

Leadership Impacts on Inclusive Education:
Shifting Practice to Meet the Needs of 21st Century Learners

by

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Abstract

Inclusive education is an ever-evolving area of practice, requiring teachers and educational leaders at school, jurisdiction, and provincial levels to adapt and adjust policies and initiatives to support the diverse learning needs present in Alberta's 21st century schools. Currently, inclusive education is focused in primarily three main areas, with the first area centered around creating cultures of inclusivity with a focus on collaborative teaching and learning initiatives, leadership support through policy and the Alberta Leadership Quality Standard (Alberta Education, 2020), as well as provincial level special education coding requirements. The second area of inclusion, supporting inclusive environments, ensures educational leaders are supporting all learners through the use of culturally relevant curriculum and land-based learning initiatives, providing market choice in education, the implementation of inclusive and supportive spaces, as well as classroom design and use of technology as a universal support. The third area of study, building capacity, explores leadership support of teacher professional development and growth, teacher supervision and evaluation practices, mentorship and modeling, as well as the effective use of differentiated teaching strategies, providing all students with an equal opportunity to demonstrate their learning and understanding.

The subsequent review of the research literature on leadership support of inclusive education practices found much work needs to be done in Alberta to foster inclusivity, as current provincial level policies act as barriers to inclusion, resulting in the province modeling a system of integration, which leaves school-based educational leaders in a limited position to carry out broader sweeping change initiatives for the benefit of Alberta's diverse learning needs.

Keywords: leadership, inclusive education, special education, collaboration

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Leadership Impacts on Inclusive Education

In Alberta, inclusive education has become a standard norm expected of all teachers and administrators as they work to support the needs of all students. Inclusive education however is often referred to as a blanket term describing the integration of special needs students, as well as students with varying academic, cognitive, and physical abilities into a general classroom environment. Alberta Education defines inclusive education as being:

Not just about learners with special needs. It is an attitude approach that embraces diversity and learner differences and promotes equal opportunities for all learners in Alberta. Alberta's education system is built on a values-based approach to accepting responsibility for all children and students. (Government of Alberta, 2020, para. 1)

It is imperative for school-based administrators, divisional, and provincial educational leaders to support schools and classroom teachers as they work together to build a strong foundation to ensure the success of all students. Although Alberta Education recognizes the varying needs, diversity, and differences among students, educational leaders must ensure a multi-level team approach at a divisional and school level, focusing on the culture, environment and capacity surrounding inclusive education practices and their alignment with the needs of 21st century learners.

Guiding Questions and Purpose Statement

As educational leaders, it is our responsibility to ensure the equitable distribution of services and ability for all students to access Alberta curriculum at an appropriate level. Further research in areas of school culture, environment, and teacher capacity is needed to determine how administrative leadership can best support inclusive education at a classroom level. An examination of the literature will be completed to identify significant findings that support

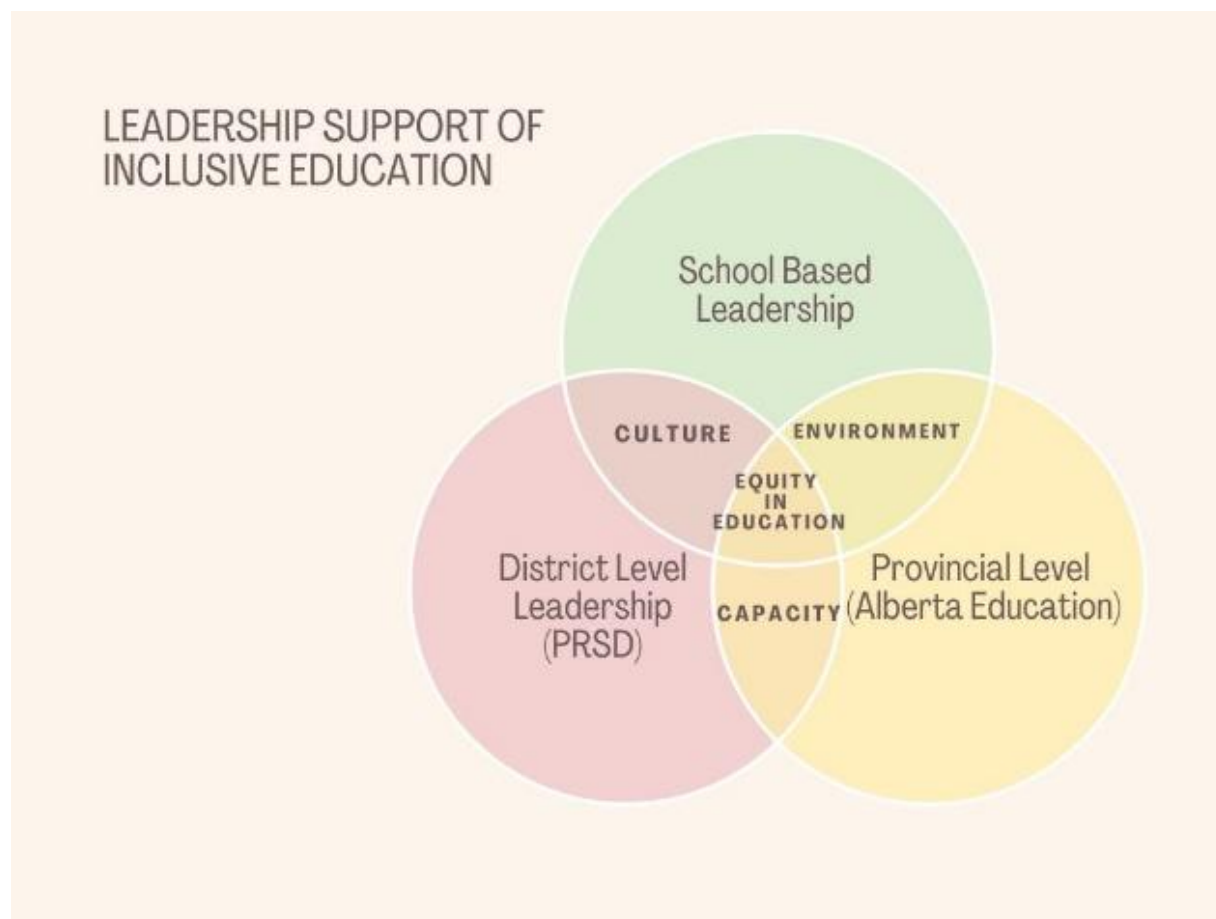
successful inclusive education leadership initiatives, while exploring the following two research questions:

- What do successful leaders need to do to fully support inclusive education practices and ensure academic success for all students?
- What barriers exist and how can we shift our current model of inclusivity to meet the needs of 21st century students?

The purpose of this review is to gain insights on how educational leaders can support inclusive education practices at a provincial, divisional, and school level and examine the barriers preventing our current model of inclusivity from fully supporting Alberta's students. Further studies are needed to validate ways in which successful educational leaders are supporting teachers and students under our current inclusive education model.

Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

This literature review has been presented using the conceptual framework outlined in Figure 1, analyzing leadership practices as they relate to inclusive education in regards to the culture of a school and school division, the environment in which inclusive education is flourishing, and ways in which educational leaders build teacher capacity in this area of study. Figure 1, an original conceptual framework, shows the relationships supporting equity in education. Equity in education is framed by three overarching themes, including culture, environment, and capacity. Culture, Environment, and capacity are all shaped and supported by leadership at three hierarchical levels including school-based leadership, district level leadership, as well as leadership at a provincial level.

Figure 1*Leadership Support of Inclusive Education*

As the culture of inclusive education has become increasingly embedded in our daily practice, literature will be reviewed for topics surrounding the impact of collaborative teaching and learning initiatives on inclusive education, as well as how district and school leaders support equity in education through policy and practice, using research-based practices and pedagogy. Alberta's current medical model of special education coding will also be reviewed, as well as leaders supporting teachers through the Alberta Leadership Quality Standard (Alberta Education, 2020). Focusing on the environment surrounding inclusive education, literature will be reviewed examining leadership support for Indigenous learners through the implementation of culturally relevant curriculum and land-based learning initiatives, providing choice in education, as well as

the importance of leadership-backed inclusive spaces, school and classroom design, and technology to support all students. When looking at educational leaders developing the capacity of teachers in order to support inclusive education initiatives, this thematic literature review will analyze how school leaders support professional development and growth, supervision and evaluation policies and practices, mentorship, as well as developing the teacher capacity of differentiated teaching practices.

Creating a Culture of Inclusivity

In order for inclusive education to be successful, it is imperative educational leaders foster a culture of learning and inclusivity within their schools. Leaders can work with teachers to create cultures of inclusivity through collaborative teaching and learning initiatives, support through local policy, as well as the Alberta Leadership Quality Standard (Alberta Education, 2020). In their research on the traits of effective special education teachers, Fisher et al. (2003, as cited in Eccleston, 2010) found, “successful special educators are masters of collaboration” (p. 41). True classroom inclusion also requires educational leaders re-evaluate provincial special education coding practices which are currently in alignment with an outdated medical model of education.

Collaborative Teaching and Learning Initiatives

Educational leaders are “in an ideal position to build trust among staff, promote collaboration among staff, and support student achievement goals” (Preston & Barnes, 2017, p. 8). Effective school leaders use collaboration to promote inclusive learning initiatives, and assist in fostering pride amongst teachers. Supportive educational leaders who focus on inclusive education have the ability to empower classroom teachers to feel confident in supporting all students. McGhie-Richmond et al. (2013) state, “some teachers may view students with disabilities as beyond their personal instructional responsibility” (p. 202). When educational

leaders provide teachers with a collaborative school culture, inclusive practices become a shared responsibility in which all teachers are accountable to all students.

Research literature centered around embedding collaborative teaching practices within a school culture demonstrates the ability of teachers to share knowledge, experience, and dialogue successes. Eccleston (2010) writes, “including students in the general education classroom effectively requires multi-professional collaboration. Scheduled collaboration between the special education specialist and general classroom teacher is an effective way to positive outcomes for exceptional students” (p. 45). Zagona’s et al. (2017) research also states the importance of leadership backed collaboration:

As schools work to shift to more inclusive placements for students with significant disabilities, it is important for educators to feel prepared to engage in conversations and have meaningful discussions about the benefits, strategies, and best practices involved in inclusive education. (p. 176)

Further research also finds successful leaders can elevate general classroom teachers' knowledge and understanding of inclusive education through collaboration as “school leaders in inclusive schools have to promote collaborative processes and lesson development with the goal of the best education for all students” (Lambrecht et al., 2022, p. 947). Overall, collaboration at multiple levels including school-based and teacher leadership emphasize its importance and the resulting teamwork created leads to more positive views of inclusion and improved learning outcomes for students (McGhie-Richmond et al., 2013).

Leadership Support through Policy and the LQS

Educational leaders in Alberta can improve collaboration and create inclusive learning cultures within their schools by providing support through a policy context. Supportive inclusive education policies exist at multiple levels, including locally at a divisional level, as well as

through adherence to the Alberta Leadership Quality Standard (Alberta Education, 2020) and the provincial standards for inclusive education. Educational leaders must adhere to the Alberta Leadership Quality Standard, whereby “the success of all members of the school community requires inclusive environments in which diversity is respected and members of the school community are welcomed, cared for, respected, and safe” (Alberta Education, 2020, p. 2).

Current research on inclusive education shows, “despite years of attempted inclusive education reform in Alberta, many of Alberta’s teachers feel unsupported in their efforts to offer inclusive classroom instruction” (Williamson & Gilham, 2017, p. 50). At a provincial level, Alberta Education has attempted to address this common concern over a number of years through policy initiatives including the current Indicators of Inclusive Schools (Alberta Education, 2013) resource as well as through the fourth Leadership Quality Standard (Alberta Education, 2020) competency which requires educational leaders to focus on “fostering the school community equality and respect with regard to rights as provided for in the Alberta Human Rights Act and the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms” (p. 5). The Indicators of Inclusive Schools document presently located on Alberta Education’s inclusive education webpage presents itself as “a synthesis of research on inclusion, school improvement and effective instruction” (p. 5) and as a resource offering “information and tools that school leaders can use to reflect on how their schools are demonstrating an inclusive approach” (p. 5). Developed as a tool to support educational leaders, the Indicators of Inclusive Schools document provides an way for educators to identify “the factors that have lead to a particular situation so that the leadership team can identify what behaviours, actions, inactions or conditions need to be changed to prevent recurrence of similar situations or outcomes” (p. 6), with the ultimate aim of supporting leaders as they in turn provide teachers with the foundation necessary to strengthen inclusivity at a classroom level.

Within the province of Alberta, school divisions have individual policies and administrative procedures to guide and support educational leaders in order to ensure teachers and students are provided necessary classroom support. For example, locally within the Peace River School Division, administrative procedures have been created to address support for inclusive education to “ensure the safety, belonging, and full participation of all members of the school community” (Peace River School Division, 2019a). Administrative Procedure 175 (2019a) outlines procedures surrounding generalized inclusive practices for students and staff, whereas Administrative Procedure 213 (Peace River School Division, 2019b) centers around inclusive education instructional practices, serving as an acknowledgment of the division’s “need to provide educational opportunities that are flexible and responsive to the needs of individual students, embraces diversity and learner differences and promotes equal opportunities for all learners” (Peace River School Division, 2019b). Policies and procedures in place across the education system at varying levels provides educational leaders with a foundation to support teachers and students as they navigate an increasingly inclusive education system.

Special Education Coding Practices

Inclusive practices are currently embedded into the culture of Alberta’s schools, with provincial policies in place regarding the medical coding of students identified as having mild, moderate, or severe needs. In theory, this coding system is in place to allow teachers and educational leaders to provide appropriate support to differently-abled students. However, in reality this current standard of practice is viewed as an outdated deficit focused model. Current research on Alberta’s special education coding model finds:

The medical model of disability supports the parallel system; thus, it often works as an obstacle to an inclusive education system. Currently, Alberta’s inclusive education programme rests upon the medical model of disability. This model can be pernicious

because it stigmatises labelled students as abnormal, subnormal, or bearing deficits.

(Williamson & Gilham, 2014, p. 554)

Further research literature surrounding the practice of special education coding finds “the current process for identifying students for support in Alberta is based on the psycho-medical or individual deficit model, where difficulties with school and education are considered to lie within the student” (Graham & Jahnukainen, 2011, p. 15). Graham and Jahnukainen’s research also raised concerns regarding the time and cost associated with documenting disabilities to justify coding, whereas resources and funding could be spent more effectively helping all students found to be performing poorly. Relevant research literature focusing on giftedness also finds a disconnect between diagnosis and labeling. Matthews and Dai (2014) write, “the act of assigning a student to a category such as ‘gifted’ ignores cultural, social, emotional, physical and intellectual needs and attributes” (p. 341). Matthews and Foster’s (2005) research on giftedness also noted IQ as being the traditional gold standard, however proper identification of giftedness is more complex, requiring more extensive diagnostic data in combination with dynamic classroom assessment approaches.

While historically coding was used in Alberta to provide educational leaders with additional funding to support inclusive programming, this is no longer the case. Alberta Education states, “Inclusive Education funding is allocated to school authorities through a formula that aims to ensure an equitable distribution of funding. Funding is not determined through coding” (Government of Alberta, 2020, para. 8). Currently, Alberta Education directly indicates special education coding is no longer used to determine funding to provide specialized supports and services. However, the question remains: why are Alberta’s differently-abled students still being medically coded mild, moderate, or severe under an inclusive model? If educational leaders are to move inclusion forward, continuing to provincially label students

based on the severity of their needs simply for data tracking, rather than for a practical purpose such as funding leaves Alberta's schools, teachers, and leaders lagging behind due to antiquated, non-inclusionary, deficit-based thinking and practices.

Supporting Inclusive Environments

The viability of inclusive and equitable education hinges on an educational leader's ability to create a supportive learning environment for all students. Inclusive learning environments can take on a variety of forms, including utilizing culturally relevant curriculum to provide all learners with representation, land-based learning initiatives, choice in schooling, creating and utilizing inclusive and supportive spaces, as well as placing a renewed emphasis on classroom design and technology. One of the principles of inclusive education in Alberta as documented by Alberta Education is the removal of barriers within learning environments, as "all education partners work together to remove barriers within the learning environment so that all learners are successful and can participate in the school community" (Government of Alberta, 2020, para. 13).

Culturally Relevant Curriculum and Land-based Learning Initiatives

One way in which educational leaders can remove learning environment barriers to promote inclusivity within their schools is through the implementation of culturally relevant curriculum and land-based learning initiatives supportive of Indigenous students. Current research promotes the practice of providing students with culturally relevant curriculum as it is beneficial for all students. The Alberta Leadership Quality Standard (Alberta Education, 2020) also addresses the need for educational leaders to support culturally relevant curriculum and land-based learning initiatives through its fifth competency, "Supporting the Application of Foundational Knowledge about First Nations, Metis, and Inuit" (p. 6). In their research on culturally relevant programming, Crooks, Burleigh, and Sisco (2015) found an "increased sense

of belonging also increased student engagement beyond the programming. That is, belonging that was nurtured in the programs provided a solid foundation and confidence for further success in the broader school context” (p. 109).

Crooks’, Burleigh, Snowshoe, et al. (2015) research identified Canada’s approach to Indigenous education as not meeting the needs of Indigenous learners. Their research also found four themes in regards to the importance of culturally responsive programming, including “programming was perceived to contribute to student success; participants experienced improved relationships, and an increased sense of belonging; participants gained confidence and leadership skills; and the provision of culturally relevant experiences and role models was key to program success” (p. 216). It is imperative for educational leaders to address the needs of Indigenous learners through the implementation of culturally relevant programming as it “allows Aboriginal youth to alternate between cultural and Western identities in response to contextual cues” (LaFromboise, et al., 1993, as cited in Crooks, Burleigh & Snowshoe, 2015, p. 217).

Further research literature surrounding beneficial leadership practices for Indigenous programming finds educational leaders who authentically value culture, beliefs, and place the physical, mental, cultural, and spiritual wellbeing of Indigenous students at the center of school activities make a significant contribution toward the achievement and participation of Indigenous learners (Davies & Halsey, 2019). Educational leaders can authentically support Indigenous learners by implementing land-based learning initiatives to bridge the gap between current, traditional models of education with a more student-centered approach. Davies and Halsey’s research also found “leadership that is grounded through respectful acknowledgement and understanding of Indigenous culture and wider RRR [rural, regional, and remote] community is required” (p. 114). Land-based learning initiatives can help further build an understanding of, and connection to Indigenous communities in a respectful learning environment. Educational

leaders have the opportunity to connect Indigenous learners with traditional land-based teachings. Through land-based learning initiatives, educational leaders can assist Indigenous learners in “finding a sense of belonging and identity, piece by piece, and nurturing this is a (re)connection to culture and community” (Fast et al., 2021, p. 131). Fast et al.’s research also states:

These acts of reclamation have given youth a chance to create a wider web of knowledge and resistance to the colonial paradigm, creating deeper relations with the Indigenous community, speaking more openly with the new knowledge, and becoming more of who they have always been. (p. 131)

Alongside culturally relevant programming and land-based learning initiatives, current research also finds successful inclusion of Indigenous students is also dependent on the preservation, revitalization, and use of traditional languages (Tunison, 2013). Further research notes the significance of language, as “even after controlling for child and family factors, speaking an Aboriginal language was associated with positive school outcomes for young children” (Goulet, 2001, as cited in Steeves & Carr-Stewart, 2017, p. 36).

Choice in Education

Providing choice in education is one way in which educational leaders can ensure the diverse needs of all students are met. Choice in education provides families with alternative learning options for their child from private, charter, public schools, virtual learning, and home-schooling options. In Loeb’s et al. (2011) current research on school-choice, it was determined:

If per-pupil funding follows children into the schools that they attend, schools that are in high demand will thrive with students and funding while schools that experience low levels of demand may succumb to closure if they cannot improve and thus increase their appeal to families. (p. 145)

Providing families the option of market choice in education can enhance the ability for students with diverse needs to be supported in an inclusive environment, particularly for families located in an area in which a public school may be subjected to limited funding or budgetary constraints. Loeb et al. (2011) determined from a leadership perspective, “school personnel in many instances can be better situated and more motivated to respond to the particular needs of their students and communities than more distant bureaucratic leaders” (p. 146).

Educational leaders at a provincial level have the ability to empower parents and improve parental involvement by allowing school market choice within the province of Alberta. In her research on determinants of school choice, Bosetti (2004) states, “a system of school choice will create competition among schools for student enrolment resulting in schools being more responsive to the needs and interests of parents and students by providing different types of programs for different types of families” (p. 387). From an inclusive education lens, increased choice in school allows parents to place their child in a school they feel will best meet their learning needs, and when intrinsically motivated through choice, will in turn result in increased involvement in their child’s education. Further, Bosetti and Butterfield’s (2016) research on charter schools found they offer a variety of educational approaches in novel combinations including differentiated instruction, inquiry-based, learning and individual program plans among others. In addition, Bosetti and Butterfield acknowledge charter schools “provide programs for students under-served in the local public education system (gifted students, at-risk-youth, second language learners, and girls)” (p. 116).

Inclusive and Supportive Spaces

Alongside educational leaders supporting diverse learning needs through market choice in schools, today’s education spaces have become increasingly supportive and inclusive at a school level. Gone are the days of seclusion rooms and classroom exclusion for students

requiring additional support. Today's classrooms have evolved into spaces of equality, meeting the needs of the students they serve. Educational leaders can support classroom teachers as they work to create inclusive and supportive spaces for all students. Korinek and deFur's (2016) research on supporting student self regulation found students with behavioural challenges and difficulty with self-regulation are associated with poorer learner outcomes, including under achievement, absenteeism, drop out, as well as strained relationships with peers and adults.

Benade (2019) explores flexible learning environments as being "dedicated 'safe' or 'happy' places for ASD students, the creative and flexible use of breakout spaces by teachers and students, and elements of building design that both provide a range of different spaces to suit different children" (p. 9). Benade also provides a note of caution, stating, "flexible learning spaces and the range of pedagogical practices they make possible are either inclusive, or actively exclude some occupants and users of those spaces" (p. 9). Current research literature on inclusive school spaces examining school design and the influence of physical environment on student achievement determined "the places and spaces where students learn make a difference in their achievement levels" (Tanner, 2009, p. 394), exemplifying the need for educational leaders to ensure environment and space are considered a priority to provide inclusivity in a school and classroom setting.

Classroom Design and Technology

Educational leaders can create equality for all learners by designing inclusive learning environments, which includes supporting teachers as they implement universal designs for learning, additional classroom level supports, and provide increased access to classroom level technology. Providing access to technology is paramount to the success of inclusive education as "technology and social networks can provide a phenomenal avenue for communication and building student / educator relationships" (Miller, 2013, p. 137). Miller's research literature on

technology and education also found “work within educational institutions needs to focus on all students having similar digital opportunities” (p. 139), and “it is the responsibility of educational leaders to prepare students not just for today, but to become positive contributors to society, which now includes as large digital component” (p. 144). When used in an educational context, technology is a powerful tool able to provide students with diverse learning needs greater access to curriculum and inclusion in the larger, digital world.

For the effective implementation of technology to support inclusive education practices, it is important for educational leaders to work with teachers to put into practice universal design for learning (UDL) within their classrooms. UDL allows for greater student access to curriculum, by providing appropriate challenges via a flexible format, allowing students to demonstrate learning in a variety of ways through the use of flexible lesson design, assessment, and technology (Hitchcock et al., 2002). Educational leadership backing of UDL supports teachers in allowing diverse learners to demonstrate understanding in multiple formats, particularly through the use of technology as a universal support. Hitchcock’s et al. research literature on UDL states, “when implemented, the UDL curriculum will be ideally suited to supporting true access, participation, and progress in the general curriculum for students with disabilities, and indeed, to improving learning opportunities for all students” (p. 14). Advocating for the use of technology within a UDL model, “allows students to focus their metacognitive processes on higher order thinking, as opposed to decoding or other low levels of knowledge acquisition associated with Bloom’s taxonomy” (Messinger-Willman & Marino, 2010, p. 8).

Meeting the diverse learning needs of a 21st century classroom requires the availability of universal supports through a universal design for learning framework, as well as the use of technology. Educational leaders can ensure equal learning opportunities for all students by making the use of technology and flexible learning strategies a universally available classroom

level support, rather than a support solely available to students identified as having a learning disability or holding a special education code. Ribble and Miller's (2013) research reiterates the importance of universally available technological supports, noting, "work within educational institutions needs to focus on all students having similar digital opportunities. Efforts should be made and monitored to ensure that all groups have access to technology, and if there is not, accommodations need to be made" (pp. 139-140). Moore (2019) also recommends the availability of supports for all students advocating, "let's teach kids the skills and decriminalize supports they need to prevail. They will self-regulate their learning and get what they need before they fail" (5:42).

Capacity

In order to successfully create cultures of inclusivity and provide supportive learning environments focused on cultural relevance, choice in education, inclusive and supportive spaces, as well as classroom design and technology, educational leaders must build the capacity of their teaching staff. Capacity building can take a variety of forms including leadership support of teacher professional development and growth, teacher supervision and evaluation practices, modeling and mentorship, as well as the effective use of differentiated instruction. This standard is met through the sixth competency of the Alberta Leadership Quality Standard (Alberta Education, 2020), "Providing Instructional Leadership" (p. 6), which contains the following indicators, including:

- #6 a) building the capacity of teacher to respond to the learning needs of all students
- #6 b) implementing professional growth, supervision and evaluation processes to ensure that all teachers meet the *Teaching Quality Standard*

- #6 d) facilitating mentorship and induction supports for teachers and principals, as required

By ensuring they are achieving each of the above competency indicators, educational leaders can help grow the capacity of teachers to serve diverse learning requirements within their schools and within the larger organization.

Leadership Support of Teacher Professional Development and Growth

Educational leaders can aid in the building of teacher capacity in regards to current inclusive education practices by providing teachers with appropriate professional development opportunities. In the province of Alberta, teachers have access to professional development at multiple levels including school based, jurisdictional, regional, as well as provincial. Funding for teachers seeking out additional professional development can also be provided through individual school budgets, the Alberta Teachers Association, and allocations within collective bargaining agreements between school jurisdictions and the provincial level education authority. Current research literature on professional development states, “prolonged interventions are more effective than shorter ones, and that combinations of tools for learning and reflective experience serve the purpose in a better way” (Avalos, 2011, p. 17).

Avalos (2011) also found professional development in the form of collaboration and networking among colleagues was strengthening to formal experiences. Borko et al. (2010) write, “the focus in most of the current PD literature is on providing a long-term, inquiry or learner-centered structure that supports teachers as they collaboratively develop the professional knowledge they need to use in their own context” (p. 548). Borko’s et al. research also noted high-quality professional development to be situated in practice and focused on students’ learning, requiring teachers to engage in concrete teaching practices, observation, reflection, and assessment. Successful educational leaders advocate and promote quality professional

development for school staff (Preston & Barnes, 2017), which is imperative to the success of inclusive education initiatives.

The Province of Alberta currently has standards in place to support teacher capacity through the implementation of professional growth, supervision and evaluation processes as outlined in the Alberta Leadership Quality Standard (Alberta Education, 2020). In order for professional growth plans to build teacher capacity, educational leaders must ensure they are embedded as part of their professional practice, rather than a top-down initiative, becoming nothing more than an annual, procedural document. Research literature on professional growth plans acknowledges, “because they are teacher directed, TPGP’s [(Teacher Professional Growth Plans)] honour professional autonomy, yet as policy they urge district commitment to teacher learning” (Fenwick, 2001, p. 3). Professional growth plans provide a positive framework for teachers to demonstrate professional learning and growth when contrasted with a deficit model of formal evaluation to ensure satisfactory performance (Fenwick, 2001). In their research on professional growth, supervision, and evaluation of teachers, Glickman et al. (2018) emphasize, “without choice or responsibility to make knowledgeable decisions about their work, they have little motivation or commitment to somebody else’s program” (p. 335). For this reason, it is imperative educational leaders ensure teachers commit to meaningful and relevant professional learning opportunities to meet the inclusive needs of all students.

Teacher Supervision and Evaluation Practices

Traditionally, teacher supervision and evaluation has been viewed as a top-down, hierarchical initiative, rather than a collaborative process. “When the purpose of supervision is perceived as a catalytic process to help [teachers] improve their performance, it becomes quite different from when supervision is perceived to be an autocratic, top-down exercise in quality control” (Gupton, 2010, as cited in Range et al., 2014, p. 3). Through supervision, supervisors

and educational leaders as change agents can either be well-informed and powerful enablers of change, or act as a barrier (Hill, 2011). Supervision, and what Glickman et al. (2018) refer to as “SuperVision” acts as the driving force towards whole school success and improvement by providing "a common vision of what teaching and learning can and should be, developed collaboratively by formally designated supervisors, teachers, and other members of the school community” (p. 8).

Range’s et al. (2014) research literature on supervision concluded, “when principals are able to link supervision and evaluation outcomes to professional development, they alleviate the fear teachers feel when they know evaluation might end with a high stakes decision concerning their employment” (p. 5). Supervision is continually present in education to ensure teacher growth and success. When teachers are able to grow and become successful leaders in their classrooms, this in turn translates to successful student growth and success, which at the end of the day is our underlying purpose, mission, and vision as educators.

Mentorship and Modeling

Educational leaders can offer additional support to teachers implementing inclusive practices and initiatives through modeling and mentorship. “A mentor is an advisor, critical friend, guide, listener, role model, sounding board, strategist, supporter, and teacher who asks questions, challenges productively, encourages risk taking, offers encouragement, provides feedback, promotes independence, and shares critical knowledge” (Duncan & Stock, 2010, p. 297). Research literature surrounding mentorship indicates “what is needed is an environment where a group of mentors surround an inductee, rather than just a single mentor as suggested by the apprenticeship model” (Hellsten et al., 2009, p. 719). Mentorship is an important area of focus for educational leaders as teachers “feel overwhelmed by the professional demands that exist and do not feel a sense of accomplishment, achievement and success” (Vierstraete 2005, p.

385), which is only compounded by adding specialized knowledge and teaching practices to service diverse learning needs under an inclusive education model.

Use of effective teaching practices to meet the needs of diverse learners is best implemented through modeling via a mentorship model. Research on modeling as a leadership practice states:

School leaders place a priority on modeling the behaviors, skills and attitudes that emanate from an understanding of living and learning as creative, improvisatory processes, and of the necessity for leaders and learners alike to be continuously involved in meaning making, and in restructuring what they know. (Beattie, 2002, p. 208)

Research on rural educational leaders also found strong correlation between successful instructional leaders who valued modeling and collaboration (Preston & Barnes, 2017). Similar to how teachers model instruction for their students, educational leaders can use modeling within their schools to provide direct knowledge surrounding appropriate inclusive education best practices.

Differentiated Teaching Strategies

Current best practices for inclusive education include the use of differentiated instruction and teaching strategies. Tomlinson (2017) breaks differentiation down into two areas, “first, in differentiating content, we can adapt what we teach. Second, we can adapt or modify how we give students access to what we want them to learn” (p. 72). Tomlinson further advocates for the use of flexible teaching strategies to provide students a genuine opportunity to demonstrate what they can do and the knowledge they have obtained. Pettig’s (2000) research on differentiated practice recognized “every day, teachers struggle to meet the needs of many learners who have individual needs. In some cases, this struggle yields a patchwork of strategies that merely make do from September until June” (p. 180). Pettig also noted the importance of starting small, as

changes regarding differentiation are systemic. Differentiation not only allows students access to curriculum and academic content, but it also enables diverse learners to take accountability for their learning. Alberta Education's (2013) Indicators of Inclusive Schools identified differentiated instruction as "an integral part of classroom practice" (p. 10) as a sample indicator for providing supports for success. The Indicators of Inclusive Schools document further advises "students have access to a diverse range of learning resources at varying reading levels, and in varied formats" (p.11), as well as, "teachers provide multiple ways for students to access new information and concepts" (p. 11), both of which are integral components of differentiated practice. It is fundamental for educational leaders to support teachers in their use of, and further enhance their knowledge surrounding differentiated practices within Alberta's schools.

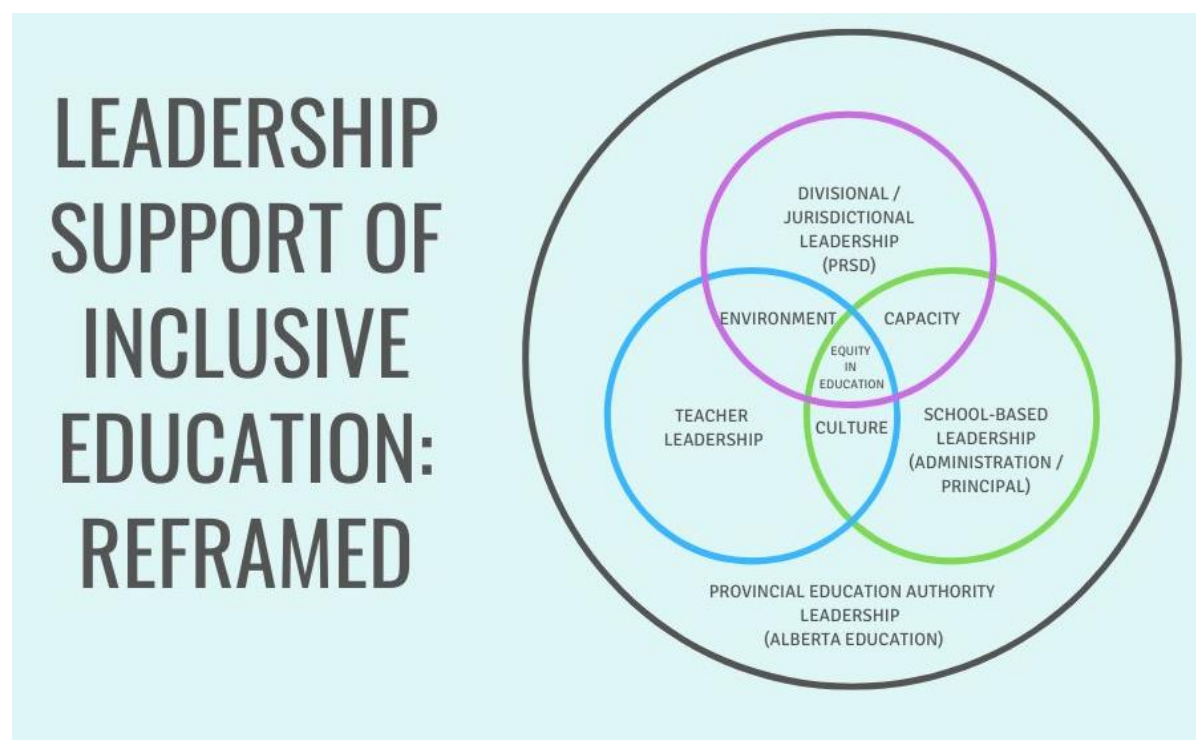
Thoughts about Application to Practice

The review of the literature centered around educational leadership support for inclusive education practices was framed by three central themes including school community, environment, and building teacher capacity. These themes were then identified as existing within three levels of educational leadership support including school-based leadership, district-leadership, and provincial educational authority leadership within the province of Alberta. Following the completion of the literature review, it became apparent that leadership support of inclusive education needs to be reframed as identified in Figure 2. Teachers work to support diverse learners and inclusive education by acquiring specialized knowledge, training, and professional development to provide equity amongst the students they teach. Many policies and procedures surrounding inclusive education remain top-down initiatives, out of the hands of school-based educational leaders responsible for overseeing their implementation. These initiatives include leadership support through policy and the Alberta Leadership Quality Standard (Alberta Education, 2020) as both are determined at higher levels, leaving school-based

leaders responsible for ensuring they are adhered to; special education coding practices as this largely outdated medical deficit model is a provincial requirement of Alberta Education; as well as teacher supervision and evaluation as the specific guidelines surrounding formal supervision and evaluation procedures and requirements have been determined by Alberta Education. Following this change in mindset, the framework presented at the beginning of the literature review has been restructured to be representative of factors within a school-based educational leaders' control, with external, provincial-level support factors removed as collaborative processes, and reframed as overarching policy driven initiatives.

Figure 2

Leadership Support of Inclusive Education Reframed



The literature review analyzing leadership impacts on inclusive education was framed around the following two research questions:

- What do successful leaders need to do to fully support inclusive education practices and ensure academic success for all students?
- What barriers exist and how can we shift our current model of inclusivity to meet the needs of 21st century students?

The subsequent review of the literature outlined numerous ways in which successful school-based leaders support inclusive education for all students. These included creating a culture of inclusivity, in which school-based educational leaders create a network of knowledge through collaborative teaching and learning initiatives. Although the research framed collaboration in a positive light, it should be noted collaboration is only successful when it is authentically motivated, requiring “both parties in the relationship are open to the ideas and opinions of the other, to the honest consideration of the perspectives of the other, and to a respectful stance towards all ways of knowing and being” (Beattie, 2002, p. 214). Collaboration cannot be forced on any party and is required for inclusive education to be beneficial.

Successful school-based educational leaders support teachers and students navigating the realm of inclusive education through the provision of culturally relevant curriculum, providing meaningful and relevant experiences and curriculum to culturally and academically diverse learning needs. Culturally relevant experiences also serve as a form of differentiation. Gone are the days of one size fits all methods of teaching, and “crucial to this shift is a view of where we are going, the opportunity to try (and stumble a bit), and the long-term support from administration to get there” (Pettig, 2000, p. 182). Differentiated instruction, culturally responsive teaching, and in-class supports need to be universally available to all students with support from educational-leadership.

Market choice in education is also an environmental element with direct implications on inclusive education. Parents can choose to enroll their children in a variety of schooling options from public, private, charter, home-schooling, and virtual education options. For students requiring additional support to achieve academic success, market choice provides increased opportunities to benefit from a school with additional resources and funding to support inclusive education initiatives. This leaves some families facing diverse learning challenges at a disadvantage if they are financially unable to access alternatives to public education or are located in a remote or rural area with limited options. Bosetti's (2004) research on educational market choice in Alberta found, "the impact of this competition is to create higher quality education for all students, but does little to address issues related to equity, diversity, and social cohesion" (p. 400), further limiting true inclusion by creating an uneven playing field.

School-based leadership is also able to directly impact teacher capacity in regards to inclusive education. School-based educational leaders can enhance the capacity of their teachers through mentorship and modeling, methods noted in the literature review as valued for developing confident, skilled professionals, their creation of professional networks, as well as reducing professional isolation and lack of support (Duncan & Stock, 2014). Supervision and evaluation also have the ability to further enhance inclusive education practices as "successful supervisors need to not only know about the different belief systems that influence teaching and supervision, but also clarify their own beliefs about education and supervision" (Glickman et al., 2018, v).

The literature reviewed also presented barriers to the realization of true inclusion within the Province of Alberta. Research reviewed addressed difficulties within a policy context as these initiatives were top-down and difficult to effectively execute when school-based leaders and teachers did not have prior background knowledge specific to inclusive education, best

practices, and pedagogy. One such example as noted by Pettig's (2000) research being, "differentiated instruction requires from us a persistent honing of our teaching skills plus the courage to significantly change our classroom practices" (p. 182). Meeting specific policy goals may require additional skills and knowledge obtained through specialized professional development, further delaying inclusion initiatives.

Alberta's students face additional inclusive barriers as the province currently adheres to a medical deficit special education coding model. Special education coding practices are a barrier to true inclusion as recognized by Williamson and Gillham (2017), "medical discourse in its norm-based analysis of impairment and detailed descriptors of symptomology is ill-equipped to speak to issues of equity and inclusion. Its very function is to document difference" (p. 58). Alberta Education's coding criteria places school-based educational leaders in a difficult position, navigating inclusive cultures and practices framed by a deficit model directly hindering inclusion.

Limitations and Areas of Further Research

Limitations as well as areas requiring further examination of research literature have been identified following the literature review. As this review examined literature focused primarily on educational leadership at a school level within a supportive context for teachers implementing inclusive education practices, current research findings are limited in context. Further research is needed to explore the support school-based educational leaders receive from divisional and provincial leaders to adequately prepare them for the challenges presented by inclusive education in the 21st century. School-based leadership preparation and support for inclusive education including the creation of individualized program plans, as well as supporting coded and diverse learners during times of remote and virtual learning was not analyzed within the current literature review and should be examined within a leadership context to determine the level of support

these students are receiving as this is a relatively new area of research. Further, it would be beneficial to explore research surrounding teacher preparation programs to ensure they are up to date with current inclusive education trends and practices to verify teachers are prepared to sufficiently meet student needs in an ever-evolving area of education.

Personal Reflections

As an educator for over 13 years, I have taught within the Province of Alberta for nine years; during this time, I worked as a classroom teacher and school-based educational leader. I came to Alberta with limited practical inclusive education experience aside from a single course I completed during my Bachelor of Education degree in 2007. I was appointed the role of Inclusive Education Coach for the school where I worked in 2016, with no prior training or additional education. From the perspective of a teacher, many of the literature review findings resonated with my personal experiences. I began my teaching career with a basic understanding of inclusive education, and at best a minimal understanding of what true inclusion is, and how to ensure all students are being appropriately supported. In regards to inclusive education, Nilholm's (2020) research found, "in order to realize such change, the professionals involved will have to have a concept of what inclusion amounts to and functional theories about how it is achieved" (p. 364). This will require backing from educational leadership at all support levels presented in the conceptual framework. Teachers require specialized knowledge and professional development to truly understand best practices to support diverse learners, as it is often only through lived experience in a classroom setting the reality of inclusion and its difficulties become apparent.

As a school-based educational leader, it is my lived experience that issues surrounding inclusive education become further compounded when school-based educational leadership does not have sufficient background knowledge of inclusive education practices, nor the ability to

support their teachers on-site. This leaves teachers feeling overwhelmed and unsupported, which Pettig (2000) noted was a struggle that led to frustration with teachers feeling it was unrealistic to meet so many needs. The path forward requires higher-level educational leaders to provide support capable of building a solid research-based foundation of inclusive education pedagogy, knowledge, and practice for school-based educational leaders to have sufficient skills and understanding to assist teachers. This begs the ultimate question: how inclusive are Alberta's schools? When additional arrangements are made to accommodate exceptional pupils within an education system that remains largely unchanged (Ainscow, 1995, as cited in Graham & Jahnukainen, 2011), one could argue Alberta's schools are functioning as a system of integration, with work left to be done to achieve true inclusivity with respect to school culture, environment, and educator capacity in the 21st century.

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