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# How Principals Lead to Promote Inclusive Practices: A Descriptive Study

Janet Armstrong

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HOW PRINCIPALS LEAD TO PROMOTE INCLUSIVE PRACTICES:  
A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY

by

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## Abstract

This qualitative study explored the role of the principal in developing inclusive schools for students with disabilities. Leading an inclusive school is a significant departure from traditional schooling. An inclusive school is founded on a common mission and vision where all students are valued and everyone works collaboratively to insure that all children are educated and part of the school community. Five practicing principals in the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania were studied within the context of their schools and practices. These five principals were identified by the Pennsylvania Department of Education as having developed and implemented schools where all students were valued and expected to be participating members. Case studies of the principals along with themes about their practice emerged. An inclusive school requires a leader to exhibit a number of skills and traits. However, this study suggests that exhibiting these skills and traits are not enough to explain the difference in an inclusive school. This study proposes spirituality is a needed element in order to inform or drive the leader's practice.

Spirituality helps provide the explanation for why and how the principals were able to lead an inclusive school and why the principals remained focused during the change process. Spirituality may provide the entire school, but especially the principal, with the focus on relationships, reflection, and process that is needed to insure the vision of inclusive practices is realized.

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- This journey was created and supported by the principals and their schools. They opened their world to me and permitted me to observe, study and theorize about their work. These schools and principals are doing incredible work for the students they are educating. It is hoped that this study will assist others in learning about inclusive schools.

- This journey was supported and assisted by my chair, Dr. Helen Sobehart. Dr. Sobehart demonstrated continued belief in my capabilities and skills. In spite of many odds, she never once let me believe the journey was not possible. She encouraged me to think, reflect, stretch, and grow throughout the journey. I thank her for her wisdom and her willingness to share it with me.

- This journey was started early in life by my parents. Growing up in our home, education was always valued and revered. My earliest memories are linked to school and education. My father was a public school teacher and I am proud that I followed in his footsteps. My father is still a part of my journey while my mother is along in spirit.

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“We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all the children whose schooling is of interest to us...Whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven’t so far” (Edmonds, 1979, p. 23).

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

#### Introduction

Researchers and practitioners have long studied the role of the school principal for creating and maintaining effective educational environments. Effective school research has shown that strong principal leadership influences student achievement (Edmonds, 1979). While the principal plays an important role in effective schools, this role must be understood within the context of the school and should be viewed as a complex interaction between environmental, personal, and in-school relationships that influence outcomes (Hallinger & Heck, 1996). Today, as schools experience great change the role of the principal must continue to be examined and described.

One of the most significant changes occurring in educational practice is in the area of special education services (Mead, 1999). Prior to 1975, nearly one million children with disabilities were not receiving any education at all (Worth, 1999). The passing of Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Act (EHA) in 1975, forever changed this fact. The EHA guaranteed all students with disabilities the right to a free appropriate education that is individualized and provided in the least restrictive environment. This phrase “least restrictive environment”(LRE) has caused much debate

since LRE has no unitary definition. Rather, the least restrictive environment can only be defined in the context of educating an individual child. Increasingly, however, the least restrictive environment is being identified as a regular education school building. Today, 96 percent of all children in special education are educated in regular school buildings and nearly 47 percent are being educated in the regular classroom for most of the school day (United States Department of Education, 2003). Spirituality is emerging as a concept that may illuminate what makes some school leaders effective at developing nurturing and welcoming school environments. Therefore, there is a need to understand the role of the principal in developing schools that promote inclusive practices.

#### Description of the Problem

As the complexion of special education changes, the responsibility for providing free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment to students with disabilities and the burden of managing special education policies and practices is being shifted to the building principal (Patterson, Marshall & Bowling, 2000). Principals are required to provide support and supervision to special education teachers and programs within their school building (Pelco, McLaughlin, Korinek, & Boerio, 1997; Doyle, 2001). On a daily basis, principals make decisions related to special education and provide leadership in special education service delivery in schools across the nation. Principals report spending 15 to 45 percent of their work dealing with special education issues (Collins & White, 2001).

These changes in special education come in part due to educational law. Each subsequent re-authorization of the EHA and most recently, with the passing of the

Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004, schools are asked to educate all students in regular classroom environments using supplemental aids and services prior to placing them in more restrictive environments. Special education once thought of as a placement is now seen as a continuum of services designed to assist students with disabilities in being successful in the least restrictive environment (DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003). Federal and state court cases have strengthened the need for schools to include students with disabilities within the regular education environment. As recently as 2005, the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) settled a ten-year class action lawsuit, *Gaskin v. Pennsylvania Department of Education*. This lawsuit alleged that the PDE had not provided adequate training or technical assistance to assist school districts in offering inclusive practices and had thus, denied students their right to a free appropriate public education (Rhen, 2005).

In addition to special education law, overall educational policy has impacted on the provision of special education. "...The Regular Education Initiative (REI) of 1985 and the implementation of AMERICA 2000 of 1991, gave public schools the charge to educate everyone among us" (Wigle & Wilcox, 1999, p. 4). The movement to include students with disabilities in general education classrooms and schools has gained support from educators, researchers, and parents (Ainscow, 1991; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Gartner & Lipsky, 1987; Stainback & Stainback, 1992, 1996).

This concept of including children with disabilities in regular education environments has been identified using many labels – mainstreaming, integration, and most recently, inclusion. Inclusion seeks to educate children with disabilities in regular education classrooms rather than in segregated settings (Mayrowetz & Weinstein, 1999).

While there has been much debate about the effectiveness of inclusion (Baker & Zigmund, 1990; Fuchs & Fuchs 1993, 1994; Kavale & Forness, 1999; Manset & Semmel, 1997), that does not change the fact that, the number of districts reportedly practicing inclusive education programs is increasing. Although the number of children with disabilities educated in general education classrooms or schools has increased dramatically, understanding how inclusion works and what inclusive practices mean for principals and schools remains limited.

Research has demonstrated that while the burden of managing special education has shifted to the principal, principals have a limited knowledge of special education regulations or instructional practices (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran, 2003; Valesky & Hirth 1992). Only five states within the United States require any special education instruction for administrator certification (Patterson et al., 2000). Few principal certification programs have adopted anything more than a cursory course in special education. This scarcity of training results in principals lacking knowledge about the characteristics of special learners and the knowledge about the complex procedures needed in order to insure that students' and parents' rights are met (Goor, Schwenn & Boyer, 1997). Given the complexity of special education rules and regulations, principals report being poorly prepared for special education responsibilities and cite needing additional help and information in implementing special education as one of their greatest needs (DiPaola & Tschannen-Moran).

Given this lack of preparation and in order to assist principals in meeting the increasing number of students being educated in general education schools, it is important to examine the role of the principal in general education schools that are

effectively providing educational services to children with disabilities. Inclusive schools represent significant departures from traditional schooling in that they welcome and embrace all students as being contributing members of the school community. This moral and ethic shift requires leaders who support inclusive practices and who have the ability to have a school embrace them too. An understanding of the role of the principal in managing and promoting this change process is needed in order to advance the field. The intent of this research is to strengthen the existing body of knowledge concerning the leadership role of the principal in creating and maintaining effective inclusive educational programs for students with disabilities in general education elementary schools. By describing the leadership role of principals within the context of the school environment, important information concerning the role of the principal and requisite skills will emerge.

### Purpose of the Study

The main purpose of the study was to investigate and describe the role of the principal in creating and maintaining effective inclusive practices and programs for students with disabilities in general education schools. Study participants were practicing principals who had created and maintained effective inclusive programs for students with disabilities as identified by inclusion experts at the Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network, the training and technical assistance program funded by the Pennsylvania Department of Education, Bureau of Special Education.

Data was gathered through semi-structured interviews, observations, and artifact analysis. The investigation was conducted in general education schools and with

practicing principals. Data collection and analysis focused on describing and developing themes concerning the leadership of principals who had successfully created and maintained effective inclusive practices and programs for students with disabilities within the culture of the school. Additionally, it was hoped to further the understanding of the role of the principal beyond a listing of skills and attributes, to an understanding of the role of culture and the spirituality of the principal and its impact on inclusive practices.

### Research Questions

The primary research question was: How does the principal's leadership promote effective inclusive practices within the context of the general education setting? This question suggested additional investigations including:

- Are there specific attitudes and beliefs related to special education that help a principal create and maintain effective educational programs for students with disabilities within the context of the regular education school?
- Are there leadership styles or skills that help a principal create and maintain effective inclusive practices and programs for students with disabilities?
- How is the role of the principal impacted by the culture of the school?

### Importance of the Study

The results of this study are important to the field of special education, principal preparation programs, and school districts. Principals are increasingly being confronted with special education as part of their expanding responsibilities while more students with disabilities are being educated in general education environments. This two-fold

effect compounded by the limited number of principal preparation programs that address special education makes this study both timely and critical.

Therefore, it is important to describe and understand the leadership skills practicing principals demonstrate that promote effective inclusive educational programs for students with disabilities. These factors or themes will provide guidance to principal preparation programs and assist school districts in developing and supporting effective principals.

### Definition of Terms

Several key terms are used throughout this study. These terms are defined for the purpose of this study as noted.

- The principal is the administrative executive of the school. This individual is responsible for the operation, management, and leadership of the school.
- General education and regular education are used interchangeably in this study. Both terms are used to define the typical education program provided to large numbers of students in elementary public schools.
- Students with disabilities are defined as those students who meet the eligibility requirements defined by IDEIA 2004 and who receive special education services.
- Special education is the public education provided to children and youth who meet eligibility requirements defined by IDEIA 2004. Each student's Individualized Education Program (IEP) delineates the public education. The IEP is provided free of charge within the public education environment.

- Inclusion refers to the practice of educating students with disabilities in general education classrooms rather than segregated settings (Mayrowetz & Weinstein, 1999).
- Inclusive practices refers to a school-wide model in which all students are valued and thought to be contributing members of the community (Lipsky & Gartner, 1996).

### Summary

In summary, due to a number of issues ranging from legal to political, the provision of special education has and continues to change. The change in the provision of special education services has resulted in increasing numbers of children receiving special education within the context of general education rather than segregated special education schools. This change has resulted in principals assuming a more involved role in special education service delivery. In order to assist schools and principals in meeting this challenge and to assist scholarly inquiry, it is important to describe and understand the leadership role of the principal in effective inclusive schools.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

#### Introduction

The role of the principal in schools has been studied extensively. The principal has been described as being pivotal to school improvement and effectiveness (Edmonds, 1979). Edmonds' work has been replicated by many scholars who have defined the role of the effective principal as instructional leader, guardian and communicator of the school's mission, facilitator of positive school climate, champion of high expectations, and agent of change at the school level (Edmonds; Sergiovanni, 1991; Purkey & Smith, 1983). This study's objective was to describe the leadership skills and behaviors of the principal within the culture of effective schools in order to better understand how a principal operates a school with inclusive practices for students with disabilities. Because the focus of the study was to understand the role of the principal, the review of the literature focused on several main bodies of research carefully selected because they contributed important insight into the study.

Transformational leadership was the starting point for the review of literature for this study. Transformational leadership provides a framework for understanding how a principal transforms a school from a group of staff each working independently to a school that is working together toward a common mission. This ability or transformation is critical if a school is to embrace inclusive practices. However, does it fully explain what occurs when leading a school that embraces inclusive practices?

Understanding that schools, at their core, are people is another body of literature that helps to understand inclusive schools. People, more so than rules or regulations, have an impact on the qualitative success of any initiative. Since inclusive practices are all about people, this is an especially accurate statement. Since this study is focused on schools that have been successful at inclusive practices because of shared beliefs, rather than a forced mandate to change, this body of literature is key.

It is important to know and have an historical perspective on the education of students with disabilities and what has led the field to the practice of inclusion. Understanding how an inclusive school differs from other schools providing special education services is critical to understanding the principal's role, skills, and behaviors. Also, understanding what is known about principals, special education, and inclusive practices sheds insight into the current state of practice related to inclusion.

While all of the above mentioned bodies of literature were critical, they did not fully explain the moral and ethical shift needed in order to lead an inclusive school. This led to reviewing the literature on educational leadership and spirituality. Educational leadership and spirituality provided key insights into how a principal can lead a school into creating an inviting, nurturing educational environment for all students. Spirituality was key since it provided a way to describe the leadership needed to fully explain the moral and ethical shift observed in the schools.

Furthermore, the concept of dissipative structures was reviewed because this concept may provide insight into what leadership skills and abilities are needed to lead an inclusive school where all students are welcomed and valued. Dissipative structures are a part of chaos theory and help to explain how a system or organization can experience

massive change and emerge as a new and different, yet even more successful organization.

### Transformational Leadership and Principal Empowerment

In order for change to occur in a school, principals must focus their attention on their facilitative powers to promote the desired change. Transformational leadership provides such a framework to the focus. Transformational leadership is an incentive based process that encourages staff to improve their practices to go beyond what is typically expected (Bass, 1990). Transformational leadership has been described as value-added (Leithwood, 1994). Principals serve to empower their followers when they

...broaden and elevate the interests of their employees, when they generate awareness and acceptance of the purposes and mission of the group, and when they stir their employees to look beyond their own self-interest for the good of the group. (Bass, p. 20)

Unlike behavioral theories of leadership (e.g. path-goal theory and normative decision theory), transformational theory emphasizes emotions and values, over rational processes (Boas, 1999). This approach helps explain why leaders can influence others to make sacrifices, commit to difficult objectives, and achieve more than anticipated; all of which are needed in order to make change occur within the school setting.

There is considerable evidence that transformational leadership is effective. Most studies have demonstrated that transformational leadership is positively related to indicators of leadership effectiveness including follower satisfaction, motivation, and performance (Avolio, Bass, & Jung 1999; Hoy & Miskel, 1996).

Leithwood and others have been instrumental in studying transformational leadership within the context of school reform. Leithwood (1992, 1994) has advocated for a move from instructional leadership to transformational leadership within the challenge of school restructuring. He argues that commitment to change rather than “control” over the instruction is at the heart of school change. His findings suggest that transformational school leaders are in constant pursuit of three fundamental goals:

1. Assisting staff in developing and maintaining a collaborative and professional school culture,

1. Fostering the development of staff skills and knowledge, and

1. Helping staff solve problems together effectively (Leithwood, 1992).

In his review of seven qualitative studies looking at the effects of transformational leadership using large numbers of schools, Leithwood (1994) found that transformational leadership practices had significant direct and indirect effects on the progress a school experiences with its restructuring initiatives.

Transformational leadership is in agreement with the concept of empowering leadership. Bolin (1989) defines teacher empowerment as “investing in teachers the right to participate in the determination of school goals and policies and the right to exercise professional judgment about the content of the curriculum and means of instruction” (p.83). The following actions have been identified as being key behaviors of principals who empower teachers:

1. Modeling and building trust with and among teachers.

1. Structuring the school to encourage collaboration and common goals.

1. Supporting shared governance.

1. Focusing on teaching and learning.
1. Supporting experimentation and innovation and viewing failure as a chance to learn.
1. Acting professional.
1. Recognizing and valuing teachers.
1. Setting the stage for discussion and problem-solving focusing on effective communication, trust, action research, and shared decision-making (Blase & Blase, 2001).

Knowing what principals do is insufficient to the understanding of the role of leadership in establishing and maintaining effective inclusive schools. A rich understanding of how and why they do it is necessary in order to fully understand and use this information to improve practice (Spillane, Halverson & Diamond, 2001).

### Schools as Socially Constructed Realities

Schools are constructed on the basis of the experiences of its administration, its teachers, its parents, and its students. This construction is heavily focused on the extent to which its members share common meanings including beliefs about students, beliefs about the mission of the school, and the norms concerning on-going professional development (Leithwood & Steinbach, 1992). This understanding of schools as organizations comprised of people, is vital as schools enter educational restructuring initiatives. For significant change to occur, the school's culture must be intentionally managed and leveraged (Patterson, 2000).

Schools are not simply brick and mortar, policies, and time schedules. At their heart, schools are relationships and interactions. Thus, a successful school is one where relationships and interactions are coordinated and meaningful in order to assist the school in achieving its common mission (Ainscow, 1991).

Within each school, there are significant contextual variables that have an impact on the school culture these include attitudes, beliefs, teacher commitment to change, school culture, decision-making processes, policies, and resources. These contextual variables have been found to be critical in explaining the variation among successful and unsuccessful school restructuring. While the principal plays an important role in effective schools, this role must be understood within the context of the school and should be viewed as a complex interaction between environmental, personal, and in-school relationships that influence outcomes (Hallinger & Heck, 1996). Thus, a principal not only influences the school, its teachers, its students, and its environment but the school, its staff, its students, and its environment influences the principal. It is this interactive nature of the principal and the inclusive school that warrants study and understanding.

### Inclusion or Inclusive Schools

In the past decade, the number of schools in the United States that have adopted inclusion as a practice has increased significantly. Schools that engage in inclusive practices are more often engaged in other school reform initiatives (Schattman & Benay, 1992). It is also important to know that many of the instructional practices (e.g., collaboration, curriculum modification, and cooperative teaching) associated with inclusive schools have been recognized as exemplary practices for all schools (Barnett &

Monda-Amaya, 1998). Over the past years, inclusive education has become an increasingly visible, extremely controversial, and emotionally charged special education reform policy.

The concept of inclusion is never mentioned in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004. Instead, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA), requires that a continuum of placement options be available to provide a free appropriate public education (FAPE) for students with disabilities. The law requires ... “to the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities are educated with children who are not disabled, and that special classes, separate schooling, or other removal of children with disabilities from the regular education environment occurs only if the nature and severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be attained satisfactorily” (IDEIA Section 612 (5) (B)). This section is commonly referred to as the least restrictive environment (LRE) clause. FAPE and LRE have no unitary definitions. Rather, they can only be defined when programming for an individual child. In order to maintain the entitlement of FAPE, IDEIA 2004 continues to require decisions concerning FAPE and LRE be made within the context of the individual student’s IEP meeting. While FAPE and LRE can only be determined according to each student’s individual needs, increasingly schools are including children in neighborhood schools and regular education classrooms.

The term inclusion has been used to describe the program delivery model that results in the regular class placement of students with disabilities, with appropriate in-class support, for the maximum extent possible. However, there exists a significant

difference between being inclusive and embracing inclusive practices for all students. A number of schools effectively include a few individual students within their programs; few schools openly embrace and nurture all children as valued members of the school community. The latter is a moral and ethical decision that the entire school embraces about the students of their school.

Skrtic (1987) has posited that the difference in inclusive schools is the difference in the people of the school. In such a school, inclusion is envisioned as a philosophy, a value system, and a moral obligation to create meaningful opportunities for all children within a school building or system and involves all participants (Lipsky & Gartner, 1996). Sebba and Ainscow (1996) posit the following definition:

Inclusion describes the process by which a school attempts to respond to all pupils as individuals by reconsidering its curricular organization and provision. Through this process, the school builds its capacity to accept all pupils from the local community who wish to attend and, in so doing, reduces the need to exclude pupils. (p.9)

This definition takes the concepts of FAPE and LRE and operationalizes them within a “value-added” inclusive process for the entire school. Using this definition, inclusive practices provided by a school requires the entire school to rethink their mission, their services, their practices, and their policies. This rethinking requires a significant change to occur within the school. This rethinking requires staff to think, teach, and work differently. It requires the school to create a community where all students are welcomed and valued, where no students are marginalized.

The work of Goor, et al., (1997) posit several core beliefs of an inclusive paradigm:

1. All children can learn.

1. All children are part of the school community.
1. Teachers can teach a wide range of students.
1. Teachers are responsible for student learning.
1. Principals believe that they are responsible for the education of all children within their building.

“Inclusive education in restructured schools both provides benefits for all students and serves as an exemplar for an inclusive society, one that is both diverse and democratic” (Lipsky & Gartner, 1996, p. 792). There are typically two ways that schools move toward inclusive practices. One way is reactive in that it comes about through parental or advocacy groups forcing the school to work with an inclusion plan that may or may not be supported by school personnel or parents of regular education students. The other way is a proactive, school-wide approach where the entire school rethinks its mission, services, practices, and policies. This second approach provides the construct for this study. A successful inclusive school is built on a common mission with shared meanings among the administrators, the parents, the teachers, and the students. The mission or vision is seen as a guidepost that is driven by clear, consistent, and strong leadership (Myers & Sobehart, 1994/95).

### Principals, Special Education, and Inclusive Practices

Principals are not only key in supporting and facilitating effective inclusive schools (Mayrowetz & Weinstein, 1999) but the demands on them in the area of special education are increasing (Conrad & Whitaker, 1997; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Wigle & Wilcox, 1999). Sage and Burello (1994) in their seminal work concerning

special education administration called for the role of the principal to change from a traditionally managerial role to a role “of leadership in and commitment to successfully meeting the needs of all students” (p. 225).

In a study, conducted by Su, Adams and Mininberg (2000), special education was one of the issues identified by principals in which they needed more training. This study surveyed 111 principals in Los Angeles County and the surrounding area during the school years of 1997-98, 1998-99 and 1999-2000. This issue of inadequate preparation is echoed in a number of studies. A survey of state directors of special education found that preservice programs do not adequately prepare principals to manage special education programs (Valesky & Hirth, 1992). In a survey of principals in the state of Alabama, only 3.5 percent of the principals reported excellent training related to inclusion while nearly 45 percent felt that their training had been inadequate (Dyal, Flynt, & Bennett-Walker, 1996). Few states require any training in special education to become a principal (Tryneski, 1999).

Sage and Burello (1994) reviewed the work of DeClue (1990) and VanHorn (1989) to identify implications for principals. These two research studies generated five case studies, consisting of principals representing three elementary and two secondary schools. Both studies used naturalistic inquiry including observations, semi-structured interviews, and artifact analysis to gain a description of principals’ daily routines, interactions, and relationships with others. The principals were selected by their special education administration as ones who were successfully providing special education services in their building. Their findings indicated five important implications for principals serving as successful special education leaders:

1. The beliefs and attitudes of the principal toward special education are key in developing a climate of acceptance for students and the program.

1. The principal serves as the symbolic leader of the inclusive school.

1. Principals tend to be reactive rather than proactive in special education service delivery although they tended to be creative within the constraints of federal and state laws.

1. Principals had direct involvement in the day-to-day operation of the special education programs in their building and only relied on central office staff for consultations.

1. Contextual factors appear to make a difference in the work of the principal but not on the acceptance of special education in the building.

In spite of the research conducted concerning effective leadership in schools, the literature is limited concerning the role of leadership theory that encourages and supports effective inclusive practices (Barnett & Monda-Amaya, 1998; DiPaola & Walther-Thomas, 2003; Keyes, Hanley-Maxwell & Capper, 1999).

Keyes et al. conducted a critical ethnography study to explore the role of the principal in empowering others in an inclusive school. The study focused on one school building within a medium-size metropolitan area in a mid-western state. The school building included students with disabilities from all high incidence categories. Thirty-eight participants were involved in this qualitative study representing twelve general education teachers, six special education teachers, six teaching assistants, two parents, nine children, two district administrators, and the building principal. Data was collected via participant observations, in-depth and focus group interviews, and artifact analysis.

Using Reitzug's framework of empowering leadership, they found that the principal's behaviors reflected the three leadership behaviors included in the framework – support, facilitation, and possibility. Additionally, spirituality emerged as an additional belief that supported the principal's behavior. In this study, spirituality is defined as “what people believe about the human spirit and the kinds of values that they have for people” (Keyes et al., 1999, p.12). The principal's spirituality emerged from six fundamental beliefs:

1. The value in personal struggle.
1. The value and dignity of the individual.
1. A merger of the professional and the personal.
1. Confidence that people will do their best.
1. The importance of listening.
1. The importance of dreams.

This single case study suggests that effective leadership in an inclusive school requires a leadership style that influences others to make sacrifices, to commit to difficult objectives, and to achieve more than anticipated. Could spirituality and its impact on leadership assist principals in promoting the needed change within a school needed for inclusive practices to occur?

### Educational Leadership and Spirituality

The concept that spirituality plays a role in educational leadership is one that has received attention albeit quietly from a number of scholars. The context of public education with its lengthy history of legal and legislative work, including the premise of

separation of church and state, has tempered the environment in which public school leaders work (Shields, Edwards, & Sayani, 2005). Spirituality and religion have often been viewed as one and the same, making the discussion and study of spirituality challenging. While spirituality is interwoven with religion for many people, it is increasingly being examined as a distinct concept.

Different scholars have defined spirituality differently. One example is Starratt's (2005) in which he defines spirituality as,

a way of being present to the most profound realities of one's world. A way of being present implies a certain discipline, a certain pattern of paying attention, a process of focusing or centering on the basic reality that gives meaning and sustenance to everything. (p. 67)

Generally, it is agreed that spirituality is a powerful force that helps us to see beyond our limited self-interests into the possibilities of deeper connections not only for our own good but also for others (Conger, 1994; Owen, 1999). Spirituality has been viewed as an answer to the moral challenges facing education. As more and more students come to school with different home languages and cultural practices, schools struggle with how to adequately educate and care for them. Spirituality provides a way to embrace students that are different from what has been considered typical.

At first review, spirituality and leadership appear to be opposites. Spirituality seems focused on inward study and reflection where leadership tends to be focused on outward behaviors. Spirituality seems to focus on the intangible while leadership focuses on reality. Spirituality invites contemplation, analysis, and insight while leadership directs attention toward results (Conger, 1994).

Starratt's (2005) definition of spirituality as being fully present provides insight into how spiritual leaders lead. Being fully present gives meaning to the deep realities of the work the leader shares with others. It requires an intense discipline to focus on what is occurring, what people are outwardly doing, and, most of all, what people are thinking about during work. It requires deep reflection of work and with this deep reflection, developing responses that are consistent with the espoused values and commitments. It is this deep awareness and presence that makes authentic and responsible leadership possible.

Being present with others occurs not only in words, but also in actions. Everything we do either communicates or does not communicate presence. Starratt (2005) discusses three dimensions of presence: an affirming presence, a critical presence, and an enabling presence.

Affirming presence involves an attitude of unconditional regard for others and invites everyone to be who they are. It encourages all to express their individuality and uniqueness. It recognizes that work is risky and that human beings are fragile and need support. School leaders who use affirming presence are honest, respectful, and kind. They develop formal structures to promote this behavior among and within staff. Affirming leaders can be seen supporting, consoling, and encouraging (Starratt, 2005).

Critical presence is the leader's ability to respond to a predatory presence in an open and honest way. It requires the leader to identify the issue or concern that separates us and to address it. Critical presence requires authenticity and openness. Critical presence is based on compassion and understanding of the human condition. It recognizes

the fragility of humans and strives to change oppressive situations into empowering situations (Starratt, 2005).

Enabling presence emerges from the foundational concept that everyone is needed in order to accomplish a goal. It realizes that no one can do it alone. It is respectful of others and confident that others want to and can help. Leaders with enabling presence reach beyond capacity building as skills and policies to develop deep convictions about the goal of the school. Enabling presence is what helps schools go beyond what is currently happening to what is possible. These dimensions of presence are not currently taught in school or demonstrated through mentor programs, yet they are learned through life experiences (Starratt, 2005).

For many people, the workplace has become one of the most important communities in their life. Yet, work is often ill equipped to function as a community that supports and nurtures its members. While there has been an exhaustive body of work associated with organizational management, the outcomes have been often mechanical processes that have been implemented with no heart, soul, or deep connections to others (Conger, 1994). Conger proposes that spirituality may provide the solution for transforming the work place into an environment...“that is humane, that provides community, that promotes a sense of higher purpose...” (p.2) for its members. And so, spirituality may provide insight into inclusive ideology and its impact on the people of the school.

## Dissipative Structures

Typically, schools are built on structure and order. Schools, boards, and leaders develop procedures, policies, regulations, and rules in an attempt to force order and structure. However, organizations that are too orderly or in equilibrium do not change or grow. Disequilibrium is a needed condition for change and growth (Walonick, 2006). By studying and understanding science, Wheatley (1994) has discussed dissipative structures as they relate to leadership and how disorder can actually be a source of order. Since inclusive schools require significant change within a school, an understanding of dissipative structures may help to illustrate how leaders need to manage or promote change in order for the school to thrive.

Wheatley (1994) shares that Prigogine, a renowned Nobel Prize winner in the field of chemistry, first defined dissipative structures. Dissipative structures are part of the science of chaos theory. Dissipative structures are ones in which actions, ideas, and changes within the structure play a crucial role in creating a new form of the structure. As new information, actions, or ideas are implemented within the structure, they provoke the entire system into a new response. New information enters the system initially as a small variation from what is normal. If the structure responds or pays attention to this variation, the information will grow in strength and it will create a cyclical process of new information and change over and over until the system is so far from its original equilibrium that it falls apart. This falling apart however is not the end. Instead, a new system is configured that functions at a higher level of complexity.

Wheatley (1994) has proposed that this understanding of nature can be applied to organizations. Wheatley states,

We will need to stop describing tasks and instead facilitate process. We will need to become savvy about how to build relationships, how to nurture growing, evolving things. All of us will need better skills in listening, communicating, and facilitating groups, because these are the talents that build strong relationships. (p. 38)

In fact, changes, disturbances, and disequilibrium in an organization should be viewed as a source of creativity. As schools desire to change and create inclusive environments, could the concept and understanding of dissipative structures play a role?

### Summary

Becoming and maintaining an effective inclusive environment for all children is a complex, dynamic, and moral process. The principal of a school providing effective inclusive education is key to this complex and dynamic process. An inclusive school is one where all students are welcomed and valued regardless of their abilities. This type of school is not typical in Pennsylvania. Yet, it is the type of school that many students, teachers, parents, and communities desire and want. In order to develop them, insight into the role of the principal then becomes a practical and necessary venture. While the principal's leadership skills and behaviors are key, these behaviors and skills must be understood within the social context of the school. Understanding the role, leadership skills, and spirituality of the principal in creating this new environment provides the field with information necessary for improving training, identifying and selecting prospective principals, and understanding how decisions and behaviors shape the social context of the school.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

#### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to explore and describe the role of the principal in establishing and maintaining effective inclusive special education practices within a school. Using a combination of case studies and an ethnographic approach, this study described emergent themes related to the role of the principal as well as the leadership style demonstrated as it relates to the delivery of special education programs. The study was qualitative in nature. Qualitative studies play an important role in the field of special education. Qualitative studies do this “by capturing involved people’s perspective and by adding to our understanding of discourses that shape social life in schools and society” (Bratlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005, p. 202).

Bogdan and Biklen (1982) state that qualitative research has the following five features:

1. The natural setting is the source of the data and the researcher serves as the main data collection instrument.
1. Its primary purpose is to describe and only secondarily is it to analyze.
1. It is concerned with the process as much as the product or outcome.
1. Its findings are analyzed inductively.
1. It is essentially concerned with what things means, that is, the ‘why’ as well as the ‘what’.

This study incorporated these features. Practicing principals of inclusive elementary schools were the primary sources of the data. This researcher served as the primary data collector. The purpose of this study was to describe the principals and their schools using the real voices and actions of the participants. The study provided insight into not only the leadership of the principal but also how and why the principal lead the inclusive school.

Ethnography is a method of studying and learning about a person or group of people. Typically, ethnography involves the study of a small group of subjects in their own environment. Rather than looking at a small set of variables and a large number of subjects ("the big picture"), the ethnographer attempts to get a detailed understanding of the circumstances of the few subjects being studied. Ethnographic accounts, then, are descriptive and interpretive; descriptive, because detail is crucial, and interpretive, because the ethnographer must determine the significance of what she observes without gathering broad, statistical information. By limiting the number of principals involved, this study was able to document a more complex understanding of the role of the principal through interviews and on-site observations of the principal and the school. Ethnography emphasizes the role of culture in influencing behavior, which was crucial for this study of principals' within the culture of these identified effective inclusive schools (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999).

### Participants

The participants in this study were a select group of principals of elementary schools who had been identified by experts in the field of inclusive practices. These

experts were employed by the Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network to implement inclusive practices within Pennsylvania. For the past 10 to 12 years, the experts had been responsible for assisting school districts in implementing inclusive practices within the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The experts identified principals who demonstrated a commitment to inclusive education within the context of school-wide reform as well as providing effective, high quality programming for students with disabilities.

Each of these principals and their schools embodied the definition of inclusion by Sebba and Ainscow (1996) who defined inclusive education as:

The process by which a school attempts to respond to all pupils as individuals by reconsidering its curricular organization and provision. Through this process, the school builds its capacity to accept all pupils from the local community who wish to attend and, in so doing, reduces the need to exclude pupils. (p. 9)

#### Instrumentation

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews, participant observations, field notes, and analysis of artifacts. The use of multiple data sources insured that recurring themes rather than isolated data emerged concerning the importance of the principals' leadership style. Semi-structured interviews provided the researcher the flexibility to explore emerging issues in more depth while still insuring comparable information was collected from each participant. The semi-structured interviews (see Appendix A) were comprised of a set of thirteen questions that focused on the school and its practice. Each question was asked and a set of probes was used in order to elicit more detailed answers as needed.

## Data Collection

Information was collected from a limited number of identified sites due to the intensity of the data collection and the limited number of sites identified. An initial contact via letter (see Appendix B) was made with the principal to explain the study and ascertain their interest in participating in the study. An informational packet was also provided to the principals to assist in determining if participation was feasible. A follow-up phone contact was made to the principals to share details concerning participation. Of the seven identified, five principals agreed to participate in the study. All principals were asked the same questions. Once the principal provided an initial response, the researcher used one or more follow-up probes to elicit additional information.

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews, observations, field notes, and analysis of artifacts. Artifacts reviewed included meeting minutes, professional development agendas, district and building policies and procedures, mission and vision statements, and school district and building websites. The use of multiple data sources insured that recurring themes rather than isolated data emerged concerning the importance of the principals' leadership style. Observations of teachers, students, and the principal were used to verify information collected.

## Context of the Study

All of the principals studied were established principals of schools that had been practicing inclusive practices for at least three years. All of the schools were located within the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. Three of the schools districts represented would be considered suburban school districts with the other two representing more rural

school districts. In all instances, the elementary school studied was one of many elementary schools within the district. The principals' experience in education was diverse as well as their path to becoming a principal. The range of time that the principals had been leading the school was between three and eighteen years. All of the schools had become an inclusive school by choice, not by parental request or legal mandate.

### Data Analysis

The semi-structured interviews and observations were transcribed and then, coded by the researcher. Descriptions of each of the schools and principals were developed. The descriptions, transcribed interviews, and observations were checked for accuracy. Careful reading and re-reading of both the descriptions and the transcriptions was then conducted. Data was analyzed and "chunked" into similarities and patterns that were consistent across the studied principals. An initial list of themes was identified. Field notes from observations as well as the artifacts were examined and studied for supporting information.

Then, careful analysis of the data was conducted. Categories and sub-categories of data emerged through this chunking of data into groups. Subsequent steps linked the categories or patterns into the development of themes to explain how what was observed in the field related to the leadership role of the principal within the inclusive school context. Using analytic induction, commonalities within the data led to the development of themes related to the principals' skills and behaviors within the social context of the school.

## Researcher Bias

One of the challenges of conducting qualitative research is the difficulty in separating the qualitative researcher from the study. In fact, the researcher is often viewed as “the instrument” of the research. The researcher is the individual who establishes the content of the study, collects the information, identifies what is relevant and what is not, and analyzes the findings (Bratlinger et al., 2005). Since this is accurate for this study, it is important that I disclose my beliefs concerning students with disabilities and inclusion. As a special educator for over 25 years, I believe that students can be educated within the regular education environment with supplementary aids and services. I have observed and provided training and technical assistance to a wide variety of schools throughout Pennsylvania and the entire United States as a national and statewide consultant. My work has been at the school-level working with principals and educators focused on improving the educational practices related to students with disabilities. I have worked with schools and staff that have readily embraced inclusion and I have been involved with schools that have not been open to or willing to practice inclusion. These experiences and beliefs were part of the lens that I used while interacting with the schools and principals.

## CHAPTER IV

### CASE STUDIES AND FINDINGS

#### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to investigate and describe the role of the principal in creating and maintaining effective inclusive educational programs. In order to collect information used to describe and understand the principal and the school, this researcher used a number of methods. These methods included interviewing principals, visiting the schools, observing the principal interact with staff, observing classes in action, talking with staff, and gathering artifacts, including websites, parent letters, and professional development agendas. The process of collecting information “in situ” provided a way to verify what the principal shared during the semi-structured interview along with providing critical insight and understanding on how the context of the school impacted on the principal.

The collected data were analyzed to search for themes that emerged from the interviews and observations. This researcher compared data segments to identify similarities and patterns among the information collected. Using analytic induction, commonalities within the data led to themes that emerged related to the principals’ skills and behaviors within the social context of the school.

As part of this study, this researcher looked beyond the overt demonstrations of behaviors in order to develop “grounded theory” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) related to how and why the principal behaved within the context of the school. Each principal led a school where all students were learning and progressing, where teachers demonstrated

excellence in their teaching practice, and where the school had been transformed into an inclusive model but each school and principal accomplished this similar outcome in a very different manner.

The results of this research are case studies of principals leading inclusive schools and “themes” related to principals’ practice that can be used to assist others in developing inclusive schools, as well as institutions offering principal preparation programs.

### Case Study of Principal A

Entering the school, one immediately noticed a welcoming environment where everyone, from students to staff, greets visitors. The mission of the school “to provide an education that empowers all students to achieve their potential and to become productive and responsible citizens” was prominently displayed. The bulletin board inside the door read, “We hope you learned a lot today. We hope you enjoyed your time with us today”.

The school’s population consisted of 620 Kindergarten to third grade students with about 12 percent being identified as students with disabilities. The school operated on a 179-day instructional calendar with a five and a half hour school day. Low-income students represented 8.9 percent of the school population. For the 2004-2005 school year, the school’s attendance rate was 96 percent.

The school operated a half-day Kindergarten program. All students were included in classes and school activities. Class size ranged from 18 to 23 students per class with a teacher to pupil ratio of 1 to 16.7. The library contained over 9,000 titles and was overseen by a full-time librarian. There were 212 computers available for student use. Physical education was provided weekly to all students along with art and music.

The school office contained comfortable chairs, tables with educational magazines, and plants. Children came in and out and were greeted by the school secretary. The principal has been the building leader for 18 years and was planning to retire within the next few years. Very late in the interview process, the principal disclosed that he has a significant learning disability that had plagued his own school success. He stated that he thought this might have provided the personal momentum for transforming the school. The transformation of the school started about ten years ago when the district took back a number of classes from the local intermediate unit. He wanted to make sure that the students were truly included in the school rather than just being housed within the school building.

He reported that the inclusive school seen today emerged over time. He stated that he started out thinking students would be a part of the school but not as fully as they are today. He shared that every staff member had contributed to the process of transforming the school. In fact, the principal credited the staff of the school with having pushed him and the entire school to grow into what it is today.

He cited the clear support he received from the district central office in his ability to cultivate and maintain the inclusive nature of the school.

I could not have created this environment without their support. Whenever I hit a snag, a bump, if staff or parents were angry about what they thought was happening... they continued to support me. This support meant a lot...I could call the superintendent to just bounce some ideas off. When I needed resources in order to implement this, whether it was technology or staff, I was supported. In addition, I got a lot of technical support in the form of training ideas from them.

He remarked about how beneficial the direct and collaborative relationship with the district coordinator of special education continued to be in maintaining the school's inclusive practices.

The principal stated that the school has high expectations for all students to make progress. "All students can and do learn if they are expected to do so. Some students may need more practice or more direct instruction but they can learn". Because of having high expectations, the school had to rethink its instructional practices such as whole group instruction for reading. Using data, the principal and a select team of staff identified the need for improved instructional practices and materials.

He volunteered there were still a few teachers struggling with the concept of inclusion for all students. These few teachers often talk of being overwhelmed by the needs of specific students and still attempt to have students removed from the regular education classroom without attempting the full array of supplemental aids and services. It was his opinion that the requirements of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) have added to this feeling of being overwhelmed since there is intense pressure on staff to have students meet adequate yearly progress.

In the classrooms observed, teachers clearly exhibited high expectations for all students. They did this by a number of activities including a) stating clear expectations at the beginning of each lesson, b) scaffolding the instruction for students who were struggling, and c) encouraging each student to do their best work. Teachers practiced research-based instructional strategies including corrective feedback and direct instruction while introducing relevant and interesting information. Rather than having the

traditional lines of desks, desks were grouped into small learning clusters to promote student interaction and learning.

At the heart of his practice as a principal was his belief that all people have strengths. He stated it was his job to tap into these strengths and bring out the best in others. He described his leadership style as being an empowering leader. Empowering leaders believe in sharing with staff the authority to make decisions that will affect the work of the school. This practice has been identified in the literature as shared decision-making, delegation of authority, teamwork, collegial organizations, and site-based management (Hoy & Miskel, 1996).

### Case Study of Principal B

Principal B led an elementary school that educated about 400 Kindergarten through fifth grade students. Approximately 12 percent of students in the school were identified as having special education needs. The students included in the school represent a number of disability categories including autism, physical disabilities, mental retardation, and learning disabilities. The faculty consisted of 33 full time teachers, one speech and language therapist, and 20 instructional assistants. In the words of the principal, “the school is an incredible place where teachers work hard, where professional development is valued, and where children succeed”.

The school operated on a 182-day instructional calendar with a seven-hour school day. The school’s population was very stable with typically less than ten students enrolling or withdrawing after the school year begins. The school’s attendance rate was

over 96 percent. Of the school population, 11 percent of the students were classified as low-income. The teacher to student ratio was 1 to 10.6.

The school operated a full day Kindergarten program. Art, music, and physical education programs were offered weekly to the students. A number of acceleration, enrichment, and tutoring services were available for students who met criteria. In addition, the school offered before-school and after-school programs and clubs. The library, overseen by a full-time librarian, contained over 17,000 titles. Students had access to the 182 computers in the school.

Pennsylvania System of Statewide Assessment (PSSA) results for the 2004-2005 school year show 78 percent of all fifth grade students were proficient in Mathematics and 82 percent of all fifth grade students were proficient in Reading. For the sub-group of students with IEPs, the percentage proficient in Mathematics was 50 percent and for Reading it was 42 percent.

Upon entering the school, it was immediately clear that the school was a child-centered school. This was evidenced by the artwork and banners prominently displayed along with the sound of children echoing in the halls. Teachers were engaged with the students in hallways and in classrooms. Teachers were heard talking with and about the students using kind and caring words and interactions. Additionally, cross-grade level activities were held monthly which brought together children from different classes around a curricular area.

The school employed a site-based model of governance. Site-based models of governance for schools have been viewed as a centerpiece within school restructuring systems both nationally and internationally. Research concerning site-based models is

inconclusive as to its positive effects on student achievement (Leithwood & Menzies, 1998).

This school's model used a site-based team that consisted of the principal, two teachers, two parents, one classified staff, and two community members. Committees and task forces comprised of the larger school community reviewed topics, problem-solved, and made recommendations to this site-based team. The school operated on the assumption that those who work closest to the students should play an integral part in the decision making process.

While the school recognized the role of the Pennsylvania State System of Assessment, the principal stated other assessments were also used to meaningfully explain progress concerning the school and students. This was corroborated by information in their district community newsletter when it stated, "...focus on development and consistent use of ever-more sophisticated assessment tools to enhance and extend student achievement (and in this regard to treat the PSSA as an assessment tool without undue overemphasis)". In this era of accountability, the emphasis on more than just standardized test scores is not found in many other schools or communities.

Faculty meetings were described as being open and lively with lots of questions and interactive discussions. The staff commented they felt safe asking questions and raising concerns with the principal. They also mentioned receiving a lot of positive feedback from the principal. In fact, in two classrooms, notes from the principal were visibly displayed.

This school had been working to develop into an inclusive school for about the last 12-15 years. The principal stated it was a process that was initially painful for many

staff and family members. The principal stated unequivocally that the process was rich and dynamic with the outcome being influenced by all members of the faculty and community. The process was filled with conversations, collaboration, professional development, and informal action research projects. The principal commented that she had worked very hard to have the teachers become reflective practitioners about what was and was not working with each student. Reflective practitioners use the critical examination of their daily work to guide future action as a strategy to improve education (McGregor & Salisbury, n.d).

The principal credited becoming reflective practitioners as having moved the school forward the most. She also shared that when this occurred the change shifted to being a positive one. She stated that today all students are accepted within the school and most receive the majority of their education within the regular education classroom.

The principal reported that while she spent about 25 percent of her time on special education issues she received clear support from the district special education director. The principal stated, "I could not run the school without her support and guidance". The principal had learned about special education "on the job". She described herself as an instructional leader with heart.

### Case Study of Principal C

Principal C has been the principal of the school for the past three years. The school that he led was relatively small serving about 290 students. The school served students with a variety of disabilities including a large population of emotional support students from all across the district. The principal seemed to be an essential part of the

heart of the school. He demonstrated his commitment to both staff and students by patting a teacher on the back to comfort him and drying the tears of a child in the hallway.

The school was a Kindergarten to fifth grade school. The school operated on a 178-day instructional calendar with a 5.25-hour school day. Student attendance (95 percent) and teacher attendance (97 percent) was high. The school was committed to small class sizes with 56.3 percent of classes having less than 20 students. There was one teacher for every 15 students. The library contained over 9,700 titles and was operated by a part-time librarian. There were 82 computers available for student use.

The PSSA scores for the 2004-2005 school year showed that 96 percent of all fifth grade students were proficient in Mathematics and 86 percent of all fifth grade students were proficient in Reading. There was not a large enough sub-group to report levels of proficiency for the sub-group of students with IEPs.

The school was involved in a construction and remodeling project with over 50 percent of the school involved. The principal recognized that the remodeling project was needed and as such, it was not viewed as a nuisance but as a necessity. The school's mission was "to provide a learning environment where all students can be successful; a place where students and adults are striving for continuous improvement and personal growth". The focus was on providing the best education for each and every child. There was an undercurrent that all students can and will learn. This undercurrent manifested itself in the words and actions of the principal and the staff members observed.

The school operated using a number of teams that met regularly to insure that students were making progress. Weekly, there were staff meetings where issues related to

the operation of the school were discussed. The principal was clearly the leader but spent much of his time listening and encouraging the staff as they problem-solved issues. He clearly trusted his staff and worked to empower them to make decisions. Biweekly, grade level teams gathered and discussed each student, reviewed the data related to the student's progress, and made instructional improvements based on the data. The meetings observed were intense, serious, and lengthy. Teachers focused on identifying instructional changes that would result in each student making progress.

The principal "thinks about each child as if it were my own child". He stated all children deserve a good chance and school must provide the chance to each and every child. His view of inclusion included more than academic achievement for the students but also social involvement and participation. He stated this is why the school is willing to have so many students with emotional support needs in the building. He stressed friendships start in school.

One student in particular demonstrated the entire school's belief about students. This student was a little boy diagnosed with autism. He demonstrated numerous challenging behaviors and could easily have been viewed as being quite disruptive to the school. He was relatively new to the school. Before he started in the school, the staff was provided with professional development about autism. Most faculty members attended even though it was on their own time. When the staff talked about the child, they stated they were all responsible for his success at the school. As a school they had arranged the environment to help him be successful. Picture schedules were located in the cafeteria, the bathroom, and hallways. The child was often permitted to transition to a new location

before the other students, and the school was busy learning sign language since he communicated using that mode.

### Case Study of Principal D

Principal D led a rural elementary school with about 480 students. The school was a Kindergarten to sixth grade elementary school. This was the principal's fifteenth year and she stated that the population has been changing with a growing number of minority students. The student body consisted of about 7 percent of students with learning support needs, two consortium classes of students with autism, and a number of students with other disabilities. She had been a teacher in the Department of Defense for many years and received her principal's training as part of the military.

The school operated on a 182-day instructional calendar with the school day being 6.5 hours in length. Of the school's population, 21 percent met the criteria for low-income. The school operated as a Title 1 targeted school. The school operated both full and half-day Kindergarten programs. The school employed a full-time librarian and operated a library with over 21,000 titles. The school had 140 computers that were available for student use. Class size ranged from 17 to 25 students with an overall ratio of 1 teacher for every 18 students.

For the 2004-2005 school year, 85 percent of all fifth grade students were proficient in Mathematics and 73 percent were proficient in Reading when assessed using the PSSA. There was not a large enough sub-group to report levels of proficiency for the sub-group of students with IEPs.

The school's office was a bright area with lots of chairs and materials. The secretary was warm in her greeting. A poster of the school's PSSA fifth grade scores was prominently displayed. The principal's office was bright and sunny with lots of windows. It was neat and orderly. The desk and bookcases were filled with curricular materials.

She stated, "Inclusion begins when a student enters the school." Her focus was on having regular education teachers recognize that if they would expand and improve their teaching practices then all students could participate and learn in the regular education classroom. The school had adopted research-based core reading, mathematics and writing programs in which every student within the school participated. All teachers have learned and were expected to practice the principles of Precision Teaching within their own classroom. Precision Teaching is a precise, fast-paced, and systematic method of evaluating instruction that requires immediate error-correction and frequent data collection to insure students are learning (Lindsley, 1990).

Students who are not learning were discussed at the weekly grade-level team meeting. At the meeting, the team identified what individualized instruction was needed and how it could be implemented. Regardless of what was needed, it was the expectation that it would be implemented within the context of the regular classroom. The staff had been taught to teach skills to mastery which had reduced the need to re-teach concepts each year. All teachers provided systematic instruction and collected, analyzed, and used progress-monitoring data to inform their instructional practices. Regular and special education teachers had shared planning time.

On each visit, there was a lot of activity in the school. In the hallways outside classrooms, teachers were doing reading probes with students and were observed

cheering with the child when they finished the work. Halls were covered with artwork. In classrooms, children were clearly engaged in the learning process. They were busy using wipe-off boards to answer questions, interacting with each other in small groups, and creating pottery that would be later fired in the school's kiln.

The transformation of the school began about 14 years ago with the recognition that many students were not learning to read and subsequently there were very high rates of referral to special education. As a school, the principal along with the staff, did a "diagnostic unwrapping of why that was occurring". She stated that this "diagnostic unwrapping" was a practice over time that helped the school to begin a process of continual improvement focused on students and student success. Professional development, mentoring, and on-going teacher support were the key components of the process. The principal stressed that she did not try to change each teacher's belief about students. Instead, she felt that the teachers' belief model changed only when they saw that children could be successful. As a school, they worked on "enduring learning in fundamental skills" to help children succeed. She believed the school demonstrated the characteristics of effective instruction consistent across both regular and special education.

The principal stated while she "shoulders the responsibility as the leader" she couldn't implement the instruction in the classroom. This meant that she had to empower and hold high expectations for her staff to make change happen. She described her leadership style as collaborative, strategic, and direct but not authoritative.

## Case Study of Principal E

This suburban elementary school was clearly a part of the community. This was evidenced not only by the number of community members in the school interacting with students but was corroborated by the building website highlighting numerous community and school events.

The principal led a school of 640 Kindergarten to fifth-grade students with about 10 percent of the students having disabilities. The disabilities represented within the school included learning disabilities, emotional disabilities, autism, mental retardation, and physical disabilities. Fourteen percent of the students were identified as coming from low-income families. The attendance rate for the school was over 96 percent.

The school office was an active place with lots of staff and students in the area. The guidance office, school nurse suite, conference rooms, and the principal's office were clustered together. The district was in the midst of a successful football season and staff and students, dressed in school colors, were found throughout the school. The principal's office was small and filled with instructional materials.

The school operated on a 180-day instructional calendar with the school day being six hours in length. The school employed a full-time librarian and operated a library with over 15,000 titles. There were 188 computers available for student use. Music, art, and physical education were provided at least weekly to all students. Class size ranged from 18 to 28 students, yet the school maintained a ratio of 16 students per teacher. The school operated an after-school program for students who qualified.

For the 2004-2005 school year, 77 percent of all fifth grade students were proficient in Mathematics and 79 percent of all fifth grade students were proficient in

Reading on the PSSA. For the sub-group of students with IEPs, 38 percent of students were proficient in Mathematics with the same percentage proficient in Reading.

The school employed homogeneous yet flexible groupings of students for instruction in reading and mathematics. This meant that regardless of the age or grade of the student, students were grouped by ability, meaning that each child received instruction directly matched to their developmental level. Conversely, students were grouped heterogeneously for all other classes and activities. All teachers, both regular and special education, taught students during all subjects. Many classes were co-taught by both regular and special education staff. Additionally, special education teachers provided push-in services to specific children or provided consultation services to the regular education staff. One special education teacher referred to the school as the “most welcoming school she had ever taught in”.

On each visit, the principal was out in the school and had to be summoned back to his office. Upon meeting the principal, one was immediately struck by his personality. His presence seemed to be everywhere. His laugh was loud and he spoke with great enthusiasm about the school, the students, and the staff. The principal described his leadership style as positive, collaborative, and empowering.

The school was run on a collaborative model where the faculty was expected to actively participate in decision-making activities. There were a number of staff committees that played an integral role in developing the school. School committees included the Instruction Committee, the Facilities Committee, and the Student Activities Committee. All staff members were expected to serve on one or more committees.

## Summary of Case Studies

Each case study provided a glimpse into the principal's practice within their school. From the case studies and as illustrated on Table 1 and Table 2, it was clear that each school was comprised of different students as well as different instructional characteristics. As illustrated, there was a wide variance between the number of instructional hours per year in the schools as well as the number of library books each school had per student. While each of the schools was different, a few commonalities were found. Each of the schools that had students eligible to participate in the PSSA evidenced a high number of proficient students. Each school had evidenced a focus on high quality instruction even though the methods or approaches to instruction were different.

Table 1

*Comparison of the Schools using Instructional Data*

	Instructional hours/year	Staff to student ratio	Books per student ratio	Computers per student ratio
School A	984.5 hours/year	1 staff to 16.7 students	15 books per student	.33 computers per student
School B	1274 hours/year	1 staff to 10.6 students	43 books per student	.45 computers per student
School C	934.5 hours/year	1 staff to 15 students	33 books per student	.28 computers per student
School D	1183 hours/year	1 staff to 18 students	44 books per student	.29 computers per student
School E	1080 hours/year	1 staff to 16 students	23 books per student	.29 computers per student

Table 2

*Comparison of Schools Using Student Data*

	Number of students	Percent of students with disabilities	Proficiency on the PSSA at Grade Five
School A	620	12 percent	
	K – 3 <sup>rd</sup> Grade students		
School B	400	12 percent	78 percent proficient in Mathematics
	K – 5 <sup>th</sup> Grade students		82 percent proficient in Reading
School C	290	14 percent	96 percent proficient in Mathematics
	K – 5 <sup>th</sup> Grade students		86 percent proficient in Reading
School D	480	11 percent	85 percent proficient in Mathematics
	K – 5 <sup>th</sup> Grade students		73 percent proficient in Reading
School E	640	10 percent	77 percent proficient in Mathematics
	K – 5 <sup>th</sup> Grade students		79 percent proficient in Reading

Additionally, the principals, themselves were different. They represented both genders and an array of ages and personalities. The schools were comprised of different people, styles, staff, and struggles. Yet, each principal was leading an inclusive school. While the case studies illustrated the richness of the schools and their practices, it is only through data analysis that commonalities about the principals and the schools can be determined. The next section identifies the themes that emerged and warrant discussion.

### Emerging Themes

The process of developing themes begins with broad research questions that provide the freedom and flexibility to explore the phenomenon in greater depth. In the study of the principals and their schools, the following themes about the principals' behavior and understanding of this behavior in the context of the school emerged:

1. Each principal evidenced a core set of values and beliefs that drove their practice. These core values remained constant throughout the process of change within the school.

1. Their practice within the inclusive school consisted of three common themes:
  - (a) Each principal demonstrated competency and skills related to leading and managing a school but they also recognized that being competent was not by itself enough. They all demonstrated that they were confident enough in their skills to seek support and assistance in order to lead an inclusive school.
  - (b) Each of the principals' demonstrated traits consistent with transformational leadership. What was especially notable was their open and collaborative problem-solving nature both with individual teachers and within

group-level processes. (c) Each of the schools spent a lot of time learning and studying about learning. The principals reflected on their own work and encouraged teachers to become reflective practitioners. Becoming a school that learned and was in a continual process of improvement through learning, was a priority for each school.

1. The principals demonstrated an understanding of the importance of school culture and used the culture to promote and anchor their practice.

### Core Set of Values and Beliefs

As humans, beliefs influence the way each of us perceives the world. Beliefs help us determine what is or is not important and informs us about how to deal with issues as they are presented. Beliefs are part of the contextual richness of schools. All of the principals held consistent, a set of core values about children and adults. These beliefs shaped their behavior and in turn, shaped the behavior of others. The beliefs determined how the principal reacted to issues and problems. They guided their decision-making process. These values were evident in their interactions with others. These values focused their attention to what they wanted to accomplish with the school, its students, and staff.

This is consistent with what Keyes et al. defined as spirituality in their 1999 single case study of a principal leading an inclusive school. They defined spirituality as “what people believe about the human spirit and the kinds of values they have for people” (Keyes et al., p. 12). Sage and Burello (1994) also found that the beliefs and attitudes of the principal toward special education were key in developing an inclusive school and aiding in the acceptance of all students.

The beliefs that each principal demonstrated are (a) belief in each and every child's capacity to learn, (b) belief in each and every teacher's capacity to learn, and (c) belief in honoring the people and the work.

### *Belief in Each and Every Child's Capacity to Learn*

The concept of inclusive practice is an outgrowth of demands by parents, advocates, and others for improved outcomes for students with disabilities. Even if the principals were unaware of the demand by these outside forces, each of the principals wanted to change the outcomes for students with disabilities within their own schools. The principals were not content to have students in their schools not learning, progressing, or actively participating. They believed and have built schools where the staff members were equally convinced that all students could learn and contributed to the school.

Central to their core values was that all students could learn. Goor et al. (1997) found effective principals of inclusive schools started with the premise that "they were responsible for all children and that teachers can teach a wide range of students" (p.140). Different principals, different schools voiced this value differently:

- "All children deserve a fighting chance to learn".
- "All students can and do learn if they are expected to".
- "We consider each of our students to be a unique individual and attempt to provide all students with the individualized attention they need".
- "We believe in the inherent ability of all our students and work to help them attain the essentials skills needed for lifelong learning, responsible citizenship, and a successful life".

- “Our school is for all students...we teach them all and we do it very well”.
- “Students come to our school to learn. It is our job, our responsibility to figure out how they learn and teach them. Every child is capable of great things”.

Additionally, the principals in this study saw the children with disabilities as children, not as problems, within the school. This is a departure from what is found in many schools where special education students are educated in separate classrooms or segregated into wings of buildings. Students and classes were not defined by their disabilities; instead they were seen as contributors to the school. In faculty discussions, it was often difficult to determine which students had IEPs and which did not. Students were included for academic, non-academic, recess, lunch, and extra-curricular activities. When observed during recess, students with disabilities were active participants in the games and activities without the assistance of staff. In the words of one of the principals, “all students add value to our school”.

This core belief inspired the principals to develop an inclusive school that welcomed all children. This belief seemed to be the backbone of their work within the school. This belief was used as the driving force to determine how to do the work of the school.

#### *Belief in Each and Every Teacher’s Capacity to Learn*

In addition to the belief that all students can learn, they also held the value that all teachers wanted to learn and improve. One principal said it best when she stated, “if a staff member is not doing something, then I have not given them the tools to make them

be successful”. This value manifested itself in different ways but always with the underlying belief that it was possible to build capacity within the staff to support all children. This belief was used to motivate teachers to do more than what they thought possible.

In two cases, the principal identified staff willing to change and introduced them to the concepts, skills, and techniques. These staff members were then used to build momentum across the rest of the faculty. In another case, the school started to include the children, one student at a time, always making sure each child included in the class and the respective teacher was successful and supported. The school as a group learned from each case, spending time discussing and learning. But regardless of the practice, the underlying belief that teachers could and would improve their skills was evident.

One principal shared her belief that, “all classroom teachers want students to learn, they do not want the students in their room to fail. My job as the leader is to give them the supports and help to do that”. Another principal characterized using staff to make the change as “leveraging human power to remove the barriers that exist to learning”.

Each principal worked in their own way to develop a shared responsibility for all students to learn. They believed that if teachers believed in all students, then remarkable success would occur. One principal used action research projects to get teachers to change their perceptions of students. She stressed teachers will change their beliefs when they see success occurring with the students who had typically been educated in the special education classrooms.

This powerful belief that teachers can and do want to learn and grow also helped each principal build a school that emphasized learning about learning, another consistent theme in this study.

### *Belief in Honoring the Work*

Another core value each principal espoused was that they valued, respected, and honored the people of the school and their work. Herzberg's theory of motivation is a widely accepted theory by administrators (Hoy & Miskel, 1996). It posits that the addition of certain factors acts to improve an employee's satisfaction with work. Employees start at a neutral point possessing neither positive nor negative attitudes about the work. Each job has a continuum of factors affecting job satisfaction ranging from hygienes (e.g., technical supervision, interpersonal relationships, policies, and working condition) to motivators (e.g., achievement, recognition, responsibility, advancement, and the work itself). The theory stresses that satisfaction and dissatisfaction are not opposites but instead distinct dimensions of each person's attitude about work. It is believed when motivators are actualized, staff members tend to be more satisfied and demonstrate improved performance (Hoy & Miskel). Each of the principals used motivators to improve both teacher and student performance.

Teachers within each of the schools were afforded greater responsibility in decision making than what is typically found with schools. They participated in site-based decision making teams, led professional development sessions, and were instrumental in the design of the school. The principals demonstrated shared

responsibility in the operation of the school. Decisions affecting the school were made by gathering input from the staff, not by the principal alone.

Focused, sincere praise about their professional performance and skills was frequently heard during interactions with staff. According to Blase and Blase (2001), valuing and rewarding work is important to the work of teachers as long as it is used for the purpose of empowering teachers, not to control them. Smith and Andrews (1989), found “the visible presence of the principal appears to be most keenly felt when the principal serves as rewarder, giving positive attention to staff and student accomplishments” (p.19).

It was clear that the principals linked recognition with achievement. Achievement was always directed toward student learning, regardless of how small. Celebrations in the schools were always focused on what students, as a group or individually, had accomplished. Each principal had his/her own style of conveying the positive messages. In one school building, appreciative notes from the principal were found displayed in a number of classrooms.

The idea that the work itself was motivating to teachers was clear in each of the schools. Teachers talked about how excited they were to see all children learning. The observations of students and teachers celebrating learning were evident in each school. Learning for each individual child was the focus of instruction, not an arbitrary score. There was a belief that the school had hired the best people in education. As stated on one school district website, “Staff are selected with great care because we know we will only be able to accomplish great things with great people”.

### *Core Values in Summary*

In spite of the tightness with which they held these personal values or beliefs, the principals encouraged staff to ask questions, experiment in how to get the work accomplished, and to question how things were changing. This is consistent with what Jackson (2000) found in his case study concerning Sharnbrook Upper Schools related to the school's journey to improvement. He found schools with a focus or tightness on values was a prerequisite to and a requirement for sustained school improvement.

### Leader-Follower

Both as a group and individually, the principals appeared to be competent and capable educators and principals. They had multiple years of experience leading and managing successful schools. They had the ability to manage budgets, supervise staff, and evidenced sound problem-solving skills. They had each completed a principal preparation program and had continued to refine their knowledge base both on the job and in coursework. They demonstrated a commitment to being life-long learners. They had the skills and traits needed to be a successful principal.

Yet, in spite of their positional power and knowledge, each one articulated that they had needed and continued to need outside support and expertise in order to establish and maintain the inclusive school. They spoke about how little they had learned about special education from the coursework at the university level. "In my principal preparation program, there was little to no training on special education. I had a bit in my undergraduate work but since I had no frame of reference it was difficult to understand".

However, they all demonstrated a level of confidence and comfort with their knowledge and skills of children that allowed them to identify their own shortcomings.

I knew what I wanted to accomplish – I did not just want to house the kids in my school. I wanted to have them be a part of the school. I wasn't sure how to start or what was even legal to do. But I did know kids and instruction and knowing that it just made sense to me that if we expected them to be a part of the school they would be and if we expected them to learn they would. So, I reached out. I talked to people. I read articles, books whatever I could do to learn.

The support and expertise came in a number of ways but consistently in the form of the district special education administrator. It was described as a partnership, a joint venture, and a working relationship with the goal of children being actively included in the school. This relationship required that both individuals abandon their traditional beliefs about their roles and create new roles related to the development of the school. The described relationship with the principal and the special education director seemed to echo what Williams (1998) has posited about leader and follower relationships.

...the term follower leads to the perception of relationships with leaders as one of collegial partnership working toward agreed collective goals. Thus, in education, leading and following are professionally interdependent and essentially complementary and not competitive roles and, significantly, interchangeable according to specific expertise and circumstances. (p. 10)

Williams also asserts that while this type of relationship is not hard to imagine, it is difficult to achieve in schools. Yet each of these principals had developed this type of relationship with not only the special education administrator but also with staff within the building.

They seemed to have developed a school where teachers also became leader-followers with each other and the principal. This was evident in both what staff

commented on and in their interactions with each other and the principal. One teacher stated,

We are a team here – no one, including the principal, is always the expert – it is a give and take. If you want to work here then you have to be willing to be a part of the team. We have learned to rely on each other. Each of us has different areas of expertise and we openly share and learn together. We see issues differently but together we come up with some amazing solutions that really help kids and the school.

Each principal made good use of the expertise within the school. Teachers were often the leaders of staff development programs, helping other staff members learn and apply new information.

#### Open and Collaborative Process

Building trust takes effort and sincerity. For many people, trust may come easily, merely from being given the opportunity to work closely with others on real problems. For others, trust comes more slowly due to personal experiences or other matters beyond one's immediate control. As successful shared governance principals demonstrate, the challenge is to *build* a trusting environment by (a) encouraging openness; (b) facilitating effective communication; and (c) modeling understanding, the cornerstone of trust. (Blase & Blase, 2001, p.23)

Using this description of trust, the principals worked to build a trusting environment in which the school could grow and improve. In every instance, trust was mentioned by the principal as a key component of the success of the school and each mentioned that trust had to begin with their behaviors. The principal had to model and demonstrate open communication with the staff. Clear and explicit communication from the principal concerning expectations was seen as key. Two principals mentioned how they had to work to improve their ability to communicate clearly with all staff. One

principal preferred to use the term “conversation” rather than “communication” to convey the two-sided exchange needed to be trustworthy.

Each principal entered the process of becoming an inclusive school from different perspectives, each went about it differently but all maintained an open and collaborative process. This openness to what transpired, brought about remarkable results. One principal described the process as “sewing together a quilt of school change – staff kept identifying new pieces that need to be included until we had made a beautiful quilt that supported our entire school”.

One principal stated she recognized things needed to be changed but that it was imperative to gather support in order for the change to be successful and sustained. It took a long time but now the “walls are down for all staff and there exists a culture of learning together”. This phrase “the walls are down” was used frequently to describe the interactions of the faculty within the school communities.

Open, collaborative communication requires trust and trust is a difficult dimension to measure or observe. However, the openness with which the principals discussed and promoted trust was evident. Principals developed numerous ways, both formal and informal, for staff to provide input into the change process. Principals established regular times when teachers needed to work together to problem-solve around specific issues, especially around individual children. Regular meetings, site-based teams, and after-school discussions are just a few examples of these.

Meetings that facilitated discussion and inquiry were key elements of each of the schools. Consistently, the meetings were designed to solicit open input into the school and the teaching and learning process. Each of the principals had adopted an open and

honest approach. During meetings when there were conflicts, the conflicts observed focused on issues, not on people. In a number of meetings, the principal or another staff member invited quiet members of the team for input. This insured reticent team members, not just vocal team members, were included in the discussion.

They encouraged discussion and debate about what was happening in the school. In spite of this openness, one principal still said that it was essential that you had staff who were willing to “tell you the truth” when others were not.

While they were open and collaborative about how to go about the change, they held sacred to the desired results that the school had envisioned. Of the principals who had overseen the transformation of the school, they said they never faltered on staying the course – it may have taken longer or occurred differently than they initially thought but they never wavered on the desired end result.

#### A Focus on Learning about Learning

In each school, there was an underlying current of continuous improvement. In none of the schools was there a sense that they were finished with the process of growing and changing. This sense permeated the school, from the principal to the staff to the students.

While none of the schools used the same instructional materials, in each instance, the principal had placed a high priority on curriculum and instruction. This was evident in their interviews, since all spoke intently about the instructional strategies and materials that the school was using. While only one of the principals identified themselves as an instructional leader, they all exhibited characteristics of an instructional leader.

Instructional leadership emphasizes instruction as the focus of the school, a culture of learning and analysis, and group agreement on instructional matters (Blase & Blase, 2001).

All the principals studied were committed to continually improving the school and its practice. This was evident not only in what they said but in what they did. One of the teachers stated,

She (the principal) is always pushing us to look at things deeper...a common question that she has for us is “is that good enough for our students?” There is a clear push for the school to meet the needs of all kids. She has helped me be a better teacher. Today, I am teaching children that I never thought that I could or would want to and I can do it! I would not want to work anywhere else. Because of this constant encouragement and push, I am a better teacher.

Each school had made a significant commitment to professional development in order to make the change happen. Each found that professional development, along with opportunities to translate the professional development into practice, were critical. Professional development was not viewed as a stand-alone activity. The principals were strategic in how and when professional development occurred. Principals attended the staff development sessions with the staff. By doing so, they demonstrated that the information and training was important enough for them to learn too. Once again, this is a significant departure from what traditionally occurs in schools. This demonstrated a commitment to changing and learning by the principals.

The principals embraced the change to an inclusive school not just as a technical endeavor but also as a social or spiritual endeavor. They recognized that while staff needed to learn new skills and techniques, they also needed to accept that all children could learn and the significant role the school played in students being successful or not.

A number of principals talked about identifying “early adopters” of the new techniques and how they used them to get the most change in a short period of time. Others opted to encourage staff to participate in the change process rather than force staff to participate. One principal strategically identified a team of staff members who would be instrumental in creating the change. This team was composed of the informal leaders at each of the grade levels and was then used to train others in the school.

Each principal had a method in place to monitor how the school was improving. One principal would spend time alone evaluating where the school was along the desired path. Others did it at the beginning, middle and end of the school year. Another principal had enacted a review team that monitored the school’s journey.

In most traditional schools, teaching is an extremely private act that is rarely observed by others. In each of the schools, this was not the case. The principal interacted with students and teachers and was in classrooms for much of the school day. Teaching had become a visible act; open for all to see. Observations of teachers, by teachers, became standard practice in a number of schools. One teacher described this practice as “having significantly altered my preparation for teaching, I really think about what and why and how I will teach. The opening of my classroom to others has made me more thoughtful about my teaching”. This approach of discussing teaching was at the heart of a number of discussions observed between principals and staff. Other teachers mentioned that they reflected on what worked and didn’t work after each lesson and used their reflections to improve their practice. In meetings and in classroom observations, it was evident that teachers were reflective practitioners. They thought about their practice and

sought out ways to improve their ability to teach. More than once, teachers stated that if a child was not learning, the teacher needed to change what they were doing.

While each school had a focus on the academic standards especially in reading and mathematics, there was a commitment to growing and teaching the whole child. Music, art, science, social studies, and physical education were stressed and included daily or weekly for each student. This was evident in the materials published for parents, in the instruction occurring in the classroom, and in discussions at meetings.

One unintended outcome of developing an inclusive school was that all teachers had refined their instructional practices. There was an undercurrent that by implementing inclusive practices, teachers had improved their instruction practices for all students. “The entire process has made all the teachers, better teachers”. Recognizing how challenging it would be to start anew with the school, one school had adopted a three-year mentoring plan for all new staff.

### Recognition of School Culture

Schools are “primarily relationships and interactions between people. Consequently a successful school is one in which the relationships and interactions are facilitated and coordinated in order that the people involved can achieve their common mission” (Ainscow, 1991, p.300). Schools are defined by how the staff within the school works. Each of the principals demonstrated an understanding of how iterative and dynamic the process of school change is by influencing and being influenced by the culture of the school.

While the data did not clearly demonstrate that the principals understood the role of the school culture at the beginning of their journey, it was clear that they understood it now and used the culture of the school to amplify the intentions of the school. They had developed a school culture that supported the beliefs they had for children and for their beliefs to support the school culture. Vision was not seen as a top-down process but as a shared responsibility among the staff.

Peterson and Deal (2002) describe school culture as the complex elements of values, traditions, language, and purpose that influences and shapes the ways teachers, students, and administrators think, feel, and act. In addition, they identified key features of school culture:

- A shared sense of purpose and vision.
- Norms, values, beliefs and assumptions.
- Rituals, traditions, and ceremonies.
- History and stories.
- Architecture, artifacts and symbols.

#### *Culture: Vision and Values*

Each of the schools evidenced a set of values that anchored their activities to a deeper purpose. Evidence of the shared sense of purpose, vision, and values was present in each of the schools. Mission statements were prominently displayed in the schools. One school even had coffee mugs on which the school mission was written. In one team meeting, a staff member relied on the mission of the school to illustrate her point of view.

The mission and vision of each of the schools appeared to be a living statement, not just empty words.

The schools resonated with a focus on all students learning and progressing. Student artwork was displayed throughout the school and it was not just the best artwork. There was a visceral excitement about the learning process in each of the schools.

Consistently, the principals and the staff spoke about the school using the pronoun ‘ours’ rather than ‘my’ when discussing the school. Each school had developed a shared vision for the school by recognizing the individual differences of staff and used the vision as a starting point for the change. One principal stated,

We will not fail...these students are ours. We had to figure out how they can learn. I understood that I was asking teachers who for many years had been told that they were great, to change and that that would be difficult. Yet, we had children in our school who were not learning, not participating, and not part of the school. I had to question our process, what we were doing and I had to do it in a way that got teachers invested in changing.

#### *Culture: Ritual and Ceremony*

Rituals provide time for reflection, connection, and meaningful experience. Rituals and ceremonies typically occur in some regular pattern and provide a way to mark the passage of time, to celebrate accomplishments and to add purpose to the school (Peterson & Deal, 2002).

Each of the schools had in place. methods and rituals that promoted the mission and values of the school. In every case, parents were encouraged both in word and in practice, to be a part of the school. Parent newsletters were friendly and full of stories and pictures that promoted the teaching and learning of all students.

Annually, special celebration days were held. Many of the ones identified resonated with the mission of the school. One school sponsored a Festival of Culture, which is a clear example of this resonance. Annually, the school held the Festival of Cultures. The festival explores and celebrates cultural diversity helping students to be more culturally sensitive and interested in other cultures. Lessons across subject matters related to this theme are encouraged and shared by staff.

*Culture: Architecture and Symbols*

In each case, the principal had used the space within the school to illustrate what was of value to the inclusive school in operation. Artwork and schoolwork from all students was prominently displayed in halls outside of classrooms. The schools were not only welcoming, but also clean and orderly. The schools felt alive and energetic and committed to the learning process. Mission and vision statements were in clear view and exhibits and bulletin boards reinforced the concepts espoused within the mission statements. The office of the school mirrored the personality of the school. Again, all were welcoming but each was different. The school secretary was pleasant and within instant sight of those entering.

Tools for learning and experiencing learning were highly visible within the schools. Libraries played a prominent placement in each of the schools. Libraries were observed in frequent use during the school day. Many of the principals or staff members mentioned that the library was open both before and after school. Computers were seen in frequent use. Even very young students appeared to be computer literate and were observed using computers on their own. In every school, the whole child was

emphasized. As schools work to meet the increasing demands related to student achievement, some schools are questioning the value of art, music, and physical education. This was not the case in any of the schools. Each one was proud to state that they offered at least weekly classes for all students in art, music, and physical education.

### Summary of Emerging Themes

While each school and principal were different, there emerged a number of common themes across the schools and principals. The principals held core beliefs about themselves, staff, and students. These core beliefs helped shape the school and became the foundation of the practices of the principal and the school. Each principal was a highly competent and skilled professional but they recognized how important others were in the process of developing an inclusive school. They built and established relationships, without regard to positional authority, that supported the mission and purpose of the school. They recognized and believed that open and honest communication was critical to the change of the school and its practices. They empowered staff to be actively engaged in the transformation of the school, realizing the results could be different based on the people involved. Each school evidenced reflective processes and skills that focused on continual improvement of the learning process. All of this was embedded in a school culture that promoted the idea that all students can and do learn.

“It is one of the greatest ironies of our age that we created organizations to constrain our problematic human natures, and now the only thing that can save these organizations is a full appreciation of the expansive capacities of us humans” (Wheatley, 2005, p.21).

## CHAPTER V

### DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

#### Discussion

This study’s intention was to describe and understand the leadership role of the principal in developing and maintaining an effective inclusive school. The development of an inclusive school can be viewed as a unique endeavor different from other forms of school change. Most school change is focused on improving the curriculum, structure, policy, or instructional methodology of the school. Becoming an inclusive school changes the intent of the school from being a place to educate most students to becoming a school where all students are welcomed.

Schools across Pennsylvania and the rest of the nation have created mission and vision statements that state “all children can learn” in one form or another. However, the reality of current practice shows incongruence between what schools say and what schools actually practice. Many schools embrace the concept of all children in their words, yet their practices tell another story. Yet, in the schools studied, the principal and the staff had risen above the rhetoric and had developed an environment where ‘all’ truly meant ALL.

I began this study believing that there were a number of technical skills and elements that principals needed in order to be a leader of an inclusive school. What has become evident is that being an inclusive leader requires one to lead a school not only through a technical change but also, a moral change. The moral change was evident in how each of the schools truly changed their beliefs about their students and their expectations about these students. It was also evident in their changed beliefs about themselves as educators. They clearly believed they could teach all students. They clearly believed schools benefited from valuing all students. They clearly believed open and honest dialogue and input improved the school community.

This type of change requires more than what has typically been considered in school restructuring. While each of the principals evidenced the traits, skills, and characteristics consistent with transformational leadership, these traits and abilities do not fully explain how the leader led their school to being an inclusive one where all students were welcomed and valued.

The themes about the principals and the schools suggest that spirituality played a significant role in achieving this moral and ethical change within each of the schools. Rather than conceptualizing spirituality as a discrete stage or type of leadership, I propose that spirituality becomes the driving force – the catalyst behind the inclusive leader’s practice. Spirituality does not inform the leader about what to do. Instead, it informs the leader about how and why to inspire the school to be inclusive. In other words, the leader’s practice is driven by spirituality. Spirituality-driven leadership provides the intensive focus needed to explain how and why the principals developed the inclusive schools.

Spirituality-driven leadership becomes the essence of the leader's actions and attitudes, beliefs and behaviors. None of the principals studied, talked about spirituality yet each demonstrated their spirituality-driven leadership in their words, actions, and behaviors. They demonstrated all three dimensions of presence: affirming, critical, and enabling (Starratt, 2005). They evidenced their spirituality-driven leadership in the following ways:

1. In their relationships with others,
1. In their beliefs about staff, students, and work, and
1. How the change to an inclusive school occurred.

These areas are not discrete in practice but rather; they overlap and intertwine within the actions, beliefs, and words of the principals. However, for the purpose of discussion and illustration, they will be described individually.

### Spirituality-Driven Relationships

The primary way the principals demonstrated this foundation of spirituality is in how they promoted relationships within the school. Each of the principals was “present to the most profound realities of one's world” (Starratt, 2005, p. 67). and treated others in the school building with respect and caring. The principals were passionate about not only including all children, but including all staff in the process of change. There existed a profound belief and feeling that each staff member was vital to the success of the school. See Table Three for a summary of indicators of spirituality-driven relationships and how the principals evidenced these indicators.

Table 3

*Spirituality-Driven Relationships as Evidenced by the Principals' Words*

Indicators of Spirituality-Driven Relationships	In the Words of the Principal
<p>“Spiritual leadership invites others to ...enable the human spirits to soar and...know who they are” (Starratt, 2005, p. 83).</p>	<p>“All staff members have strengths. It is my job to tap into each person’s strengths”.</p> <p>“The vision of the school is not a top-down process; it was a shared responsibility of staff”.</p>
<p>What is critical is the relationship...the relationship will always be different and will evoke different potentials (Wheatley, 1992).</p>	<p>“Every staff member contributed to the process of transforming the school – it was the entire school’s journey, not just the principal’s”.</p> <p>“The school emerged over time with every staff member contributing to the process”.</p> <p>“We worked together to make this school a possibility”.</p>
<p>Leaders who use more participatory approaches are astonished with the capacity, energy, creativity, and commitment they evoke (Wheatley, 2005).</p>	<p>“Any stigma or concern is directly discussed as a group and resolved...nothing is left to fester”.</p> <p>“We worked hard at building a safe and trusting environment in which we all contributed”.</p> <p>“ The school is much better than I had ever envisioned; the staff pushed me and the entire school to grow”.</p>

Each of the principals saw and treated people as “bundles of potentiality” (Wheatley, 1994, p. 34), but they did not force or coerce their wishes on them. Instead they invested in the people of the school to transform it into an inclusive environment. As opposed to the role of the principal in the more traditional school, the principals actively valued and encouraged the involvement of staff in the decision-making processes. They did not accept less than full involvement of staff. Additionally, the principal clearly valued the uniqueness of each staff member and recognized each could and must contribute to the process.

The Kellogg Foundation’s National Fellowship Program states, “leadership is about building trusting relationships with others to achieve the common good. It is about respecting the individual integrity of each person, and it is about self-knowledge and just being, as much as it is about action” (Sublett, 2001, p. 119). The principals of the schools embodied this description; they achieved the results they did by focusing on reflection, relationships, and respect along with quality programming.

Driven by their spirituality, the principals relied on the relationships that existed within the school. They realized it was the relationships between and among the school that would evoke the new potential of the school where all students were valued and welcomed. Each of the principals operated on the assumption that people and their relationships were the heart of the school. They harnessed the power and energy of the relationships within the school as a catalyst for change. Each of the principals was open to others and saw both children and staff as capable and full, thus creating the positive energy and support needed for the transformation (Wheatley, 2005).

## Spirituality-Driven Beliefs

It has long been posited that beliefs about children and staff were key to the success of an inclusive school (Sage & Burello, 1994; Goor, et al., 1997). This study corroborated these findings. This study also found that it was critical for the principals to be engaged and in touch with what they believed about children and staff – and to have these beliefs inspire their work. In addition to having the skills and competencies of leadership, they led from the heart, which permitted them to inspire not only themselves, but also their staff. This also helped them to gain the needed support from their special education staff and their administration. They did not just say all students could learn – they evidenced this in how they worked and why they did what they did. They exhibited a relentless focus on the mission of the school and used this to drive their decisions, their words, and their actions.

Each of the schools used broad-based beliefs about children and people along with a vision to guide the change to being an inclusive school. With these beliefs and vision in mind, the entire school and its culture, not just the principal, shaped the change to an inclusive school. See Table Four for a summary of indicators of spirituality-driven beliefs and how the principals evidenced these indicators.

In each case, the beliefs transformed the school into a community where everyone belonged and was valued. This community and the welcoming environment it created was evident in all visits and observations from the school office to the hallways. The school community welcomed the students and the staff. The community that developed was a school community that welcomed and valued differences in people; it did not

attempt to negate the differences. The school community recognized that this new community would only be maintained through open and honest discussions.

Table 4

*Spirituality-Driven Beliefs as Evidenced by the Principals' Words*

Indicators of Spirituality-Driven Beliefs	In the Words of the Principals
It is only with shared beliefs and desires that people are motivated to seek each other out and develop a cohesive system (Wheatley, 2005).	<p>“We are not going to fail – these are our children and they will be successful”.</p> <p>“The ‘walls are down’ ...we have developed a culture of learning together that benefits all”.</p> <p>“Here, all means all!”</p>
“It is impossible to impose anything on people. We must participate in anything that affects us” (Wheatley, p.105).	<p>“ We included all staff in the process...while it was my vision I needed everyone to ‘get on board’ with this idea or it would not have happened”.</p> <p>“Everyone was needed and valued”.</p>
Spirituality is a powerful force that helps us see the possibilities of deeper connections not only for our own good but also for others (Conger, 1994; Owen, 1999).	<p>“The school is an incredible place where teachers work hard, where professional development is valued and where children succeed”.</p> <p>“All students add value to our school”.</p> <p>“We are all better people because of the process”.</p>

## Spirituality-Driven Change

The principals' practice was also spirituality-driven. All of the principals were confident in their abilities and this permitted them to seek assistance and support from others. Each of the principals had made being a reflective practitioner a priority. They held high expectations of staff to be reflective practitioners while providing opportunities for staff to engage in reflection. They expected open and honest communication not only of themselves, but also of all members of the community.

Much of school change has been promoted as a project to be accomplished, a goal to be completed. This project approach does not lead to the moral or ethical change needed to develop and maintain a school where all means all. None of the schools embraced inclusion instantaneously. Instead, the schools proceeded to becoming inclusive as a journey. This journey took place overtime and with input from all. The principals, driven by their spirituality, used a process-driven approach to achieving the inclusive school. They knew what they wanted (a welcoming environment where all children are successful), but how they arrived at this outcome was a process with all staff participating and contributing. This is evidenced by the fact that all of the principals trusted and engaged their staff in the decision-making processes. This meant the journey then became the entire school's, not just the principal's journey.

Could the theory of dissipative structure originally posited by Prigogine in 1977 within the field of science and discussed by Wheatley (1994) within the field of organizational management help to understand the role of the principal in the change to an inclusive school? Dissipative structures are ones that use items that disturb the system's equilibrium in order to create a new form of order. In the case of the principals

and the schools, this new mission, educating all students, disturbed the equilibrium of the school. However, rather than disregard it or attempt to make rules and regulations to thwart it, the principal and the school were open to the change and used the change to transform itself into a new order that was more complex and adaptable. Being open to this disequilibrium is critical to lasting school change.

As new information about children and their possibilities were introduced into the school, the school responded. Students, who had previously not been actively involved in school activities, were participating and were successful. As new information about teachers and their potential were introduced to the school, the school welcomed them. The typically quiet meetings became authentic, open, and productive, thus changing the school. As the leader demonstrated new behaviors such as empowering teachers and staff, the system responded. Active involvement of staff in decision-making became the norm. Eventually, there was enough change that the school became so far removed from where it had been that it became a new structure, a new school – one that could respond to the “chaos” of having a wide variety of students, teachers, and others. It became a welcoming and nurturing environment, a community. The school not only restructured itself, it actually recultured itself. Reculturing efforts affect the deeper structures and meanings of school. Reculturing builds the capacity to critically ask “why” as opposed to merely planning for “how” (Doyle, 2001).

Change or the transformation to the inclusive school, then becomes an ambiguous process, not one that is driven by orderly, linear, or predictable steps. This ambiguity can be viewed as a possibility or concern. The principals in this study appear to have been comfortable with and actually leveraged this ambiguity to move the schools and the

change process forward. They viewed the change not as a step-by-step process, but instead a journey where everyone would be involved and benefit. See Table Five for a summary of indicators of spirituality-driven change and how the principals evidenced these indicators.

This helps explain why spirituality would be so critical to the process because it requires the leader to be comfortable with and promote disorder. It demonstrates that inclusive leadership is more about purpose than plans (Wheatley, 2005). It requires leadership to recognize that from disorder and complexity, order will emerge. This takes a new vision of leadership, one that recognizes the spiritual aspects of leadership. Spiritual leadership invites contemplation, analysis, and insight while recognizing that only through these processes will we achieve the desired results (Conger, 1994; Wheatley, 2005). The schools did not rely on structure to operate; they relied on the relationships and the trust that had emerged during the change process. None of the schools had settled into a comfortable pattern. Each reported that they were continuing to change, evolve, and clarify their beliefs, processes, and culture.

Table 5

*Spirituality-Driven Change as Evidenced by the Principals' Words*

Indicators of Spirituality- Driven Change	In the Words of the Principals
<p>“Leaders begin with a strong intention, not a set of action plans” (Wheatley, 2005, p. 43).</p>	<p>“I knew what I wanted to accomplish ...I wasn’t sure how it would happen; just that I wanted the children to be a real part of the school”.</p> <p>“I didn’t know how just that it needed to be done”.</p>
<p>Leaders “believe the system is talented enough to organize in whatever ways the future requires” (Wheatley, p. 43).</p>	<p>“Every staff member helped get this school to where we are today. They pushed us further than I thought we would go”.</p> <p>“I had to question our process, what we were doing and I had to do it in a way that got teachers invested in changing”.</p>
<p>Leaders must “learn to live with instability, chaos, change and surprise” (Wheatley, p 112).</p>	<p>“Where we are today, I could not have predicted. We have changed so much both as individuals and as a school”.</p> <p>“Staff had to abandon their traditional beliefs about their roles and create new roles”.</p> <p>“It was a rich and dynamic process that changed all of us”.</p>

## Spirituality-Driven Leadership

The principals in this study never once used the term spirituality however they evidenced spirituality in what they said and what they did. Spirituality helps to explain why and how they were able to create an inclusive school where all students were welcomed and valued. Spirituality-driven leadership explains how this group of principals transformed schools into welcoming and nurturing environments for staff and students. Spirituality-driven leadership requires leaders to have a foundation of leadership traits and characteristics, but recognizes that those traits and characteristics are not enough. Leaders must know how and why to use the skills, knowledge, and attributes to develop relationships that support an ever-changing and growing school environment.

## Recommendations for Further Study

As data was analyzed and themes emerged, implications for further research related to the role of the principal in developing inclusive schools became evident. These recommendations are:

1. Are there elements or attributes that assist a leader in promoting disequilibrium such as is found in dissipative structures? Can they be taught so that leaders can be open and comfortable to the change process?
2. Is spirituality a key element to lasting reform in schools? If so, how can the aspects of spirituality be taught to aspiring school leaders?
3. Since the data was inconclusive related to the influence of the school culture on the principal, a longitudinal study of a principal in the development of an inclusive

school may add valuable information related to the interactive nature of a school culture on the change process.

4. Three of the principals shared personal struggles that included being from a minority group, having a significant learning disability, and having a sibling with a disability. Is there a correlation between personal struggle and spirituality?

5. This study was limited to five principals and their schools; this study could be replicated with a larger number of schools. Development of a questionnaire or survey related to pertinent themes would make this feasible.

6. This study included principals identified as developing inclusive schools. How does their practice compare and contrast with principals operating more traditional schools?

7. In this study, all schools were producing sound results for all children. Is there a correlation between schools using inclusive practices and high student achievement?

### Implications for Policy and Practice

While this study was limited in its scope, the findings do suggest implications for practice and policy within the field of special education and principal preparation. Additional studies will be needed to ascertain whether the suggestions posited are sound and applicable.

This study supports the identified need for increased emphasis on special education programming to be included in principal preparation programs. While this study clearly supports continued focus on preparing principals to provide quality special education programming, this study also appears to suggest that this focus is insufficient.

As schools continue to become more inclusive, this study suggests that principals must know how to lead and respond to an ever-changing school environment whose purpose and mission is to welcome and educate all students. This study suggest that training and support to practicing and aspiring principals should assist principals in:

1. Learning the importance of relationships and how to build and cultivate relationships within the school to achieve the common purpose or mission.

2. Learning how to be reflective in their practice, while supporting their faculty to becoming reflective practitioners.

3. Developing welcoming and nurturing school environments where children and staff flourish and are actively engaged in a school culture that supports open and honest dialogue and work.

4. Becoming comfortable with and even promoting deep cultural change at the school level. Since inclusive educational practices mark a significant departure from common practice, schools that adopt these practices undertake a journey that defines the school and its practice; this requires strong leadership with a sense of purpose.

Institutions of higher education and other types of principal training programs should consider the work of Wheatley, Starratt, and others. Their work specifically in the area of spirituality may be useful and beneficial in informing coursework and practicum decisions. If inclusive education is to be successful, it is imperative that regular and special education become a unified system where all students are educated, are valued, and assumed to be part of the school culture. As students with disabilities are being educated more and more within general education, schools that can respond successfully to this purpose are clearly needed.

## Conclusion

Leading an inclusive school is a significant departure from traditional schooling. An inclusive school is founded on a common mission and vision where all students are valued and everyone works collaboratively to insure that this happens. An inclusive school requires a leader to exhibit a number of skills and traits. However, this study suggests that having skills and traits were not enough to explain the difference in an inclusive school. This study suggests spirituality is needed to inform or drive the leaders practice. Spirituality provides the explanation for why and how the leader does what she does within the school setting. Spirituality explains why the leader can remain focused and even comfortable during the change process. Spirituality provides the entire school but especially the principal, with the focus on relationships, reflection, and process that is needed to insure that the vision of all meaning all.

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## APPENDIX A

### Semi-Structured Interview Questions And Probes

## Semi-Structured Interview Questions And Probes

1. Tell me about your school?
  - a. Probes:
    - i. Describe your student population.
    - ii. Describe the economic status of your families.
    - iii. Describe student achievement rates.
    - iv. Describe the demographics of your student population.
    - v. Describe the area in which your school is located.
2. What does inclusive practices mean to you as the principal of this school?
  - a. Probes:
    - i. How has this definition changed over time?
3. What do you believe about students with disabilities?
4. What is the mission of your school?
  - a. Probes:
    - i. Who was involved in developing the mission?
    - ii. Describe how it was developed.
    - iii. Is it different from the mission of your district?
5. What does inclusive practices look like in your school?
  - a. Probes:
    - i. From students perspective?
    - ii. From the school board's perspective?
    - iii. From a teachers perspective?
6. Tell me about your training and experience with students with disabilities.
  - a. Probes:
    - i. What happened in your teaching experience?
    - ii. What happened in your personal experiences?
    - iii. What formal or informal training have you had in special education?
    - iv. Which of these most effectively helped you provide an inclusive school?
7. How would you describe the culture of your school?
  - a. Probes:
    - i. How has the culture changed?
    - ii. How are decisions made?
      1. Student decisions
      2. School decisions

8. How did you transform your school from a traditional school to one that practices inclusive practices?
  - a. Probes:
    - i. What was the process – can you give me an historical perspective?
    - ii. How planful was the process?
    - iii. What was not planned for?
    - iv. What training and technical assistance was provided?
  
9. How did the teachers react to inclusive practices?
  - a. Probes:
    - i. Which teachers did embrace inclusive practices? Which did not?
    - ii. What did you not expect that happened?
    - iii. What training and technical assistance was provided? Did that help?
  
10. How did the parents react to inclusive practices?
  - a. Probes:
    - i. Parents of students with disabilities?
    - ii. Parents of students without disabilities,
    - iii. What problems/sources of strength did you find?
  
11. What do you do on a day-to-day basis to insure that your school is continually practicing inclusive practices?
  - a. Probes:
    - i. Tell me about the school’s curriculum.
    - ii. Tell me about the school’s instructional practices.
    - iii. Tell me about the involvement of staff in solving problems together.
    - iv. Tell me about staff meetings.
  
12. Tell me about special education practices and procedures in your school?
  - a. Probes:
    - i. How are children referred for special education evaluation?
    - ii. Who is part of the MDT?
    - iii. Who typically commits resources for IEPs for the district?
    - iv. Who supervises special education staff in your building?
    - v. How are students included in statewide assessment measures?
  
13. Tell me about your communication with central office staff? The special education director?

APPENDIX B

Letter Requesting Involvement In The Study

## Letter Requesting Involvement In The Study

Dear Principal of an Inclusive School,

I would like to introduce myself to you. My name is Janet Sloand Armstrong and I am a student at Duquesne University in the Interdisciplinary Doctoral Program for Educational Leaders (IDPEL). Additionally, I am the special education department director at Lancaster-Lebanon IU 13. My dissertation is focused on studying how principals lead to promote effective inclusive practices. It will be a descriptive study. The principals that I want to study are the outstanding principals who have successfully implemented inclusive schools.

Your name comes recommended from <insert names> of the Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network. They have identified you and your school as a principal who has implemented inclusive practices and who has transformed the school into a welcoming environment for all students.

I hope that you will take time to participate in what I hope is an important study that will improve both educational practices and principal preparation. If you do, I will be sensitive to your involvement and time. As part of participating, I will ask that you permit me to interview you and observe you in your school interacting with teachers and students. Additionally, I may ask for artifacts (e.g., staff meeting minutes, calendars) that would support my findings or observations.

Thank you in advance for your participation in this study. Your professional response is greatly appreciated. If you have any questions, please call me at my office 717-540-4986X3003 or at home 717-526-4366 or via email at [janet\\_armstrong@iu13.org](mailto:janet_armstrong@iu13.org)

If you are willing to participate, can you fax (717-541-4968) back to me the enclosed form and let me know when is a good time to call or contact you.

Janet Sloand Armstrong