

The Relationship Between Administration and Inclusive Education:

Perspectives From One Ontario School Board

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Abstract

For the past two decades, school boards around the world have transitioned to more inclusive service delivery for students with exceptionalities. Derived from a larger study (Bennett, Gallagher, Somma, & White, 2021), this research focuses on one school board in the Province of Ontario that transitioned from segregated special education classes to full inclusive service delivery and programming for students with exceptionalities through a board-wide policy. The current major research project utilizes qualitative methods and analyzes 10 semi-structured interviews with administrators from this school board. This project aimed to cull findings to better understand how administrators understand inclusion and make sense of their role within an inclusive education policy and was guided by three research questions: (a) How do administrators define inclusion? (b) How do administrators perceive their role in facilitating an inclusive school culture? (c) What staff and personnel supports do administrators believe are integral to the implementation of inclusive policy? Interview data derived from 10 school administrators were examined using thematic analysis. Findings indicate administrators play a key role in the implementation of inclusive policy by maintaining a positive school culture regarding inclusion, creating a shared school vision, taking ownership over the inclusive policy in their school, and gaining buy-in from all members of the school team. Implications describe steps administrators can take in this role and suggest that a policy shift toward inclusion can be an effective way to positively transition toward inclusion.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Special education and best practice for teaching students with exceptionalities has been a hotly debated topic for decades. Since UNESCO's (1994) World Conference on Special Needs Education, countries and school boards around the world have begun to shift towards more inclusive policies (Ainscow et al., 2019; Haug, 2017). The *Salamanca Statement* (UNESCO, 1994) makes clear that mainstream schools with "an inclusive orientation" (p. ix) not only are the most effective at providing education to the majority of students but also provide a means of combatting discrimination, creating inclusive communities, and are ultimately the most cost-effective at delivering education. While this shift began almost 20 years ago, the design and pace of these changes vary from country to country and even from school board to school board.

Derived from a larger study (Bennett, Gallagher, Somma, & White, 2021), this research focuses on one Ontario school board that transitioned to full inclusive service delivery and programming for students with exceptionalities through a board-wide policy. Based on the research question, "What is the relationship between administrators and inclusive education," data from interviews with 10 administrators in the board were thematically analyzed to reflect the perspectives of nine school principals and one vice principal on their role in their school board's policy of full inclusion. Results elucidate how administrators define inclusive education, how they perceive their role regarding school culture and inclusion, and what staff support they deem necessary to facilitate successful inclusion.

Context of the Research

Canada has no federal ministry of education, leaving regulations and policies to be decided at a provincial/territorial level; this allows some provinces to be more

progressive than others with respect to inclusive practices (Timmons, 2007). However, despite the absence of a national approach to inclusion, a review of these provincial/territorial policies indicates that inclusion of students with exceptionalities is the predominant policy across Canada (Burge et al., 2008). Despite these widely espoused policies, large numbers of students with exceptionalities are not included in their neighbourhood school classrooms. For example, Brown et al. (2013) found that over 50,000 students in Ontario spent at least half their day in special education classrooms. More recently, numbers from the Ontario Ministry of Education (OME, 2017) indicate that 15,550 elementary students and 6,801 secondary students are educated in fully self-contained settings (Bennett et al., 2019). Comparatively, the 2009–2010 numbers indicate 15,483 elementary students and 7,206 secondary students in fully self-contained settings (Bennett et al., 2019). Over a decade, the numbers have only marginally changed, with an increase for students at the secondary level.

From these numbers, it is evident that progress to fully inclusive policies is slow and there is still room for implementation enhancements. This major research project focuses on one school board and its board-wide policy for fully inclusive environments and programming for students with exceptionalities, allowing a unique perspective of this issue.

Significance of the Study

As the debate on best practice for educating students with exceptionalities continues, this research remains pertinent. Currently, the Province of Ontario acts in accordance with the *Human Rights Code* (1990) which prohibits actions that discriminate against people based on a protected ground, including disability, within a protected social area—in this case, the right to equal treatment in education without discrimination. Under the Ontario *Human Rights Code* (1990), educators have a duty to accommodate for

students with exceptionalities. Several different stakeholders have roles and responsibilities under this code to ensure equal treatment in education, including school principals. School principals are responsible for referring exceptional students to a committee for identification and placement (IPRC), for preparing/approving individual education plans (IEPs) for each exceptional student, and for communicating board policies and procedures to staff, students, and parents (Bennett et al., 2019). This research project focuses on administrators communicating inclusive policies and procedures to their school community.

As school boards across Canada and the world continue to transition to more inclusive education policies for students with exceptionalities, understanding administrator perspectives becomes increasingly important. Administrators play a crucial role in creating an inclusive school culture, as well as fostering positive attitudes toward inclusion in their staff (Irvine et al., 2010; Reid et al., 2018; Waldron et al., 2011). Research indicates that the success of inclusive policies and practices can hinge on the attitude and beliefs of school administrators (Lunde, 2020). Thus, it is important to better understand the perspectives of the administrators themselves.

While a large body of research has been conducted around teachers' views and roles in inclusion, few studies focus on the perspectives of administrators in inclusive settings; further, in those that do, "it is difficult to separate the administrative perspectives from other school staff" (Irvine et al., 2010, p. 72). While the larger research project on which the current study is based included various stakeholder perspectives, this paper will focus on the administrator perspectives alone in an attempt to address this dearth in the literature on administrators' roles in inclusive practices.

Further, Woodcock and Hardy (2019) found that although most principals viewed inclusive education positively, they expressed uncertainty toward inclusive education policy. This research study examines principals in a school board where full inclusion is the board-wide policy. This allows a unique look into principals' perceptions of inclusion without the challenge of navigating through unclear policy.

Operational Definitions

Several terms used throughout the paper have various definitions depending on context. For the purpose of this paper, inclusion or inclusive education, further defined below, refers to students with exceptionalities being educated in mainstream classes with their same-age peers at their neighbourhood school with academic, social, and extracurricular opportunities (Porter & Towell, 2017). Exceptionality refers to the OME's (2017) definition, which includes 12 labels and five categories of exceptionality: behavioural, communicational, intellectual, physical, and multiple. These categories are used in Identification Placement and Review Committees, to determine both placement and additional funding (OME, 2017). In the context of this paper, administrator or administration refers to school-level administration including principals and vice principals. Any mention of school board-level administration will be distinctly noted.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this project and were posed collectively as a lens to guide the analyses of the data garnered from administrators 5 years after implementing a board-wide inclusive policy:

1. How do administrators define inclusion?

2. How do administrators perceive their role in facilitating an inclusive school culture?
3. What staff and personnel supports do administrators believe are integral to the implementation of inclusive policy?

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that guided this study was sensemaking theory.

Sensemaking, as a theory, is generally associated with research that is interpretive, social constructivist, processual, and phenomenological (Brown et al., 2015). Sensemaking theory has its roots in social psychology, but it was Karl Weick's seminal work that brought it to the forefront of organizational studies. Weick's (2001) work explores sensemaking related to how members of an organization operate, engage with, and make sense of policies and issues within the organization. Weick (2001) refers to sensemaking as "a retrospective activity that is sensitive to conditions of choice, irrevocability, and visibility" (p. 4) and describes it as "people concerned with identity in the social context of other actors engage ongoing events from which they extract cues and make plausible sense retrospectively while enacting more or less order into those ongoing events" (p. 463). However, there is no single agreed upon definition of sensemaking and Weick's broad definition has been expanded upon by scholars from various disciplines (Brown et al., 2015; DeMatthews, 2015). Sensemaking theory is broadly understood as "the social processes of meaning construction and reconstruction through which managers understand, interpret, and create sense for themselves and others of their changing organizational context and surroundings" (Rouleau & Balogun, 2010, p. 954). In simple terms, sensemaking is the process by which individuals understand and give meaning to their experiences.

Evans's (2007) article about school leaders using sensemaking around race and demographic changes in schools provides a good background and definition of sensemaking. Evans describes three key elements of sensemaking outlined in Weick's (1995) work. First, sensemaking is socially constructed and negotiated through a shared process, indicating individuals find meaning through actions and interactions with others. Next, sensemaking is "context specific and value laden" (Evans, 2007, p. 161), meaning how individuals make sense is based on contextual cues, as well as their own previous beliefs, expectations, and interpretations. Finally, sensemaking is dependent on the socially acceptable actions and behaviours of the institution (Evans, 2007; Weick, 1995).

In the last 20 years, sensemaking has become a more prominent theory used in education, particularly during change processes. Sensemaking has been used to examine teacher responses to various new situations; recent examples include interpreting student data (Bertrand & Marsh, 2015), professional development on new standards (Allen & Penuel, 2015), and changes to the curriculum (Blignaut, 2008; Marz & Kelchtermans, 2013; Pietarien et al., 2019). Research also looks at student sensemaking in education (Fitzgerald & Palincsar, 2019; Furberg et al., 2013; Kline et al., 2019). Predominantly, sensemaking in education focuses on school leaders. Sensemaking and school leaders focuses on policy changes and new initiatives, as these individuals are in a unique position as intermediaries between the board level administrators and school staff.

In keeping with Weick's (1995) key elements for sensemaking, school administrators socially construct their meaning through interactions with teachers, staff, board level administrators, as well as their peers (DeMatthews, 2015; Evans, 2007; Spillane et al., 2002). As well as these interactions, administrators also use environmental

cues of the school and their own personal beliefs, past experiences, and previous knowledge (DeMatthews, 2015; Evans, 2007). All these factors are personalized to the individual and can change with new experiences; as Weick (1995) argues, individuals are part of the sensemaking experience and continually redefine themselves based on social and contextual cues. Previous studies using sensemaking in education have been utilized to examine how administrators' beliefs, prior experiences, and knowledge impact their understanding and actions (DeMatthews, 2015; Evans, 2007; Ganon-Shilon & Schechter, 2016; Spillane et al., 2002).

Chapter Summary

This major research project explored administrators' perspectives with respect to a board-wide policy shift to full inclusive education for students with exceptionalities. This chapter introduced the research project, outlined the context and significance of the research, and defined common terms that will be used throughout the paper. This research is centred on three research questions: How do administrators define inclusion? How do administrators perceive their role in facilitating an inclusive school culture? What staff and personnel supports do administrators believe are integral to the implementation of inclusive policy? This research was guided by sensemaking theory, which was outlined in this chapter, both broadly and how it has been used in educational studies.

Next, Chapter 2 will present the previous literature conducted on this topic, including a brief history of inclusive education, an introduction to special education in the Province of Ontario, and finally will focus on literature pertaining to administrator attitudes towards inclusion and their role in facilitating inclusive education. Chapter 3

will provide an overview of the method and methodology of the overall research project, place the context of the research, describe the participants, data collection and analyses, and the ethical considerations. Chapter 4 provides the findings from the qualitative data analyses. Finally, Chapter 5 provides a discussion and implications based on the findings from this major research project.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The focus of this major research project was to examine administrators' perspectives on inclusive education practices within their schools and school board. More specifically, I examined how 10 administrators defined inclusive education, how they perceived their roles related to school culture, and their relationships with the in-school team of educators (e.g., classroom teachers, special education resource teachers, educational assistants, paraprofessionals) providing inclusive service delivery. Chapter 2 first presents a brief insight into the history of inclusive education, contextualizes the issue in Ontario, and then reviews previous studies focused on administrators and inclusive education.

A Brief History of Inclusive Education

There is no single universally accepted definition of inclusion; it can vary based on area and context. For the purpose of this paper, Slee's (2007) definition will be used, which describes inclusion not as "the adaptation or refinement of special education" but rather as "a fundamental rejection of special education's claims to be inclusive. Inclusion demands we address the politics of exclusion and representation" (p. 164). This definition was chosen because it acknowledges that inclusion means going beyond simply moving students into mainstream classrooms and entails more than an incremental change to special education policy; it demands that policies are in place that allow for meaningful inclusion into academic and extracurricular opportunities at the students' neighbourhood school with their same-age peers.

The *Salamanca Statement* (UNESCO, 1994) calls for schools to accommodate all children, regardless of their ability. Arguing for a child-centred pedagogy, the *Salamanca*

Statement indicates successful inclusion requires changes to curriculum, organizational arrangements, teaching strategies, use of resources, and partnerships with the community. This is consistent with more recent studies on successful inclusive education practices (e.g., Rieser, 2012; Somma, 2018). The *Salamanca Statement* is considered one of the most significant international documents regarding special education, leading to most Western and European countries acknowledging the importance of inclusive education and slowly beginning to transition towards inclusive practice for students with exceptionalities (Ainscow et al., 2019; Haug, 2017).

The *Salamanca Statement* (UNESCO, 1994) was critical in the shift towards a rights-based model of inclusion, stipulating that each child has the right to fully participate in all aspects of education, including being in a mainstream classroom with same age peers, as well as extracurricular activities. The OME (2017) calls for every student to feel engaged, included, and given the opportunity to succeed, regardless of their background or circumstances. Inclusive schools provide support for both students with exceptionalities and educators to accomplish meaningful goals for students (Porter, 2010). Rioux and Pinto (2010) argue that in order for full inclusion to be successful, an accessible, barrier-free, social and physical environment must be created by changing the existing organizational school structure.

Special Education in the Province of Ontario

The *Education Amendment Act* (1980), more commonly known as *Bill 82*, introduced special education to Ontario, mandating that school boards provide special education programming that is based on and modified in accordance with a plan (now the IEP, as outlined in Ontario Regulation 181/98) containing specific objectives and services

that meet the needs of the student with exceptionalities. These tenets provided the groundwork for special education in the *Education Act* (1990). Special education in the Province of Ontario is implemented in accordance with the *Education Act* (1990), which legislates three principles for the rights with students with exceptionalities: each school-aged student is entitled to access public education, regardless of need; students with exceptionalities are entitled to special education programs and services suited to their needs; and parents/guardians will be invited to participate in meetings regarding the identification, placement, and review of their children. This agenda was further advanced through a verdict by the Supreme Court of Canada in *Moore v. British Columbia* (2012), which clearly outlined the legal requirements that educators must provide for students with exceptionalities, including raising the standards of accommodating students and providing “meaningful access” to the education system.

The OME (2009) defines inclusive education as, “education that is based on the principles of acceptance and inclusion of all students. Students see themselves reflected in their curriculum, their physical surroundings, and the broader environment, in which diversity is honoured and all individuals are respected” (p.4). Despite providing a document on special education standards, the OME does not have an overarching mandate requiring inclusive service delivery for students with exceptionalities. The OME has implemented a broad special education policy that ensures all students have a right to be educated but does not offer further guidance on the type of service delivery. Most Ontario public school boards offer five placements for students with exceptionalities in accordance with the principles outlined in the *Education Act* (1990). These placements range from regular classrooms with indirect support to full-time self-contained classroom placements.

As described in *Special Education in Ontario: Kindergarten to Grade 12* (OME, 2017) the following are the five main special education placement options in Ontario: A *regular classroom placement with indirect support* includes the student being in the mainstream class for the entire day, with the teacher receiving specialized support or consultative services. A *regular classroom placement with resource assistance* includes the student in the mainstream class for most to all of the day, but with additional support and receiving specialized instruction within the mainstream classroom from a special education teacher. A *regular classroom placement with withdrawal assistance* refers to when a student remains in the mainstream class for at least 50% of the day, but also receives instruction outside of the classroom from a special education teacher. A *special education class with partial integration* refers to when a student is educated for at least 50% of the day in a special education class but is integrated into the mainstream class daily for at least one instructional period. Finally, a *full-time special education classroom placement* has the student in a self-contained setting for the full school day (OME, 2017).

For context, OME data from 2017 shows that at the elementary level, 90,149 students received indirect support, 49,763 received resource assistance, 37,674 received withdrawal assistance, 18,322 in partially integrated settings, and 15,550 in full-time special education placements (Bennett et al., 2019). At the secondary level, 69,853 students received indirect support, 23,024 received resource assistance, 33,159 received withdrawal assistance, 11,069 in partially integrated settings, and 6,801 in full-time special education settings (Bennett et al., 2019). This provincial context is important to situate the research as the board that is the focus of this project was transitioning to inclusive service delivery at this point in time.

Administrator Attitudes Towards Inclusive Education

Kalambouka et al. (2008) argue that inclusion does not occur in a vacuum; it requires all stakeholders to be invested and fully committed to the idea in order for successful inclusion to occur. The literature clearly indicates that administrators play a key role in setting the attitudes and beliefs of staff towards inclusion (Al-Mahdy & Emam, 2018; Correa & Wagner, 2011; Salisbury, 2006). Villa et al. (2005) looked at previous literature on the ways schools can improve curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices in order to better respond to all students' needs and conducted interviews with general education teachers at a high school that exemplified inclusive practices. Findings indicated that the degree of administrative support was the most powerful predictor of teachers' positive feelings toward inclusive education (Villa et al., 2005). This is consistent with Ahmmed et al. (2013), who used five different measures to survey 708 primary school teachers in Bangladesh to determine teachers' intentions around including students with exceptionalities based on teacher attitude and efficacy. The authors found the strongest predictor variable for teacher intent towards inclusion was perceived school support, which indicates that when teachers believe they are receiving adequate administrative support, they are more likely to include students with exceptionalities in their classrooms (Ahmmed et al., 2013). Finally, in another consistent study, MacFarlane and Woolfson (2013) sent a five-measure survey package to 111 teachers in Scotland regarding their attitudes and willingness toward inclusive teaching. MacFarlane and Woolfson (2013) found school principals have a key role in communicating the expectations and culture of the school, providing support and training, and promoting self-efficacy to impact the attitudes and behaviours of teachers in teaching students with social, emotional, and behavioural difficulties in mainstream classrooms.

Parents have also identified and described the importance of school administrators' attitudes towards inclusion. In a study conducted by Reid et al. (2018), 32 parents of students with exceptionalities were interviewed and it was found that the degree of the school principal's inclusiveness shaped their interactions with teachers and the overall school culture toward inclusion. Negative attitudes toward inclusion are a significant barrier in the implementation of inclusive education (Abegglen & Hessels, 2018). A study conducted by Praisner (2003) surveyed 408 elementary school principals to investigate their attitudes toward inclusion and the variables that factor into their opinions. Findings showed one in five principals held positive attitudes toward inclusion while the majority were uncertain; principals with more positive attitudes are more likely to place students in less restrictive settings (Praisner, 2003). Similarly, Salisbury (2006) found schools with stronger administrative support and commitment to inclusion reported serving more students with exceptionalities in general education classes for a longer time period per day. Lunde (2020) argues the extent to which schools act inclusively depends on the leadership of school administrators and without their support, the likelihood of inclusion to be established decreases significantly. Thus, it is important that principals themselves view inclusion in a positive light. Various studies show principals often have favourable views of inclusion (Hadjikakou & Mnasonos, 2012; Horrocks et al., 2008; Idol, 2006; Irvine et al., 2010; Woodcock & Hardy, 2019).

Administration's Role in Inclusive Education

The literature on inclusive education is consistent regarding administration holding a prevalent role throughout the implementation and service delivery of inclusive education (Reid et al., 2018; Thompson & Timmons, 2017; Waldron et al., 2011). A

meta-analysis by Cobb (2015) on recent research pertaining to the role of the school principals as special education leaders analyzed 19 studies across three factors: inclusive program delivery, staff collaboration, and parental engagement. Within this study, Cobb found school administrators must play seven different roles to foster inclusive education: visionary, partner, coach, conflict resolver, advocate, interpreter, and organizer. It is evident in current schools that administrators must fill many roles, including leadership in inclusive education.

In School Culture

In order for inclusion to be successful, the creation of an inclusive school culture is crucial. Studies have shown that a school culture that embraces inclusive shared values often derives from a top-down approach of strong leadership with these values (Urton et al., 2014; Zollers et al., 1999). Waldron et al. (2011) conducted a case study of a principal at one school seeking to understand what the role of the principal was in developing and sustaining a highly effective, inclusive school. A key theme that emerged from their study was that principals must provide leadership in setting the direction of the school by developing a shared vision and redesigning the school organization by engaging teachers and working with them to meet that school vision. Irvine et al. (2010) conducted a mixed method study in one Canadian school board to understand the experience of principals in creating authentic inclusive schools. Based on both their quantitative and qualitative results, the role of the principal was critical to create an inclusive atmosphere and to value and promote diversity (Irvine et al., 2010). In addition to this, results from Cobb's (2015) meta-analysis indicate establishing a shared vision of inclusion is key to encourage staff collaboration in order to foster inclusion.

In particular, principals who lead by example and model inclusive behaviours were found to be especially effective in implementing an inclusive school culture (Osiname, 2018; Zollers et al., 1999). Thompson and Timmons (2017) examined two inclusive secondary schools in Saskatchewan, conducting 34 interviews and three focus groups with various stakeholders including students, teachers, parents, a principal, and paraprofessionals to better understand “authentic inclusion.” Thompson and Timmons (2017) found one aspect of authentic inclusion was leadership implementing the vision, which included demonstrating the belief that inclusion was “the right thing to do” (p. 74) through modelling behaviour. It is important that administrators genuinely believe that it is their role to promote an inclusive school culture through common values, traditions, and beliefs and set the tone for these norms (DiPaola et al., 2004).

For an inclusive school culture to thrive, it is key that all members of the school community feel safe and welcome there. Zollers et al. (1999) conducted an ethnography over a school year in one urban elementary school that had an established successful inclusive education program. In their seminal study, one key finding was focused on the feeling of belonging and safety: school community members commented on feeling safe and protected in the school and all students were understood to be a part of the school community intrinsically (Zollers et al., 1999).

Connection With Staff Members

A key element to creating and promoting an inclusive school culture is ensuring this vision is shared among staff members by creating a collaborative and trusting environment (Angelides et al., 2010; Osiname, 2018; Waldron et al., 2011). Osiname (2018) conducted a case study of five principals in Manitoba, profiling how they built an

inclusive school culture and found that providing teachers with a space to talk openly, collaborate, and acknowledge the struggles of inclusive education was key. Similarly, Hoppey and McLeskey (2013) detailed how a principal from their case study “lubricated human machinery” (p. 250) through building meaningful relationships with his staff by displaying trust, listening to teachers’ ideas and concerns, and treating them fairly. This research was part of a larger study (see Waldron et al., 2011), which held similar findings, arguing the importance of improving the working conditions for staff by building trust and redesigning the school organization to work with teachers. Gray et al. (2017) reviewed previous literature related to teacher well-being, school climate, inclusive education, and student learning and found that administration could alleviate some of the work-related stress by creating a supportive and collaborative school environment.

An important element in the administrator’s role with staff is ensuring that staff feel their voices are heard. Jimenez et al. (2007) explored criteria to best support Universal Design for Learning (Hitchcock et al., 2002) in schools and established seven criteria. Among these seven criteria, one element included teacher training and support, which consisted of administrators listening to teachers and helping to brainstorm solutions to their challenges (Jimenez et al., 2007).

This idea of building trust with staff and fostering a collaborative environment as a means to implementing successful inclusion was common across the literature (Angelides et al., 2010; Irvine et al., 2010). In his meta-analysis, Cobb (2015) found facilitating staff collaboration was one of the most discussed actions across the articles he analyzed, with 14 of 19 research articles discussing staff collaboration to enrich school-

wide inclusion. Similarly, a literature review on the expectations of administrators in inclusive schools by Lunde (2020) found collaboration between educators and administrators was key across the literature. Lunde found that administrators must actively create a climate of collaboration for the in-school team, and support this by allowing time for collaboration for the team to meet and plan instruction.

It is important to note that there can be a discrepancy between the support administrators believe they are providing versus how teachers perceive this support. Valeo (2008) conducted a study that interviewed six elementary school teachers and five elementary school principals in one Canadian school board about their perceptions of support for integrating students with exceptionalities. In this study, administrators felt they were offering support to teachers; however, teachers wanted principals to coordinate more collaboration, particularly with special education teachers (Valeo, 2008). Thus, it is crucial that administrators not only foster collaborative relationships in their schools but also offer a trusting environment where teachers feel comfortable openly discussing their challenges.

In Promoting Professional Growth

Another prevalent theme across the literature regarding how administrators support inclusive education is promoting staff professional growth. Hoppey and McLeskey (2013) and Waldron et al. (2011) described promoting staff growth by providing multiple opportunities for high-quality professional development as well as opportunities for teacher leadership and the importance of this in developing inclusive schools. This is consistent with Zaretsky et al. (2008), who conducted interviews with eight principals from one large school board in Ontario in order to better understand the

role of the principal in special education programs, services, and personnel. Zaretsky et al. identified five roles and responsibilities for administration, including arranging effective in-service professional development for staff regarding special education. DeMatthews (2015) conducted a case study over two academic years of one principal who sought to create a more inclusive school, to improve inclusion, and the numerous steps to build staff capacity that were taken including hiring an inclusion consultant, establishing a committee to oversee inclusive measures, and creating professional learning communities within the staff. An additional criterion for implementing Universal Design for Learning in the Jimenez et al. (2007) model includes “administrative support,” which they define as school principals showing commitment by supporting release time for teacher training and support.

It is also important to note the need for administrators to receive professional development regarding inclusive education. Irvine et al. (2010) found professional development opportunities were a necessary support for principals in implementing inclusion, as it enhanced their abilities in leadership by providing new ideas, giving them a chance to compare how things were done at other schools, and affirmed that inclusion was the right thing to do.

Chapter Summary

The literature review consisted of journal articles on previous research related to the role of administrators in inclusive education, as well as reports and textbooks for context numbers. The literature review was categorized into sections. First, a brief history of inclusive education was provided (Ainscow et al., 2019; Haug, 2017; Porter, 2010; Slee, 2007) followed by contextual information for special education in the Province of

Ontario (Bennett et al., 2019; OME, 2017). There was a section on administrator attitudes toward inclusive education, focusing on the importance and impact of them having positive opinions of inclusion (Abegglen & Hessels; Ahmmed et al., 2013; Al-Mahdy & Emam, 2018; Correa & Wagner, 2011; Lunde, 2020; MacFarlane & Woolfson, 2013; Praisner, 2003; Reid et al., 2018; Salisbury, 2006; Villa et al., 2005). Studies show that principals often have favourable views of inclusion (Hadjikakou & Mnasonos, 2012; Horrocks et al., 2008; Idol, 2006; Irvine et al., 2010). The final section focused on the role of administrators in inclusive education, divided into three sections: in school culture; connections with staff members; and promoting professional growth. First, administrators' role in school culture suggests strong leadership to create a shared vision, a collaborative culture by leading through example, and ensuring all school members feel safe and welcome (Cobb, 2015; DiPaola et al., 2004; Irvine et al., 2010; Osiname, 2018; Thompson & Timmons, 2017; Waldron et al., 2011; Zollers et al., 1999). Next, the connection with staff members subsection focused on promoting a collaborative and trusting environment by allowing for time to meet and a space to talk openly and acknowledge challenges, ensuring that the in-school teams' voices are heard (Angelides et al., 2010; Bateman et al., 2017; Gray et al., 2017; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; Jimenez et al., 2007; Lunde, 2020; Osiname, 2018; Valeo, 2008; Waldron et al., 2011). Finally, promoting professional growth was a prevalent theme across the literature, studies showed that providing professional development to enhance teacher capacity, show support, and provide new ideas and methods can make schools and teachers more inclusive (DeMatthews, 2018; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; Irvine et al., 2010; Zaretsky et al., 2008).

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This major research project was designed to examine the perspectives of administrators related to inclusive education through the research questions: How do administrators define inclusion? How do administrators perceive their role in facilitating an inclusive school culture? What staff and personnel supports do administrators believe are integral to the implementation of inclusive policy? Data collection included interviews with 10 administrators from one school board in the Province of Ontario who recently transitioned to fully inclusive service delivery for students with exceptionalities through a board-wide policy. These data were coded into categories that address the research questions. This chapter will address the project context, describe the method and methodology, participants, data collection and analyses, as well as discuss the ethical considerations of the study.

Project Context

The data were derived from a larger twofold study (Bennett, Gallagher, Somma, & White, 2021) whose purpose was to examine one Ontario school board's transition to fully inclusive service delivery for students with exceptionalities over the course of 2013 to 2018. This school board is mid-sized, consisting of 30 elementary schools and nine secondary schools and serves over 15,000 students, approximately 10% of whom are identified as having an exceptionality. In 2013, a board-wide policy was put in place to ensure that all students were educated at their neighbourhood schools and in classrooms with their same age peers. The school board hired 13 Inclusion Coaches to work alongside teachers and aid in the transition to this new service delivery style. The Inclusion Coaches were responsible for supporting several teachers in three to four

schools, 4 days a week and meeting with one another on the 5th day for debriefing, sharing their experiences, and professional development. Inclusion Coaches were all certified teachers who came from a background in special education, including roles as self-contained classroom teachers, resource teachers, and board special education support personnel.

These changes in policy emerged from a changing understanding of best practice for students with exceptionalities as well as an alignment of the beliefs of senior school board administrators. Community members and parents were engaged in the process; speakers were brought in to discuss positive elements of inclusive practice and feedback was solicited from these stakeholders. School board administrators met with school-level administrators, including principals, to roll out this policy and engage the newly created Inclusion Coach role with their staff and within their schools.

The first phase of this research took place from 2013 to 2015 and described the transition process itself, focusing on teacher and Inclusion Coach perspectives, utilizing surveys, focus groups, and blog-style reflections. The second phase of data collection took place 5 years after the initial implementation of this board-wide policy (i.e., 2018); interviews were conducted with various school-board stakeholders including administrators, teachers, educational assistants, students, parents, and adult service providers. The current research examines a subset of the Phase 2 qualitative data: the administrator interviews.

During this second phase of the larger overall research project, I worked in the capacity of a research assistant and project coordinator. As project coordinator, it was my role to contact all 69 participants (i.e., 10 administrators, 21 teachers, six educational

assistants, 14 students, 12 parents, and six community program leaders), arrange all interviews at a time convenient to both the participant and interviewer, and coordinate with the school board to make these arrangements. My role as a research assistant allowed me to conduct interviews in this project, including several with administrators. This created a unique position for me to be an insider in the data collection, while still being an outsider from the school community. I did not partake in the conversations and professional development offered to stakeholders or attend the Special Education Advisory Committee meetings where the project was discussed.

Method and Methodology

A qualitative approach was taken in this research to allow for rich, descriptive data (Bogdan & Biklen, 1997). The overall project utilized case study as a methodology. According to Stake (1995), case studies can be defined as an in-depth exploration of a particular context using largely qualitative methods. In this study, the context is the school board and the phenomenon being studied is the inclusive policy implementation and delivery. Yin (2009) argues interviews are a key method in case studies, as interviews provide a voice to the participants to share their experiences of the studied phenomenon. Interviews were conducted with various stakeholders to better understand the phenomenon from multiple perspectives. The interview questions were designed to be open-ended, allowing participants to decide which elements of their experiences they wanted to share and in their own words (Fontana & Frey, 2005; Yilmaz, 2013).

Participants

Interviews were conducted with 10 administrators from 10 different schools in one school board. This included nine principals and one vice principal—seven working in

elementary settings and three in secondary settings. The gender breakdown included eight female administrators and two males. This rural school board encompasses two counties, with six administrators coming from the larger county and four from the smaller county. The pool of eligible participants included 34 principals and 24 vice principals. The criteria for eligibility included any principal within the school board who worked at a school that had employed an Inclusion Coach in the previous 5 years, meaning they had one or more students with exceptionalities included in their schools.

Recruitment for interviews was conducted through a Letter of Invitation sent via email to prospective participants. The Letter of Invitation briefly outlined the purpose of the study, described the voluntary nature of the process, and what to expect from the interview process. Participation in these interviews was completely voluntary; three rounds of interview requests were sent before the representative sample of 10 were completed. To maintain confidentiality of the participants, all names and identifying information have been removed in this paper.

Data Collection

Interviews were the primary source of data for this study. Interviews were conducted from November 2017 to February 2018. Participants were offered different methods of conversation based on what was most convenient for them; four administrators opted for face-to-face interviews and six participated in telephone interviews. The average time for these interviews was 19 minutes and 11 seconds.

The interview guide asked administrators to describe what inclusive education meant to them, what inclusion looked like in their experiences within this school board, what factors (including resources) contributed to inclusion, what challenges they had

faced in their role implementing inclusion, and how they viewed their role in the school culture regarding inclusion. For the full interview guide, see Appendix A. Interview questions were open ended to allow participants to share their experiences.

Each interview was audio recorded with the participants' permission and saved to a hard drive kept in a locked office. I then individually transcribed each audio file. The transcripts were edited to be grammatically correct and, in an attempt to keep them true to the participants' meanings, all their words were kept, including hesitations and repeated phrases. This is consistent with suggestions made by Carlson (2010). Each participant was offered the chance to member check their transcript for accuracy and meaning; however, none accepted the offer. My role in data collection included being one of the four team members who conducted these interviews, transcribed each interview, and contacted participants for member checking their transcripts.

Data Analyses

The larger data set has been previously analyzed. The first phase was analyzed for Inclusion Coach and teacher perspectives (see Gallagher & Bennett, 2018; Gallagher et al., 2016; Wlodarczyk et al., 2015). The second phase was initially analyzed across all stakeholders in a report to the school board. Additional analyses were conducted on the educational assistant data (Bennett, Gallagher, Somma, & White, 2021) and for a chapter of mixed perspectives of teachers, Inclusion Coaches, and administrators (Bennett, Gallagher, Somma, White, & Wlodarczyk, 2021).

A separate analysis was conducted for this current major research project. Interview data from the 10 administrators were examined using thematic analysis. Thematic analysis is used to identify, analyze, organize, describe, and report patterns that

emerge within the data (Braun & Clark, 2006; Nowell et al., 2017). According to Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006), thematic analysis is a search for themes that emerge as important to the description of the phenomenon being studied. This form of analysis involves identifying patterns within the data and using these emerging themes as the categories for analysis through reading and re-reading the data (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

To complete this data analysis, I started by developing a list of a priori codes based on my research questions and the interview guide. Coding is defined as “the process of analyzing qualitative text data by taking them apart to see what they yield before putting the data back together in a meaningful way” (Creswell, 2015, p. 156). Five broad code categories emerged: inclusion, school culture, support, staff, and role. I then read through each transcript and developed a list of emergent codes while reading. Emergent codes included: ownership, school team, belonging, and shared vision. After assigning different colours to each code, I went through the transcripts and coded by colour. The overlap in colour allowed me to collapse codes that were too similar and often repeated. Interviews were then read through a second time to ensure no instances of the codes were missed. These codes were then grouped into themes that allowed me to best address my research questions. Table 1 presents a summary of the priori codes and a description of what is included within each.

These themes were organized around the three research questions: How do administrators define inclusion after 5 years? How do administrators see their role in school culture? What staff supports do administrators find integral to implementing inclusion? Representative quotes were chosen to best illustrate these themes and were pulled from each transcript to ensure that each participant’s authentic voice was included.

Table 1*A Priori Codes*

Code	Description
Inclusion	Definitions of inclusion; examples of inclusive practice; inclusive experiences
School culture	What makes participants' school safe and welcoming; how participants see themselves in the culture
Support	References to personnel and resources participants saw as support in implementing inclusion
Staff	Any mention of the school staff and their role in inclusion
Role	How the principal viewed their role

Note. This table summarizes the a priori codes and describes what is included in each code.

Ethical Considerations

This research received clearance from the Brock University Research Ethics Board and all data collection was done in accordance with these standards. See Appendix B for the certificate of ethics clearance (File # 13-042 – BENNETT). Participants' confidentiality was of the utmost importance throughout this study. For this reason, the list of participants was shared only with the research team in a secure folder. Additionally, any identifying information—including school names, locations, and staff names—were removed from the transcripts.

Chapter Summary

This major research project is qualitative in nature and utilizes a case study approach. This chapter contextualized the overall research project and established my role in the data collection and data analyses of the larger project. The current major research project accessed 10 qualitative interviews with administrators as the primary data. These interviews were analyzed through thematic analysis including a priori and emergent codes. Ethical considerations were taken through each step of the research.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to explore administrator perspectives on inclusion in their schools 5 years after the implementation of a board-wide inclusive education policy. Data were collected through 10 semi-structured interviews with school administrators. The interviews were transcribed and the documents were then examined using thematic analysis. The data were coded and clustered into broad themes and representative quotes were selected to best illustrate these themes. Representative quotes were pulled from each transcript to ensure every participant's authentic voice was included. The following research questions guided the data analysis:

1. How do administrators define inclusion 5 years after implementing a board-wide inclusive policy?
2. How do administrators perceive their role in school culture regarding inclusion?
3. What staff and personnel support do administrators find important to the implementation of inclusive policy?

This chapter will explore these three research questions, each in its own subsection. The first subsection discusses the different definitions of inclusion and examples of successful inclusive practice in participants' experience. This section speaks to administrators' personal knowledge, previous experiences, and values around inclusion. The next subsection discusses the importance of a positive school culture regarding inclusion and addresses how participants see their role in facilitating this. This section indicates the socially acceptable behaviours and actions of the school and illustrates how administrators have made sense of their role in inclusive schools. Finally, the third subsection addresses participants' perspectives on the in-school team and their

impact on inclusive education. This is viewed through the theoretical framework, as sensemaking is socially constructed and contested through a shared process (Weick, 1995); therefore, this section speaks to the social process as well as the contextual cues that impact how administrators interpreted the inclusive policy and their role in it.

Research Question 1

In the interviews, each participant was asked to define successful inclusion and describe what it looked like in their experience. All 10 administrators were supportive of the inclusive policy adopted within their school district and viewed inclusion positively in their experience. Administrator 5 described her view of inclusion: “When I really think of inclusion and that’s where I think I don’t want it to be just a word in quotations, we’re implementing inclusion because to me, it’s a philosophy and it’s a way of life.”

While each participant was positive in his/her opinion of inclusion, there were clear levels of their inclusive definitions. One administrator described broadly that “successful inclusion would mean all students see themselves in this space and in their learning” (Administrator 9). On this basic level, another administrator described inclusion in terms of students with exceptionalities being academically included in mainstream classes and doing similar work to the rest of the class:

Students with their same age peers doing some meaningful work, not just sitting in a classroom at the back, saying “oh they’re here” but actually being involved in the class in a meaningful way and it has to be like work, it shouldn’t be something completely different. (Administrator 6)

Other participants described inclusion beyond academic terms and included social elements both in the classroom and outside of it:

Well, where a student is included both socially, emotionally and also academically. Well, um, the least restrictive environment for students, so hopefully that all students are in the regular classroom with the supports that they need in that classroom and that they have age-appropriate peers that they can interact with both during structured and unstructured times at school, both inside and outside, at recess and during instructional time as well. (Administrator 4)

Beyond the physical, social, and emotional inclusion, some administrators included the idea of belonging and feeling welcomed in their definitions. One administrator said: “So successful inclusion is that every child feels they have a voice and feels as though they belong” (Administrator 8). Other administrators went on to elaborate:

Uh I think I can answer most parts of that, to me, successful inclusion is a building that welcomes and includes all students, staff included, community members, parents, anyone with a variety of needs, whether it’s challenging needs, it could be physical needs, it could be academic needs, it could be social needs, right? I see that as um an inclusive place being one that invites all of those differences in and doesn’t see them as such. (Administrator 1)

I think it means that all students are welcome and able to access the curriculum and in addition to that, they feel like they’re part of the social community. So not only academically are they involved and partaking in some part of the classroom, socially, peers are interacting with them. I see that kids are collaborating, I see that kids can identify why they feel they belong in that group, they have a sense of belonging. (Administrator 5)

So what does it look like, think about in the classroom; it's students collaborating together. So if we had groups of students learning and working that, again, everybody has a voice and everybody feels included. So if the students are picking their own groups, we don't have a child that's left out. Everybody learns what's valuable about each other. (Administrator 8)

One participant described that inclusion implied that there was no longer questioning of whether students with exceptionalities should be included; that was the bare minimum assumption:

To me, successful inclusion is when the question of whether a student should or shouldn't participate isn't even brought up and we're going to automatically assume it's the standard that we include everybody and plan things that do include everybody and that would be academically, as well as socially. (Administrator 10)

Further, one participant described inclusion as being not only a policy but also a way of life, stating:

I have a difficult time when people say I'm intentionally working on inclusion as a word. So for me it's just a way of life and we all have our differences but how are we going to move forward so everyone feels as though they belong, if they have a difference that requires a teacher or maybe even a parent to think differently than they have in the past. (Administrator 5)

Interestingly, several participants described inclusion as a process or "a shift in practice" (Administrator 7). They looked at both past special education experiences as part of this journey and acknowledged there is still a way to go toward authentic inclusion:

I think you'll see that shift kind of happen kind of naturally anyway but we've got

to battle through some old school thinking of what's best for kids and it's tough because even as a principal, when we started out we were selling the SCC classes when I started out, calling the family and telling them this is the best thing and you do better when you know better. (Administrator 3)

Okay one thing that we're also working on, and of course each implementation stage is different depending on each classroom in our building but many teachers are working towards currently differentiation in high school. What we'd ideally like to see more of is some universal design, which I think is new to a lot of high schools and it's understanding the difference, truly understanding the difference between universal design and differentiation and to add on to that, I also think there's more work to do around truly understanding what it means to have a learning disability rather than cognitive delay. ... I know that's a large wish, but truly in education I think if we focused solely on that, we would see a huge change in practice and achievement for all of our students. (Administrator 5)

Education of the other kids, of all kids on respecting differences, training of staff, our staff definitely have to know how to facilitate the inclusion and that quite honestly is where we haven't done a great job in the past. Sometimes it was a seen as an event that occurred, rather than a process. (Administrator 6)

While acknowledging there is still progress to be made toward inclusive practice in their school board, Administrator 10 pointed out the significant gains this inclusion policy had made for students and staff within the school board:

The gains that we have made in inclusion in the past ... have been monumental. I can't say, think of anything I've been doing, I've been in this job for over 25

years, I can't think of any shifts that we've had in our board in 25 years that have been so significant and has changed the lives of kids. It really has changed the thinking of staff and truly it's not just toeing the party line, they truly have changed their thinking and I think that is pretty significant.

The findings for this research question have showcased how administrators express their perspectives on inclusion, describe their experiences, and share examples of what successful inclusive practice looks like in their schools. These findings are integral to lay the foundation to understand the administrators' beliefs and expectations, both of which are important to sensemaking (Weick, 1995).

Research Question 2

One of the findings that emerged from the interview data was the importance of an inclusive school culture and the role that administrators believed they played in facilitating this. Several interview prompts addressed school culture to allow participants to think about the culture in their school regarding inclusion and reflect on their role within it. Participants were first asked what it was about their school that made it safe and welcoming; several participants mentioned a community of adults who help students feel safe:

I find that those kids are actually quite happy and positive and that's because they know that certainly their peers and the majority of staff are not judging them, they're actually out to help them with their best interests in mind ... I mean it's just a positive school culture. What makes it that? We've got kind and caring adults. (Administrator 2)

Additionally, participants described how having a shared school vision was an important

aspect in having a successful, inclusive school culture. Administrator 4 described it as “shared visions of an inclusive environment where it’s a non-negotiable that every student as much as is as humanly possible part of every aspect of the school life.” Other administrators expressed their school community in relation to school vision:

I think we work hard to make it a community where the differences of students are valued and seen as gifts as opposed to deficits and we work really hard at making sure that students have a sense of belonging and feel that they are part of something bigger than themselves, a part of the [school name] school family. I think we have a shared vision as a staff of what it means to include all students and for it to be a safe and welcoming environment and we talk about it every month at our staff meetings. It’s included in our updates every week and we’re really conscious of creating a sense of belonging for our students. (Administrator 4)

I think one thing that’s really important to work in each school is the administrative team has to work in tandem. So I’ve been in previous situations where if your philosophies don’t align or your goals don’t align, it can create one more barrier to the work that we’re doing. So I feel very supported currently, I feel like we work very well as a team and I can see the positive changes that has, not only on our students on a modified program, but on the school community in terms of the sense of belonging. Students come in, they know what to expect, they know what goes at the school, what we stand for and what our core beliefs are and I think that that makes a huge impact on the successes of the school. (Administrator 5)

The vision is key. I also think alignment is really important; I believe in seeding ideas before going big with ideas. Having those one-on-one ideas with

people and getting sort of a feel and then moving in that direction so nothing is a surprise but over and over again, articulating what is right, making decisions around individual students ... the vision itself being articulated over and over and over again for what we want for our students and why we want this for everyone.

(Administrator 7)

For staff, for me I think why we've had some success is that you've had an administrative team in this building who believe in inclusive education and who will hold true to that vision and in holding true to that vision, we have put specific supports and expectations in place that help to adjust our practice and belief and sometimes it's the why first and others need the change in practice first. So in trying to go at those two things in a parallel way, we have been able to move forward, to be honest, at a little bit of a faster pace than I expected to initially.

(Administrator 9)

Administrators acknowledged that leadership was crucial to anchor a shared vision of inclusion and implement the inclusive policy within the school board:

Okay so specifically my role would be ensuring that it's in the vision, ensuring that I am sitting at the table doing that learning, meeting with the teachers around inclusive practice. Having those challenging conversations when things may be starting to stray away from that direction. (Administrator 9)

An interesting finding that uncovered how administrators saw their role in the inclusive school culture was the notion of taking ownership over the inclusive policy within their school:

I see me as probably the lead influence for the building, right? So I am the one

who deposits a lot of ideas to staff with the hope that they'll take root and we'll grow some new ideas but um so mine is to always keep the conversation going, right? So to talk about what's new, what's happening, what's current, not only just to get people to understand but also to find out what people know about it. So you know, I guess I take the temperature of the culture and I correct it and use people that I think are the most influential in the building, including myself to create change, to be agents of change in the building. (Administrator 1)

Oh gosh, my belief is the school culture is a direct reflection of the belief of the leader in the building. If I don't think it's going to work, they're not going to think it's going to work and if I'm not positive, they're sure isn't anyone else around me that's going to be positive, it's going to suck. So my belief is as much as we're not the ones directly in the classrooms teaching, our teachers are our classroom and if they don't feel good, the kids aren't going to feel good and if I'm not out there welcoming the kids, they're not going to know who I am, they have to know coming in that they have safe spaces to go, not just the teachers but to the offices too. So the principal sets the tone. (Administrator 3)

I think you really are at the, if the philosophy isn't coming from you and doing the hard work and recognizing the hard work that's being done, then it's not going to take root. If I didn't believe in it or I even showed any little chink in the armour, that would be I think a significant setback. ... They have to see that we're in it too, it's not just outside the door. (Administrator 7)

This belief in inclusion must be at the forefront of all decision-making in the school; it must be "embedded in every single thing we do" (Administrator 5).

It is significant, my personal belief is that as a school administrator, you need to be on that page. If you don't have a fundamental belief that this is the right thing to be doing and that is tightly connected to and drives that decision making around your school goals, your school plans, connecting to your SIPSOP, whatever that literacy, numeracy, but that it's not lost in all of those other things. That it's at the forefront is critical, that administrative leadership piece is critical for that. (Administrator 9)

Several participants described how part of this role in ownership was modelling behaviour for staff and students to see:

Um, I feel that I have to take a leading role in making sure that we have unrelenting standards of what it means for kids to feel included in our school and the buck stops with me. So if kids aren't feeling included or kids aren't properly included, it's up to me to be sure that it happens. I have to model it for staff, I have to articulate it to staff repeatedly. (Administrator 4)

It's important to not just talk the talk, but walk the walk. There have been occasions where educational assistants will ask for backup, rather than just being seen as a bystander, sometimes they're actually asking for you to show them what should work. So not being afraid or having reservations to truly demonstrate what it would look like, both in the classes what it would look like, but also to support staff, I guess all members of the school, demonstrating for them whether they ask or whether they're just watching, just always knowing that people are thinking about what you're saying and they're also going to see if you're walking the talk. It is my true belief that this is the right thing to do, so I would, I can't say I'm putting on a show because it's what I believe. (Administrator 5)

Yeah I think when I visit a classroom is definitely working with all kids, not just seeing me who walks in to work with the student who might be struggling but actually sitting down and working with all of them and working with the ones that struggle and showing that you can with patience and the right breaking down of the questions, you can have conversations and help them succeed. So I think you model it, you model it on the school yard if you see a student standing on their own, get over there and talk to them, try to bring in others to talk to them. So I think my role is to lead that. (Administrator 6)

Participants also recognized that their role in school culture could also be around shaping and shifting staff perspectives toward inclusion:

Helping staff understand that it's good for all of us to have, involve some students that benefit from inclusion, you know, it's good for them socially but it's good for us socially too. You start to understand differences when we're surrounded by that. (Administrator 2)

A teacher may not have the belief that this is how it should be, that can occupy a lot of your time. But I believe that if you work with that individual and show them why this makes sense, then all those other things come in order and student achievement usually will be impacted in a positive way. (Administrator 5)

Working with the staff that don't want to accept them [students with exceptionalities] into their class, who still see the self-contained classrooms for a fix to what they see as a problem and convincing people to change their thinking... [through] positive messaging, helping people see the good in all,

helping people see the advantages to inclusion, promoting it in our community, with our parent community, with the students. (Administrator 6)

I think it's just keeping it always on the forefront and always keeping an ear out for when you hear things that don't quite sound right and questioning and pushing back on them without offending anybody and then trying to foresee when hiccups are going to come. (Administrator 10)

The importance of administrative leadership in facilitating a positive school culture toward inclusion was acknowledged by all ten participants. School culture is an important element to consider within a sensemaking framework as it speaks largely to the socially acceptable behaviours and actions within the school (Weick, 1995). Beyond this, the findings for this research question speak to how administrators were making sense of their role within inclusive schools.

Research Question 3

While participants acknowledged the crucial role leadership plays within inclusive schools, they also spoke to the importance of the in-school team for successful inclusive education. Throughout the interviews, participants described different members of the school and board staff who helped to implement inclusion. One topic each participant mentioned in the interviews was the importance of the in-school team working together in order to implement inclusive policy:

So a lot of that support for students is what makes it a good, positive space for kids and it's a lot of team work. Aside from just the teachers, we have a lot of support staff here and people do tend to work to the benefit of all the kids, so I do

see that as being the number one reason why kids would feel safe and included here. (Administrator 1)

Regarding working together, participants discussed the importance of both educational assistants and Inclusion Coaches in planning and implementing inclusive education:

I mean we have educational assistants that support us with that, so they support students with behaviour concerns, academic concerns and even some actually that can support social, emotional type concerns ... we've got curriculum folks, we've even got learning-for-all coaches, there's one I was going to say, these are people who come in and help you work with some of, the teacher has to be willing to accept the help, have a person with a specific skill set come in and help them plan, maybe it's alternative planning for students, maybe it's helping them identify resources whatever that may be. (Administrator 3)

Well, I, one thing we need more of in my opinion, is either more EAs or really [pause for interruption] because that's something we're still falling short on. So I don't think we're at the point where we say the role of the EA has been redefined and we understand how to maximize their time. (Administrator 6)

The, um, the supports in terms of the learning for all coach, incredibly valuable in this school, in the last school, I was at [school name] for 2 years and for 1 year there was a learning coach there, the relationships that are formed, the deep learning that happens for the teachers that work with that coach, I don't know how that would have moved forward. I don't believe that the principal as an instructional leader can take that on in that, to that degree. EAs, EAs are key and

having EAs that also bring the right philosophy into the classroom, very, very important. (Administrator 7)

The importance of open communication and time to meet to discuss the educational needs of all students who were included was described by several participants; this was integral in order to work together as a school team:

You have to have an open dialogue, you really have to be communicating with your staff and your students to pinpoint what's going on. It's dialogue but its awareness too, looking around me, it's about observing what's happening, who's in our building, what are the issues going on here and then really talking about them. I think the dialogue is so, so important because it allows us to identify what we're doing right and where we're going wrong and if we keep that focus, I think that's what helps us to be inclusive. (Administrator 1)

So what we've done here is we [teacher, EA] collectively meet on a, we try to meet every week and look at tracking and documentation and sort of discuss what's working and what's not working and do we need to change any of our practices moving forward to support this student? And at that time, because the days are busy and there is a whirlwind, sometimes they're brought forward or information is shared "this student may have had a difficult week, an upcoming event is in the near future and really important to that student" so we use that opportunity at the ending of the day. For the educational assistants and our department head, it's a mandatory thing, for teachers, because of union guidelines, they're not required to come but we see that most do attend if they question or feel that there's progress to be had and they're having questions "I don't know where to go next" then they are popping in. (Administrator 5)

Participants noted the importance of staff sharing their successful experiences with each other.

Yeah, and then we're having, you know, some staff feel comfortable and confident to share those stories and successes with each other, which you know, gradually feeds into other people trying it. It is a change in practice, we all know that change is hard, but when one person jumps ship, maybe others will go along and try a new way of education and I think that's where we are. (Administrator 5)

Teachers were also a crucial element to implementing inclusion, and similarly to school culture, participants highlighted the importance of teacher belief in inclusive education:

Most important for students, I would say, I would say, I would repeat what I said first of all and then I would add to that, where we have had most success is where, is teacher belief and teacher will. So when kids have been at that space of, or teachers have been in that space where they're willing to take on that learning for kids and willing to adjust that practice and really solicit that voice from kids, then we've been able to have a positive change. (Administrator 9)

Participants recognized their role in shifting teachers' beliefs positively toward inclusion was not only in a shared vision and a strong philosophy, but also logistically as it related to professional development:

Helping staff find the resources they need, who could they ask and I support them with could we sit as a team and come up with some ideas for when things go off the rails, so to speak, all those things and then sometimes it leads to me saying "enough is enough, these kids are here, you need to work with them" or say "hey you're doing a good job, it's not easy" and recognize that. (Administrator 2)

I have to make sure that staff can access the resources that they need. I have to be an emotional support for staff, I have to be a cheerleader for staff, I have to be a redirector for staff and I have to be their protector at times too, in terms of them feeling overwhelmed. I need to be an advocate with administration at the board level, yeah, their coach, you name it, it's up to me I guess [laughs].

(Administrator 4)

I think we have to help staff understand what they need to know, some because they would be able to say specifically "I don't know how to program for this student"; in other cases it might take working with them and digging deeper into the students they're working with, the particular exceptionality, working from their point of "this is what I need." (Administrator 6)

I think the other piece which is kind of budget and human resources is professional learning, where we've been able to make gains is where we've committed to professional learning, which has brought in human resource people, as well as finances, I've had to release teachers. That's been a school-based decision so that we could do some focused learning around inclusive education and modification of programs so that we can build teacher confidence and then therefore competence and then teacher belief in themselves. So that they can do this. (Administrator 9)

The support put into place for the staff because the learning PD, I think we have seen a change in staff, the staff understanding and knowledge of a whole variety of disabilities and they just see that as what we do as opposed to, "oh I have now one more thing I have to learn about." So as the years go by, with each new student they have built their repertoire of differentiation. (Administrator 10)

It was evident from the administrator interviews that these participants believed in supporting the role of the in-school team as it is a crucial element to successful inclusive education. The findings from this third research question draw on interpretations through sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995), as the social processes and acceptable norms within school are illustrated. This section also discusses the instrumental role that participants believed they held as part of the in-school team and inclusion within their school.

Chapter Summary

Through the thematic analysis of the data from 10 qualitative interviews in this major research project, themes and subthemes emerged to address the three research questions. This chapter presented the findings through three subsections, each laid out to address a research question. The first research question, how do administrators define inclusion, explored the participants different ranges of definitions of inclusion, from basic physical inclusion to all students feeling a sense of belonging, and through sharing examples of what successful inclusion looked like in their experience. The second research question, how do administrators perceive their role in facilitating an inclusive school culture, acknowledged the importance of a positive school culture and each participant described the importance of leadership in this through taking ownership of the inclusive policy, shaping staff opinions, and modelling behaviour. Finally, the third research question, what staff supports do administrators believe are integral to the implementation of inclusive policy, discusses the importance of the in-school team for successful inclusion. Participants discussed teachers, educational assistants, and Inclusion Coaches as integral personnel, and described the need for open communication between all the stakeholders.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

The purpose of this major research project was to examine administrators' perspectives on the implementation of a board-wide inclusive education policy 5 years after the transition. This was explored through three research questions: How do administrators define inclusion 5 years into inclusive service delivery? How do administrators perceive their role in facilitating an inclusive school culture? What staff and personnel supports do administrators believe are integral to the implementation of inclusive policy? Guided by sensemaking theory (Weick, 1995), the findings related to these questions documented administrators' social interactions in their schools, their personal beliefs and motivations, and cues of their school environments in light of how administrators' made sense of inclusion policies and their role interpretations. This chapter will integrate findings from this major research project with existing literature for the topic, discuss implications for both policy and practice, and describe the limitations of this study with potential future research.

Discussion of the Findings

Research overwhelmingly advocates for the importance of the role of administrator in the implementation of inclusive policy (Al-Mahdy & Emam, 2018; Lunde, 2020; Ryan, 2010). Of particular importance for the success of inclusive education is administrators' attitudes toward inclusion (Lunde, 2020; Praisner, 2003). In this major research project, all 10 participants were supportive of the inclusive policy that their school board adopted and spoke positively about inclusion in their experience. Participants had a variety of definitions of inclusion; some outlined inclusion in its most basic form, physical inclusion, others described social inclusion and the importance of a

sense of belonging for all students. Some participants discussed how inclusion went beyond policy and described it as the right thing to do, a philosophy, and a way of life. One interesting finding was that some participants described inclusion as a process or a work in progress and acknowledged they were still transitioning to authentic inclusion, defined as “education that incorporates all children and youths as active, fully participating members of the school community; that views diversity as the norm; and... [provides] meaningful curriculum, effective teaching, and necessary supports for each student” (Ferguson, 1995, p. 286). Administrators described steps towards authentic inclusion, including a better understanding of universal design for learning and meeting staff where they are at on this journey. Administrators using these reflective practices to examine past special education policy shows the importance of how previous experiences assist administrators to make sense of the current inclusive policy.

The administrators in this project acknowledged the importance of leadership to the success of inclusive education policy. Of particular importance was the role that school administrators believe they play in maintaining a positive school culture regarding inclusion. One key element that administrators discussed in the creation of a positive school culture was a shared school vision. Participants discussed creating an environment that prioritized a sense of belonging and was non-negotiable for every member of the school team. In particular, administrators discussed alignment of this vision throughout the school and described how a lack of alignment could be a barrier to inclusion. Administrators recognized the importance that they played as school leaders in sharing this vision and the alignment of these values. The role of administrators in the creation of

a shared school vision is widely recognized in the literature (Irvine et al., 2010; Urton et al., 2014; Waldron et al., 2011; Zollers et al., 1999).

In the formation of this positive school culture, several participants described the importance of taking ownership over the inclusive education policy in their school. Participants recognized that it was up to them to set the tone in the building (i.e., school site) and that the school culture was a direct reflection of their beliefs. This is consistent with Irvine et al. (2010), who found that administrator ownership and responsibility for inclusion of the school was an important element in creating authentic inclusion.

Administrators understood part of their role was shaping staff opinions of inclusion, which was a key element for both aligning the school vision and taking ownership of the inclusive policy in the school. Participants described how school community members who did not believe in inclusion were a barrier to the success of inclusive education. Several suggestions to shift opinions were discussed, including positive messaging, showing the advantages of inclusion, promoting inclusion to the entire school community, including parents, and modelling behaviour. Modelling behaviour or leading by example was mentioned often in the existing literature related to inclusive leadership (Osiname, 2018; Thompson & Timmons, 2017; Zollers et al., 1999). Thompson and Timmons (2017) found one aspect to modelling behaviour was demonstrating that inclusion was the right thing to do and is an important leadership attribute that can lead to authentic inclusion. Zollers et al. (1999) also described the importance of engaging the school community, including parents, in the creation of a welcoming school culture toward inclusion.

While administrators understood the importance of their leadership in implementing inclusive policy, they also discussed how crucial the in-school team was in

this implementation. This in-school team included teachers, educational assistants, and Inclusion Coaches. Participants discussed the importance of teamwork and open communication with and among these stakeholders. Existing literature complements these findings, describing how creating a collaborative and trusting environment is a key element to successful inclusion (Angelides et al., 2010; Osiname, 2018; Waldron et al., 2011). Administrators in this major research project described the importance of creating an environment where staff can share their successful experiences, but also openly discussed challenges and issues they are having. Consistently, Hoppey and McLeskey (2013) and Waldron et al. (2011) discuss building trusting relationships and listening to both teachers' ideas as well as their concerns. Jimenez et al. (2007) also describe the importance of listening to teachers challenges and brainstorming solutions with them.

Finally, administrators recognized part of their role in facilitating inclusive education was logistical. Regarding a collaborative environment for staff, administrators discussed the importance of finding time for school team members to meet. This is consistent with a study by Lunde (2020), which highlights the importance of administrators actively creating a climate of collaboration by allowing time for the team to meet and plan instruction. Further, a logistical role that administrators described in this major research project was providing their staff with the resources they require and opportunities for professional development. Administrators described prioritizing professional development in the school budget, as they recognized the importance of building teacher capacity and confidence in modifying curriculum and universal design for learning. Existing literature describes the importance of professional development regarding inclusion and advocates for administrators' role in providing these

opportunities (DeMatthews, 2015; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; Jimenez et al., 2007; Waldron et al., 2011; Zaretsky et al., 2008).

The research questions for this study were posed to garner an understanding of how participants made sense of the inclusive education policy and their role within it. Sensemaking theory, according to Weick (1995) has three key elements: First, it is socially constructed and negotiated through interactions with others, next it relies on organizational context and the individuals' previous beliefs and experiences, and finally it is dependent on the socially acceptable norms of the organization. The first research question addressed participants' beliefs about inclusion and their experiences around inclusive education. The second research question speaks largely to the schools' contextual cues as well as the socially acceptable actions and behaviours within the school. Finally, the third question addresses both the socially acceptable norms as well as illuminating the social actions around the inclusive policy. These research questions address how these variables influence administrators' understanding of their role in facilitating inclusive education.

Implications

The findings from this major research project offer a unique look at administrator perspectives after their school board transitioned to inclusive service delivery for students with exceptionalities. The findings of this research have implications for both policy and practice.

Implications for Policy

Within the Province of Ontario, there is no overarching mandate as to how school boards implement special education within their district. Most school boards in Ontario offer a range of five special education placements for students with exceptionalities in

accordance with the *Education Act* (1990). These placements range from mainstream classrooms with indirect support to full-time self-contained classroom placements (OME, 2017). The broadness of the province-wide special education policy poses challenges for inclusion, as it allows individuals at different levels, particularly school administrators, significant discretion over decision-making around how special education will be implemented. How inclusive a school is can be determined by the school board's policy but can also vary from school to school within a board, based on decisions made by school-level administrators, as special education policy practices in Ontario are heavily influenced by their contextual and institutional settings (Massouti, 2018). This means across Ontario, numerous school boards and schools continue to maintain settings that congregate students with exceptionalities based on characteristics such as intellectual ability as the single factor for placement decisions, while a co-terminus school board can offer entirely different placements and levels of inclusivity.

Findings from this major research project provide evidence of a school board that has successfully transitioned to fully inclusive service delivery for students with exceptionalities through a board-wide inclusive policy. Administrators shared their experiences of successful inclusion occurring within the board and credit this inclusive policy as being impactful for students. As school boards continue to transition towards inclusion, evidence from this major research project argues that one of the most effective ways to affect change is through a policy shift toward inclusion.

Implications for Practice

Administrators in this major research project acknowledged that inclusion is not just a destination that you reach and are finished doing the work; it is an ongoing journey.

A transition to inclusion is a constant, reflective process for administrators that requires creating a positive school culture, changing mindsets in the school community, meeting staff where they are at in their professional practices, moving them forward, and making each member of the school community feel safe and welcome. Two key implications for practice for administrators emerged from this major research project: their role as a leader in creating a positive school culture and, with some overlap, their role in facilitating inclusion with staff members.

Administrators talked at length about the importance of a positive school culture toward inclusion and how they saw their role in facilitating it. The findings from this major research project suggest administration plays a major role in the development and maintenance of a positive school culture. To facilitate this inclusive school culture, a non-negotiable shared vision with a top-down approach is recommended (Urton et al., 2014; Zollers et al., 1999). This can be aided by administrators modelling behaviour for staff and students, as well as creating an open and trusting environment. The importance of buy-in by administrators into inclusive policy was highlighted in this major research project; it is key that administrators genuinely believe in inclusion and see it as their role to promote this through a positive school culture.

Inclusion is not just a policy that affects special education; it is a philosophy that must be factored into every school decision that administrators make. School administrators have discretion over both time and the school budget. Administrators must play a practical role in allotting time for the in-school team to meet, collaborate, and openly communicate. This is key because it allows teachers, educational assistants, and paraprofessional staff time to co-plan, share their successes, and find solutions to challenges together.

Resource support for inclusion not only can address challenges but also improve teachers' feelings of self-efficacy and confidence toward providing inclusive service delivery (Chiner & Cardona, 2013). Thus, it is crucial that administrators prioritize inclusion in budgetary decisions and advocate for resources with board-level administrators. Beyond resources, professional development and training can impact teacher self-efficacy (Malinen et al., 2013; McLeskey et al., 2014). It is important that administrators make financial support and time for professional development opportunities available for all staff. Ultimately, it is educators who must provide inclusive service delivery through differentiation and universal design. Thus, teacher buy-in is at the crux of successful inclusion and perceived administrator support through a collaborative environment, logistical and resource support, and professional development opportunities are key.

Research indicates in order for teachers to positively shift their perceptions of inclusion, it is necessary for them to have opportunities to engage and experience success using inclusive practices in their classrooms (Porter, 2010; Porter & Towell, 2017; Somma, 2018). Thus, for inclusive policy to succeed, it is crucial that administrators provide every possibility for teachers to experience successful inclusion in their classrooms. Findings from this major research project offer evidence that inclusive policy can aid in making significant gains for students with exceptionalities. In order for these gains to occur, administrator support and buy-in from all staff are required.

Limitations and Future Research

This major research project examined administrator data from one school board in Ontario 5 years after the implementation of a board-wide inclusive education policy. Due

to the nature and timeline of this research, only a snapshot was provided of administrators' perspectives at one specific point of the post-transition to inclusion. It may be useful for future research to examine administrators' perspectives earlier in the transition process to see if their attitudes differ from those in this study. Further, future research could collect data from different points in the transition to measure potential changes in attitude over time. This could be particularly interesting as recent research indicates that educators are more likely to have a positive attitude toward inclusion after experiencing successful inclusive education practices (Porter & Towell, 2017; Somma, 2018).

This study only examined perspectives from one school board in the Province of Ontario. Additional future research could also compare these administrator perspectives to those working in boards without an inclusive education policy to examine how inclusive policy impacts administrators' opinions.

The data analyzed for this study consisted of 10 interviews with nine school principals and one vice principal. While this was a representative sample of this school board, it is a limited number of perspectives. Additionally, it is worth noting that this larger research project was conducted in coordination with the school board. While the raw interview data was kept separate from the school board and participants' confidentiality was maintained, this could have impacted how participants chose to respond to interview prompts.

Conclusion

The purpose of this qualitative major research project was to better understand administrators' perspectives on inclusive education within their school and how they make sense of their role in inclusive schools. This research focused on one school board

in the Province of Ontario that transitioned to full inclusive service delivery and programming for students with exceptionalities through a board-wide policy shift. Ten interviews with school administrators were thematically analyzed, examining the research questions: How do administrators define inclusion? How do administrators perceive their role in facilitating an inclusive school culture? What staff and personnel supports do administrators believe are integral to the implementation of inclusive policy? Several findings emerged from this major research project.

This major research project provides findings and implications for both policy and practice. Findings confirm previous research indicating the significant role administrators play in inclusive service delivery and policy implementation and echo the importance of positive attitudes towards inclusion to be successful. Findings described the key role administrators have in maintaining a positive school culture regarding inclusion, including creating a shared school vision, maintaining a trusting, collaborative environment, and taking ownership over the inclusive policy in their school. Further, findings described the importance of all school team members being invested in inclusion, requiring administrators to meet staff where they are at in their inclusive practice and shift opinions through positive messaging, promoting inclusion to the school community, and modelling behaviour. As school leaders, part of administrators' role in implementing inclusion was logistical, allowing staff time to meet and collaborate, providing necessary resources to facilitate inclusion, and allocating time and budget towards professional development to build staff capacity. Findings from this major research project indicate that a shift towards inclusive policy can be one of the most effective ways to affect change. It is evident from this study that administrators play many key roles in the implementation of inclusive policy.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide

Verbal Consent

Do you agree to participate in this research?

Do you agree to be audio recorded?

Do you consent to the use of unidentified quotes obtained during this study in the dissemination of this research?

Administrator Interview Prompts

What is it about your school that makes it a positive and safe place?

What do you consider successful inclusion to mean? Can you give us an example of what that looks like in your experience?

What is the most important factor you would attribute to the success of the inclusive practices? For staff? For students?

What are three of the most significant challenges you face in your role as an administrator in including students with exceptionalities?

From your experience, what types of resources, including human, contribute to inclusion? Describe

As an administrator, what is your role in your school culture in relation to inclusion?

Appendix B

Certificate of Ethics Clearance



Brock University
 Research Ethics Office
 Tel: 905-688-5550 ext. 3035
 Email: reb@brocku.ca

Social Science Research Ethics Board

Certificate of Ethics Clearance for Human Participant Research

DATE: 2/6/2018
 PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR: BENNETT, Sheila - Teacher Education
 FILE: 13-042 - BENNETT
 TYPE: Ph. D./Faculty STUDENT:
 SUPERVISOR: Sheila Bennett
 TITLE: A School Board's Transition to Inclusion

ETHICS CLEARANCE GRANTED

Initial Clearance Date: 10/18/2013
 Expiry Date: 2/1/2019

Type of Clearance: RENEWAL

The Brock University Social Science Research Ethics Board has reviewed the above named research proposal and considers the procedures, as described by the applicant, to conform to the University's ethical standards and the Tri-Council Policy Statement.

Renewed certificate valid from **2/6/2018 to 2/1/2019**.

The Tri-Council Policy Statement requires that ongoing research be monitored by, at a minimum, an annual report. Should your project extend beyond the expiry date, you are required to submit a Renewal form before **2/1/2019**. Continued clearance is contingent on timely submission of reports.

To comply with the Tri-Council Policy Statement, you must also submit a final report upon completion of your project. All report forms can be found on the Research Ethics web page at <http://www.brocku.ca/research/policies-and-forms/research-forms>

In addition, throughout your research, you must report promptly to the REB:

- a) Changes increasing the risk to the participant(s) and/or affecting significantly the conduct of the study;
- b) All adverse and/or unanticipated experiences or events that may have real or potential unfavourable implications for participants;
- c) New information that may adversely affect the safety of the participants or the conduct of the study;
- d) Any changes in your source of funding or new funding to a previously unfunded project.

We wish you success with your research.

Approved: 

Ann-Marie DiBiase, Chair
 Social Science Research Ethics Board

Note: Brock University is accountable for the research carried out in its own jurisdiction or under its auspices and may refuse certain research even though the REB has found it ethically acceptable.

If research participants are in the care of a health facility, at a school, or other institution or community organization, it is the responsibility of the Principal Investigator to ensure that the ethical guidelines and clearance of those facilities or institutions are obtained and filed with the REB prior to the initiation of research at that site.