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# School Principals and Students with Special Education Needs: Leading Inclusive Schools

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# School Principals and Students with Special Education Needs: Leading Inclusive Schools

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## **Abstract**

Over the past 30 years, school boards, faculties of education, and teaching organizations have helped teachers develop skills to support students with special education needs in their classrooms. However, less attention has been given to school principals in building their leadership skills to support inclusive schools. The purpose of this study is to identify the types of special education training that school principals engage in, as well as to

explore the day-to-day issues and critical incidents that principals might experience when supporting students with special education needs. An exploratory study involving interviews with 15 principals and five other educational stakeholders in four school boards was employed to examine the related research questions. Five key themes emerged from the analysis of the interviews, including personal values in shaping inclusive school culture; variety in professional learning experiences; similarities in day-to-day experiences and the importance of being accessible for students and staff; the importance of leadership in fostering inclusive school culture; and the effect of critical incidents in shaping principals' leadership roles. These themes are examined in light of the literature contending that school leaders are central to the shaping of inclusive school cultures.

*Keywords:* inclusion, inclusive education, principal, school leadership, critical incident, special education

## Résumé

Au cours des 30 dernières années, les conseils scolaires, les facultés d'éducation et les associations professionnelles en éducation ont accompagné les enseignantes et enseignants à développer des compétences en vue d'appuyer les élèves ayant des difficultés d'apprentissage dans leurs salles de classe. Cependant, moins d'attention a été accordée aux directions d'école dans l'accroissement de leur capacité de leadership visant le soutien des écoles inclusives. L'objectif de cette recherche a été d'identifier les genres de formation en enfance en difficulté dans lesquels s'engagent les directions d'école ainsi que d'explorer les expériences quotidiennes et les «occasions de pratique réflexive» qu'elles pourraient rencontrer lorsqu'elles apportent de l'appui aux élèves ayant des besoins particuliers. Une étude exploratoire comportant des entrevues avec quinze directions d'école et cinq autres intervenants du milieu de l'éducation provenant de quatre conseils scolaires a été utilisée pour examiner les questions de recherche. Cinq thèmes clés ont émergé de l'analyse des entrevues: le rôle des valeurs personnelles dans l'établissement d'une culture scolaire inclusive, la diversité des expériences d'apprentissage professionnel, les similitudes dans les expériences quotidiennes et l'importance d'être disponible, l'importance du leadership pour favoriser une culture scolaire inclusive, et l'impact des «occasions de pratique réflexive» sur les rôles de leadership des directions d'école. Ces cinq

thèmes sont examinés à la lumière de la littérature qui soutient que les leaders scolaires sont au cœur d'une culture d'école inclusive.

*Mots-clés* : inclusion, éducation inclusive, direction d'école, leadership scolaire, occasion de pratique réflexive, enfance en difficulté

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## Introduction

School leaders, such as principals and vice-principals, face situations and decisions involving students with special education needs on a daily basis. These interactions are often based on a school leader's past experiences with—and perceptions of—effective practices (Cameron, 2016). However, there can be a disconnect between educational policy, research-based practices, 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 (Jahnukainen, 2015). Further, the very ways in which school leaders support students with special needs often serve as key factors in determining how well teachers engage students in inclusive classrooms (Howell, 2016).

This article presents findings from a research project that examined the practices and experiences of principals in supporting students with special education needs in their schools. The study addresses a gap in the literature between two robust bodies of research. First, there is a significant amount of literature examining the experiences of teachers and students in inclusive classrooms (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007; Graham & Jahnukainen, 2011) and, second, there is a substantial body of literature indicating that the role of the principal in a school is closely tied to both healthy school culture (Gülşen & Gülenay, 2014) and enhanced student achievement (Leithwood, Patten, & Jantzi, 2010). However, there has been limited research connecting these two bodies of literature; that is, examining how school principals support (or do not support) inclusive school environments for students with special education needs (Edmunds & Macmillan, 2010). This article provides an opportunity to address the gap in these bodies of literature by examining the perceptions and experiences of school leaders in supporting inclusive school contexts based on an exploratory research project involving 20 principals and other educational stakeholders.

A specific focus of this research study is the examination of day-to-day activities of school principals in supporting students with special education needs and the identification of critical incidents that have informed their views of inclusive education. Yamamoto, Gardiner, and Tenuto's (2014) work in exploring critical incidents is utilized as a means to derive meaning from and reach an understanding of leadership. The analysis of the responses from the participants led to the development of a number of themes, including how personal values influence principals' support of inclusive schools, the variety of

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training activities that principals had engaged in, the types of day-to-day activities that they experienced, the relationship of school leadership to inclusive school cultures, and the effect of critical incidents in shaping their roles as principals. These themes are examined in light of literature that contends that school leaders are central to the shaping of inclusive school cultures (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010).

## **Literature Review**

### **Inclusive Education**

There is a gap in the scholarly literature between that which informs our understanding of inclusive education for students with special education needs and that which speaks to the importance of school leaders in fostering healthy school environments. Inclusion is a multifaceted concept focused on including all members of society with their many facets of diversity—including areas such as ability, culture, and family—in everyday experiences in multiple contexts (Simplican, Leader, Kosciulek, & Leahy, 2015). The concept of inclusion reflects a movement away from viewing differences as deficits toward understanding and honouring diversity (Zaretsky, Moreau, & Faircloth, 2008).

Within the wider field of inclusion, school-based inclusion, or inclusive education, is an important field of study and can be understood in multiple manners (Bennett, 2009). The Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC; 2008) indicates that inclusive education represents a belief that all students belong and that every student can make a valued contribution to a class and school. A goal of inclusive education is “to increase meaningful participation and achievement of all students who [are] increasingly vulnerable to the effects of marginalization in existing educational arrangements” (Zaretsky, Moreau, & Faircloth, 2008, p. 170). There are a variety of conceptions of inclusive education stemming from a number of subdisciplines of education, including multicultural education, special education, and anti-racist education (De Luca, 2013). Thus, the conceptualization of inclusive education considers a wide range of diverse student needs, including gender, sexual orientation, religion, language, and ability; however, the focus of this article is on inclusive education specifically for students with special education needs.

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One of the goals of inclusive education is for children with special education needs to have these needs met in their neighbourhood schools in classes with similar-aged peers (Bennett, 2009). However, the practice of inclusion is not yet complete—nor perfected—as its goals and objectives continue to be ongoing core issues in related research and practice:

...teachers are often constrained by legislation, terminology, and board practices that do not fully embrace the shift towards a reconceptualization of schooling that supports inclusive learning environments for all children. Until legislation changes, we must work within a system that has enough room for adaptations, yet few explicit requirements for accountability regarding inclusion. (Killoran et al., 2013, p. 242)

The Canadian Council on Learning (2009) reviewed the literature on the academic outcomes of students with exceptionalities in inclusive versus segregated settings and found that, generally, studies supported the inclusive environment as being more positive (or no different) than segregated settings. Further, inclusion does not just benefit the child with special education needs but is effective for the social and academic outcomes of all students (Kambouka, Farrell, Dyson, & Kaplan, 2007). It appears that school settings promoting inclusion are more successful at promoting learning for all, the goal of education, which in turn promotes “what is good for special education is good for all education” (Cobb, 2015, p. 231).

## **Leadership and Special Education**

School leadership should be transformative, systematically promoting academic achievement, family and community empowerment, democratic engagement, and global citizenship (Shields, 2010). These values—always essential—are even more important in the context of inclusive schools. Yet, despite the research that has studied the role of teachers in supporting inclusive classrooms, only limited attention has been given to how principals support inclusive schools (Edmunds & Macmillan, 2010). Certainly, there is a significant body of literature which indicates that effective principals are critical in supporting effective schools (Fullan, 2011). Further, the effectiveness of principals is widely considered to influence student achievement and success in the classroom (Leithwood,

Patten, & Jantzi, 2010), although the direct effect of school leadership on student achievement is minimal (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1999; Shin & Slater, 2010). Principals, however, have significant indirect leadership effects on student achievement through their influence on teachers' self-efficacy, commitment, and beliefs (Ross & Gray, 2006).

School leadership is generally characterized as the process of recruiting and managing the talents and energies of educators, students, parents, and other community stakeholders toward achieving shared educational goals. This view is what Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, and Hopkins (2006) refer to as the “four broad categories of practices identified in research summaries: setting directions, developing people, redesigning the organization, and managing the instructional (teaching and learning) programme” (pp. 18–19). These categories set the tone for school culture and define to a large extent school conditions through which the general health of the learning environment can flourish.

There is limited research in Canada, though, on special education leadership from the perspective of school principals. Zaretsky, Moreau, and Faircloth (2008) carried out an Ontario-based qualitative study focused on perceptions of special education leadership roles and responsibilities. From the standpoint of eight school principal participants, they found the following: many layers of instructional leadership (e.g., relational leadership); multiple domains of essential knowledge (e.g., technology); and various professional development needs (e.g., curriculum/assessment). More recently, Cobb (2015) completed a meta-analysis of 19 North American articles—mainly research studies from 2001 to 2011—related to special education leadership with school principals ranging from elementary to secondary areas of responsibility. It is clear that there are interjurisdictional differences with the approaches that principals take within special education leadership—but also multiple similarities; for example, disproportionate time allocated by principals for supporting special education services. Cobb noted that principals are essential human resources in both interpreting and implementing policy: their behaviours affect the behaviours of classroom teachers themselves, the front line of service delivery in schools. Plus, principals set the tone and expectations in a range of foundational processes, including inclusion and special education, and their leadership role in the field is a top issue. Cobb identified various domains and roles that principals maintain in supporting special education inclusion in schools (see Table 1). Table 1 summarizes what is a deep and rich finding: principals navigate and support school-based inclusion in multiple



domains involving various relationships, bodies of knowledge, and practical skills, but they also rotate amongst several key roles (and therefore perspectives) in each of these domains. It is clearly a set of complex knowledge, skills, and values that principals bring to this particular role, which is only one of (again) many roles that principals play in their schools—and beyond.

**Table 1.** Domains and roles of principals in school-based special education inclusion

Domains	Roles
Inclusive program delivery	Visionary, advocate, innovator, interpreter, organizer
Staff collaboration	Visionary, partner, coach, conflict resolver, organizer
Parental engagement	Partner, interpreter, organizer

Clearly, “special education leadership is both multifaceted and complicated” (Cobb, 2015, p. 229). School leaders are critical contributors to fostering inclusive school contexts where students with special education needs are enabled and supported (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010).

## Methodology

The research study followed a qualitative research framework, using semi-structured interviews with school administrators and other educational stakeholders to explore the identified research questions:

1. What formal training do principals experience in supporting students with special education needs in inclusive schools?
2. What are some of the critical, and day-to-day, leadership experiences of school principals in supporting students with special education needs in inclusive schools?
3. What do other key stakeholders in schools (e.g., students, parents, teachers, school board officials) perceive as important leadership issues regarding supporting students with special education needs in inclusive schools?

The research questions emerged from a review of the literature and the identified gaps within the scholarly research literature. For example, the work of Cameron (2016) and Cobb (2015) assists in exploring the roles and perceptions of school principals in

supporting students with special education needs, but neither identifies the types of training or day-to-day experiences that they have. It is important to document the types of professional learning that principals engage in to assist in understanding their knowledge of special education practices and policies. Further, the exploration of critical incidents has been used as a way to help school leaders identify and consider ethical decision-making in school leadership (Dollarhide, Smith, & Lemberger, 2007) but has not been specifically used to consider issues related to supporting inclusive school contexts. The opportunity to develop a deeper understanding of how critical incidents inform leadership practices is important when considering how principals' values and commitments are fostered (Yamamoto et al., 2014). Finally, it is important to consider the perceptions of other educational stakeholders to provide insights into how inclusive school culture is nurtured (Simplican et al., 2015).

Following research ethics clearance, 20 participants representing four different school boards in southern Ontario took part in the study. Participants were recruited through the professional network of the authors and the university–school board partnerships that existed. A purposeful sampling process was followed to solicit input from educational stakeholders who identified inclusion as an important part of their school leadership practices (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The participants included 15 school principals, two school board officials (consultant, supervisory officer), a parent, a student, and a teacher. Principals were from elementary and secondary schools from both the public and Catholic school boards, and included French immersion school settings. Face-to-face interviews took place between March 2014 and May 2015 and were one to one and a half hours in length. All interviews took place in school contexts, usually in the office of the school administrator or in a school meeting area. Typical qualitative research approaches were followed; for example, all interviews were digitally recorded and transcriptions of the interviews were returned to participants for member checking (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Analyses of the transcripts were completed using qualitative software. Themes emerged from this data analysis and were shared with participants as a further measure of validating the themes (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

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## Results

Five key themes emerged from the analysis of the interviews. These included personal value statements in supporting inclusive schools; types of training and professional learning activities; day-to-day experiences that principals engaged in to support inclusive schools; how principals' leadership contributed to inclusive school cultures; and the impact of critical incidents in their role as principals. Pseudonyms are used in the reporting of these results below.

### Personal Value Statements

Many principals articulated statements that reflected a personal belief in school inclusion for students with special education needs. For example, one principal stated that “working with students who struggle in school or who are experiencing challenges with behaviour has always been a passion of mine” (Sheila). This same sense of support for students with special education needs was highlighted by another principal:

I visit classrooms as much as possible each day to make sure that the needs of all students, including those with special needs, are being met. I need to see that the students are happy and are working on goals that are both challenging and achievable. (Alfred)

Principals noted that it was important for them to nurture relationships and trust with students with special education needs. The value of relationships was illustrated by one principal who said, “It is all about building relationships. When you know the student, you can handle the behaviour and learning issues as they arise because you know them well and they know you well; it’s all to do with trust” (Helen). Another commented that a student’s regular suspensions in the office provided the principal with a great opportunity to foster a professional relationship with the child: “My first years as a VP [vice-principal], there was a kid who must have been suspended 15 times. We had a great relationship because we spent so much time together!” (Peggy). Nurturing relationships with students with special education needs provided an opportunity for principals to find authentic ways in which to support these students in the school community.

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Principals discussed how it was important to them that students with special education needs be included in the various school programs. One principal illustrated this through an example of a child with a significant physical disability:

We made sure that when we had our Christmas concert, she was on the stage, like everyone else, doing what everyone else was doing at the best of her abilities. And was the child happy about it? Absolutely, because she felt that she belonged, that she was worthwhile. (Alfred)

One principal expressed why this inclusion was important, saying, “I think it adds to the flavour of the school and gives opportunity for teaching other kids as well” (Felicia). The inclusion of students with special education needs was reflective of the value that principals placed on relationships—and the trust that emerges from these relationships.

## Training and Professional Learning

Participants in the study discussed the various training and professional learning experiences that they had while supporting students with special education needs in their schools. This training tended to be in three areas: previous work and life experience, usually as a special education resource teacher (SERT) or vice-principal (VP); courses and workshops, such as those through the Ontario Principal Qualification Program or school board-sponsored events; and on-the-job training and mentoring.

***Previous Work and Life Experience.*** Some participants had been SERTs and VPs before becoming principals and credited this with helping them in supporting children with special education needs and the associated special education programs. One principal commented:

I think that’s [background in special education] been a real strength of mine going into this role as an administrator because a large portion of the role of administration is that special education component. I think, personally, that you’re disadvantaged yourself if you don’t have that perspective of special education, and it can’t come through courses. It’s a combination of the theoretical work that you get from courses, the practical application of being in the role of a special education teacher, and the problem solving that goes with leadership. (Kelly)

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Being able to rely on previous experiences as a SERT or VP was significant to those participants who had held these roles prior to becoming principals.

***Courses and Workshops.*** Many participants felt that the courses they had taken as part of the provincial principal qualification program provided minimal assistance in preparing them to support students with special education needs. However, participants commented that courses they had taken specifically in special education or related areas were valuable in preparing them for their roles as principals. For example, one participant commented, “I honestly think taking my reading specialist [course] was really important to understand how children not only learn to read, but to acquire language, so I felt that was very helpful” (Sheila).

School boards were credited with providing short workshops for principals to develop greater understanding in areas such as the creation and administration of individual education plans (IEPs), support for students with autism spectrum disorder, and behavioural interventions. Some of these workshops were mandated by the school board and others were optional workshops that principals chose to attend. The general concern about some of these types of workshops was expressed by one principal who stated, “Training of safety plans, training in all that kind of thing was done centrally for everyone in the board, in a very generic kind of way” (Donna). Participants commented that they wish they had received more formal inclusive education training in courses and board-sponsored workshops. Topics that were identified included helping with transition times for students, effective parent communication, and differentiated instruction in the inclusive classroom.

***On-the-Job Training and Mentoring.*** Most participants felt that the on-the-job training they had received had significantly informed their practices and approaches to special education. This kind of training was seen as emerging from the regular work that principals do, whether that is supporting teachers, interacting with parents and caregivers, or fostering relationships with students. One principal used the analogy of a puzzle to describe on-the-job training: “I feel like I’m this puzzle maker, right? Just sort of putting pieces together based on sort of what I’ve heard around” (Jolene). Participants discussed mentoring that they had received from peer principals, from consultants, or from school board psychologists in supporting their abilities in special education. This on-the-job

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training is reflected in the day-to-day activities that principals engaged in to support students with special education needs.

### **Day-to-Day Activities**

Principals were quick to identify the daily activities that they engaged in to foster inclusive schools, including supporting students, teachers, support staff, and parents. Participants identified many administrative duties that were required to support each of these groups. However, a common theme in these day-to-day activities was principals' identification of having a "presence" in the school as foundational to the supports that they provided. Principals indicated that being accessible and available to students, teachers, and support staff was a critical value they held in fostering inclusive schools.

***Having a Presence.*** Principals indicated that if they were accessible in the school community then they had greater opportunity to support inclusive education. Being "present" meant regular interactions with students, teachers, support staff, and parents. In order to have these regular interactions, principals indicated that they occasionally had to decline work-related opportunities at the school board office or engagement in board-related initiatives. Principals discussed the conscious choices they would make to be available in the school so that students and teachers were aware of their presence. Most participants shared illustrations of how they would intentionally leave their offices and be in the hallways, classrooms, and playgrounds. They wanted students and staff alike to know that they were aware of challenging behaviours and situations. One principal stated it this way, "That presence piece, I think, is so important. Show that you will be there. If there is something happening, that you are going to be there and be a support to the people present" (Donna). Another principal explained it as:

At critical times, it's really important to be present for people, just [for them] to know you are there, and, nine times out of ten, I reassure them of what they're thinking and support them in what they want to do. They just need to know they're in the right path and I'm supporting them. (Bella)

This sense of being available and knowing what was happening on the playground, in classes, and in the hallways was foundational to the supports that principals provided on

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a regular basis to students, teachers, support staff, and parents. Beyond being accessible, principals described the multiple ways in which they supported those in the school.

**Supporting Students.** Principals expressed empathy for the students with whom they worked and felt that their presence provided support for these children in critical times. Ella shared, “Yesterday was a revolving door. I actually suspended two students, which I don’t do very often. Kids are dealing with things I’ve never had to deal with and [things] which kids shouldn’t have to deal with.” Principals shared examples of how they worked one-on-one with students, sometimes when a child had been removed from a situation due to problem behaviours or as part of a regular intervention to support a student with special needs. Principals recounted examples of students that they had worked with, some many years earlier, and how that support had seemed to make a difference for the student. Other principals described situations in which they had helped students, sometimes for significant periods of time, but without having a sense of whether their support had made a difference.

Principals also discussed scheduled activities like weekly school-based team meetings or monthly multidisciplinary team meetings in which the needs of students were raised. At these meetings, teams of teachers and school board support staff would work together to identify how to best support a student. Other principals discussed daily or regular meetings with SERTs and support staff, such as child and youth workers, personal support workers, and speech language pathologists. One principal stated:

We have these formal meetings every week with the SERTs but I don’t think there’s a day that goes by that I don’t have at least one or several meetings with one or both of the full-time SERTs...so the only way to stay on top of that is to have the ongoing conversations. (Pierre)

Although, in these situations, the principal was not directly working with a student, such involvement in the meetings and in communication with staff had an indirect effect on the support that a student received.

**Supporting Teachers.** Principals discussed the importance of regularly supporting teachers in their work with students with special education needs. One principal stated: “So if there’s a volatile situation happening, I will often be the one to go and work with

that child. I just feel that's my responsibility, and I want to make the learning environment as safe as possible for all children" (Felicia). Another principal talked about the importance of helping teachers develop planning strategies to support students within the class: "...good planning means that you're going to engage those children; plan for your most vulnerable and hardest-to-plan-for first because, if you can get a lesson and plans that are going to engage them, the rest will follow" (Kelly).

Beyond the interventions that they might provide for a student, principals discussed how their support of teachers in these situations created a more trusting and collaborative work environment. Principals shared illustrations of teachers who were fully capable of supporting a student with a special education need in their classroom but who needed just a few minutes to be able to regroup and then re-attend to a student. A principal's ability to intervene with a student in question, even for just a few minutes, could give a teacher the time needed to positively engage the student in an activity.

***Supporting Support Staff.*** Many principals spoke of the importance of also supporting support staff, such as educational assistants and personal support workers. These support workers often spend many hours each day with students with special education needs and develop strong knowledge of effective practices and interventions. Principals indicated that sometimes support staff were not included in the regularly scheduled teacher meetings, and that they needed to make a conscious effort to incorporate them into the formal support system:

The EAs weren't always at that [staff meeting], so we would try and meet at least once a term with the whole team. More of a celebratory thing...we'd have breakfast for them, because they work hard for not very much money, in my opinion. So just to help make them feel like they're appreciated for the work that they do because I think they often don't feel that way. (Stuart)

Principals recognized that often these front line staff had rich insight into how students could be effectively supported. Since support staff are not often involved in programming meetings for students with special education needs, principals had to find ways to solicit their input and engage the support staff in problem-solving discussions.



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***Supporting Parents and Caregivers.*** Many principals discussed their interactions with parents and caregivers. There was a range of experiences, from parents who expressed significant hesitation and suspicion in the special education process to others who were eager to work with the school staff. Many principals reflected the comments of the following principal:

And when the parents come in, I pull them aside to say, “Okay, how are things going with your child? Is there anything more we can do to help out? What’s your input?” In other words, “You’re a part of this process...we are a team for the benefit of the child.” (Alfred)

Principals indicated both positive and negative experiences in working with parents and caregivers. Some principals expressed insights that parents’ previous school experiences, either as a child with a special need themselves or in previous interactions with school personnel as an adult, could significantly affect their current attitudes toward school supports and processes. This was a challenge that principals indicated had to be overcome before effective practices and relationships could be established.

The day-to-day work of a school principal is complex. Principals in this study indicated that they regularly support students, teachers, support staff, and parents and that this support is diverse and challenging. Foundational to the supports they provide was having a presence in the school. Being accessible and available to students, teachers, support staff, and parents was seen as an important aspect to supporting a healthy and inclusive school culture.

## **School Culture and Leadership**

Participants indicated that an inclusive school culture was personally important to them. For some, this was because of their own experience as a student or a teacher; for example, participants shared illustrations of having witnessed the bullying of students with special education needs. Others shared examples of their own family contexts in which there was a child with a special education need and how this motivated them to try and provide leadership for inclusive schools.

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Principals described their efforts to build a strong, inclusive school culture. Principals identified that this was fostered through a whole-school approach to inclusion of students with special education needs. As one principal stated:

I also think that if you have a strong special education team—and that includes anyone, including the custodian, including the secretary—because you don't know who's impacting that particular child, if you recognize the gifts that each of us has to offer, together as a team, if we have a strong team, we will have a strong school community. (Sheila)

Principals recognized that inclusive schools could not be fostered through “just” the work of teachers. Participants shared multiple examples of how various members of their staff contributed to inclusive environments.

Many principals discussed the importance of nurturing healthy relationships in order to build this school culture:

[I can't overemphasize the] importance of community and relationships. To me, if you don't have those in place, you can beat the curriculum up and you can do whatever you want, but it's not going to work very well. So when I'm making a decision, and whatever aspect of my role as principal, I think of how it affects the community and the relationships first, and that guides my decision-making. (Felicia)

One principal spoke about how fostering a healthy, inclusive school culture can take time and significant effort:

I think to build any kind of culture in a school, you have to wear it and live it yourself, and they'll figure it out pretty quickly if you're just mouthing the words. I think it's crucial that you look at a school, you see what type of climate and atmosphere is there and let's say it's not an inclusive place, it takes time, you need to knock down the walls slowly and you need to keep presenting opportunities to people whether it's staff, parents, or kids and certainly advocate for inclusivity. (Scott)

The importance of developing healthy, professional relationships was identified by many participants as an important factor in supporting inclusive schools.

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Principals also noted that building a healthy school culture required them to be deliberate in their leadership and advocacy. Principals spoke about how their advocacy for students with special education needs was an important part of supporting an inclusive school culture. For example, one principal stated:

Now I'm advocating for them as a principal which can be tough because you have different people, different personalities working with them; some say, "Well, I can't do this, I've got this and this and too bad if they need that because that doesn't suit my program." Others will do everything they can to support that child in the classroom. (Helen)

Fostering healthy, inclusive schools was a key theme that emerged from the interviews with principals. Principals indicated that nurturing inclusive schools is a complex endeavour, often influenced over significant periods of time.

## Critical Incidents

Each of the principal participants identified critical incidents that had informed their perspective on leadership and inclusive education. For example, one participant stated:

I think every incident teaches you something. By incident I mean, every tough, challenging situation where you have to figure something out for what's best for that child and the teacher involved and the parents involved. How you work through a problem, and when you come to the end of it—well, hopefully come to the end of it—how well you think you managed it, what changes you make...I've learned from everything. Every single situation. (Donna)

Many of these critical incidents revolved around significant problem behaviours, teamwork, and family complexities. Three critical incidents are described here; these examples are reflective of many other critical incidents shared by the principal participants.

***Problem Behaviours.*** Principals shared many examples of incidents involving students with problem behaviours that had significantly affected them. Principals indicated that the severity of these situations had elevated their consciousness and had influenced their long-term consideration of inclusion. A critical incident shared by Sheila

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reflects a number of key lessons that principals shared about supporting students with significant behavioural exceptionalities. Sheila describes the context:

So I went up to my classroom, and I walked in, and he [student with problem behaviour] was in my classroom, and...essentially, he was trashing the classroom. He ripped things off the wall; he had dumped things. It was quite a mess. And I remember walking in and just being shocked.

Sheila describes how in the immediate interaction with the student after encountering the situation, she was able to maintain her composure. This immediate response seemed to de-escalate the situation. As Sheila kneeled down to pick up some of the items that had been thrown, the student quickly ran past her, and Sheila thought the student was heading down the stairs outside of the classroom. She describes what happened next, "All of a sudden, I heard this voice from behind me say, 'No matter what you say or do, you can't stop me from loving you.' It was him." This phrase was a statement that Sheila had made to the student time-and-time again in her interactions with him. Her measured response had not escalated the student's behaviour and had apparently caused him to reflect on an ethic of care (Noddings, 2012) that Sheila had been fostering with him.

As Sheila reflected on the incident, she noted that she learned a valuable lesson through the immediate interaction with the student and through the long-term work she had been doing with him:

And what he taught me, and this is my life lesson, was never to give up, always start again, because you know what? These are just things that can be fixed, that can be put back together, but that relationship is always there and you just have to try another way.

Sheila noted that in her career as a principal, she had drawn on this incident many times to help her remember the importance of relationships and a measured response when dealing with significant problem behaviours. She has also referred to the incident when working with new principals: "I always tell that story to new principals, because, I say, even when you don't think you're making a difference, when you reach that point where you don't know, keep on going." Many of the principal participants shared similar illustrations of critical incidents that had occurred with students with significant behavioural exceptionalities. Principals consistently commented that although their responses to the

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problem behaviours had not always been as they would have liked in the moment, they learned much from these interactions that had influenced their long-term growth as school leaders.

**Teamwork.** Principals in the study identified critical incidents that illustrated the importance of teamwork in fostering inclusive schools. Alfred shared an example of how the staff at one of the schools where he was principal had worked together to meet the needs of a child with a significant physical disability who needed assistance, particularly with general health and hygiene. He described the response when the child first started at the school:

When she registered at our school in JK [junior kindergarten], the custodian set up a makeshift change table in the handicapped washroom. This room turned out to be insufficient but it was the best we could do at that time.

Later, and for unrelated reasons, the school was informed that an addition would be built. As a result of the renovation, a new custodian supply area was due to be included. Alfred recalled:

It was the custodian who led the proposal of converting this area [custodian supply area] into a spacious and most suitable room for this one child. He knew that by making his suggestion, it would mean a further workload for him, for days and months and years, as far as carting whatever was necessary to clean the rooms at the end of the school day, but he was ready to proceed for the sake of this child.

Alfred indicated that the willingness of the custodian to relinquish a space that would have made his work easier for the sake of the child provided a powerful example to the rest of the school staff. The actions of the custodian served as a critical incident; his response drew attention to the needs of the student and served as a catalyst to a whole-school response to the inclusion of the child. Alfred stated that it reminded everyone of

the importance of putting others first before ourselves, and our sacrifices can indeed make a big difference in the lives of those who struggle with various kinds of disabilities. I believe the child herself, although non-communicative, did indeed

communicate her appreciation through her grunts and smiles and general positive demeanour.

A staff that works together for the inclusion of all students is important to the success of inclusive schools. Alfred noted, “You need to have the right people with the right knowledge and background to understand the kinds of special needs that are there and adjust accordingly, putting them first and not yourselves.” Many principals provided similar examples of teachers, front-office staff, custodial staff, and bus drivers who made special efforts to support students with special education needs in their schools. Leading by example and fostering a supportive team environment were key aspects that principals identified in ensuring these kinds of inclusive environments.

***Family Complexities.*** Principals regularly shared examples of situations and critical incidents that reflected the complex family dynamics that intersect with the school experiences of children. Donna shared an example of a young student that is illustrative of the experiences shared by other principals:

This little guy arrived in Grade 3 with very little literacy, very little school experience, first language in place, starting to have second language in place, but still pretty significant gaps. Some play language—I would say playground language—but not a lot of school language...so we spent two years working with him.

Donna stated that as the child progressed into Grade 6 concerns continued to emerge that there were more serious issues involved beyond learning difficulties:

When he moved into Grade 6, his family fell apart and there was violence in the family. The mother was taken from the family, he was placed in foster care, and it didn't really work well, and he fell apart. And he fell apart violently...

The school staff found it difficult to support the child and his family due to the complex family situation and the child's increasingly violent and aggressive behaviour. Donna stated, “It was a lot of balancing, supporting staff, supporting his parents and his foster parents, supporting the child himself, supporting the kids around that child who were observing some of the things that were going on.” The staff made significant efforts to support the child through this time. The lack of resources within the school led to

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a change in the child's placement, and he was placed into a specialized and focused behaviour program. Technically, the child should not have been placed in the program since he was considered underage for it. However, Donna, the principal, fought for the child to be in the program since she felt that it would provide the kind of support the child needed. The child stayed in that program for three years with the same teacher. The teacher developed a strong relationship with the child and provided the structure the child needed as he transitioned into secondary school.

On reflecting on the complex situation, Donna stated that sometimes in the role of principal she had to help navigate the various resources available to support families and children in crisis. These resources are not always readily available and the principal has to sometimes fight to access them. As Donna stated, "And we had to really fight some protocols and some things to get there, but it worked, and that was good to see that happen. But, again, part of it is navigating all those different resources." Other principals shared similar examples of very challenging and diverse family situations and incidents that significantly affected their leadership practices. Principals are often seen as the connection between what takes place in school and what takes place outside of school.

The three subthemes that emerged predominantly from the study of these critical incidents involved significant behavioural issues, teamwork, and family complexities. These critical incidents, and the many others that were shared, were linked by the principal participants to the shaping of their beliefs about inclusive education. The incidents were deeply meaningful to the participants, and they attributed the value they placed on inclusive education to these types of experiences.

## **Discussion**

As the participants in this study reflected on their day-to-day experiences with supporting students with special education needs, a number of key themes emerged, including the importance of fostering an inclusive school culture. Principals identified that an inclusive school culture is framed by their own active presence in their schools and through their ongoing support of students, teachers, support staff, and parents. Principals noted that they had to be deliberate in being accessible and available. Sometimes this meant declining opportunities for board-wide professional learning. They also noted that sometimes

the previous school experiences of parents or caregivers could significantly affect their current willingness to engage with the school.

These day-to-day experiences provide an opportunity to further consider the work of Cobb (2015). For example, the principals in this study are clearly essential in interpreting board and provincial special education policy. These policies are implemented in the day-to-day work of principals. In this work, principals have to oversee student progress, coordinate collaborative meetings, and communicate effectively with parents. Yet, when discussing their day-to-day experiences, principals focused much more on the relational aspect of their work. As such, they function more as partners, interpreters, and coaches than implementers of inclusive education policy (Cobb, 2015).

Principals also identified critical incidents as having influenced their perspectives on inclusive education. Critical incidents provided an opportunity for participants to reflect on their leadership practices and to pinpoint how the incidents had influenced them (Hanhimäki & Tirri, 2009). Participants were able to make connections between these incidents, some of which had occurred many years earlier, and their current perspectives on inclusive education. For some participants, a critical incident did not involve them directly but was an observation they made of a staff member who engaged in inclusive practices. Others clearly described very meaningful and personal illustrations that had affected their leadership of inclusive education settings. Further illustration of how critical incidents can be used as a framework for professional learning are provided later in this section.

These day-to-day activities and critical incidents present an opportunity for emerging leaders and current principals to explore how they can support inclusive schools. As one principal stated:

If you are going to move into a position of leadership, you need to learn how to listen, you need to learn how to watch, you need to learn how to plan ahead, and some of the only ways you can plan ahead to see what's going to be a problem is if you ask people who have been through it. (Janna)

This advice is well positioned as Canadian school leaders continue to wrestle with what inclusive education “looks like.” Despite years of research and professional learning that have supported the development of skills and resources for teachers in developing inclusive classes, there has only been limited attention given to how principals can support



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inclusive schools (Edmunds & Macmillan, 2010). The positive results of inclusion, in terms of student learning outcomes, indicates the need for further work in exploring how inclusive school cultures can be fostered (Cobb, 2015; Kambouka et al., 2007). Thus, it is important to consider how school leaders can support inclusive education and how critical incidents can be used to support principals in the development of inclusive leadership practices.

## **Leadership and Inclusion**

School leadership matters: effective principals support effective schools (Fullan, 2011). The direct effect of school leadership on student achievement is minimal (Hallinger & Heck, 1998; Leithwood, Jantzi, & Steinbach, 1999; Shin & Slater, 2010), but the indirect effect on student achievement through educator self-efficacy, commitment, and beliefs is quite high (Ross & Gray, 2006). This is reflected in this study where principals clearly communicated their commitment to inclusive schools and placed a high value on fostering equitable environments. Their presence and interactions with students spoke to their commitment to such environments.

Principals are involved with setting direction, developing people, shaping the organization, and designing the program of schools (Leithwood et al., 2006). The principals in this study shared examples of all four of these leadership practices. They discussed the importance of being intentional, invitational, and present. Illustrations of how they supported their staff were shared. Principals discussed that sometimes shaping the organizational culture can be a slow and tedious process. They also referred to how they have designed the programs within their schools to support inclusion. Many of these leadership responsibilities for nurturing inclusive schools are technical in nature, such as overseeing school team meetings and ensuring appropriate human and technical resources are available for students. Certainly, as identified by Zaretsky, Moreau, and Faircloth (2008), this is part of what it means to be a principal in a Canadian school. At the same time as they are carrying out the day-to-day administrative and technical work of supporting students with special education needs, principals are also fostering the cultures of their schools, whether they do so intentionally or not (Gülşen & Gülenay, 2014). Relatedly, it is important to recall that supporting an inclusive school culture not only benefits students with special education needs, but all students (Cobb, 2015).

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One of the goals of inclusive education is to increase authentic involvement and the potential for success of all students in school, particularly those students with special education needs who are often marginalized in schools (Zaretsky, Moreau, & Faircloth, 2008). That being the case, leadership within these contexts has to be explored further to consider how to most effectively support students with special education needs. For example, further exploration of Cobb's (2015) examination of the domains and roles of principals, specifically in Canada, might provide further insight into how principals support inclusive schools. It is interesting to note that Cobb's three domains of support that principals provide in inclusive schools—inclusive program delivery, staff collaboration, and parent engagement—are reflected in the subthemes that emerged from the principals' sharing of critical incidents. Further study needs to consider how critical incidents intersect with these domains and roles.

Clearly, the participants in this study stated that the limited training they had received in principal qualification programs was not satisfactory. An important step in rectifying this is to ensure that principals are not just learning about the legal aspects of inclusive education but also the emotional and affective aspects (Killoran et al., 2013; Yamamoto et al., 2014). By doing so, principals will be supported in their understanding of how to influence inclusive school contexts (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010).

### **Critical Incidents as a Framework for Professional Learning**

Critical incidents provide an opportunity to engage in ethical reflection (Hanhimäki & Tirri, 2009) and to consider leadership dilemmas and issues (Dollarhide, Smith, & Lemberger, 2007). Yamamoto et al. (2014) stated that critical incidents which “initially caused disequilibrium, determined if the view of self was altered, solidified, or remained fragmented” (p. 177). As such, critical incidents can provide an opportunity for professional learning about inclusive education.

Each of the principals involved in this study readily shared examples of critical incidents that they identified as being formative in their development as school principals. As can be seen through the examples shared by Sheila, Alfred, and Donna, certainly these incidents caused principals to reflect carefully on their views of themselves and of their school contexts. The incidents caused the principals to reflect on who they are as leaders and what kind of leaders they want to be in the future. In the case of Sheila, a critical

incident involving a student with a problem behaviour was instrumental in her long-term commitment to fostering strong, positive relationships with students with special education needs. For Alfred, a situation involving the willingness of a custodian to use space that could have made his work easier, in favour of providing space for the needs of a student with a physical disability, served as an example of inclusion for the whole school. Donna discussed how a complex family situation helped her understand the importance of the principal in linking various resources in order to provide for a student.

Critical incidents are key to supporting principals' views of inclusion since past experiences inform their perceptions of effective practices (Cameron, 2016). Yet many principals are not aware of the advantage of these occurrences as it pertains to professional learning. Further research as well as effective training and learning opportunities should be developed to assist school administrators in recognizing and seizing these critical moments in order to make their schools more inclusive. If educators are provided with professional learning opportunities to reflect on their own experiences, and those of others, these opportunities can lead to changed practices (Sider & Ashun, 2013). The development of case studies that are reflective of the day-to-day experiences and critical incidents of the participants in this study could be an effective tool to help leverage these experiences to benefit other school leaders. Further, how school leaders interact with and support students with special needs serves as an important determinant of how teachers engage students in inclusive classrooms (Howell, 2016). Thus, if a goal of Canadian schools is to support inclusive classrooms, principals must model the way.

## **Conclusion**

There has been limited attention given in the scholarly literature to the training that school principals have in supporting students with special education needs. What is clear through this exploratory study is that principals wish that they had received more professional learning opportunities, both in the provincial principal qualification program and in the in-service workshops. The day-to-day experiences of principals illustrate that the technical training they require—from program development to the monitoring of student progress—is important, but that they particularly value the importance of being accessible and available to students, teachers, support staff, and parents. Further, participants in

this study identified critical incidents that they can specifically point to as having influenced their perspectives on, and commitment to, fostering inclusive school environments.

The work of Cobb (2015) in identifying domains and roles of principals in inclusive settings is valuable in understanding the work that principals do. It is clear from this study that principals do engage in activities such as partnering, organizing, advocating, and interpreting in working with parents and staff in inclusive program delivery. We can extend Cobb's work by illustrating these roles through the experiences of participants in this study both in their day-to-day activities and through the critical incidents that they have identified. The identification of critical incidents by principals appears to have helped them in articulating how they have helped foster inclusive school contexts. As such, critical incidents have led to reflection on practice (Hanhimäki & Tirri, 2009). Critical incidents also appear to provide a suitable framework by which leadership dilemmas and issues related to inclusive school leadership can be explored (Dollarhide, Smith, & Lemberger, 2007).

One participant in this study noted that future principals should be reminded of the importance that principals place on supporting students and their families:

We're in a service position. It's not a "power thing," so keep students and parents front and centre. These are people's kids and they love them. Sometimes we get caught in roles and programs, but the reality is that we wouldn't be here if not for the families and kids. If this were your child, what would you want to know that the school has done for this child? Because that's what it's all about. It's about the kids. (Ella)

Thus, this study presents an opportunity to consider the ways in which principals can support students with special education needs. This article also addresses a gap in the literature: there is limited scholarly research that examines the role of the school principal in supporting students with special education needs (Edmunds & Macmillan, 2010). Clearly, further research examining how school principals provide leadership for inclusion needs to be completed. As scholars examine strategies to foster inclusive classroom environments, it is also critical to consider how principals can be supported in nurturing inclusive school contexts.

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