perfect, but umm that connection matters.

So if they know that they've connected with one person, that really gets to know them, you know what their middle name is, what their interests are, how they learn, what are their strengths and challenges. Kids can tell if they really care and not saying it's gonna be perfect, but that's one other little piece that I'm not saying.

They're not doing it. There's so many different ways to connect, no matter if they whatever who they are. But one of the biggest things she talked about was connections.

So I just wanted to add that little bit about the relationship and the trust and the yeah. (Participant 11)

And that's where I, when I'm talking with families and things, I guess I like to, you know, get to know them a bit in feet, feel out what their what their situation is and how much are they really wanting to share with us.

And sometimes it's a slower process than what we want.

You know, maybe what we necessarily need off the hop, but sometimes we have to step back

and give them that opportunity to build the trust and see where you know what information will eventually help. (Participant 13)

Building trust in our immigrant population. And just showing interest like I show and interest in their food, have them come in to present to your class. And I think that has really helped us in just bridging that and that takes a lot of work and it's not easy and I know that in different contexts and different schools its' different scenarios. I recognize that too but I think investing hard with families will allow the school to be much more inclusive. I really believe that. (Participant 2)

Being inclusive and having an inclusive school a community is really hard work and that you know it comes down to community it comes down to relationships it comes down to you know for me it's been building relationships with community and with groups of people that have really been hurt. (Participant 7)

True inclusion includes the families and that is hard in this system that has caused high levels of mistrust for so many of our families. Leaders need to work hard on culture and make sure everyone is rowing in the same direction. (Participant 9)

Make emotional deposits with all you interact with and be committed to relationship building. (Participant 9)

Moving From Findings to Action

Key questions:

1. What strategies can school leaders use to build stronger relationships with staff who are reticent to engage in inclusive practices?
2. How can we strive to build stronger trust and relationships with marginalized communities?
3. What logistical issues need to be addressed to support the work of relationship building?
4. How do we include the families of our students in our school communities?
5. How can we build stronger relationships with students and involve them more in the decisions about their learning paths?

Thematic Chart #5

Theme 5 – Barriers Exist to Implementing Inclusion in Manitoba Schools Question: What are the barriers to inclusion experienced by school leaders? Key Words: Systemic, Definition of Inclusion, Understanding, Training and Experience
Overview Despite ongoing progress made towards developing inclusive schools and pockets of successful and innovative programs supporting students, School leaders in this study voiced concern about the number of barriers that keep them from exploring and developing more inclusive programs and supports for students with diverse needs. The participants also voiced frustration about the lack of communication between different levels of the system and how they feel alone in making decisions about how to address the barriers and how to advocate for students and families.
Findings/Outcomes 1. All school leaders in this study identified several barriers to their daily work in developing inclusive schools. 2. Some barriers come from a lack of knowledge and experience on the part of the school leaders themselves. 3. Some barriers varied in influence depending on geographical location in the province. 4. Systemic barriers include training, lack of communication, financial and outdated infrastructure.
Participant Perspectives <i>Inclusion doesn't mean that every child in a classroom inclusion is what's best for that particular child, and the whole idea of put pushing everybody into a room and fully integrated that doesn't work even in the mainstream. (Participant 1)</i>

The education system doesn't necessarily address everybody's learning style and everybody's needs. So we're compounding it even more when we say this is going to be our only model of inclusion. (Participant 1)

We've had parents demand that the Principals inform them when this sub is going to be on the building so they can keep their kid at home and we need to know and you know, some of our high school kids like they've been suspended because they've asked just offensive and Gross inappropriate questions. And then the parents phone and scream and yell. These outdated and ignorant perspectives like we are not going to let these people make our employees even our casual employees, feel uncomfortable. (Participant 8)

But has anybody had any experience with any staff members that come out or, you know, change their gender even I guess you know, while there have been teaching on staff, uh, I did have that experience a few years back and it was difficult to navigate with some of the parents. Yeah, we had those parents that were questioning and now they wanted, you know, their children out of that class and have based on the, you know, the teacher. (Participant 10)

I'm having difficulties keeping it together because the first response we often get especially and I think in in some classrooms we just want that kid removed. If they're, if they're, you know, having challenges, or we want an educational assistant and all those things that we know we're not necessarily going to get. (Participant 10)

We can manage some of the academic things and all of these other things, but it's oftentimes it's the behavior that trumps everything else but the behaviors, communication of some other issue too. (Participant 15)

It's the lack of a shared philosophy that I see. There's so much disjunct between like, support staff and not understanding what the terminology means. Even our Educators, not understanding what does inclusivity mean? And then when you get into like all means all what? Well, what does that really mean? And so everybody has their own ideas and everybody feels like they have their own role within that. (Participant 3)

So it's all French immersion and in our school one I have one classroom that's a standalone classroom, which is a junior life skills program and that's it's it remained at this new school because there was just no space for it anywhere else. (Participant 2)

Regardless of whether we were single track or dual track or whatever it is, we have some kids that just cannot be in a regular classroom. And so, like, I've got one who is extremely violent. I have a one kid who has two eyes with her at all times and she's in her own room at all times, so they are there has to be those tier 3 exceptions. (Participant 2)

So I kept asking. They didn't, actually, that the provincial reps didn't even quite know what to say about that.

So here we're meeting trying to tell leaders across the province of what are the standards, but yet the people guiding these groups that were department of people didn't actually know how to answer their questions. (Participant 2)

I think barriers to Inclusive school leadership, I think.

I think one of the big areas is just not having different experiences as a leader, such as understanding, awareness around culture and inclusion. (Participant 2)

I'm just goes back again to experience and exposure working with different families that are coming in. (Participant 13)

it's a system thing.

The whole system has to come together and prepare us better for all. (Participant 1)

Deans need to get together and really, truly listen to school leaders. That's really what needs to happen. But we know universities are businesses. They wanna make money, right?

And so and they have to find the right profs to teach the courses too, right.

Which is very difficult. But unfortunately I think not everyone's getting together and working together to really talk about what really needs to happen. (Participant 2)

I think the length of the school day it's been looked at as a punishment or a uh under the suspension It was all part of the conversations with suspensions and then it the length of the school day is really dependent on adaptations for the children.

If it's agreed upon with the school and the parents, because sometimes you run into situations and I know we've run into situations where that full day is just too much for that child and even the parent says, can we start slow? (Participant 1)

The other standards that the other standardization that needs to happen is that whole Jordan's principle stuff. So the equity and the confusion across the province from division to division is insanity. And so there's inequity and it's a tool that could help with inclusive practice, but there's so many barriers. (Participant 2)

A barrier is transportation like I have one student who gets his sister to another school, takes her to kindergarten and then he comes to our school. But he's away a lot, so I'm like, and I think he's school of choice, but I think I'm gonna try to advocate for him to get bussing because he does have some unique needs and has some adaptive programming right now. (Participant 11)

It's really hard to make sure that people are. It's not even a buy in, but it's a philosophical switch and that like that is a barrier in itself, because we just have to make sure that people are accepting and all means all. (Participant 3)

It's an insecurity because there are. There's a lingo that's attached.

There's things that there's stigma attached that you just like. How do you get past the?

You know, even the Stigma like how do you get past that? (Participant 3)

But anyway, just because you create a document doesn't mean the government and this is what I would say to them. They become very popular at creating documents by providing absolutely no training or PDF of any consequence to support these documents like they used to do Once Upon a time. (Participant 1)

Parent support and parent communication and ongoing parent activity and that would be probably for us a bit of a barrier because our parents are we have a large catchment and our parents have issues with transportation access.

Yeah, other ways of transportation to, to and from school and to other community events. So all of our events are free. So what we can put on is never a fundraising event.

It's always for free, for our families and they are well attended, but we are given out a ton of prizes and food and popcorn. (Participant 3)

But definitely noticed in the last four years even the change in in the demographics but and the amount of money that people have, right, like the people in our first year even I know when we were raising money for our playground, I mean all that money, yeah, we were trying to generate you know funds for that. But even within four years, like people are still coming out for things like family movie night, or they've done a couple of family dances and stuff, but they just don't seem to have the money. So that that's where I propose. Well, let's make it free. (Participant 10)

workload of teachers— violent and aggressive youth is a big barrier. This group is the hardest for teachers to cope with and include. (Participant 6)

Big influx of EAL students with needs. Is this a government initiative? And Structures of the system, credits, curriculum, age appropriate placements sometimes. Budgetary constraints (Participant 12)

It's been hard because my ways of looking at things haven't always matched policy. They haven't always matched the way things you know are told that we're told we have to follow, and so then I get into a philosophical or an ethical battle with myself and the system in which I work. (Participant 7)

They have now put a colonial system in because many of our families do not have credit cards, they'll never own a credit card, and some of that comes down from the Indian Act. They can't get a credit card. Some of them can't pay like it's just economically, it's not feasible for them. (Participant 7)

I top down type of decisions that are being made without consulting with individual schools to say, how would this impact you? (Participant 7)

Another barrier our policies.

Again, there are certain policies that are made, for example staff attendance, you get 20 sick days. Meanwhile I have indigenous staff who require three or four days when someone passes away in their community and they have, they have to go to the wake and they need to make the moccasins and they need to do all of those things so they don't get the bereavement leave

because it's not their sister blood sister let.

So that's, you know, that's another example. (Participant 7)

There's different philosophies in the community.

We have people that you know are always angry because we do indigenous education here. (Participant 7)

Well, I think you know the government is doing an amazing job at pumping out these fabulous documents. The Mamatawisiwin document then all these inclusive of Ed document, all these different documents, we don't have anybody who's training us on these things\. (Participant 7)

We're doing the job of the government, we're doing the job like, and I I sound like I'm whiny because that's not who I am. But those are barriers, so we're not appropriately trained to deal (Participant 7)

we're trying to fit a new way of doing things, you know, post COVID new generations of kids, new social media issues, all those things.

But we're trying to fit it into an old way of old system.

Our system has not moved or changed or adjusted to anything we need and that's a big barrier for sure. (Participant 7)

Our building is not even accessible.

You know I have a an elder, an elder, who would come into the school and do work in a wheelchair. She cannot fit through the doors because our school has been built in 1966 and nothing's been changed since. And you know, it's an infrastructure issue. I've got stairs coming one way, stairs coming the other way, and the one ramp we have is not in good shape. Right So just really simple things that we don't think about on a day-to-day basis become barriers for us to have an inclusive space. (Participant 7)

I think we have made progress with inclusion as a system and there are pockets of inclusive teachers and practice. School is still a traditional system that serves a certain kind of learner – those who are easy to teach, easy to connect to (based on your own experiences). (Participant 9)

There is also a high level of mistrust for many of our families of multiple systems in society. True inclusion includes the families and that is hard in this system. (Participant 9)

Moving From Findings to Action

Key questions include:

1. How can principals advocate with the department of education and school divisions for consistent training and support on inclusive education policies and practices?
2. What is meant by the term inclusion and how do we foster common understanding across the province?

Appendix L

Analytical Category Development Process

Analytical Category 1: Post Secondary education in the Faculties of Education do not adequately prepare new teachers or principals for working with the diverse needs of students in today's classrooms.

It does not seem possible that education faculties are solely responsible for all new teachers or new school leaders coming into the system lacking the necessary skills and training to respond to student needs. What are other possible reasons? Are there other possibilities? Other solutions? How do principals and vice-principals know this for sure about their teachers or is this just their interpretation? There are differences in backgrounds and personal experiences that could explain this barrier

Personal Experiences and Characteristics

New teachers (Millennials and Gen Z) have different experiences and outlooks on the world that older teachers in the field. Personal idiosyncrasies also come into play, including things like motivation, commitment, academic ability, and other psychological and personal factors and challenges, and personal biases. It may also be that some students are not sufficiently motivated to take the courses offered in inclusive education and addressing diversity for a variety of reasons; not motivated to do the rigorous work, lack of confidence in their own ability, and a lack of understanding of the importance of this foundational learning.

Some new teachers are succeeding in effectively addressing the array of needs in their classrooms right out of the gate – so why is that? What are the factors that lead to their success? The same is true for school leaders...what kind of preparatory training and experiences do they have prior to and throughout their leadership role?

Program Design

The primary purpose of higher education is to foster critical thinking and expose students to philosophical and theoretical concepts. Because of all of the varied contexts and scenarios that could be part of a unique classroom or school environment, it is unlikely that course work can fully prepare students for the experience of *doing it*. Students learn by *doing*, that is through experience. Perhaps there should be more practicum experience in the undergraduate program

and mentorship opportunities for new school leaders during their graduate studies and in their school divisions before they assume a formal leadership position.

The requirements for school leader appointments vary greatly across the province and not all divisions require their principals to have a master's degree or a School Leader certificate from Manitoba education.

It seems that course work is not adequately preparing educators for inclusion, either at the undergraduate or at the graduate level. Knowledge is sought out elsewhere in mostly informal ways.

Link to literature on Multi Tiered System of Support, Collaborative School Communities, Co-teaching, Prioritizing Professional Development, Mentorship programs

Analytic Category 2: What school leaders needed to know and how they acquired that learning.

Participants in this study acknowledged the benefits of their personal backgrounds and their training before becoming school leaders as being a key part of their success in fostering inclusive environments. They also acknowledged that they needed ongoing training and support in new provincial documents and facilitating professional learning for their staff to successfully do their jobs.

What did they need to know?

Policies/Legislation/Provincial Documents

Why?

- Graduate courses do not always provide a foundational knowledge of the government documents needed to make daily decisions necessary for school leaders.
- There are different policies in different school divisions across the province governing decision making.
- Policies and support documents are often changed and updated without any training for school leaders on implementation and if the training is provided, not all school leaders are required to attend.
- Once participants stepped into an administrative role, there was very little in terms of training provided to them to help them in their daily work, specifically in inclusion.
- Principals and vice-principals are left to their own devices to seek out help and support from colleagues. They do not have adequate time to talk together, and problem solve in a safe and collaborative space.

How did they get the knowledge they needed?

Largely through informal learning

Why?

- Reliance on self, reading, seeking out professional learning opportunities. Why? When we are left without supports, most people rely on their personal strengths. We have a preference to finding things out on our own to avoid looking incompetent. Adults want to be independent.

- Reliance on colleagues. Why? We look to the strengths of others we trust who are “in the same boat” both for support and for knowledge. Learning with colleagues is perceived to be less threatening than asking supervisors or the experts.
- Literature shows that adults tend to learn best through dialogue, reflection, and collaboration, rather than in isolation. If these aren’t provided, we tend to seek them out.

Sometimes through formal learning

Why?

- Post Bach and master’s programs provide formalized programs in Educational Administration to help leaders learn about issues being faced in schools.
- Programs are not always successful because of the departmentalization of knowledge and school leaders need a cross section of training and experiences to address an array of needs.

School leaders are not involved in the planning of their training and supports throughout the year. They are looking for guidance and support for their ongoing efforts towards inclusion in their schools.

Link to literature on Transformative Leadership.

Analytic category 3: Supports and Barriers Influencing School Leaders’ Inclusive School Success

In the absence of formal help, through either graduate study, divisional and provincial training on pertinent subjects and support documents, participants had to rely on themselves and their colleagues to try to interpret directives and carry out their daily work in inclusion.

Supports:

- Personal backgrounds, experiences, and attributes. People spoke about needing relationship building skills, communication skills, commitment, determination, bravery, and persistence.
- Colleagues

Why? See above in Category 2

Barriers/Impediments to Progress:

A lack of training and knowledge about inclusion. Why?

- Not everyone in schools has the same understanding of inclusion and what it means in practice, lack of a shared philosophy.
- Inconsistent expectations for inclusion from different members of the school community.
- A lack of communication between school divisions, the university faculties, and the provincial department of education about how to successfully support inclusion in schools.

Regardless of the reasons or the organization responsible, principals and vice-principals are feeling unprepared to deal with issues arising from their efforts in inclusion. It must be

acknowledged though, that some school divisions do more to prepare their school leaders in the area of inclusion than others, and this is not clearly reflected in this study's sample.

Community perceptions on inclusion. Why?

- Community perspectives on the inclusion of LGBTQ2S* staff, students, and resources
- Inclusion of students with behaviour difficulties and their affect on other students' learning environment.
- Parent support and parent communication.
- Financial concerns in the community affecting access and inclusion in school activities.
- Community concerns around the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives.
- High level of mistrust for many families in the education system as well as other societal systems, with whom we partner in our efforts towards inclusion.

The reasons that some school leaders feel ineffective in their efforts towards inclusion are a combination between their own perceptions of inadequacy in terms of their background experiences and personal skills, as well as their professional training in this area and a lack of ongoing support from the province and their school divisions.

Link to literature on prioritizing professional development, meaningful partnerships, definition of inclusion and time and opportunities for discussion on inclusive practices.