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# Leadership and Teacher Agency for Inclusive Classrooms: Insights about Integrating Students with Disabilities into Inclusive Classrooms from Teachers and School Leaders in Three International Schools

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# LEADERSHIP AND TEACHER AGENCY FOR INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS: INSIGHTS ABOUT INTEGRATING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES INTO INCLUSIVE CLASSROOMS FROM TEACHERS AND SCHOOL LEADERS IN THREE INTERNATIONAL SCHOOLS

by

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# ABSTRACT

As international schools continue to flourish, they must consider how to be inclusive and meet the needs not only of multicultural populations of students, but also the needs of students with diagnosed learning difficulties (i.e., students with special needs). Promoting teacher agency is a potentially important component in successfully implementing inclusive practices given that teachers are key actors in the implementation process. Currently, however, there is limited empirical evidence regarding the interconnectedness of teacher agency and inclusion of special needs populations in international schools.

This qualitative research explores the role of school leaders in promoting teacher agency to support the inclusion of students with identified learning needs in inclusive classrooms. Through in-depth interviews with three school leaders, six primary class teachers, and six learning support specialists from three international schools in Europe, the study examines the factors influencing teacher agency and the implementation of inclusive practices. These factors include: participation in policy development, collaboration structures, professional development, self-advocacy, colleague influence, and leadership influence. The findings reveal that school leaders can enhance teacher agency by fostering trusting relationships, prioritizing interdisciplinary teams, establishing consistent collaborative structures, including learning support specialists in decision-making processes, and providing meaningful professional development opportunities. These findings emphasize the importance of proactive leadership in creating inclusive school environments and supporting educators in meeting the diverse needs of students. The study contributes to filling a gap in the literature on the relationship between leadership, teacher agency, and inclusion, and offers insights for policymakers, school leaders, and educators seeking to improve inclusive practices in schools. Future research directions are also discussed to further explore these dynamics across diverse educational contexts.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

The inclusion of students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms has been both praised and criticized by teachers, school leaders, and researchers (e.g., McCoy & Glazzard, 1978; Praisner, 2003; Salend, 2007; Friend & Bursuck, 2011). All the while inclusion practices in general education settings has changed somewhat over time. For example, the percentage of students with disabilities in public schools continues to grow, from 13.3% in 2000-2008 to 14.1% in 2018-2019 (The U.S. Department of Education, 2021), with inclusion recognized as a key factor in improving school systems internationally (Tiwari, Das, and Sharma, 2015). It is important to recognize, however, there is no standardized understanding of inclusion, or a single approach to implementing inclusive practices. Schools operate with different resources and constraints, leading to differing interpretations of inclusion by teachers, school leaders, and policy makers (Allaf, 2006). Nevertheless, even though teachers and school leaders may bring different levels of experience and knowledge to their schools and may have to work with different resources and within different constraints, they are still responsible for creating some form of inclusive environment, whether or not they have the skills and knowledge to do so (Nota et al., 2018).

Positive teacher attitudes toward inclusion have been a successful predictor of whether schools can develop inclusive communities (Gelheiser & Meyers, 1996; Van Laarhover, et al., 2007). Research shows principals have an important role to play in implementing inclusion policies (Idol et al., 1994; Larrivee & Cook, 1979; Servatius et al., 1992). Consequently, principals must lead, inspire, and develop a positive learning climate, in their schools (Idol et al., 1994) to prepare teachers for the present day, where it is no longer a question of whether a teacher will have one or more students with disabilities in their class;

the question now is, “How are teachers meeting their diverse students’ diverse learning needs?”

As a result of the changes alluded to above, research interest in teacher agency has been growing, because teachers’ roles and responsibilities are changing, and their responsibilities are sometimes multiplying. School leaders recognize teachers can not only enact positive changes in their environments (Fu & Clarke, 2017; Nguyen & Bui, 2016), but also can be “agents of change” in an effort to address inequalities in education (Florian, 2009). Bandura (1977a) and other researchers, define *human agency* as the intentional action an individual takes to get a desired outcome. Given this definition, agency clearly plays an important role in creating school cultures in which teachers are empowered to actively contribute to the educational process (Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011). Moreover, it takes a team effort to support all students on their learning journeys, and, to do this, teachers’ voices and input should be heard, represented, and valued in leadership decisions and policy development (Lipponen & Kumpulainen, 2011).

## Statement of the Problem

Unfortunately, there is limited evidence demonstrating how agency is developed and influenced in teachers. Teacher self-efficacy is generally linked to the concept of agency, and both concepts are associated with how teachers view their ability to teach in inclusive classrooms. Research, for example, has demonstrated a teacher’s level of self-efficacy can be influenced by collaborative planning time and professional development (Kuyini, Desai, and Sharma, 2018), both of which are associated with structures implemented by school leaders, but it is unclear what aspects of these structures influence teacher agency. Additionally, it is unclear, however, if self-efficacy is a catalyst for teachers to become “agents of change” in inclusive schools.

In school settings, whether in domestic or international contexts, the successful implementation of school-wide inclusion initiatives that promote the inclusion of students with identified learning or behavioral difficulties in regular programs ultimately is the responsibility of school leaders. The allocation of this responsibility to school leaders is hardly surprising. After all, school leaders, along with teachers, are on the ground adapting to new initiatives and navigating multiple professional identities (Naraian, 2017), whether or not they have the skills and experience to do so. School leaders and teachers are experiencing roles and responsibilities which now go beyond the "traditional dichotomy of general education versus special education" (Miller et al., 2020).

Severance et al., (2016) refers teacher agency as the ability to adopt, adapt, or resist school-wide initiatives and goals. It is unclear, however, to what extent teachers' power to influence the policy implementation process has led to teachers being included in the policy development process. We do not even know whether teachers are supported by adequate resources and professional development opportunities to make inclusion successful (Salisbury, 2006).

One can assume school leaders can positively influence teacher agency, but this assumption has not yet been supported by the literature. [1] Frost (2020) makes the assertion that self-efficacy and agency are linked, reporting that "each can either be enhanced or diminished" with experience (p. 20), but Emirbayer & Mische (1998) have noted, "Many theorists have failed to distinguish agency as an analytical category in its own right" (p.962). Consequently, the literature does not say very much about what school leaders can do to influence teachers to not only enact but also actively define and promote any sort of change in schools, including the addition or expansion of inclusive practices and policies.

[1] The search for literature on school leaders developing teacher agency was conducted in a variety of databases, with Academic Search Premier, EBSCOHost, Education Source, and ERIC (Education Resource Information Center) providing some results with the search terms like *teacher agency, leaders promoting agency, but the searches revealed did not definitively demonstrate that school leaders can positively influence teacher agency.*

In short, teachers are expected to use inclusive, culturally sensitive, and differentiated teaching strategies, regardless of their professional or educational experiences. Clearly, teacher agency could be critical in implementing effective inclusive practices, goals, and policies endorsed by schools and accrediting organizations. But, unfortunately, there is virtually no literature to describe how teacher agency is developed in the context of promoting inclusive practices and policies in a school, much less how teachers can be engaged in policymaking to help promote teacher agency in a very real sense.

Additionally, the literature exploring teacher agency is oriented toward describing what individual teachers do to manifest agency rather than providing comparative analyses across individuals and school settings. To advance research, it's crucial to grasp the support systems school leaders establish for teachers to implement inclusive practices, policies, or overarching educational goals. Understanding how leaders foster teacher buy-in for these objectives is essential for research progress. Further, the teacher agency literature is also limited in terms of the geographical areas studied (Miller et al., 2020). In fact, no studies have focused on international schools, which has been an under-researched area of inquiry more generally.

It is likely some of the gaps in the literature are due to the varying theoretical frameworks of agency, different cultural underpinnings, and the idiosyncratic nature of schools (Cong-Lem, 2021). Or, possibly, the literature does not answer key questions about the development of teacher agency and school leaders' role in that development because not enough time or resources have been employed to study teacher agency and its impact on inclusion at this point. There is a need for the research to provide an understanding of how leaders may or may not influence both general education teacher's and special educator's agency toward promoting inclusion.

One final point: The literature is especially silent about the role school leaders have in developing teacher agency in international schools[2]. This silence is unfortunate because international schools are likely to offer an ideal environment to explore and learn about teacher agency and its connection to inclusion because international schools are independent of national or statewide standards and practices. This could potentially open the doors for collaborative and intentional development of policies and practices that aim to support the unique and individual needs of an international school's students. At this point, however, we do not know if school leaders are including teachers in decision making about educating students with disabilities in international school settings and, if so, if school leaders are preparing teachers for changes in the role they will have to play in more inclusive environments. We need to know the extent, if at all, that teachers are able to take up their agency and affect school practices that support disabled students. In short, there is a need for the voices of school leaders, general classroom teachers, and special educators to be heard, represented, and empirically grounded in research (Salisbury, 2006) to illuminate the actions both school leaders and teachers are taking (or not taking) to improve the learning opportunities for all students.

## Purpose of the Study/Research Questions

The purpose of this research study was to explore and compare how school leaders enhance or diminish teacher agency with respect to the actions general education teachers and special educators take toward improving the inclusive policies and practices in their schools. Among other things, this case study/cross case analysis will ask whether school leaders are promoting teacher agency, and, if they are, how they go about taking up this task. What school leaders say about these matters will be compared to what other school leaders and

[2] A traditional international school as "one established to offer education to children of globally mobile parents and has a large cultural mix of children'' (Mayer, 1968, p. 10). International Schools continue to grow around the world, and, according to the International School Consultancy (as cited in Sharma, 2016), in 2016 there were approximately 8,000 international schools in total.

teachers say about leaders' support or lack thereof, and its impact on their professional identities, as well as their willingness to enthusiastically embrace, and possibly promote and implement, inclusive practices.

The following research questions will drive this study:

1. To what extent do international school leaders claim they are attempting to develop teachers' capacity to meet the needs of students with identified learning difficulties through inclusionary policies and practices, and in what forms do their development efforts take?
2. To what extent do teachers participate in the development of (a) school-wide goals or (b) policies related to promoting inclusive practices?
3. To what extent do teachers' perspectives of school leaders' actions correspond to leaders' own descriptions of their actions?
    a. What leadership decisions and structural factors do teachers perceive as supporting or interfering with their agency in being able to support students with diverse learning needs in inclusive classrooms?
    b. According to what teachers say about their school's leaders and their leadership practices related to inclusion, how do school leaders' actions influence teachers' beliefs and values and, ultimately, their professional identities related to teaching students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms?

# CHAPTER TWO

# LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review draws from disability research and social cognitive theory sources to demonstrate what is already known about the ways in which school leaders from across all school types can support teachers in achieving school-wide goals related to the inclusion of students with disabilities. The history of the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education settings has changed over time, and it is up to school leaders and teachers globally to determine how they can successfully meet the needs of all students in their classrooms and schools. Successful implementation of government and school inclusive reform initiatives requires action, or some level of agency from school teachers and leaders. For this reason, the empirical literature on the history of inclusion of students with disabilities will be positioned in this review as a cornerstone for better understanding of where we are and where we have come in terms of inclusion practices and policies. This will be followed by a deep dive into school culture, teacher agency, teacher self-efficacy, and the role school leaders play in supporting teacher self-efficacy and agency toward implementing inclusive policies and practices, will help provide direction for where school leaders can or need to go in their inclusion development efforts.

## Organization of the Review

This literature review will be structured into three sections. Firstly, it will offer a brief historical overview of inclusion policies in the United States. Given the abundance of empirical literature available from this geographical region and my own experience as a special educator in the USA, the focus will primarily be on American policies and practices. This approach aims to provide specific examples of any potentially unfamiliar or perplexing terminologies.

However, to ensure a broader understanding of the global context, this first section will also touch upon developments in Europe and delve into the United Nations Salamanca Statement. The Salamanca Statement (UNESCO, 1994), a pivotal document in the realm of inclusive education, will be examined to shed light on its significance and influence on global educational practices. This discussion will serve to contextualize the subsequent sections of the literature review, offering insights into the international landscape of inclusive education policies and initiatives.

In the second section, there will be an exploration of the literature regarding the evolution of teacher and administrator attitudes in response to updates in inclusion and special education policy. This examination serves as a crucial segue to the final section on leader self-efficacy and teacher agency. Understanding the shifts in attitudes among educators provides insight into the motivations behind their actions in fostering inclusive environments.

In the final section, social psychological theories underpinning teacher and leader self-efficacy, as well as teacher agency, will be reviewed and discussed. This analysis aims to elucidate how school leaders can theoretically influence teachers' self and collective efficacy, as well as agency, to cultivate more effective inclusive classrooms in practice. Additionally, gaps in the literature will be highlighted to suggest areas for future research, including the proposed study. A glossary of terms used in this section of the proposal can be found in Appendix A.

**Search Details**

To find relevant literature for each section of this literature review, I conducted a search using keywords such as, "history of inclusion in USA," "IDEA," "leadership attitudes and special education," "teacher attitudes and special education," "teacher agency," "school leaders and agency," "teacher agency and inclusion", and "teacher agency and inclusion." The search yielded lists of thousands of publications. For the first section of the review, I

followed a timeline from 1979-2004, which outlined some of the main federal inclusion policy developments and changes that were thought to be relevant. I focused briefly on the literature discussing PL 94-142 (Lietz & Kaiser, 1979), Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) (Schuster, 1985), the Salamanca Statement (Oliver & Barnes, 2010), the Individuals with Disabilities Act (1997), and response to intervention and positive behavior intervention supports (Smith et al., 2010).

For the second section of the review, there were also thousands of publications. To make this part of the review manageable, articles were reviewed that focused directly on teacher and administrator perspectives and attitudes towards the inclusion policies: PL 94-142 and IDEA (2004). For the final section, there was a considerable number of publications emerging from the data-based search, articles focusing on teacher agency in the context of promoting inclusion were limited, and even more limited studies focusing on teachers promoting inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream schools. Therefore, a more selective approach was necessary to encompass all three of the categories listed above. In the end, the work of, and work cited by these authors: Ketelaar et al. (2012); Priestley et al. (2015); and Imants and Van der Wal, (2020) were reviewed. The authors cited in the previous sentences were the primary sources; then I investigated their references as secondary sources. In short, these sources provided a systematic overview of the current literature on the history of inclusion, teacher and administrators attitudes towards inclusion, and teacher and leader agency and self-efficacy.

## History of Inclusion of Students with Disabilities

Inclusion of students with disabilities in mainstream education has been researched, praised, and criticized by teachers and school leaders. To understand the dynamic and broad nature of inclusion of students with disabilities, it is important to first explore the history of inclusion policies, and the efforts of teachers and administrators to implement such policies.

In 1975, the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (i.e., PL 94-142) was the first major inclusive policy passed by the United States' Congress requiring all children, regardless of disability, to "receive a free and appropriate education [FAPE]," in a student's "least restrictive environment" (Schuster, 1985, p. 231). This policy was based on national data suggesting that over one million students were excluded from public schools, and over four million students did not receive appropriate special educational services (Lietz & Kaiser, 1979).

The implications of this change in policy required schools to change practices to meet the needs of all students in their classrooms, regardless of disability. PL 94-142 required schools to "mainstream" students, which meant to the "maximum extent appropriate, handicapped children...are to be educated with children who are not handicapped" (Lietz & Kaiser, 1979, p. 31). This was a move away from segregated school systems in which disabled students were educated only with other disabled students to a more inclusive approach of integrating students with disabilities with their non-disabled peers.

As a result of PL 94-142, principals had to adapt their roles and responsibilities to set up special education services in their schools, design referral processes, and arrange appropriate educational opportunities and support personnel to fully accommodate students with disabilities of the law (Lietz & Kaiser, 1979). As principals were making the required adaptations, teachers were worried about not meeting the needs of the non-disabled students in their classes (McCoy & Glazzard, 1978). Teachers also felt they did not have knowledge or skills to implement recommendations from specialists in special education (McCoy & Glazzard, 1978).

Similar reforms started in Europe following the U.S. adoption of PL 94-142. Specifically, there was a paradigm shift from a medical model of disability to a social model of disability (Oliver & Barnes, 2010). The medical model defined disabilities by their

medical impairments, whereas, the social model viewed disabilities as a form of social oppression. In 1994, the United Nations and the European Union adopted *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Needs Education* which declared: “Inclusion and participation are essential to human dignity and to the enjoyment and exercise of human rights” (UNESCO, 1994, p. 12).

In 1997, PL 94-142 became the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1997). The new law required schools to make considerable efforts to include students with disabilities in general education. There were substantial disagreements about doing this among teachers and school leaders. Those who opposed IDEA (1997) believed students with disabilities should be educated in segregated schools equipped with relevant resources, while supporters believed students with disabilities can be provided with systematic support in mainstream schools (Friend & Bursuck, 2011; Praisner, 2003; Salend, 2007). Furthermore, IDEA (1997) did not provide schools or states with recommendations for how to set up governance structures to effectively implement inclusive practices (Katsiyannis & Yell, 2004). In effect, the lack of directives about governance structures left school leaders with the responsibility to define and develop inclusive policies and practices.

IDEA, originally passed in 1997, was amended in 2004 and called for early intervention and more accountability for schools and states regarding the disproportionality of students with disabilities from minority populations (The University of Kansas, 2021). More specifically, IDEA (2004) required schools to develop response to intervention (RTI) and positive behavior intervention supports (PBIS) (Smith et al., 2010). Response to intervention is a three-tiered process of monitoring student progress and responding with interventions when students are not making adequate progress in their learning (Bradley et al., 2005). When students are not making progress, they receive more intensive interventions, either in small groups or individually, until progress is made, or the student is referred to

special education services. Similarly, PBIS follows a three-tiered model of support for the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students (Chitiyo & Wheeler, 2009b). The level of support intensifies based on the progress students make toward achieving specified goals. Next is a review of teacher attitudes and their implications for inclusive instruction.

## Teachers' and Administrators' Changing Attitudes Toward Inclusion

The percentage of students with disabilities in public schools has shown a steady increase, rising from 13.3% between 2000 and 2008 to 14.1% between 2018 and 2019 (USDE, 2021). Throughout this period, school leaders and teachers faced the task of fostering inclusive environments, regardless of their preparedness and knowledge in doing so (Nota et al., 2018).

Literature suggests that the responsibilities of both general and special educators expanded in response to policy changes. However, attitudes, skills, and motivation toward establishing successful inclusive classrooms varied between these two groups of teachers (Fisher et al., 2003; Davern, 1999). For instance, in a quantitative study by Webb (2004), which measured the attitudes of general education and special education teachers, it was found that special education teachers were more supportive of inclusion, whereas general education teachers expressed concerns about meeting the needs of students with cognitive difficulties.

Similarly, studies employing the TATIS survey (Teacher Attitudes Toward Inclusion Survey) revealed that general education teachers perceived inclusion as time-consuming and requiring specialized skills (Moen, 2008). Furthermore, teachers reported feeling unprepared to teach students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms (Connor et al., 2007). While these quantitative findings helped identify the challenges, the literature lacked depth, and a qualitative or mixed-methods approach could have provided insights into the actions—whether positive or negative—that teachers had taken to improve their teaching practices.

Other studies have focused on pre-service teaching to ascertain how undergraduate or higher education institutions can enhance teaching and learning in inclusive classrooms. For instance, Van Laarhover et al. (2007) developed Project ACCEPT (Achieving Creative & Collaborative Educational Preservice Teams) to offer practical experiences and courses to general education and special education pre-service teachers, aiming to improve their attitudes and skills for teaching in inclusive classrooms. This experimental trial yielded substantial gains in both the general education and special education groups compared to the control group, as evidenced by survey data collected after one year. The authors acknowledged the limitations, including the variation in instructors across experimental groups, which could have influenced the results. Nonetheless, despite these limitations, the study underscores the significance of pre-service training in inclusive education methodologies for both general and special education teachers.

Moreover, the literature suggests that teacher attitudes toward inclusion are a crucial predictor of a school's ability to foster inclusive communities (Gelheiser & Meyers, 1996; Van Laarhover et al., 2007). Recommendations for improvement include fostering collaboration between general education and special education teachers with support from administrators (Hammond & Ingalls, 2003), and implementing comprehensive training programs at the pre-service or professional in-service levels (Webb, 2004). However, the effectiveness of these recommendations in inclusive classrooms is not extensively explored in the literature, and it shifts the responsibility for skill development onto entities other than the individual, such as educational institutions, policymakers, and community organizations. Next, we will review administrator attitudes and their implications for inclusive education.

**Administrator Attitudes**

Inclusive schools require more than just the efforts of teachers; they necessitate organizational, structural, attitudinal, and instructional changes within each institution (Block

& Haring, 1992; Sapon-Shevin, 1995). Principals play a pivotal role in shaping the culture and direction of a school, thus making it crucial to examine their attitudes toward inclusion (Horrocks, 2008). Principals are tasked with leading schools through the adaptation and implementation of inclusive policies, highlighting the significance of their attitudes and leadership styles (Idol, 1994; Larrivee & Cook, 1979; Servatius et al., 1992).

For example, in a mixed methods study of eight inclusive schools in the same district, assistant principals, classroom teachers, special education teachers, counselors, speech–language pathologists, physical education teachers, music teachers, art teachers, and paraprofessionals were surveyed and interviewed to reflect on their schools' collective attitudes towards inclusion and their perceptions of their school principals (Idol et al., 1994). The staff members were asked specifically whether they felt their principals supported them as professionals, if their principals were more managers or instructional leaders, and if their principals supported inclusion (Idol et al., 1994). The authors found that the staff members had positive perceptions of their administrators because they were instructional leaders and visible in classrooms. The study concluded that instructional leaders (principals) were able to identify where additional staffing, resources, or training was needed because they were on the ground and experiencing what the teachers were experiencing on a day-to-day basis. This in turn, had a positive impact on teacher perceptions of developing their inclusive practices. Although this study was limited in sample size, the rigorous methods employed demonstrated that instructional leadership from principals was an important factor in building a community of trust and teamwork.

However, not all schools have the right leadership, skills, and supports necessary to establish a successful and inclusive school. In fact, empirical literature also suggested that school administrators had mixed feelings toward inclusion, and many were not prepared to support the integration of students with disabilities in mainstream schools. The reason for this

lack of support, according to many researchers, was that school leaders did not have the knowledge, background, or training (Anderson, 1999; Goor et al., 1997; Lasky & Karge, 2006; Monteith, 2000).

Similar to the research on teacher attitudes, numerous authors focused on higher education programs, identifying a structural deficiency, particularly the insufficient emphasis on special education or inclusive practices from the perspective of administrators. For example, in a study of administrator preparation programs, Katasiyannis (1994) found school administrators only received limited education on special education in their higher education programs, and indicated principals did not feel prepared to lead out on inclusive practices. Praisner (2003) expanded on this line of inquiry by exploring what positively or negatively influenced principal's attitudes toward inclusion and its impact on teachers and students. In this study, 408 elementary principals were surveyed, and only 1 in 5 indicated positive attitudes towards inclusion because they had either experience or training in special education (Praisner, 2003). Although this study did not specify the scope of resources or provide details of the student populations and disability status at each school, it still provides an answer to a knowledge gap. We know now that experience and training with inclusion can influence a school administrator's perception of inclusion (Katasiyannis, 1994). However, it is still unknown what actions school administrators can take to improve inclusion goals for their schools besides going to a university to learn about inclusion or special education. The next section of this literature review will focus on agency, self-efficacy, and the impact school leadership can have on these constructs as a means to support inclusion goals.

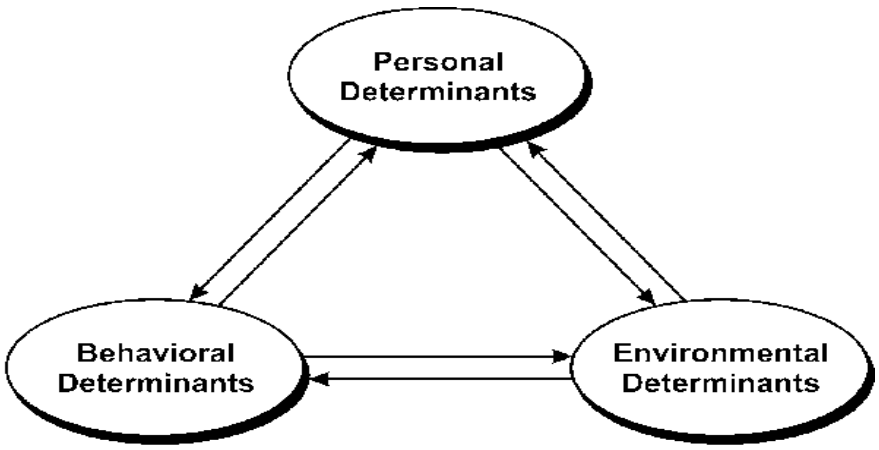
## Agency and Self-Efficacy in Theory and Practice

It is appropriate to commence this section of the review by delving into social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1997). As illustrated in Figure 1, social cognitive theory posits a connection between an individual and their behavior within an environment when pursuing a

desired outcome, termed as agency (Bandura, 1997). This idea emphasizes how individuals' desires interact with their actions, revealing the dynamic nature of human behavior within educational settings, which is considered teacher agency. In the context of education, setting goals, articulating visions, and leading inclusive agendas necessitates agency among school leaders and teachers. An individual's confidence in their ability to achieve these goals is known as self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). Moreover, within the framework of inclusive practices, both school leaders and teachers must possess a degree of agency and self-efficacy to effectively fulfill the requirements outlined by IDEA (2004).

**Figure 1**

*Bandura's Model of Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura 2001)*




As previously discussed, the attitudes of teachers and administrators significantly influence the implementation of inclusive policies. Given that school leaders must rally a collective effort towards realizing a school's inclusive vision, the successful implementation and attainment of this vision hinge upon the skills and motivation of the school's teachers. Therefore, the literature examined in this section will pay close attention to teacher self-efficacy and collective efficacy, as these are pivotal variables associated with agency and achieving a school's inclusion objectives.

Furthermore, this section of the review will explore the literature on self-efficacy and agency as a theoretical framework to elucidate the interconnectedness of these constructs and underscore the factors contributing to their development. Understanding how self-efficacy and agency influence individuals' perceptions and actions can shed light on their potential impact on the promotion or hindrance of inclusion within educational environments. Subsequently, a focus will be placed on teacher, leader, and collective self-efficacy towards inclusion to emphasize the potential impact of self and collective efficacy on fostering inclusive classrooms. Finally, the literature will be surveyed to investigate how school leaders or administrators can facilitate the development of teacher agency and self-efficacy, as well as collective efficacy, towards inclusive instructional practices.

**Theorizing Agency and Self-Efficacy**

The literature presents multifaceted perspectives on agency within social cognitive theory, viewed through both sociological and ecological lenses that are pertinent to our discussion. First, Bandura (2001) defines agency as "the capacity to exercise control over the nature and quality of one's life" (p.1). According to Bandura's (1977a) social-cognitive Theory (SCT), human agency represents intentional actions individuals take to achieve desired outcomes (Bandura, 1997). For instance, if a school leader aims to enhance teachers' inclusive instructional practices, they would formulate a plan, seek advice, and take deliberate steps towards this goal. In this context, the school leader and/or teacher is viewed as an active participant, not merely an observer.

The second perspective, introduced by Giddens (1994), sheds light on how structures can influence agency. Giddens posited a theory on agency and structure, suggesting that individuals have the capacity to act within the context of social structures while also being influenced by them. This perspective acknowledges the importance of both individual agency and the broader social context in shaping behaviors and outcomes. Giddens' (1994) research

provides valuable insights into how agency operates within institutional frameworks, offering further depth to our understanding of how teachers and school leaders navigate inclusive practices within educational systems.

Building upon this theoretical foundation, the perspective highlighted by Eteläpelto et al. (2013) emphasizes the influence of social structures on individual agency. Professional agency, as described by Eteläpelto et al. (2013), is practiced when teachers or school communities influence decisions and take stances that impact their work and professional identity. This perspective acknowledges the dynamic interplay between personal agency and the broader social context within educational settings, recognizing that individuals both act within and are influenced by institutional frameworks.

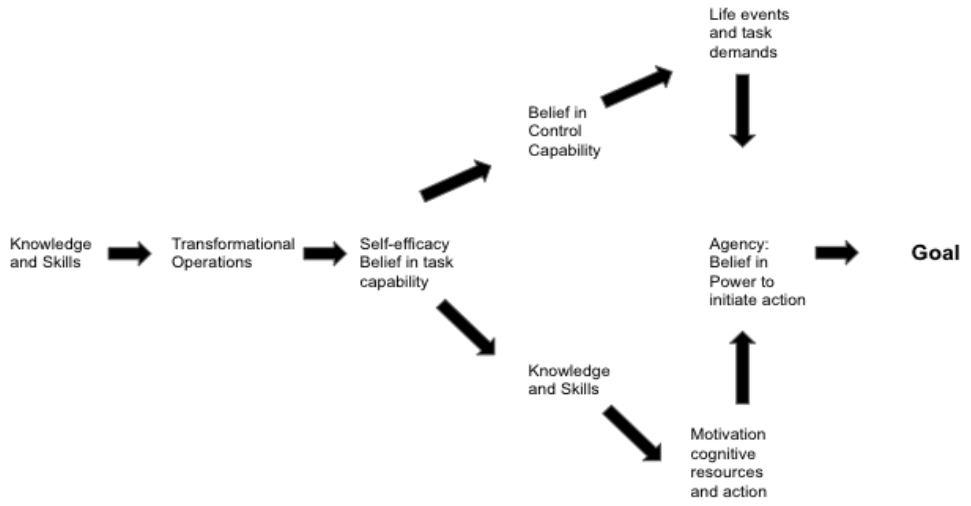
Generally, agency is described as "the capability of individual human beings to make choices and to act on those choices in ways that make a difference in their lives" (Martin, 2004, p. 135). However, Biesta and Tedder (2007) argue that agency is not an inherent trait but rather something individuals acquire within specific contexts. From this perspective, agency is viewed as an evolving ecological process shaped by interactions with the environment and past experiences. Emirbayer and Mische's (1998) theory further suggests that agency is fluid and influenced by environmental factors and past experiences, including collective agency, where individuals share beliefs in their collective power to achieve desired results (Bandura, 2000). Bandura (2001) asserts that intentionality, self-regulation, and self-reflectiveness are the core elements of agency, yet points out that the key driver of agency is self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is explained as "people develop[ing] domain-specific beliefs about their own abilities and characteristics that guide their behavior by determining what they try to achieve and how much effort they put into their performance in that particular situation or domain" (as cited in Grusec, 1992, p. 782). In turn, self-efficacy is the mediator between a person's perceived ability and the willful actions the person takes.

Bandura (2001) posits that intentionality, self-regulation, and self-reflectiveness are core elements of agency, with self-efficacy serving as a key driver. Self-efficacy refers to individuals' beliefs about their capabilities to accomplish specific tasks (Bandura, 1997). It acts as a mediator between perceived ability and intentional actions, influencing individuals' choices and efforts.

It's important to distinguish between self-efficacy and personal agency. While self-efficacy pertains to the belief in one's capability to achieve a goal, personal agency refers to the belief in one's power to attain the goal through action (Marat, 2003), as illustrated in Figure 2. Both concepts require planning, forethought, self-evaluation, motivation, and self-regulation (Bandura, 2001). However, an individual's sense of self-efficacy and agency may not always align; for instance, a teacher may feel capable of implementing a reading intervention but may not take the necessary actions to achieve the desired results (Marat, 2003).

**Figure 2**

*Self-efficacy and agency in human functioning - conceptual framework (Adapted from Marat, 2003)*



Bandura's social cognitive theory (1997) emphasizes a reciprocal relationship between personal factors, behavior, and the environment, wherein each influences the others. Self-efficacy, described as a generative capability, is central to this relationship, driving individuals' thoughts, behaviors, and emotions (Bandura, 1997).

Mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological states are key contributors to self-efficacy. Mastery experiences, in particular, are deemed the most influential, as they involve individuals directly engaging in tasks and receiving feedback (Bandura, 1997). Vicarious experiences, on the other hand, involve individuals observing others' behaviors and outcomes, influencing their self-efficacy beliefs (Bandura, 1997).

While verbal persuasion and performance feedback can also impact self-efficacy, their effectiveness depends on various factors, including the credibility of the source and the nature of the feedback (Bandura, 1997). Additionally, individuals' physiological states, such as anxiety or arousal, can influence their perceived ability to accomplish tasks (Bandura, 1997).

Collective efficacy, akin to collective agency, refers to groups' beliefs in their ability to achieve desired outcomes through collaboration and action (Bandura, 1997). Research suggests that collective efficacy varies across cultures and is influenced by factors such as ethnicity and collectivist values (Gibson, 1999; Bempechat & Drago-Sevenson, 1999). This highlights the importance of considering cultural contexts when examining collective efficacy. For instance, research by Hofstede (2001) examined cultural dimensions and their impact on collective efficacy beliefs. Hofstede's (2001) study explored how cultural values, such as individualism versus collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance, influence group dynamics and collaboration. Understanding these cultural dimensions provides valuable insights into how collective efficacy manifests across different cultural

contexts, thereby informing strategies for promoting effective collaboration and action within diverse educational environments.

In summary, agency and self-efficacy are essential constructs within social cognitive theory, shaping individuals' thoughts, behaviors, and emotions. Mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, verbal persuasion, and physiological states contribute to self-efficacy beliefs, which in turn influence individuals' actions and choices. Collective efficacy plays a crucial role in group dynamics, with cultural factors, as elucidated by Hofstede's (2001) work on cultural dimensions, influencing its manifestation. Cultural values such as individualism versus collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance shape how collective efficacy is perceived and enacted within different societies. Understanding these constructs and cultural influences is vital for informing practices aimed at fostering agency and efficacy in diverse educational settings.

The following sections of this literature review shifts the focus somewhat. The next part of the review begins to shift the focus of the review from theory to practice.

**Teacher Agency and Self-Efficacy Towards Inclusive Classrooms**

To contextualize agency in education, researchers emphasize the importance of understanding teacher agency within the constraints of standardized testing and organizational policies (Buchanan, 2015; Priestley et al., 2015a; Toom et al., 2015), highlighting the need for support and professional development to enhance teacher agency (Imants and Van der Wal, 2019).

In the realm of education, there's a growing call for research on teacher agency, particularly in the context of standardized testing, where teachers often have limited autonomy (Buchanan, 2015; Priestley et al., 2015a; Toom et al., 2015). Biesta and Tedder (2007) define agency as the actions teachers can take given the resources, support, and individual efforts available to them. Similarly, Priestley et al. (2015) describe agency as

teachers' contributions within the policies and conditions set by their organization. These definitions emphasize that teacher agency is not inherent but can be cultivated through professional development and collaboration.

Further, teacher agency intersects with various aspects of educational practice, including data-driven decision-making. Datnow and Hubbard (2016) explore how teachers' beliefs, attitudes, and skills regarding data-driven decision-making contribute to their agency in the classroom. They highlight the importance of fostering a culture of collaboration and professional learning communities to support teachers in developing their capacity for data-driven decision-making. Similarly, Lockton, Weddle, and Datnow (2019) investigate teacher agency in data use efforts within low-performing schools. Through qualitative research, they examined the challenges teachers face and the factors influencing their agency in utilizing data for instructional decision-making. These studies emphasize the critical role of teacher agency in shaping educational practices and outcomes, highlighting the need for targeted support and professional development to cultivate a data-informed teaching culture within schools.

Despite the importance of teacher agency in educational reform efforts, the empirical literature on agency in education remains limited, with scholars failing to distinguish agency as an independent analytical category (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). Moreover, there's a scarcity of evidence on how teacher agency influences the implementation of inclusive policies. Nonetheless, researchers, including Datnow (2012), are exploring the components of teacher agency and strategies to support teachers in developing agency amidst accountability measures and school reforms. Datnow's (2012) work sheds light on the intricate dynamics of teacher agency within the context of educational reform, emphasizing the role of collaboration, leadership, and professional autonomy in fostering meaningful change. Through the lens of social networks research, she examines how teachers leverage their

professional relationships and networks to influence educational reform efforts. This emerging research emphasizes the significance of teacher agency in driving effective and sustainable reform, offering valuable insights for policymakers and educators alike.

A systematic review by Imants and Van der Wal (2019) identified five elements crucial for building teacher agency through professional development: teacher's active involvement, dynamic and collaborative relationships, varied learning experiences, ongoing professional growth, and alignment with reform goals. However, there's a lack of research evaluating the effectiveness of such models on teacher professional development.

Moving forward, it's essential to understand the interdependence of teacher agency and self-efficacy and their implications for inclusive education. This discussion will shed light on the reciprocal relationship between these constructs and their role in promoting inclusive practices within educational settings.

**Interdependence of Teacher Agency and Collective Self-Efficacy**

In this section, I will delve into the intricate relationship between teacher agency and collective self-efficacy within educational settings. Building upon the foundation of previous discussions on teacher empowerment and organizational dynamics, I will examine how these two constructs intersect and influence each other in promoting inclusive practices and fostering resilience among educators.

By understanding the interplay between teacher agency (Bandura, 2001) —the capacity of individual educators to exercise control over their professional lives—and collective self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997)—the shared belief in a group's ability to achieve desired outcomes—we can gain insights into how schools can cultivate environments conducive to collaboration, innovation, and continuous improvement.

For example, in reviewing the International Teacher Leadership project across fifteen countries, Frost (2006) highlighted a missed opportunity in schools to leverage teachers'

potential for leading innovation. Much of the existing literature on teacher and administrator attitudes tended to focus on deficits rather than empowering educators to collectively develop shared goals and knowledge, as Frost (2006) suggests. It's crucial to recognize the link between self-efficacy and agency, as both can be either "enhanced or diminished through experience" (Frost, 2006, p. 20). Therefore, by learning how to enhance agency and self-efficacy, school leaders may better support teachers in improving their approaches to inclusion through experience, professional development, or collaborative opportunities.

Frost (2012) further emphasizes the importance of resilience in teachers, which can be bolstered by a higher sense of self-efficacy. Resilient teachers are better equipped to problem-solve and learn from their experiences, especially when faced with diverse classroom needs. Bandura (1997) defines collective efficacy as the collaboration and action of individuals within an organization, suggesting that schools can harness the collective experiences of teachers to support each other in overcoming challenges related to inclusion.

Empirical research supports the notion that collective efficacy among teachers can enhance organizational effectiveness (Leyser, Zeiger, & Romi, 2011; McGregor & Vogelsberg, 1998). School leaders must therefore prioritize empowering and motivating teachers to believe in the vision of inclusion while providing the necessary time, resources, and opportunities for collaboration. Collective efficacy has been linked to improved student learning outcomes, indicating the need for reconsidering organizational structures in schools to foster a culture of collective efficacy (Bandura, 1993; Goddard et al., 2000; Hoy et al., 2002; Tschannen-Moran & Barr, 2004).

**Leadership Self-Efficacy**

Understanding the intricate dynamics between leadership self-efficacy, instructional leadership, and collective efficacy is paramount in fostering inclusive educational environments. This section delves into the role of leadership self-efficacy in shaping teacher

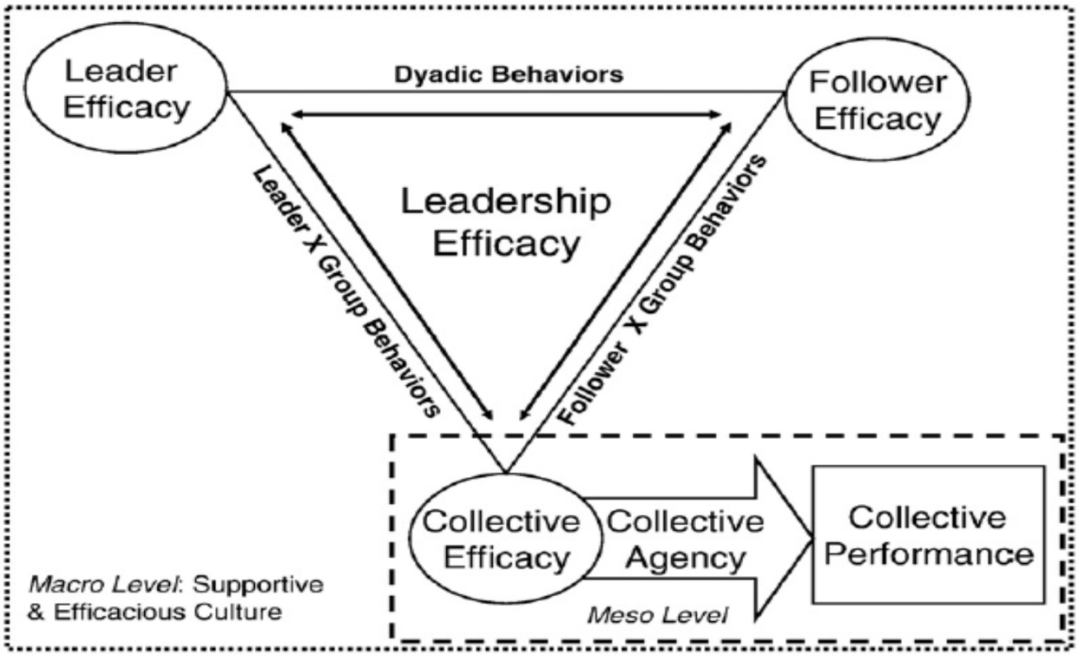
agency and collective efficacy, exploring how leadership styles and practices influence educators' beliefs and behaviors. By examining empirical studies and theoretical frameworks, the interplay between leadership efficacy and the collective capacity of teaching staff to enact inclusive practices comes to light. Through this exploration, I will aim to highlight the pivotal role of educational leaders in cultivating an environment conducive to the success of inclusive programs and fostering a sense of collective efficacy among educators.

For instance, research on leadership self-efficacy offers valuable insights into its impact on various aspects of educational settings, including job satisfaction, administrative management, and student achievement (Federici, 2013; McCollum & Kajs, 2015; Williams, 2012). However, the predominantly quantitative nature of existing studies limits a nuanced understanding of this phenomenon (Fisher, 2020). Notably absent are studies investigating how leadership self-efficacy influences teachers' agency and self-efficacy in the context of teaching students with disabilities in inclusive schools. Nevertheless, research suggests a positive association between principal self-efficacy and collective teacher efficacy, highlighting the potential influence of leadership on teacher attitudes and behaviors (Hallinger et al., 2018).

Contemporary perspectives acknowledge the need to consider the dynamic and idiosyncratic nature of schools (Hanna et al., 2008). For instance, as seen in Figure 3, Hanna et al. (2008) developed a theoretical model illustrating the interplay between leadership efficacy, follower efficacy, and collective efficacy within an organization, emphasizing the reciprocal influence of leaders and followers in shaping efficacy beliefs and behaviors.

**Figure 3**

*Theoretical framework for leadership efficacy (Hannah et al., 2008)*




Bandura (1999) posits that self-efficacy can be shaped by vicarious experiences, with leaders' feedback and interactions influencing followers' self-efficacy and vice versa (Naidoo & Lord, 2008; Shamir et al., 1993). Similarly, leaders' and followers' perceptions of their group can impact collective efficacy, with implications for inclusive practices in schools (Hanna et al., 2008).

Examining leadership styles, Cobanoglu and Yurek (2018) found a prevalence of transformational leadership among school administrators in Turkey, with this style positively associated with leadership self-efficacy. Transformational leaders, known for fostering follower strengths and potential, play a pivotal role in setting goals, motivating followers, and promoting collaboration (Leithwood et al., 2004).

Furthermore, research underscores the importance of instructional leadership in enhancing teacher collective efficacy toward inclusive missions and visions (Chen & Bliese, 2002; Gully et al., 2002). Ninković and Knežević (2016) found a positive relationship between transformational and instructional leadership and collective teacher efficacy in Serbia, suggesting that these leadership styles contribute to building collective efficacy, potentially enhancing the effectiveness of inclusive programs.

While these studies provide valuable insights into the relationship between leadership self-efficacy, leadership styles, and collective efficacy, limitations in sample diversity and contextual factors highlight the need for further research to elucidate the mechanisms through which leadership influences teacher agency and collective efficacy in inclusive educational settings.

**Leaders Fostering Collective Agency and Self-Efficacy**

Following the examination of leadership self-efficacy, the focus now shifts to how educational leaders can actively foster collective agency and self-efficacy among teaching staff. This section will explore strategies and practices employed by leaders to cultivate a culture of collaboration, shared vision, and empowerment, ultimately enhancing the collective efficacy of educators in realizing inclusive educational goals, policies, and practices.

The empirical research examining teacher agency and self-efficacy within the context of promoting effective inclusive practices remains limited. However, existing literature suggests that school leaders play a crucial role in shaping the self-efficacy and agency of teachers, which in turn influences their capacity to create inclusive classrooms. For example, Tschannen-Moran et al. (1998) and Tschannen-Moran & Gareis (2004) highlights the significant influence of school leaders on teachers' sense of self-efficacy and agency through school leaders' ability to establish a positive and effective school climate, culture, decision-making structures, and leadership style.

In a qualitative study focused on principals' impact on teacher self-efficacy, Lambersky (2016) found that principals' behaviors can influence a teacher's self and collective efficacy, morale, and stress levels. Principals who demonstrate empathy for teachers, maintain visibility within the school, and acknowledge teacher achievements contribute positively to the development of self and collective efficacy among the teaching

staff. Similarly, Flores (2004) and Gunter (2011) argue that principals who possess the capacity to co-create goals and vision with their staff members can foster professional learning communities, thereby enhancing teachers' self and collective efficacy.

Moreover, collaboration emerges as a pivotal aspect of building collective efficacy in schools and preparing teachers for internal and external school change (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). Lai and Cheung (2014) suggest that principals and school leaders need to provide teachers with more opportunities to participate in decision-making processes and allocate sufficient time and resources for collaboration. When teachers feel a sense of shared ownership over reform initiatives, there is a heightened sense of collective efficacy toward achieving the reform goals (Murphy, 2005). This collective efficacy is likely relevant to a school leader's initiatives aimed at fostering inclusive practices within the school environment.

**Principals as Instructional Leaders in the Era of Inclusion**

Building on the crucial role of school leaders in fostering collective agency and self-efficacy among teachers, the next section explores the concept of instructional leadership. Instructional leadership entails the actions and strategies employed by school leaders to enhance teaching and learning practices within their institutions (Johnson, 2016). By centering our attention on instructional leadership, we can explore in greater detail the specific practices and behaviors exhibited by school leaders, and whether they facilitate or hinder the development of inclusive instructional practices among teachers.

In previous research, the role of principals as instructional leaders has been extensively explored, yet the specific emphasis on inclusive practices for students with disabilities remains limited. Given the requirements outlined in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), teachers often turn to principals for professional development and support in developing inclusive instructional practices. Barnett and Monda-

Amaya (1998) underscore the increased anxiety principals face when they perceive inadequacies in their preparation for implementing inclusion, alongside the difficulty of articulating a clear vision for the school's dedication to inclusion, which is a critical aspect emphasized in prior studies (Servatius et al., 1992; Villa & Thousand, 1990, 1992).

Further, authors such as DuFour & Marzano (2009), Odell (1986), and Salisbury (2006) argue that principals must possess the requisite experience and knowledge of evidence-based inclusive practices, resources, and methodologies to effectively support their teachers. However, research indicates that many principals do not feel confident in evaluating inclusive practices (Jacobs & Lefgren, 2006) and often require further training in evidence-based instructional practices (Loiacono & Palumbo, 2011). In fact, in a 2011 study by Loiacono and Palumbo, "61.3% [of principals] reported a need for further training in evidence-based instructional practices grounded in the principles of [Adaptive Behavior Analysis], and [Positive Behavior Support] interventions" (p. 217). Additionally, the existing literature on instructional leadership in inclusive practices often overlooks the nuanced nature of schools and the potential impact of cultural diversity on the inclusion implementation process.

Leithwood et al. (2004) stress the importance of school administrators developing shared goals and building capacity for change, necessitating the creation of flexible, accepting school-wide visions that value all students' abilities to learn. Principals must establish positive relationships with stakeholders to garner support for the school's vision of inclusion (Green, 2005; Halvorsen & Neary, 2005) and ensure clear communication about student needs and learning attainment between general and special educators (Pivik et al., 2002). In addition, Fullan (1991) emphasizes the importance of administrators providing opportunities for teacher collaboration, feedback, and in-service training to support inclusive practices. However, there remains a gap in the literature regarding culturally competent

leadership in the context of inclusive education (Horsford et al., 2011), leaving school leaders feeling ill-prepared to implement effective inclusive policies and instructional practices (Bustamante et al., 2009).

## An Ecological Approach

Following the exploration of instructional leadership in promoting inclusive practices, it is imperative to adopt an ecological perspective to delve deeper into the multifaceted challenges and solutions within inclusive education. An ecological approach considers the dynamic interplay of various factors, including organizational structures, cultural diversity, and professional development, in shaping the implementation of inclusive policies and practices (Meyers et al., 2012). By examining the broader ecological context, school leaders can better understand and address the complexities associated with fostering inclusive environments and supporting teachers in meeting the diverse needs of students.

In response to the mandates of IDEA (2004), schools are increasingly tasked with developing inclusive policies that encompass Response to Intervention (RTI) and Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS) to address the diverse needs of students (Glover & DiPerna, 2007). However, research indicates significant challenges in implementing these initiatives due to gaps in teachers' knowledge and skills (Glover & DiPerna, 2007; Chitiyo & Wheeler, 2009b). This has prompted organizational consultants like Meyers et al. (2012) to advocate for an ecological perspective, which emphasizes the role of school leaders in facilitating professional development and involving teachers in decision-making processes to enhance staff buy-in (Barrett et al., 2008).

From an ecological standpoint, it's essential for school leaders to consider cultural differences among staff to anticipate and address potential challenges in implementing inclusive initiatives (Meyers et al., 2012). Meyers et al. (2009) proposed a protocol for organizational consultants and school leaders, emphasizing the importance of collecting

background knowledge, co-creating problem definitions, conducting needs assessments, co-developing interventions, and ongoing evaluation throughout the process. This protocol brings to light the non-linear nature of intervention implementation and the necessity of ongoing evaluation to determine the effectiveness of interventions and the need for further support or training for teachers.

Reflecting on in-service training, Kauppinen et al. (2020) found that while teachers acquire knowledge, they may struggle to translate it into practice due to "identity renegotiation," wherein teachers reassess their self-efficacy in adopting new practices. Consequently, Kauppinen et al. (2020) recommended frequent and ongoing in-service training to foster a collaborative environment, scaffold learning, incorporate reflective practices, and evaluate the effectiveness of trainers. These insights can be particularly relevant for special education and inclusive practices, and highlight the importance of school leaders leveraging the expertise of special educators to support inclusive practices among classroom teachers.

## Gaps and Future Research

As the landscape of education evolves, the concept of inclusive schooling undergoes continual transformation, demanding a holistic understanding informed by various perspectives. Although attitudes towards inclusion, leadership theories, and social cognitive theory each play crucial roles in shaping inclusive school environments, existing literature tends to compartmentalize these factors, hindering a comprehensive and integrated approach. To effectively support students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms, it is essential to adopt a multidisciplinary framework that addresses the interconnected nature of these elements and fosters the collective efficacy of teachers and schools.

Much of the current research on inclusion predominantly revolves around student achievement metrics, often driven by standardized testing requirements (Dover et al., 2016).

While school leaders set goals aimed at reducing disparities and promoting overall student success, the delineation of responsibilities for achieving these goals remains ambiguous. Ultimately, the onus falls on teachers and school leaders to navigate the complexities of inclusive education. However, the concept of agency, as a distinct analytical category, has been overlooked in terms of inclusive education by many theorists. Much of the exploration of teacher agency has been within the context of accountability and school reform (Pantić 2015; Eteläpelto et al., 2013).

Although social cognitive theory posits that school leader self-efficacy can cultivate the agency necessary to attain school-wide objectives (Marat, 2003), there remains uncertainty regarding the specific actions principals can take to influence teacher agency effectively. This raises pertinent questions for future research, including what support structures teachers require from school leaders to feel empowered and effective in inclusive classrooms, and to what extent teacher inclusion in decision-making processes impacts collective self-efficacy and agency.

In light of these considerations, it is evident that the implementation of new initiatives necessitates a foundation of teacher self-efficacy and agency. Yet, the literature on culturally competent leadership remains largely underdeveloped (Horsford et al., 2011), prioritizing teaching practices and student achievement over nuanced discussions of inclusive practices. Therefore, future research endeavors should adopt a critical lens, focusing on the practical realities of how teachers and school leaders implement inclusive practices and the decision-making processes that influence collective and self-efficacy and agency in achieving the overarching goals of inclusion.

# CHAPTER THREE

# METHODOLOGY

## Introduction

The following sections provide a rationale for conducting a qualitative multiple case study employing a holistic approach to address the challenges surrounding Chapter One and in harmony with the literature synthesized in Chapter Two. Recognizing the pivotal influence of school leaders' decisions on teacher agency, which in turn impacts the inclusion of students with identified needs in inclusive classrooms, this study initiated an investigation into the current condition of teacher agency within the context of international schools. By delving into the current landscape of teacher agency in relation to inclusive classrooms, this research endeavors to offer insights that could shape future strategies for school leaders in equipping teachers with the requisite skills and knowledge to effectively support and engage students with diverse needs, fostering an inclusive and supportive learning environment for all. Guided by existing scholarship on leadership attitudes towards inclusion, teacher agency, and self-efficacy, the following research questions steered the inquiry:

1. To what extent do international school leaders claim they are attempting to develop teachers' capacity to meet the needs of students with identified learning difficulties through inclusionary policies and practices, and in what forms do their development efforts take?
2. To what extent do teachers participate in the development of (a) school-wide goals or (b) policies related to promoting inclusive practices?
3. To what extent do teachers' perspectives of school leaders' actions correspond to leaders' own descriptions of their actions?

a. What leadership decisions and structural factors do teachers perceive as supporting or interfering with their agency in being able to support students with diverse learning needs in inclusive classrooms?
b. According to what teachers say about their school's leaders and their leadership practices related to inclusion, how do school leaders' actions influence teachers' beliefs and values and, ultimately, their professional identities related to teaching students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms?

## Positionality Statement

Because I was exploring leadership, teacher agency, and inclusion in international schools, it was essential to further explore my positionality due to the specific research design choices and personal identity factors that intersected with my role. As a white, gay, male, principal, international educator, and special educator, my identity encompassed multiple dimensions that shaped my perspective and influenced my interactions within the research context. Through my experiences as an international educator and school leader, I recognized the importance of embracing multiple perspectives from a diverse community. This understanding underscored the significance of examining how my various identities intersected with my roles as both a researcher and a school leader.

While conducting this research my positionality was inherently complex, marked by a dual role as both the researcher and a school leader within one of the case schools. This duality presented both opportunities and challenges that warranted careful consideration throughout the research process. For instance, my identity as a principal provided me with unique insights and access to insider perspectives within the school setting, facilitating a deeper understanding of the organizational dynamics and cultural nuances. However, it also introduced potential biases and power dynamics that had to be addressed transparently. As a

school leader, I held authority over staff, potentially influencing their willingness to participate or the nature of their responses. Furthermore, my vested interest in the school's reputation and achievements may have subtly influenced the direction of the research or the interpretation of its outcomes. In practice, this manifested as occasional reminders to case participants about the importance of discussing past leadership experiences, a detail reflected in my case notes.

Acknowledging my identities as a white, gay, male, doctoral candidate, principal, international educator, and special educator was crucial for understanding how they influenced my approach to research, interactions with participants, and interpretation of findings. These identities shaped my worldview and could impact the research process in nuanced ways that required careful consideration. Therefore, to address these complexities, I committed to upholding rigorous ethical standards and maintaining reflexivity throughout the research process. This entailed continuously examining my own biases, assumptions, and motivations, and actively seeking to mitigate their impact on data collection, analysis, and interpretation. To do this, I conducted regular self-reflection sessions where I critically analyzed my own perspectives and preconceptions that could potentially influence the research process or interpretation of data. For instance, during one of these self-reflection sessions, I uncovered a potential bias stemming from my identity as a white, gay male. Reflecting on my experiences, I realized that my own struggles with discrimination and marginalization within the education system might inadvertently shape my perceptions of certain participants or their narratives. This revelation prompted me to approach data analysis with heightened sensitivity and openness, ensuring that diverse voices were accurately represented and that interpretations remained grounded in the participants' lived experiences rather than my own biases.

Furthermore, I prioritized transparency, ensuring a clear distinction between my roles as principal and researcher, and actively worked to cultivate an atmosphere of openness and autonomy among participants. To facilitate this, I provided participants with an interview guide before interviews, outlining expectations regarding transparency and confidentiality (See Appendix B).

By embracing reflexivity, transparency, and ethical rigor, I aimed to navigate these complexities with integrity, ensuring that my identities didn't unduly influence the research outcomes. This commitment to self-awareness and transparency was crucial for maintaining validity, guarding against biases, and ensuring the credibility of the research findings. Through ongoing self-examination and critical reflection, I could continually challenge my assumptions and perspectives, leading to a more balanced interpretation of the data. This approach not only enhanced the credibility of the research process but also contributed to its overall trustworthiness and reliability.

## Research Method and Design

This study employed a qualitative research approach within the interpretive paradigm (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). According to Van Maanen, qualitative research is "an umbrella term covering an array of interpretive techniques which seek to describe, decode, translate, and otherwise come to terms with the meaning, not the frequency, of certain more or less naturally occurring phenomena in the social world" (1979, p. 520). A qualitative research design was selected to gain an in-depth understanding of the development of teacher agency and to understand from a first-person perspective (Guba and Lincoln, 1994) how agency is developed in international schools aspiring to be inclusive.

With qualitative methods as the guide, this study employed a case study/cross case analysis design to study three international schools in Europe. Yin (2018) offers a detailed explanation of a case study, highlighting its two main aspects. Firstly, it involves a thorough

investigation of a current phenomenon in a real-world setting. Secondly, a case study focuses on a particular scenario with many variables compared to the available data points, requiring information from various sources to ensure accuracy through triangulation. In the context of this study, the participating schools were selected from a sample of international schools claiming to practice inclusion or which have adopted special education policies related to promoting inclusive practices[3]. A school leader (principal or senior leader), two class teachers, and two special educators at each school were treated as individual cases due to their involvement in various aspects of inclusive education. These individuals either participated in (a) the development of inclusion policies, (b) the implementation of inclusion policies and practices, or (c) a combination of both. By treating them as individual cases, the study aimed to comprehensively understand their perspectives, roles, and contributions to inclusive education within their respective schools.

Moreover, it's important to note that this research obtained approval from the University of San Diego's Institutional Review Board (IRB) through an expedited review process. This approval confirmed that the study presented minimal risks to participants, no greater than those encountered in everyday life. This emphasized the ethical considerations and protective measures that were implemented to safeguard the well-being and confidentiality of all involved. To maintain participant confidentiality, I labeled case participants as Teacher 1, Teacher 2, and so forth, to effectively anonymize their identities. Additionally, all data collected were securely stored and only accessible to me as the primary researcher, which further minimized the risk of breach or unauthorized access. These measures were taken to maintain the integrity of the research while respecting the trust placed in the study by its participants.

[3] International schools may use different names to describe policies which support students with disabilities; they may include: Inclusion Policy, Special Education Policy, Student Support Policy, SEN Policy, or Learning Support Policy.

Furthermore, once these cases were constructed, a comparison was conducted within each school to analyze the nuances and variations in experiences and practices. This intra-school comparison facilitated a deeper understanding of how individuals within the same school approached and contributed to inclusive education. Additionally, a cross-case analysis was performed to compare the three school-level cases, aiming to identify broader patterns and themes across different school contexts (Yin, 2014). This approach enabled the examination of similarities and differences in inclusive education practices and policies, shedding light on the effectiveness and challenges of implementation within diverse educational settings.

Furthermore, in line with Yin's (2014) assertion that case studies aim to investigate phenomena in real-life and authentic settings, this design was chosen to either "anticipate similar results" (a literal replication) or "anticipate contrasting results for predictable reasons" (a theoretical replication), (Yin, 2018, p. 55). This approach ensured the ability to predict and compare results across individual and school cases. Ultimately, cross-case generalizations were drawn across the three international schools to offer deeper insights into the influence of school leaders on teacher agency, particularly concerning the advancement of inclusive practices within educational settings.

## Research Sites and Participants

### Research Site Selection Criteria

This study was carried out in three international schools situated in Europe, specifically in Austria, Germany, and Greece. Table 1 provides an overview of the three selected international schools. To maintain anonymity, the schools were denoted as School A (located in Austria), School B (in Germany), and School C (in Greece). These schools were chosen due to their status as international institutions, their implementation of the International Baccalaureate curriculum across various sections, their diverse populations of

both staff and students, and their shared accreditation from organizations such as the Council of International Schools, the International Baccalaureate, and the Education Collaborative of International Schools. The selection of case schools was based on their similarities, encompassing comparable curriculums, accrediting bodies, and leadership structures (See Table 1).

***Table 1***

***Description of Case Schools***

| Case school | Student population | Leadership structure | Student body | Organizations |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| School A Austria | 1,400 | Board of Governors<br>School Director<br>Primary Principal<br>Deputy Principal<br>Grade Level Leaders<br>Learning Support Department Leader<br>Teachers<br>Learning Support Specialists | Students aged 3-18 | International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO)<br>Council of International Schools (CIS)<br>Education Collaborative of International Schools (ECIS)<br>Middle Schools of America (MSA)<br>Austrian Ministry of Education |
| School B German | 850 | Executive Board<br>School Director<br>Elementary Principal<br>Deputy Principal<br>Grade Level Leaders<br>Learning Support Department Leader<br>Teachers<br>Learning Support Specialists | Students aged 3-18 | International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO)<br>New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC)<br>Council of International Schools (CIS)<br>Education Collaborative of International Schools (ECIS)<br>German International Schools |
| School C Greece | 1,219 | Executive Board<br>School President<br>Elementary Principal<br>Assistant Principal<br>Grade Level Leaders<br>Learning Support Department Leader<br>Teachers<br>Optimal Learning Teachers (Learning Support Specialists) | Students aged 3-18 | International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO)<br>Council of International Schools (CIS)<br>Education Collaborative of International Schools (ECIS)<br>Middle Schools of America (MSA)<br>National Association of Independent Schools (NAIS)<br>Mediterranean Association for International Schools (MAIS) |

**Participant Selection Criteria**

From each of these case schools, participants were chosen based on their comparable roles and active engagement in promoting inclusivity for students with disabilities. Exclusionary criteria were employed to maintain consistency, with selection restricted to individuals exclusively working in secondary education, holding single subject teaching positions, or serving in administrative capacities. Interviews were subsequently conducted with two class teachers, two special educators (referred to as learning support specialists), and one senior leader. This approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of each school's inclusion strategies. The deliberate selection aimed to capture diverse perspectives within each school setting, aligning with research literature recommendations that advocated for including at least four to five cases for thorough thematic identification and cross-case analysis (Creswell, 2013).

Further, senior leaders were initially contacted via email, and upon their agreement to participate, they were asked to recommend the other four participants. Leaders were specifically requested to suggest participants with a range of experience levels and grade levels, spanning from kindergarten to grade five. All participants willingly volunteered to take part in the study, ensuring a high level of engagement and commitment to the research process.

Additional details regarding the case participants demographics can be found in Table 1, which outlines the fifteen selected case participants. The table includes an identifier for each case participant (e.g., Class Teacher A1, Class Teacher A2, LS Teacher A3, LS Teacher A4, etc.). In this identification system, "A" corresponds to the international school in Austria, "B" to the international school in Germany, and "C" to the international school in Greece. This system is employed throughout the results and discussion sections to maintain participants' privacy and confidentiality. Moreover, participants categorized as special

educators are referred to as Learning Support Specialists, aligning with their titles at their respective schools.

***Table 2***

***Descriptions of Case Participants***

| Case participant | Case school | Sex | Role in school | Age of students supporting | Years at school |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| School Leader A | Austria | M | Senior Leader - Primary Deputy Principal | 3-12 | 14 |
| Class Teacher A1 | Austria | F | Class Teacher and Team Leader - Grade Primary | 5-6 | 4 |
| Class Teacher A2 | Austria | F | Class Teacher and Team Leader - Grade 3 | 8-9 | 11 |
| LS Teacher A3 | Austria | F | Learning Support Department Leader | 3-12 | 3 |
| LS Teacher A4 | Austria | F | Learning Support Teacher | 3-12 | 22 |
| School Leader B | Germany | F | Senior Leader - Primary Deputy Principal | 3-12 | 2 |
| Class Teacher B1 | Germany | M | Class Teacher – grades 3 and 4 | 8-11 | 7 |
| Class Teacher B2 | Germany | F | Early Years Teacher | 3-5 | 3 |
| LS Teacher B3 | Germany | F | Educational Psychologist | 3-18 | 2 |
| LS Teacher B4 | Germany | F | Head of Learning Support | 3-15 | 3 |
| School Leader C | Greece | F | President | 3-18 | 5 |
| Class Teacher C1 | Greece | F | Grade 5 Class Teacher | 11-12 | 13 |
| Class Teacher C2 | Greece | F | Grade 3 Class Teacher | 3-12 | 14 |
| LS Teacher | Greece | F | Optimal Learning | 3-18 | 18 |

| Case participant | Case school | Sex | Role in school | Age of students supporting | Years at school |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| C3 | | | Coordinator | | |
| LS Teacher C4 | Greece | F | English Language Learning Coordinator | 3-18 | 12 |

In summary, this case study involved fifteen total participants from three international schools in Austria, Germany, and Greece. The participants included three senior leaders, comprising of two Deputy Principals and one School President, six class teachers, and six learning support specialists (special education teachers). The average years of experience among participants varied across the schools: School A had an average of 10.8 years, School B had 3.4 years, and School C had 12.4 years. The gender distribution differed among the schools as well, with Schools A and B having 80% female and 20% male participants, while School C consisted entirely of female participants. Additionally, the supporting age range of participants spanned from 3 to 18 years, with the majority primarily teaching in the age range of 3 to 12 years within primary schools.

## Sampling Rationale and Procedure

The sampling rationale for this study was driven by the aim to capture a comprehensive understanding of how school leaders influence teacher agency to promote inclusive practices across a diverse range of international school contexts. To achieve this, one principal or senior leader, two class teachers (grades K-5), and two special education learning support teachers were sampled using purposeful and snowball sampling techniques (Patton, 2002). Purposeful sampling was chosen to select individuals experienced and knowledgeable about the phenomenon under study (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011), such as class teachers, special educators, and senior leaders, as their characteristics were critical to the study's objectives. Snowball sampling was utilized because I relied on school leaders to assist in selecting case participants with the relevant characteristics needed for the study.

Details regarding the recruitment strategy and further sampling techniques will be elaborated on in the subsequent paragraphs.

**Recruitment Strategy**

As a new principal and former special educator, I had firsthand insight into the experiences of potential case participants within their respective schools. Prior to the interview phase, I leveraged my professional relationships with the case schools and participants cultivated through the Educational Collaborative of International Schools (ECIS) student support committee. This pre-established rapport facilitated trust with some case participants and streamlined access to interviews (Donmoyer, 1990).

At Case School A, where I am employed, I purposefully selected two regular classroom teachers and two special education learning support teachers who met the outlined criteria (i.e., knowledgeable and experienced with inclusive practices). Notably, participants from my school were instructed to reference leadership preceding my tenure as principal, as my recent ascendance to this role aimed to foster honesty, comfort, and transparency in their responses. Given the inherent subjectivity in this study, transparency in decision-making processes and methodological choices as a researcher was paramount. To achieve this, I meticulously maintained a research journal, engaging in reflection and documenting my thoughts throughout the study. For instance, in my research journal, I documented the teachers' passion for fostering inclusivity, some of their personal experiences with having a disability, and the trust they had in their collaborative teams. These reflections prompted me to consider the broader implications of inclusive practices and policies. Additionally, I reflected on how these anecdotes aligned with themes emerging from other interviews and observations, which contributed to a deeper understanding of the factors influencing teacher agency in promoting inclusivity.

For Case Schools B and C, after confirming the participation of school leaders via email, I initiated follow-up communications through phone calls or virtual meetings. During these interactions, I asked principals to recommend both regular classroom and special education teachers with expertise in inclusive practices and involvement in inclusion policy development. The objective was to identify teachers with diverse levels of experience in both inclusion practices and policy development. In cases where multiple participants were recommended by School Leaders B and C, I employed stratified random sampling (Singh & Masuku, 2014) to select two class teachers and two special education participants from each list. Stratified random sampling involved dividing the population into distinct subgroups or strata based on certain characteristics, and then randomly selecting samples from each stratum to ensure proportional representation (Singh & Masuku, 2014). For example, School Leader C recommended six class teachers and four learning support specialists meeting the criteria, from which participants were categorized into two groups, and two were randomly selected from each. This method ensured that the selected participants represented the diversity of expertise and involvement in inclusion practices and policy development within each school.

Once the participant lists were finalized, I reached out to the recommended participants via email to assess their willingness to participate in interviews. The recruitment email included the title of my study, confirmation of permission from the case participant's school Director, a succinct overview of the study's purpose and methodology, an estimation of the time required for participation, and details about consent and confidentiality. All participants who received the email expressed their willingness to volunteer for the study.

**Obtaining Informed Consent and Data Security Strategies**

Before the interviews, participants were provided with an interview guide (See Appendix B), which outlined the focus areas, potential discussion questions, and clear

expectations regarding confidentiality agreements. Additionally, participants were emailed a waiver of consent, which they were asked to sign and return to me via email prior to the scheduled in-person interviews.

Data security was a top priority throughout the study. To ensure the protection of participants' information, all electronic data, including consent forms and interview recordings, were stored on a password-protected and encrypted computer. Moreover, physical copies of consent forms and any other sensitive documents were kept in a locked file cabinet accessible only to me as the primary researcher. Strict confidentiality protocols were followed during data analysis, with all identifiable information anonymized to safeguard participants' identities. These measures were implemented to uphold the integrity of the research and prioritize the privacy and confidentiality of the participants.

In the next section the data collection procedures will be elaborated upon, providing insight into the systematic approach employed to gather information from the selected participants. Additionally, the techniques used to ensure the reliability and validity of the data will be discussed in detail.

## Data Collection Procedures

Over a three-month period, three rounds of data collection were conducted. Qualitative data was acquired through a semi-structured interview protocol (see Appendix B), which was complemented by gathering documents outlining the written inclusion practices and special education policies of each school. The utilization of multiple data sources facilitated triangulation, thereby bolstering the overall trustworthiness of the study, aligning with Yin's (2018) recommendations. Data analysis took place in the Fall of 2023. This section provides a comprehensive exploration of each of these data collection methods.

**Semi-Structured Interviews**

Interviews played a crucial role in gathering data and addressing all three research inquiries. In total, 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) described semi-structured interviews as utilizing a predetermined set of open-ended questions while allowing flexibility for the researcher to adapt to the respondent's perspective and emerging insights. In-person interviews were selected as the preferred method of communication with the case participants due to their effectiveness and efficiency. I spent two days at each case school, conducting interviews with two or three participants each day, throughout March, April, and May 2023. The interviews typically lasted approximately 45 minutes each and were recorded using Otter.ai software for transcription. All participants agreed to the recording of the interviews in their signed waiver of consent. After transcription, the researcher reviewed and edited the transcripts before sharing them with each case study participant for review and verification of their comments.

In alignment with this approach, a decision was made to create three separate interview protocols (refer to Appendix B) tailored for classroom teachers, learning support specialists, and school leaders. The protocols were titled "Classroom Teacher," "Learning Support Specialists," and "School Leaders," respectively. This decision was based on the recognition that each participant group may offer unique perspectives and insights relevant to the research questions. For example, during interviews with learning support specialists, a notable discovery emerged concerning the significance of collaborative planning in fostering inclusive practices. These specialists emphasized that collaborative planning sessions facilitated the creation of personalized instructional strategies and accommodations, enabling classroom teachers to effectively tailor their approaches to students' unique learning profiles. This finding aligned with the construct of collaborative practice, and illustrated how joint

efforts between learning support specialists and classroom teachers played a pivotal role in advancing inclusive practices within school settings.

Additionally, by utilizing distinct interview protocols, the study aimed to ensure that the questions were tailored to the specific roles and experiences of each participant group, thereby facilitating more focused and in-depth discussions. The interview questions were designed to address the three research inquiries, primarily focusing on eliciting each case participant's views on teacher agency and its development. This line of questioning aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of how teacher agency influences the integration of students with disabilities into inclusive classrooms.

Prior to our interview, participants received an interview guide (See Appendix C) containing an outline of the focus areas and potential questions for our discussion, along with clear expectations and confidentiality agreements. While documents were collected from each study site to triangulate data, after reviewing them it was observed that the responses of the participants often encapsulated the information contained within these documents, rendering their use unnecessary. Opting for in-person interviews proved to be both effective and efficient in engaging with the case participants because it allowed for a deeper exploration of participants' perspectives, experiences, and insights beyond what could be gleaned from documents alone. Additionally, the interactive nature of face-to-face interviews fostered rapport and trust between myself as the researcher and participants, facilitating more candid and nuanced responses. This approach not only enriched the data collected but also provided valuable context and understanding that may have been missed through document analysis alone.

During the interviews, I applied the responsive interviewing model (Rubin & Rubin, 2012), which allowed me to adapt questions based on the responses provided. In the interview protocols, I anticipated that some case participants might struggle to answer certain

questions, such as whether they had undergone professional development in the past year and a half. Therefore, I included instructions in the interview protocol, such as “if the case participant answers yes, proceed to question 6,” and “if the case participant answers no, then proceed with these alternative questions.”

The responsive interviewing model complemented semi-structured interview protocols by encouraging me as the researcher to actively listen to participants and respond to their cues, probing deeper into areas of interest or significance. This responsiveness proved beneficial, particularly when teachers were unable to recall or had not participated in professional development activities during the previous year. It also enhanced the richness and depth of data collected, allowing for a more organic and participant-driven exploration of the research topic.

Furthermore, it is essential to clarify that, as the researcher, I conducted interviews with educators at my school, focusing specifically on their interactions with previous school leaders These interviews were designed to gather insights into the leadership styles, practices, and support systems implemented by past administrators, rather than soliciting evaluator comments from participants regarding my own leadership. Therefore, case participants were asked about their interactions with former school leaders, including the extent of support provided for implementing inclusive practices and addressing the needs of students with identified learning needs. Educators expressed a greater sense of comfort and transparency discussing their experiences with previous leaders compared to directly engaging with me as the researcher. By examining educators’ perspectives on previous leadership, this research sought to uncover valuable insights into the impact of leadership on professional identities and the willingness of educators to embrace inclusive approaches in education.

In summary, data collection encompassed 15 semi-structured interviews conducted with educators across three international schools, focusing on their experiences with previous

school leaders. Additionally, documents detailing inclusion practices and special education policies were collected, but were not analyzed due to unnecessary redundancies. With this wealth of qualitative data in hand, the subsequent section delves into the data analysis process.

## Data Analysis Procedures

Merriam and Tisdell (2016) emphasized the essence of qualitative data analysis in identifying themes, categories, patterns, or answers to research questions. In this study, the aim was to uncover similarities and differences in the perspectives of case participants which could offer insights beneficial for future school leaders. Therefore, data analysis was conducted using an inductive method, the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), and cross-case analysis across three stages. Insights from the study were derived from analyzing multiple interviews, with a total of fifteen participants interviewed in person over six days, each session lasting approximately 45 minutes. Otter.ai software was employed to record the interviews, ensuring accurate verbatim transcriptions. Following transcription, I meticulously reviewed and edited the transcripts before sharing them with each participant for verification of their comments.

During the first stage, each case participant was treated as an individual case because it allowed for a comprehensive understanding of their unique perspectives, experiences, and contributions within their respective school contexts. This individualized approach ensured that no significant insights or nuances were overlooked, providing a rich foundation for subsequent analysis and comparison.

Utilizing the constant comparative method, interview data and documents from each case school were analyzed. This method, as described by Conrad et al. (1993), involved systematic data collection, coding, and analysis with theoretical sampling to generate theory closely tied to the data. Subsequently, in the second stage, cross-case analysis was performed

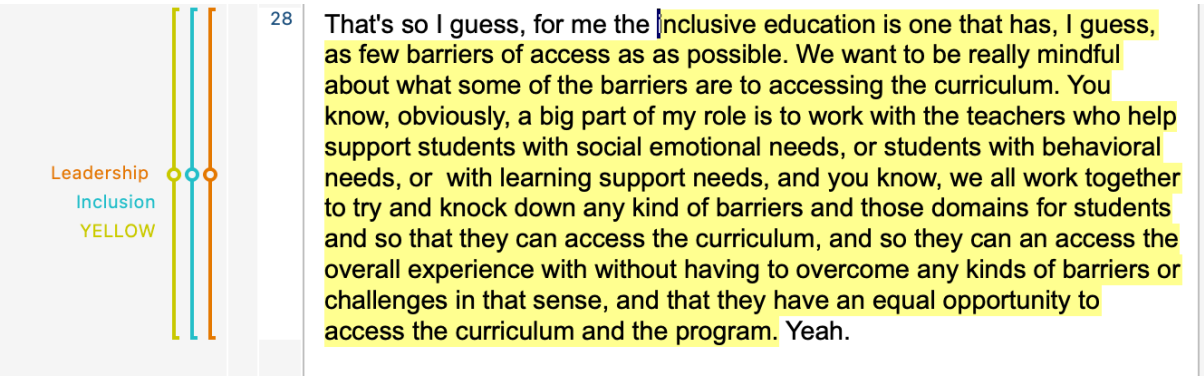
for the five individual cases within each school to compare similarities and differences, following the approach outlined by Cruzes et al. (2015). Lastly, in the third stage, all three schools were subjected to cross-analysis, mirroring the methods employed in stage 2. This sequential approach allowed for a comprehensive exploration of both within-case and cross-case variations, leading to a robust understanding of the overarching phenomena under investigation.

**Stage 1**

In stage 1, the constant comparative method directed the analysis of interview data and documents for each individual case. This process involved uploading interview transcriptions to MAXQDA software and creating a codebook (See Appendix D) to document codes, categories, descriptions, and memos. Initially, I coded each case participant's data line-by-line according to each research question. Subsequently, through data reduction, I selected and highlighted pertinent quotes and assigned them codes that reflected the analyzed content and essence of each research question. Initial codes, such as agency, inclusion, leadership, or communication, were generated with evidence from interview transcripts, and relevant data from collected documents were added to each corresponding code file. Figure 1 illustrates an example of a line-by-line code from MAXQDA software. This iterative process of coding, simplifying, and combining data facilitated the formation of categories.

**Figure 4**

*Inclusion Perception from School Leader A: Line-by-Line Coding Example*




**Stage 2**

After establishing clear conceptual definitions, stage 2 saw the emergence of themes. This phase entailed data reduction, display, and drawing conclusions, following the process outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994). Themes identified in each case were compared through cross-case analysis. For instance, in addressing research question 1: "To what extent do international school leaders claim they are attempting to develop teachers' capacity to meet the needs of students with identified learning difficulties through inclusionary policies and practices, and in what forms do their development efforts take?" All class teacher respondents highlighted the significance of staffing in fostering inclusive practices within their schools. Participants from all three schools emphasized the importance of interdisciplinary teams engaging in collaborative discussions to formulate effective plans for supporting students with identified learning needs.

The objective of stage 2 was to visualize patterns, connections, relationships, and areas of consensus or divergence among cases. This process involved assigning codes and organizing them into relevant categories. The overarching goal was to draw conclusions informed by the identified themes and their relevance to the research questions, thereby

ensuring the validity and trustworthiness of the findings through evidence derived from the data.

**Stage 3**

In stage 3, the process paralleled stage 2, emphasizing cross-analysis across all three schools using the same methods and procedures. Cross-case analysis involves exploring similarities and differences between cases, aiming to support empirical generalizability and theoretical predictions (Borman et al., 2012).

During this stage, I transitioned from codes to categories to themes, relying on the frequency and repetition of the data. While themes began to emerge in stage two, they were further elucidated through comparison among the core themes across all three case schools. For instance, the theme of inclusive staffing allocations identified in stage two underwent further development in stage three. While class teacher respondents across all three schools discussed the necessity of inclusive staff allocation to address student needs, stage three revealed a common overarching theme: trust in school leaders. This theme encapsulated the efforts of school leaders to foster inclusive environments by cultivating trust among staff while appropriately allocating staffing resources to support students with identified needs.

## Methodological Tradeoffs

In the process of methodological decision-making, tradeoffs inevitably arose, necessitating adjustments to the research plan. In this study, while document collection was initially planned for triangulation purposes (Bowen, 2009; Birt et al., 2016), it became evident during data collection that such documents were not necessary, given the richness of participants' responses.

Originally, the primary category for document collection included documents describing special education, learning support, or inclusion policies, which were publicly available on the respective websites of the three case schools. These documents were

intended to provide an overview of each school's special education philosophy and practices, shedding light on collaborative efforts in policy development.

The second category of documents planned for analysis comprised personal or internal special education or learning support documents and presentations. However, due to the confidential and sensitive nature of this information, access to these documents was expected to be limited.

Although participants were asked at the end of each interview if they had any relevant documents or presentations related to inclusion efforts at their schools that they were willing to share, the need for these documents was ultimately deemed unnecessary. Nevertheless, the need for these documents was ultimately deemed unnecessary as participants' responses already provided comprehensive insights.

Notably, one of the participants in the study served as the English Language Acquisition department leader and contributed unique perspectives on inclusive practices within their department. This role fell under the umbrella of the learning support specialist, offering specialized insights into inclusive practices within the English Language Acquisition department. Additionally, school leader C held the position of school president, providing insights into leadership strategies at an executive level. As the senior leader responsible for the entire school, their perspective offered valuable insights into the development of inclusion-focused school-wide goals and initiatives.

Overall, the methodological choices and procedures employed in this study aimed to comprehensively explore the influence of school leaders on teacher agency in promoting inclusive practices. These methods facilitated rich data collection and analysis, shedding light on the complexities of leadership dynamics within educational settings. However, it is important to recognize the significance of the findings in light of certain limitations inherent

in the research design and data collection methods. The significance of this study and the limitations will be discussed in the following section.

## Limitations and Significance of the Study

### Strengths

The strength of this study's data collection and analysis procedures is rooted in their comprehensive and meticulous approach. By conducting qualitative interviews with a total of fifteen participants across three international school sites in Europe, a diverse array of data was obtained, which enabled a multifaceted exploration of the research questions. Utilizing semi-structured interviews allowed participants the flexibility to express their perspectives while maintaining consistency in data collection. Although initial plans for document collection were not fully realized, primary documents such as public inclusion and special education policies were referenced based on participant responses. This contributed to data triangulation and enriched the credibility of the findings. The iterative process of data analysis, guided by established methodologies such as the constant comparative method (Yin, 2018), facilitated the identification of themes and patterns across various data sources. Additionally, meticulous transcription and coding ensured the accuracy and reliability of the analysis. Overall, these robust data collection and analysis procedures bolster the validity and trustworthiness of the study's findings.

### Limitations

Undoubtedly, this study, like all research endeavors, came with inherent limitations. With a focus on fifteen participants across three distinct school sites in Europe, the findings may not have aligned with traditional notions of generalizability as conceived by social scientists. Nevertheless, the methods employed in this study were anticipated to yield valuable insights.

Certainly, it's important to address the decision-making process regarding the focus on private international schools rather than public schools and its potential impact on data collection and findings. The decision to focus on private international schools was primarily influenced by factors such as accessibility and convenience. Private international schools often have more streamlined administrative processes, making it easier to obtain permissions and access for research purposes compared to public schools, which may have stricter protocols and bureaucratic procedures.

Moreover, private international schools tend to have more diverse student populations, including students from various cultural backgrounds, which aligns with the global nature of this study. However, this focus on private international schools could have limited the diversity of perspectives represented in the study, as the experiences and challenges faced by educators in public schools may differ significantly. Therefore, while the findings from private international schools provided valuable insights, they may not be fully representative of the broader educational landscape, particularly in public school settings. This limitation should be considered when interpreting the findings and extrapolating conclusions to other educational contexts.

In addition, the qualitative nature of the study and the relatively small sample size of fifteen participants may limit the generalizability of the findings. While qualitative research offers valuable insights into the experiences and perceptions of individuals, the findings may not be statistically representative of larger populations. Also, the use of semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method may introduce biases based on the participants' interpretations and responses.

Further, as a white, gay, male educator with a background in special education and international education, I bring a unique lens to the research process. My experiences as a member of the LGBTQ+ community and as an educator working with diverse student

populations have sensitized me to issues of equity, inclusion, and social justice within educational contexts. Additionally, my roles as a school leader and a doctoral candidate provide me with insights into the complexities of educational leadership and the challenges faced by educators in promoting inclusive practices. These intersecting identities inform my interpretation of the findings, influencing how I conceptualize concepts such as teacher agency, leadership, and inclusive education. Moreover, my commitment to promoting equity and social justice in education motivates me to critically examine the implications of the research findings for educational policy and practice. Ultimately, while my identities undoubtedly shape my perspective, I strive to maintain reflexivity and openness to alternative viewpoints, ensuring that my interpretations are grounded in rigorous analysis and ethical considerations.

**Significance**

Despite these limitations, the findings of this study bore significance for practitioners, researchers, and policymakers interested in advancing inclusive practices within international school environments. While acknowledging the diverse contexts and participant characteristics, the themes and insights derived from the data analysis contributed to a broader comprehension of the factors shaping teacher agency and inclusive education. Moreover, the methodological rigor applied in data collection and analysis bolstered the credibility and trustworthiness of the findings, enhancing their potential applicability to analogous contexts. Nonetheless, as noted, it is important to be cautious when applying the findings to different educational settings. More research with larger and more diverse samples is needed to confirm and build upon the results of this study.

Yin (2018) suggested that even single-case studies could significantly contribute to knowledge and theory building by confirming, challenging, or extending existing theories. In the context of this study, which represented a pioneering attempt at conducting a comparative

analysis of teacher agency and its impact on the inclusion of students with disabilities across various international schools, the findings held potential to raise awareness among practitioners and school leaders. By shedding light on how agency could be cultivated or hindered to facilitate the inclusion of students with disabilities, this study laid the groundwork for future research in the field.

Furthermore, the concept of generalizability does not have to strictly follow traditional frameworks typically used by most social scientists. Donmoyer (1990) offered a psychological perspective by applying Piaget's (1971) schema theory, suggesting that findings from this study's cases and cross-case analysis could enrich teachers' and school leaders' understanding of agency development. The firsthand accounts and experiences shared by the case participants illuminated their efforts and actions in supporting students with disabilities, potentially resonating with readers and inspiring new insights.

In sum, despite the modest sample size inherent in this case study, the researcher's established rapport with many participants fostered an environment of trust and honesty in their responses. Ultimately, the research findings offered insights into the structures, policies, or professional development opportunities conducive to fostering teacher and special educator agency for promoting inclusion in inclusive classrooms. Moreover, this research may have stimulated future investigations, including on-site observational research and comparisons between private international schools and public schools, to discern similarities or differences across diverse educational contexts. Overall, by delving into relatively uncharted territory, this research endeavor sought to bridge the gap between theory and practice in understanding and promoting teacher agency in inclusive education.

# CHAPTER FOUR

# RESULTS

The primary purpose of this study was to explore and compare the extent to which international school leaders promote teacher agency with respect to the actions general education teachers and special educators (learning support specialists) might take toward improving the inclusive policies and practices in their schools. This study asked school leaders how they are developing both class teachers' and special educators' capacity to support international school students with identified needs and how school leaders are including the voices of class teachers and learning support specialists in the development of school-wide inclusive procedures, policies, and/or goals. Additionally, class teachers and learning support specialists (LS) were asked to indicate whether their perspectives corresponded to the leaders' perspectives and whether school leaders have had a positive or negative influence on teachers' identities as inclusive educators.

Participants shared their experiences by responding to semi-structured interview questions. Analyzing the responses and comparing responses in different schools provided valuable insights into the topics of leadership, teacher agency, and inclusive work culture. In this chapter, the three research questions articulated in earlier chapters will be discussed and broken down into themes with supporting evidence and quotations from the case participants interviews. First, however, the demographic characteristics of participants will be discussed.

## Demographics of Participants

The results of this qualitative study are based on fifteen participants from three different European international schools in Austria, Germany, and Greece. The three schools were selected because they are international schools, they offer the International Baccalaureate curriculum in one or more sections of the school, they have diverse populations of staff and students, and they have similar accreditation bodies, i.e., the Council

of International Schools, the International Baccalaureate, and the Education Collaborative of International Schools. From each case school, two class teachers, two learning support specialists (special educators), and one senior leader were interviewed in-person. Initially the senior leaders were solicited through email and once they agreed to be a part of the study, they recommended the other four participants. Leaders were asked to recommend possible participants with a range of years and grade level experiences. All participants volunteered to be a part of the study.

In-person interviews were an effective and efficient way to communicate with the case participants. I spent two days at each case school and interviewed two or three participants each day in March, April, and May 2023. The interviews lasted approximately 45 minutes each. Interviews were recorded using Otter.ai software and transcribed verbatim. Once I reviewed and edited the transcripts, I shared them with each case study participant to review and verify their comments.

Further details about the case schools and case participants can be found in Table 1 and Table 2, along with an identifier, i.e., Class Teacher A1, Class Teacher A2, LS Teacher A3, LS Teacher A4, etc. In this identification system A refers to the international School in Austria, B refers to the international school in Germany, and C refers to the international School in Greece. This identification system will be used for each case participant throughout the results and discussion section. This is used to protect participants' privacy and confidentiality. Additionally, the case participants who fell into the special educator category will be called Learning support specialists, which is more in-line with their titles at their schools.

## Findings for Research Question 1

The interviews with School Leaders A, B, and C started with them discussing their views and beliefs about inclusion and whether they felt their schools were inclusive or not.

These discussions opened the conversation in three different, yet similar, ways. All three school leaders demonstrated empathy by expressing concern for special needs students and acknowledging there are areas for improvement in their schools' inclusive practices and policies. However, the three school leaders had slightly different, albeit somewhat similar, responses to questions about how they support their teachers' journeys to developing inclusive practices: School Leader A focused on how higher education training has supported him to be able to jump in and support teachers; School Leader B focused on having empathy conversations; School Leader C directed attention to setting high expectations and getting staff trained if they needed support.

**Leaders' Beliefs about Inclusion**

School Leader A initially shared his perspective on School A's journey to being more inclusive; he explained:

> We're striving to become more inclusive, but I would say our school has grown and become more inclusive over time. We're able to provide a lot more accommodations and support services for students with academic needs…social emotional needs…and our goal has shifted to helping our students see themselves in the curriculum, and we aim for our program to be reflective of who our students are, so they can relate and connect to it…

School Leader A further acknowledged: "[Inclusion is] an area that we're continuing to grow in…and I think we can be pretty proud of the journey we have taken to get to this point as a school." He described how he believes in his school and staff and how they are aligned in their mission to helping students feel included in their school and curriculum, regardless of whether they have identified needs.

When asked how he would support a teacher if they did not feel they were able to meet the needs of a student in their class, he initially referred to his Master's Education

training, where he learned to "to develop individual education plans and positive behavior intervention plans." It appeared this experience and training made him feel confident with how he would engage in supporting the teacher and student. He explained that he would have a conversation with the teacher and if they were comfortable, he would "spend time working with individual student(s)...trying to understand what their needs are, what their strengths are, and then support the teacher in developing some strategies or accommodations to support the student in class."

School Leader A felt a hands-on approach helped the teachers in his school feel comfortable requesting support from him. He said, "It is sometimes a challenge to determine how much support to provide a teacher…but I think it is important to demonstrate an effort to build trust by getting involved in a measured and empathetic way."

School Leader B shared:

> I think there's [sic] some teachers that are much more open to inclusive practices than others. I think there's a real sense of community at our school, and I think all teachers want to try and do their best for kids, but when teachers feel like they are not helping their kids progress, then they feel like they're failing those kids.

School Leader B often emphasized how important it was to have a sense of empathy as a school leader in her responses and was often reflective on why teachers might feel including students with identified needs was difficult. As an effort to build trust with teachers as the teachers attempt to accomplish their difficult tasks, School Leader B explained, "I'm teaching in classrooms quite a bit to try to get to know the kids and to build trust with the teachers and to model student inquiry lessons for different styles of learning." She said by getting into the classroom, she noticed she "[gets] called a lot more into meetings about kids with learning concerns, and teachers now want to share how their students are settling in, or responding to different lessons, and what their learning is looking like in their classrooms."

School Leader C shared a similar response to how teachers are having to adapt to changing learning styles and needs of students; she said:

> What I realized lately…is that even our program needs to be enhanced, and the differences are growing, the differences are more diverse, and there are more learning and social-emotional needs, so we need to continuously stay ahead of that and get training and our teachers need to be continuously adapting so… [inclusion is] an ongoing conversation.

In this response, School Leader C highlights that their school is also working towards improving their inclusionary policies and practices but also indicates that this is an ever-evolving process. Compared to School Leaders A and B, School Leader C emphasized the need for high expectations. She shared, "The expectation is that we are a student-centered school, and we need to figure out how each student learns." She further elaborated that this expectation is a "part of our mission and vision." When asked what she would do if a staff member was not sure how to meet a student's needs and asked for help, she said:

> As a leadership team, we know our staff come from systems that might not have the same background in inclusive practices. So, the first thing is to get them training and resources and setting them up with meetings with our Optimal Learning Team.

School Leader C added, "Myself and the leadership team are going to provide the support needed, and we will figure it out." It was clear that School Leader C really believes in a student-centered approach, is understanding that teachers may have different skills towards inclusive practices. With School Leader C's background in counselling and psychology, she expressed that she was also willing to get involved to support her teachers and students when they need it.

The school leaders shared different ways in which they felt they were able to build an inclusive school culture by supporting their teachers to meet the needs of their students.

Research questions 3a and 3b will address how class teachers and learning support specialists perceived the actions of their school leaders to be. Next, school leaders A, B, and C discuss how staffing implications are essential to developing inclusive practices where class teachers feel supported.

**Staffing Resources**

All three school leaders characterized their staffs as resources that were an essential element to support students with identified needs. School Leader A shared, "Our school has grown and become more inclusive over time." He further elaborated on at least one reason greater inclusiveness had occurred: Six years ago, School A originally only had two learning support teachers and one counselor; in the last five years, the school has increased its staff to include five learning support teachers, one learning support team leader, two primary school counselors, and one whole school educational psychologist in the last five years.

Leader A explained that the school decided to increase the level of specialized staff in learning and social-emotional support because of the increasing demand from students, but also because teachers had been asking for additional help and support. School Leader A also explained why this decision was important: "We are now an interdisciplinary team of staff members that represents expertise for a range of areas to support the growing and diverse needs of our students." School Leader A added that interdisciplinary team members also were essential staff involved in developing their school's inclusive practices and policies.

Comparably, School Leaders B and C also discussed how important it is to have learning support teachers, counselors, and an educational psychologist as a part of their teams. A quote from School Leader B summarized that learning support specialists are essential in "developing the inclusion policy [and practices] and by helping staff unpack the policy together." One slight difference was expressed by School Leader C who referred to the learning support program as the Optimal Learning Program instead of learning support.

Members of the optimal learning team offer the same support services for students and teachers as in School A and B. However, one slight difference is School Leader C also added that members of the Optimal Learning Team provide "professional mentorship" for class teachers. This was a recurring theme from School C that will be discussed in more detail later, but, overall, it was evident that all three school leaders value their learning specialist staff members because they support their teachers to meet the needs of all students by helping to establish inclusive policies and practices.

### Additional Research Question 1 Findings about Setting Up Systems and Structures

In addition to expressing their belief in the importance of staff members and touting the need to establish trust and high expectations, the school leaders also discussed the various ways they set up systems and structures to support teachers' agency for supporting students with identified needs in their classrooms. Here, what they said will be described in four parts: a) collaborative planning, b) professional development and mentorship, c) inclusive practices and resources, and d) developing inclusive policies.

#### Collaborative Planning

The school leaders all endorsed collaborative planning, but they described somewhat different approaches to collaborative planning. Field notes indicated that literally all the participants asked whether the question about collaborative planning was about general planning or for planning to support specific students with specific identified needs. When they were told both types of collaborative planning should be discussed, the responses indicated that each school has set aside time for grade level teams to collaborate. For instance, Schools A and C have eighty minutes built in each week for grade level teams to meet and plan or reflect on their lessons and units. For these planning meetings, the team members include, but are not limited to, class teachers, English language acquisition teachers, learning support teachers, teaching assistants, and either the curriculum leader or a principal.

School B had a similar structure but allocated 40 minutes a week for this type of planning. Then, based on feedback from teachers requesting more time for collaborative planning, professional development, and discussions about students with identified needs, the school leaders decided to have half days every Wednesday so that, from "1:30 to 4:30…staff can meet and focus on transdisciplinary planning, professional development, or have student support meetings."

Similar to School B, Schools A and C also hold what School B referred to as student support meetings. These meetings involve interdisciplinary teams discussing specific students of concern. However, unlike School B where these meetings took place during regular school hours, in Schools A and C, they occurred during lunch breaks or after school. Participants noted that this scheduling presented challenges due to depleted energy levels at these times.

Although the school leaders have slightly different approaches to their collaborative planning structures, all three of the school leaders in this study indicated they find value in setting aside time for staff to collaborate on a range of topics including inclusive teaching and learning practices. This quote from School Leader A sums up this general idea:

> In addition to student support meetings, we've also got Professional Learning Communities'...where staff can focus on learning data and how to work collaboratively as a team on an area identified as a priority and that they'd like to know more about or grow in. We provide that kind of space and time to be able to do that and we've also got other staff-led structures like book clubs that are looking into aspects of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Belonging and school leaders are a part of that.

In summary, the school leaders have developed and implemented a variety of ways for staff to have time to focus on the inclusion of students with identified needs. Further

examples and details of the school leaders' inclusive policies and practices will be discussed later.

**Professional Development and Mentorship**

When asked about providing professional development related to inclusion, the three school leaders described different approaches. School Leaders A and B focused on in-house professional development in the last school year, whereas School Leader C utilized external professional development facilitators. As stated earlier, School B has half days on Wednesdays for staff to engage in collaborative planning and professional development. When asked about what specific inclusive-oriented professional development has been given to staff, School Leader B explained:

> We did one Wednesday afternoon session this year focused on inclusion with our principals and head of learning support. We used the book *Yardsticks* as a basis to engage staff in discussion about what is developmentally appropriate, like behaviors, but also like cognitive skills…so we had discussions about when your kids are not in the developmental bands that are described in *Yardsticks*, what does that look like? So then we discussed specific strategies for support with the help of our learning support team, we discussed specific strategies for support with the help of our learning support team."

Correspondingly, School Leader A shared a slightly different focus area for professional development throughout the past school year. He said they needed to spend time developing teachers' approaches to social, emotional, and behavioral issues "due to a high number of referrals for counseling and behavior support the previous year." In this quotation taken from an interview transcript, School Leader A indicates the leadership team functioned as facilitators of professional development for the staff and parents, and shared insights into his thoughts after discussing challenging behavior with these stakeholders:

> We've talked with our primary staff and parent community a lot this year on our mindset to students who present challenging behavior and whether it's a notion of skill deficit or whether it's challenging or willful behavior. Staff showed a range of different beliefs about why students present challenging behavior. And so one of the aims for continued growth of our staff was to enable changing teachers mindsets about students who present challenging behavior…because I think that if we have the right mindset, and when we approach students in that way, we may be able to identify some factors there that are preventing them from accessing the curriculum or preventing them from engaging in the program, and I think this will probably lead to a more caring and empathic community here at the school.

In comparison, School Leader C also mentioned the importance of inclusive professional development for staff and shared that they often host professional development conferences, some of which are inclusion focused. Field notes indicated that by hosting external professional development for their school and by opening their facilities up for other schools to attend, School C was able to receive discounted rates for staff to attend. School Leader C added to this by stating:

> Having a conference at our school…we can focus on that important piece of the professional development where they come together on half days, but then also giving people opportunities to either go to conference workshops or to lead out on workshops… and then they can come back and share that opportunity with their teams and colleagues.

In this response, School Leader C further elaborates on how important it is to have a follow-up process for colleagues to speak and share with each other what they learned after a professional development workshop or conference. One of the expectations School Leader C puts in place is for every staff member to do at least one action research project per year that

connects to the school's priorities and encourages staff to "write and publish…whether for our school's research magazine, or journals, or books…we share that with all staff."

Overall, the school leaders' responses illustrate that they believe professional development is important for the ongoing development of their staff. In-house professional development, hosting conferences, and encouraging action research are ways the school leaders are trying to support their teachers to adapt to the changing landscape of teaching and learning.

**Inclusive Policies and Practices**

Participants were asked about their school's process for developing and implementing school-wide goals, policies, and practices that focus on the inclusion of students with identified needs. Field notes taken during the interviews indicated delayed responses by School Leaders A and B for questions specifically about developing policy and school-wide goals. The delay in responses may have been due to differences in leadership positions and specific work-related responsibilities. They had less formal authority than School Leader C had. School Leader C, as the President of School C, has the responsibility of establishing school-wide goals and policies. Consequently, School Leader C was able to describe the following processes and procedures:

> I'll meet with the division chairs, and with the principals throughout the year. I will ask what the challenges are and what fires we have to put out by the end of the year. This helps me make a conclusion of what areas to work on for the following year and also based on our predictions. So, I'll put together my goals. I'll prepare an entire workshop and I will present it to the board, and then I'll work with the leadership teams to develop action plans. And then I'll tell them to work on action plans with your teams. Then we come back together and check in on progress throughout the year.

School Leaders A and B indicated they had not been involved in recent development of school-wide goals and instead focused their responses on how their inclusion policies and practices were developed. This quote from School Leader B summarizes their similar processes for when they developed their past inclusion policy:

> There's a policy committee and when there's areas of policies that need to be developed, like inclusion for example, then we ask members of the teams that have experts in inclusion to be on the committee and we also send out a survey to see if other staff members are interested to have a balance of school leaders, content experts and other members of staff that are interested in contributing. Then policy is shared as a draft with staff, parents, and students to collect feedback and then the committee revises the draft and then the board of governors finalizes the policy.

Although the school leaders may have different involvement and responsibilities in developing their school's inclusion policies, all three shared that staff feedback is involved at some point in the process, which was valued by the school leaders. For example, School Leader A explained:

> I feel like there's definitely an opportunity for teachers and middle leaders to take part in the process of forming those policies and procedures within the school. We usually send out a call for interest to be a part of the focus group and then the leadership team decides on the group. And then by the end before it's finalized…there's usually an opportunity for all staff to review it and provide feedback at the end, or even before, we often would send out a survey gathering feedback. So, staff are free to kind of raise questions and concerns and ideas for how to improve a policy. I think it is important to hear their feedback because they are the ones who implement our policies and procedures.

In addition to policy development, all three school leaders discussed other inclusion-specific procedures and practices developed as a result of their inclusion policies. They all implement a similar system called multi-tiered systems and supports (MTSS), previously known as response to intervention (RTI), which is a framework to establish effective instruction and interventions for all students. This involves collaborative discussions around student learning data and referral procedures for teachers to refer students with academic, social-emotional, or behavioral concerns. The process is initiated when a teacher submits a referral, and then each school has developed a similar strategy to collaboratively discuss students' strengths and challenges through 'child study teams' or 'student support team meetings.' School Leader A describes this process:

> The child study meeting is when an interdisciplinary team gets together to discuss students of concern, this includes all of that student's teachers like, the school leaders, class teacher, learning support, ELA teachers, and PE, Art, Music, and Drama teachers. We set a more formalized structure and protocol to discuss the students of concern…The protocol includes discussing strengths first, then areas of concern, student learning data, previous strategies implemented, and then actions are developed to implement. These could be implementing a specific strategy, consulting with parents, recommending psychoeducational assessments or therapy, etc.

Beyond the described procedures, School Leader B also shared they have weekly discussions with the learning support team and educational psychologist to talk about students with identified needs on their caseload on a weekly basis. For instance, School Leader B shared:

> The principals, head of learning support, and educational psychologist meet every Friday for a student support meeting. We spend like an hour and a half discussing all the kids on our roster. We talk about where they're at, what interventions they're

receiving, and if there has been a notable difference week on week. However, I'm not sure whether the structure of those meetings is the most effective, because I think we try to rush them because there are a lot of students to discuss.

Overall, the School Leaders discussed thorough procedures and practices for supporting teachers to meet the needs of their students in a variety of ways. Although only one school leader alluded to a pitfall or challenge of these policies and procedures, which included not having enough time to thoroughly discuss students of concern, it can be assumed that the other two schools experience the same time constraints. In the next sections, class teachers and learning support specialists were interviewed to share their thoughts and perspectives on their school's inclusion policies and procedures, providing a comparison to the school leaders' perspectives.

## Findings for Research Question 2

In this section of the paper, the discussion turns to what class teachers and learning support teachers said about the extent to which they participate in the development of school-wide goals or policies to promote inclusive practices. This section is broken into three parts: a) level of class teacher or learning support teacher participation, b) feedback in the policy development process, and c) trust in leadership and learning support specialists.

### Level of Participation

Field notes taken during the interviews noted pauses in responses regarding the establishment of school-wide goals. None of the participants responded affirmatively to questions about their participation in the development of school-wide goals. However, all six learning support specialists were involved in developing some or all aspects of their school's inclusion policies and practices, while the six class teacher participants were not included. For instance, LS teacher A3 shared:

> I worked very closely with the school psychologist, the principal, the vice principal, counselors, and with the English Language Acquisition department leader, and the Secondary Learning Support leader to develop our inclusion policy and inclusion focused protocols or procedures. Learning the systems has been interesting and there are some similarities to other international schools I've worked at before here, and I really enjoy that part of the job and working with the various stakeholders to establish effective and efficient policies.

LS Teacher A4 also added:

> The learning support policy was presented by the senior leader and head of the learning support department to staff and then there was feedback on it from class teachers. I remember we also sent out a questionnaire also asking the whole school what we thought the learning support team did well and what we needed to improve on so there was feedback from that as well and we were able to incorporate it into the policy.

Similarly, from School B, LS Teacher B3 shared:

> The Student Learning Support handbook, the inclusion policy, and the referral guidelines, we were all included in the creation of that. The LS team and principals took the lead on writing it, but everyone had a chance to give feedback on it.

LS teacher B4 concurred that they were involved in developing the inclusion policies and procedures, and LS teachers C3 and C4 also mentioned being included in the process of developing the policy and sharing it with staff. LS teacher C3 summed up their thoughts when she stated, "We worked with the leadership team and the senior leaders worked with the board, and once the policy was finalized, then it was shared and presented to staff."

The LS teachers were asked if they believed Class Teachers had a voice or should have a voice as well in this process. LS Teacher A3 stated:

> I think class teachers or specialists like art/PE would want to be included as well, I think there are time constraints that limit their participation in the whole development process. Honestly, because teachers are so busy, and they're like, I just really don't have time for that. So, it's not that there's not a will but they are also trying to conserve their time and energy, which I respect.

LS Teacher C4 echoed these statements, but also added:

> Even if class teachers did not have a voice in the development process, they can still take the inclusion policy or practices and make it their own, as long as it aligns with their values.

LS Teacher B4 added a new perspective that was further elaborated on by class teachers:

> Teachers still ask if we use this language, or what their expectations are…So, teachers will often ask the LS team about the policy information, and I would say it's tedious, but it often starts a collaborative dialogue about student needs and how to support them.

In summary, the learning support specialists were involved in policy development because of their skills and expertise. There was a clear sense that they valued being part of the process because they would then support the implementation of the policies and procedures in class and support class teachers with this.

**Feedback in the Policy Development Process**

Although it quickly became apparent that the Class Teacher participants selected for this study were not included in the development of their school's inclusion policy and practices, it was evident they were able to provide feedback at some stage in the development process. For example, Class Teacher A1 explained:

> I have not personally been involved in strategic planning or developing the inclusion policy, but teachers had an opportunity to apply when we were doing strategic planning, so a few people from different areas were a part of it. To develop that so that there was an overall perspective and representation of staff voice.

Class teacher C2 echoed this statement by adding:

> We do have an inclusion policy for our learning support program and optimal learning program, but these were probably created by the members of those teams. We unpack them together as a school and can provide feedback, but I also think they are the specialists and should be the ones involved with creating the policy documents.

Class Teacher B1 added, "I was not involved in creating the policy, but I believe the relevant people were." This sentiment was shared by the Class Teachers interviewed, and there was also a shared understanding that decisions had to be made and that the class teachers did not have the time or sometimes expertise to have a voice in every school decision. For instance, Class Teacher C1 explained, "We have to all be on board. In whatever way, and even if a decision is made, it was probably made for a justified reason. So just understanding the background and rationale can be really helpful for staff." Along the same line of thinking, Class Teacher A1 stated:

> I know that some decisions just have to be made and that you're not always going to have a voice and everything. It is nice to feel your voice contributed to a decision, but we [class teachers] are already making so many decisions in our days, so it is hard to be a part of every decision in a school day.

**Trust in Leadership and Learning Support Specialist**

Participants were asked what they would do if they disagreed with a policy decision. The participants all shared they would feel comfortable discussing their disagreement with a

colleague or one of their school leaders because there was a feeling of mutual trust. Class Teacher A2 summarized these thoughts when she said:

> If I felt like I disagreed with a school policy, I would probably go and talk to that leader and be quite upfront with my reasons behind it because I think sometimes when you disagree, you don't always understand exactly where the decision was coming from. And if you have more background knowledge, then maybe you might not disagree anymore if you have a more in depth discussion, but even if you still disagree, there are some things within this school that you just have to follow and it is just the way things operate.

The other case participants also shared that there are numerous times to have discussions with school leaders or the learning support teams, whether formally or informally. It was clear that it was a matter of Class Teachers not wanting to be included in inclusion-related policies or practices due to their multiple responsibilities, but that they trusted the school leaders and learning support specialists to be responsible for the development and implementation of these policies and practices. The class teachers want to be able to ask for help or a collaborative discussion when they need it, and it seems when the learning support teaching resources are available, it makes it easier to do this.

## Findings for Research Question 3a

This section of the paper focuses on what class teachers' and learning support specialists' their perspectives about what structures they found to be supportive or not supportive of their teaching of students with identified learning needs. Their discussions will focus on: a) Staffing, b) Collaborative structures and procedures, and c) Professional development.

**Staffing**

As previously mentioned, School Leaders A, B, and C emphasized the importance of interdisciplinary teams in their discussions of the importance of staffing resources and discussed how they facilitated collaborative discussions within these teams. From the teachers' perspectives, it was evident that all twelve case participants viewed having time to collaborate between class teachers and learning support specialists as essential for supporting students with identified learning needs. Before delving into the types or opportunities for collaboration found beneficial or ineffective, it's noteworthy that teachers from Schools A and C mentioned specific changes made by their school leaders to enhance the culture of collaboration between class teachers and learning support specialists. For instance, Class Teacher A4 shared:

> Our leadership and head of learning support made quite a few changes when learning support wasn't a structured environment within the school. And after building a new learning support space, hiring new LS teachers, and an educational psychologist, they completely overhauled the whole system, and put collaborative structures in place, where you could refer students easily, and discuss what you needed to do with a particular student with the learning support teachers, which made our jobs much easier.

Furthermore, class teachers from each school discussed the supportive roles of the learning support staff in their schools, aiding class teachers in meeting the needs of students with identified learning needs. Class Teacher C1 summarized this point as follows:

> The great thing about having such a program in the school, which also includes the shadow teacher program (individual learning assistants) is that you do have help. Because you have a lot of students who come in with assessments or a diagnosis, but you have other students who fly under their radar, and you can see that they're not

> meeting grade level expectations. So as a teacher you spend a lot of time differentiating and trying to meet the individual needs of your class and there can be a lot of different types of needs. But when you have specialists who create individual learning plans for the students and help with pre-referral strategies that means we can collaborate together and we come up with goals that we want that particular child to meet and decide if having additional support either outside of class, or in-class support would be more beneficial.

However, some teachers also discussed challenges related to staffing and communication issues that hinder effective support for students with individualized needs. For instance, Class Teacher B2 mentioned the following:

> I think it's that there are some limitations that make it difficult. For one staffing. We just don't always have all the resources that some students might need. And those students could be successful here. But for one reason or another, we just don't have the staff to support all of our students who have or may have identified learning needs.

Class Teacher A2 highlighted communication challenges:

> The minute that a student is admitted to your class, they [school leaders] expect you to bring them where they need to be where they are. Sometimes there's a lot of miscommunications there from the admissions side. Because you're admitting them based on some criteria, and there may be different criteria at a different international school…Because the student is in my classroom, I have to do that extra mile and I want to do it, but if we do not have all of the right information, then we cannot provide optimal support that I could have, right when that student enters.

And Class Teacher C2 discussed time constraints due to support staff's experience and student needs:

> Generally, I would say once a week I meet with the shadow teacher in my class. It depends on the students' needs and the shadow teachers experience though. For example, if the shadow teacher does not have experience, then I will have to spend a lot of time teaching them, and the same would be if the student they are supporting in my class has big behavior needs, then we will have to work daily together to adapt our plans to support that student. So, having a shadow teacher can take up a lot of your time as a teacher.

Additionally, LS Teacher C3 mentioned the impact of stigma on learning support and how a location change impacted accessibility, she said, "The location of our learning support space changed, increasing accessibility. This led to more discussions between class teachers and the learning support team."

In summary, class teachers valued the support of learning support specialists, which eased their responsibilities. However, they expressed the need for comprehensive information about students upon admission and highlighted challenges related to staffing limitations, communication, and stigma.

**Collaboration Structures and Procedures**

In addition to staffing and location considerations, all class teachers and learning support teachers emphasized the importance of weekly or daily collaborative planning. For instance, Class Teacher A1 stated, "I think collaborative planning helps pinpoint student needs across grades and coordinate support. We use shared data sheets and Google Docs to ensure everyone is on the same page."

Similarly, Class Teacher A2 emphasized:

> We're always talking about our kids, what we're doing, and my learning assistant and I are always sharing ideas or asking each other for support…There's a lot of collaboration within the team, because we spend so much time together.

While the participants appreciated designated collaborative planning time, they also expressed concerns about excessive meetings impacting their time and energy. Many reported discussing student issues during non-contact hours, such as before or after school, or during breaks and lunches. Class Teacher B2 mentioned: “We meet non-stop, often during lunch or before/after school.” And Class Teacher B1 added: “We have long meetings on Wednesdays, followed by planning sessions that can last 2-3 hours. It’s quite a lot.”

Despite concerns about meeting frequency, structured meetings like the child study team meetings were valued. These meetings provided a forum for discussing students of concern among class teachers, learning support specialists, and administrators. For example, LS Teacher A3 explained: “When strategies aren’t working, we have Child Study Team meetings where we discuss concerns and decide on a plan of action.” Likewise, Class Teacher C2 stated: “Child Study Team meetings help us decide on the best support strategies for students.”

In summary, teachers perceived structured opportunities for discussing students with individualized needs positively. While time constraints were evident, having procedures in place alleviated anxieties about supporting students, as teachers knew they could seek help when needed.

**Professional Development**

Participants provided insights into the variety of professional development (PD) formats they experienced in the last year, with differences noted between schools and individual perspectives. School A’s teachers focused on individualized professional development (PD) supported by allocated funds, leading to a diverse range of experiences. LS Teacher A3 expressed satisfaction with external PD, citing valuable discussions with colleagues from different international schools. LS Teacher A4 similarly found external PD beneficial for sharing perspectives and addressing common challenges.

School B emphasized PD during weekly half-day meetings, with teachers expressing gratitude for ongoing development opportunities. Class Teacher B2 valued cross-program collaboration sessions, appreciating the chance to learn from colleagues. School C hosted international conferences and encouraged action research projects. LS Teacher C4 highlighted the benefits of action research for improving teaching practices.

Despite positive experiences, participants identified areas for improvement. Some expressed a need for PD on anxiety and social-emotional needs, given evolving student needs. Class Teacher A1 emphasized the importance of addressing societal shifts in PD content. LS Teacher B3 suggested structuring PD sessions with theory followed by practical application. LS Teacher C4 noted challenges with after-school PD due to fatigue.

Additionally, LS Teacher B4 raised concerns about accessibility for sign language interpreters in PD sessions, particularly in regions where local sign languages differ from international standards. This highlights a need for greater inclusivity in PD delivery.

In summary, participants valued collaborative PD experiences and recognized areas for enhancement, emphasizing the importance of ongoing development to improve teacher practice and support evolving student needs.

## Findings for Research Question 3b

In this section, participants' responses regarding what factors influenced their ability to support students' needs in their classrooms are discussed, focusing on four aspects: identity, self-advocacy, influence by colleagues, and influence by school leaders.

### Identity

All case participants identified themselves as inclusive educators, with some sharing personal insights into how their own experiences influenced their professional identities. School Leader A and LS Teacher A4 spoke about facing barriers in their education, barriers

that they claimed motivated them to become inclusive educators and leaders. School Leader A, for instance, said the following:

> I have lived experience as a student facing barriers in my own education and know what it's like to have educators who have been able to help me overcome some of those barriers…I realized how important teachers and school leaders are and I wanted to devote my energies and commitments in the same area so that other students can feel that success and reach their potential.

LS Teacher A4, in particular, shared how personal experiences of being placed in lower academic streams drove her to prove herself and eventually pursue a career in special education:

> I think now, in retrospect, I probably have some learning problems. Because when I was in school, we were streamed into groups. So, I was second to the bottom and that's kind of something you carry with you forever. So, I think I've always had a need to prove myself…I tried a few different career paths, and then I came here as a teaching assistant. The school was quite supportive, and I felt like I could identify with the students that struggled, so I started my degree in early childhood and special education.

Similarly, Class Teacher B2 reflected on their experiences with undiagnosed anxiety disorder and ADHD, shaping their empathy towards students facing similar challenges. She shared:

> I grew up with anxiety which I found out now was undiagnosed ADHD. And so, I see a lot of similar things that I faced in some students. And so, I feel as a teacher, it's my job to do as much research as I can and know what I can to support those students because I was that student.

Another LS Teacher (B4) expressed a personal connection to inclusion as someone who is deaf and had to navigate education without accommodations. This teacher reemphasized the emotional ties these experiences had to their work.

In summary, participants' professional identities often were influenced by their own disabilities or experiences struggling as students, and these sorts of experiences highlighted for them the importance of inclusion in their work. While not all participants shared personal stories, a commitment to inclusion remained a significant aspect of all teachers' professional identities.

In the next paragraphs, we will delve into how participants advocate for themselves, are influenced by colleagues, and interact with school leaders in shaping their approach to supporting students' needs.

**Self-Advocacy**

Most case participants expressed dissatisfaction with the level of preparation they received from their universities for teaching in inclusive classrooms. Consequently, many pursued further educations through specialization courses or professional development opportunities to enhance their skills.

Class Teacher A1 exemplifies this sentiment, noting that their initial teacher training

Was insufficient for addressing the needs of all students. They decided to pursue further education in psychology, particularly educational psychology, to gain a deeper understanding of inclusion and better support their students. She says, "There were some kids that I couldn't help but I wanted to be able to, so I started to go to university again, and I studied educational psychology. I felt that training helped me understand inclusion better and become a better teacher."

In School C, where shadow teachers are prevalent, three out of four interviewed

Teachers initially worked as shadow teachers before transitioning to roles as class teachers or learning support specialists. These individuals discussed how their experiences as shadow teachers inspired them to pursue further education and advocate for their own career advancement. For instance, LS Teacher C4 emphasized how starting as a shadow teacher provided valuable insights into student needs, enabling them to guide colleagues effectively as a coordinator. Similarly, Class Teachers C2 and C1 shared their journeys from shadow teaching to pursuing formal education in teaching, driven by their desire to make a difference in students' lives.

In summary, participants demonstrated self-advocacy by recognizing the gaps in their initial training and taking proactive steps to acquire additional knowledge and skills necessary for supporting students with diverse needs. Their experiences as shadow teachers particularly influenced their career trajectories, motivating them to pursue further education and advance in their roles within inclusive education settings.

**Colleague Influence**

Ten out of twelve case participants reported that their perspectives on inclusion were influenced by their experiences with colleagues or mentors. These interactions, whether formal or informal, had a significant impact on their beliefs, values, and teaching practices. For instance, LS Teacher A3 described how she learned valuable phonics strategies from a colleague in the learning support department, which she continues to use in her teaching. This practical knowledge supplemented her university training and enhanced her ability to support students' literacy development effectively.

Similarly, Class Teacher A2 mentioned how conversations with learning support colleagues challenged her beliefs about pulling students out of the classroom for specialized instruction. Through collaboration and support from colleagues, she became more confident

in meeting students' diverse needs within the classroom setting, fostering a sense of belonging for all students. Furthermore, she shared:

> Now I prefer to have all of my students in my class because I feel more skilled to meet their needs, and I have support from my colleagues, and ultimately, I want all of my students to feel a sense of belonging.

Class Teacher B2 highlighted how working with international colleagues enriched their understanding of different cultures and beliefs, emphasizing the importance of creating a comfortable and inclusive classroom environment for students from diverse backgrounds. They stated, "Now I always want to make sure that my students feel comfortable in my classroom."

In School C, where a mentorship program was implemented, three participants shared positive experiences with their mentors. These mentors played pivotal roles in their professional development, instilling confidence, and advocating for inclusive practices. LS Teacher C4 and LS Teacher C3 credited their mentors for inspiring them to advocate for student needs and push boundaries within the educational community. For example, LS Teacher C3 shared, "I learned that I can advocate and push boundaries for student needs in a way that would still allow me to be an esteemed member of the community, with no judgment." Additionally, Class Teacher C1 expressed gratitude for their mentor's guidance in communication with parents and students, highlighting the significant influence mentors can have on shaping teaching approaches and interpersonal skills.

Overall, the feedback from case participants underscores the importance of supportive and collaborative relationships among colleagues. These interactions foster professional growth, challenge existing beliefs, and ultimately enhance inclusive teaching practices in the classroom. Small but meaningful exchanges contribute to a culture of continuous learning and improvement within educational communities.

**Leadership Influence and Work Culture**

Participants from all three schools expressed how their school leaders had a positive influence on their beliefs and practices regarding inclusion. These leaders played a significant role in shaping the school culture and fostering a collaborative environment where all staff members felt empowered and supported.

For example, LS Teacher A3 highlighted how school leaders facilitated a shared responsibility for inclusion and provided structures for collaboration, which contributed to a sense of growth and progress within the school community. This emphasis on collaboration promoted a collective approach to supporting students with diverse needs. She stated, “I think our school leaders have helped create a shared responsibility and provided effective structures for us to collaborate.”

Similarly, LS Teacher A4 shared a personal example of how a senior leader supported her during moments of anxiety or uncertainty. Through guidance and encouragement, the leader helped her navigate challenges and develop actionable goals to support student progress effectively. LS Teacher A4 expressed:

> I can become anxious or flustered when I think I’m not helping a student make progress, so this senior leader just sat me down and talked me through it and guided me through my own thinking, so that I was able to break down in short goals what I needed to do next.

Class Teacher A1 reflected on the influence of a past principal who fostered an environment where teachers felt trusted and empowered to make decisions. This open-minded approach encouraged professional growth and innovation among staff members.

LS Teacher B4 emphasized the strength of teamwork and collaboration cultivated by school leaders, where every staff member felt valued and accessible for support and discussion. She sheared, “There isn’t a person in this building that I couldn’t pull aside and be

like, hey, let me talk about this or let me ask you how you did that…I really value our team culture."

Class Teacher B1 praised the understanding and prioritization of student mental health by the principal, highlighting a school culture that places the well-being of students at the forefront. This approach fosters a supportive and nurturing environment conducive to academic success.

Class Teacher B1 said:

> Our principal said, if you are emotional, and mental health is not in place, then your academic health is not going to be in place. So, I was really impressed that he was able to kind of say that and put the student's needs first. And so, I would say that was for me a big win for the culture of the school.

LS Teacher C3 summarized the collective perspective from School C, highlighting the school leaders' commitment to inclusion as a primary focus. Their efforts to empower both students and teachers contribute to a culture of support and empowerment across all levels of the school community.

Overall, the participants recognized the positive influence of their school leaders in promoting a culture of trust, collaboration, and support. Whether through setting structures for collaboration, providing personal guidance, or prioritizing student well-being, the leadership teams at Schools A, B, and C are instrumental in fostering inclusive environments where all members feel valued and empowered to support student success.

## Summary

The research examined factors influencing the ability of educators to support students' diverse needs in inclusive classrooms, focusing on school leaders and teachers perspectives on participation in policy development, collaboration structures, and professional development. Additionally, participants provided insights into how colleagues

and school leaders influenced their professional identities and how teachers have taken action to enhance their knowledge and skills to meet the even-evolving needs of their students.

In the section on participation in policy development, findings revealed that learning support specialists were actively involved in developing inclusion policies, while class teachers were often not included due to time constraints. Despite this, class teachers appreciated the support provided by learning support specialists in implementing these policies, which highlighted the need for interdisciplinary teams.

Regarding collaborative structures initiated by school leaders, educators emphasized the importance of regular collaborative planning between class teachers and learning support specialists to pinpoint student needs and to coordinate support. However, concerns were raised about the frequency of meetings impacting teachers' time and energy. In terms of professional development, participants highlighted the value of diverse PD formats, including external workshops, weekly meetings, and action research projects. Despite positive experiences, they identified a need for PD on anxiety and social-emotional needs and emphasized the importance of ongoing professional development to support the ever-evolving needs of their students.

Personal experiences played a significant role in shaping educators' professional identities and commitment to inclusion. Participants with personal experiences of overcoming barriers or facing disabilities were motivated to become advocates for inclusive practices.

Self-advocacy was evident among educators who recognized gaps in their initial training and pursued further education or professional development to acquire additional knowledge and skills for supporting students with diverse needs. Colleague influence emerged as a crucial factor, with interactions with colleagues shaping participants' beliefs, values, and teaching practices related to inclusion. Collaborative meeting times allowed for relationships to be fostered, and enhanced inclusive teaching practices in the classroom.

Lastly, leadership influence and work culture were found to be pivotal in promoting a culture of trust, collaboration, and support within schools. School leaders played a crucial role in shaping the school culture and empowering educators to support student success.

In short, the research brings to light the multifaceted nature of supporting students' diverse needs in inclusive classrooms, emphasizing the importance of collaborative partnerships, ongoing professional development, self-advocacy, and supportive leadership in creating inclusive educational environments.

# CHAPTER FIVE

# DISCUSSION, IMPLICATIONS, AND CONCLUSION

In Chapter 4, the study results for each research question were discussed. This chapter compares and contrasts both the findings from this study's different research sites and these results with the somewhat limited existing literature about how school leaders attempt to develop teacher agency to meet the needs of students with identified learning needs in inclusive classrooms. This discussion will be followed by discussions of (a) implications for various stakeholders and (b) recommendations for future research.

## Discussion of Findings

While this case study may be relatively small in scale, Donmoyer (1990) suggests that case studies hold significant value in providing opportunities for learning from exceptional models, especially in fields where such models are scarce. In this study, we aimed to merge research on teacher agency with a focus on inclusion within international school settings. International schools serve diverse student populations, and it is crucial for teachers to be empowered as agents of change in fostering and maintaining inclusive environments. This study sought to explore whether and how this is being achieved in three European international schools.

The findings of this study illuminate the experiences and perspectives of teachers and school leaders regarding the development of teacher agency to support students with identified learning needs in inclusive classrooms. These insights not only contribute to the existing literature on inclusive education and teacher professional development but also provide fresh perspectives on the factors influencing teacher agency in inclusive settings. Through a thorough cross-case analysis, common themes emerged across the three schools, showcasing both shared experiences and unique viewpoints.

This chapter will delve into these identified themes and unique perspectives in relation to each of the study's research questions. Furthermore, it will examine commonalities and differences among the cases, drawing comparisons with relevant existing literature. The chapter will conclude with discussions on the implications of the findings for school leaders, educators, and policymakers, along with recommendations for future research aimed at furthering similar investigations.

**Discussion for Research Question 1**

Research question one asked: To what extent do international school leaders claim they are attempting to develop teachers' capacity to meet the needs of students with identified learning difficulties through inclusionary policies and practices, and in what forms do their development efforts take? For this question, the theme of building trust and staffing resources emerged, as it encapsulates the efforts of school leaders to foster inclusive environments by cultivating trust among staff while allocating appropriate staffing resources to support students with identified needs. This theme emerged prominently across all three schools and school leaders, and, in so doing, highlights the significance of leadership actions in shaping inclusive practices and reinforces other findings reported in the literature.

Horrocks (2008, p. 1472), for example, emphasized that principals "set the tone" for teachers and students, and Idol et al. (1994) indicated that principals' ability to effectively implement inclusive policies relies on their ability to lead, inspire, and develop a positive learning climate. Feedback from participants in this study showed that school leaders achieved this by demonstrating a commitment to supporting their teachers in meeting the diverse needs of students and through cultivating trust, empathy, and support. This emphasis on trust also is supported by previous research indicating that trust between teachers and school leaders is key to building collective efficacy (Tschannen-Moran et al., 1998). Despite discussions of the importance of trust, multiple past studies concluded that principals were

unable to support teachers due to a lack of experience or training (Anderson, 1999; Goor et al., 1997; Lasky & Karge, 2006; Monteith, 2000). That did not appear to be a problem in the three schools that were studied for this dissertation.

In this study, however, all participants believed in the importance of building inclusive practices and policies, but different participants recalled unique experiences for how they achieved this. For example, School Leader A had furthered his educational training in the area of special education and felt confident in being able to "jump in'' and support teachers and students when needed. School Leader C, on the other hand, talked about his background in psychology and focused on setting high expectations for building an inclusive culture that prioritized students at the center of teaching and learning. School Leader B had the least training in special education but found herself building trust with staff through personal involvement in classrooms and by acknowledging her own areas for needed improvement. In these somewhat different ways, School Leaders A, B, and C sought to establish open lines of communication and to create a sense of community within their schools. Furthermore, the school leaders engaged directly with students and teachers with the aim of fostering a culture where teachers felt supported and empowered. This demonstrated the leaders' sense of self-efficacy by believing in their ability to accomplish a goal, and agency by believing in their ability to take action to achieve their goal (Marat, 2003).

In addition, much of the literature on developing inclusive schools and cultures has focused on principals creating school-wide visions (Fullan, 2003), positive relationships (Green, 2005; Halvorsen & Neary, 2005), clear expectations, and collaboration (Pivik et al., 2002), as well as specialized training and professional development (Barrett et al., 2008; Meyers et al., 2012). The findings in this study reflected a similar approach taken by the school leaders and encapsulated an additional theme that emerged for this question, which

was: cultivating inclusive learning environments through collaborative structures and professional development.

For example, the school leaders recognized the importance of dedicated time for teachers to collaborate on designing and implementing inclusive practices. While there were slight variations in the frequency and format of collaborative meetings, the overarching commitment to fostering teamwork and interdisciplinary collaboration was evident among all three leaders. By creating time for collaborative planning sessions, albeit admittedly not enough time, the school leaders provided opportunities for educators to exchange insights, share best practices, and collectively address the diverse needs of their students. Furthermore, through a combination of in-house workshops, external professional development opportunities, and mentorship programs, the school leaders aimed to enhance teachers' capacity to cater to diverse learning needs. Respondents shared that they held workshops or external professional development with an emphasis on topics like inclusive pedagogy, social-emotional learning, and behavior management. This reflected a proactive approach to addressing the multifaceted challenges encountered in inclusive classrooms.

Additionally, by engaging in a transparent process of policy development, the case schools strove to uphold principles of equity and inclusivity by "develop[ing] ways of teaching that respond to individual differences and that therefore benefit all children" (Ainscow, 2020, p. 8). Each school leader aimed to establish systematic procedures such as multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) to identify and address students' diverse needs. Through structured meetings like child study meetings and meetings of student support teams, educators collaboratively discussed and analyzed student data, devised targeted interventions, and monitored student progress over time. However, School Leaders A and B also described challenges such as time constraints in discussing individual student cases, which shed light on areas for improvement in the implementation of inclusive practices.

A final factor raised by the school leaders that was important for building inclusive environments, but not described in the existing literature, was the strategic allocation of staffing resources. School Leaders A, B, and C recognized the importance of having specialized staff, including learning support teachers, counselors, and educational psychologists, to provide targeted support for students with diverse learning needs. They described deliberate efforts to increase staffing levels and establish interdisciplinary teams to address a wide range of academic and social-emotional needs. These findings suggest that by investing in specialized personnel, the school leaders aimed to create a collaborative environment where their teachers had access to expertise and support, ultimately building teachers' capacity to meet the needs of students with identified learning needs.

**Discussion for Research Question 2**

Research Question Two asked: To what extent do teachers participate in the development of (a) school-wide goals or (b) policies related to promoting inclusive practices? This section delves into the perspectives of class teachers and learning support specialists regarding their involvement in the development of school-wide goals and policies aimed at fostering inclusive practices. Three interconnected aspects will be discussed: the level of participation, feedback in the policy development process, and the impact of trust in leaders and learning support specialists. These aspects shed light on the importance of collaboration, feedback mechanisms, and building trust in promoting inclusive practices within educational settings.

***Level of Participation***

In a study using the TATIS survey (Teacher Attitudes Toward Inclusion Survey), Moen (2008) found that classroom teachers thought inclusive practices required too much time, energy, and specialized training. In this study, all respondents described themselves as inclusive educators, but, similar to the teachers in Moen's (2008) study, the findings in all

three schools revealed a stark contrast in the level of participation between class teachers and learning support specialists in the development of inclusion policies. The class teacher participants preferred to have the learning support specialists and administrators involved in the policy development process. For example, Class Teacher B1 explained, “I was not involved in creating the policy, but I believe the relevant people were.” This highlighted a potential issue regarding the inclusivity and transparency of the policy development process. While the class teacher participants expressed a preference for involvement from learning support specialists and administrators in the policy development process, there’s a sense of detachment or lack of direct engagement implied in the statement of Class Teacher B1. This raises concerns about whether all relevant stakeholders are adequately represented in the decision-making process. By not actively involving class teachers in the policy development process, there’s a risk of overlooking valuable insights and perspectives that could contribute to the formulation of more comprehensive and effective policies. Additionally, a lack of ownership may lead to challenges in implementing and enforcing the policies, ultimately undermining their effectiveness.

***Feedback in the Policy Development Process***

Moreover, while learning support specialists were actively engaged in the development process with school principals, class teachers were largely not included in these discussions. Despite recognizing the value of class teachers’ perspectives, logistical constraints and competing demands on class teachers’ time limited their involvement in strategic planning and policy development. Although class teachers were not directly involved in the development of inclusion policies, they were afforded opportunities to provide feedback at later stages in the process. Furthermore, this asymmetry in participation calls attention to the specialized role of learning support specialists in shaping inclusive

practices while also emphasizing the need to explore avenues for greater collaboration and inclusion of class teachers in decision-making processes.

***Impact of Trust in School Leaders and Learning Support Specialists***

Correspondingly, the literature indicates that teachers' attitudes toward inclusion are a successful predictor of whether schools can develop inclusive communities (Gelzheiser & Meyers, 1996; Van Laarhover et al., 2007), which requires a combination of support from principals and consistent opportunities for classroom teachers and learning support specialists to collaborate (Hammond & Ingalls, 2003). Although classroom teachers were not involved in the policy development, findings concluded that class teachers from Schools A, B, and C expressed a high level of trust in their school's leadership and learning support specialists. This enabled class teachers to voice concerns and seek clarification on policy decisions if they disagreed with them.

Therefore, class teachers who were interviewed in all three schools recognized the expertise and dedication of learning support specialists in crafting policies tailored to meet the diverse needs of students. For instance, Class teacher C2 shared, "I think…the specialists…should be the ones involved with creating the policy documents. They have the most experience and we have built trust in our team." This trust dynamic points out the importance of building strong interpersonal relationships and cultivating a supportive environment conducive to collaboration and shared decision-making. In fact, despite their limited involvement, class teachers demonstrated a willingness to engage in collaborative dialogue and contributed constructively to policy discussions for implementation purposes. This reflects a culture of mutual respect and shared responsibility within all three school communities, just as Hammond & Ingalls (2003) described.

**Discussion for Research Question 3a**

Research Question 3a asked: What leadership decisions and structural factors do teachers perceive as supporting or interfering with their agency in being able to support students with diverse learning needs in inclusive classrooms? The findings for this research question highlighted the theme: nurturing collaborative environments and professional growth for inclusive education. This section is dissected into three key components: staffing considerations, collaborative structures and procedures, and professional development initiatives. These components collectively signify the need for school leaders to foster collaborative environments and facilitate ongoing professional growth to support teachers to effectively support students with diverse learning needs.

***Staffing Considerations***

Guided by social-cognitive theory (Bandura, 2001; Biesta and Tedder, 2007), I will first address how the research findings are interconnected with staff members' personal agency, and then later address structural factors that influenced teacher agency (Giddens, 1984). Biesta and Tedder (2007) argue that agency refers to the action's teachers are able to take given the availability of resources, support from administrators, and individual efforts. School Leaders A, B, and C made positive changes to expand their teachers' agency, such as establishing collaborative structures and enhancing learning support resources. For example, Class Teacher A4 shared:

> Our leadership…made quite a few changes when learning support wasn't a structured environment within the school. And after building a new learning support space, hiring new LS teachers, and an educational psychologist, they completely overhauled the whole system, and put collaborative structures in place, where you could refer students easily, and discuss what you needed to do with a particular student with the learning support teachers, which made our jobs much easier.

Responses from other participants also gave prominence to the importance of interdisciplinary collaboration, supportive staffing structures, and shed light on the pivotal role that learning support specialists play in providing tailored interventions and collaborative discussions. These resources aided class teachers in having a greater sense of agency because they had the resources and structures available to make what they felt were the best decisions for their students. For instance, after building a positive relationship with a learning support specialist, Class Teacher A2 expressed:

> Now I prefer to have all of my students in my class because I feel more skilled to meet their needs, and I have support from my colleagues, and ultimately, I want all of my students to feel a sense of belonging.

However, challenges were also described as interfering with teacher agency, including staffing limitations, communication gaps, and time constraints. These impeded the seamless provision of support and necessitated comprehensive information sharing, resource allocation, and proactive communication strategies to optimize support structures.

***Collaboration Structures and Procedures***

Giddens' (1984) adds to Bandura's theory of agency by explaining that structure and the individual have a reciprocal relationship. In the context of this paper, this point can be understood as indicating the structures that have been put in place by the school leaders have a reciprocal impact on the individual teachers and the structure itself. Therefore, if school leaders set up effective collaborative structures and procedures and teachers respond to these structures positively, then one could say the structures have enabled teacher agency, and vice versa. The findings in this study indicate that class teachers and learning support specialists emphasized the significance of structured collaborative planning sessions to aid in helping them pinpoint student needs to coordinate support efforts effectively. The structured meetings, like child study team meetings, were lauded for providing forums to discuss

students of concern and helped teachers devise targeted intervention plans collaboratively. In short, these structures, set by the school leaders, had a positive impact on teacher agency.

However, despite best efforts, collaborative structures also on occasion interfered with teacher agency. In fact, both class teachers and learning support specialists raised concerns regarding meeting frequency and duration. Their responses highlighted the delicate balance between collaborative engagement and the need for school leaders to safeguard teachers' time and energy.

***Professional Development Initiatives***

Diverse professional development experiences were shared by teachers and school leaders from each school. It was evident that teachers valued collaborative and tailored professional development opportunities. When teachers felt the professional development was meaningful and engaging, their sense of self-efficacy and agency towards implementing new ideas increased. For example, Class Teacher B2 valued and appreciated the chance to learn from colleagues during professional development sessions, and said:

> I feel confident trying new ideas after a good professional development session because I trust my team. I can have a go at something new and then share how it went with my team, so that we can learn from each other and improve our teaching practice.

Teachers appreciated various formats of professional development, ranging from individualized external workshops to collaborative in-house sessions. Participants were happy to have many opportunities for various professional development and the funds to do so, which is necessary if principals want their teachers to gain a sense of collective efficacy towards achieving school-wide goals (Lai & Cheung, 2014; Murphy, 2005). On the other hand, participants also identified areas for enhancement for their professional development experiences. They expressed that school leaders need to consider incorporating practical

application components in PD, ensure inclusivity in delivery formats, and find ways to address the ever-evolving student needs that teachers are facing in real time. Overall, the findings expounded upon the importance of responsive and inclusive professional development initiatives that are necessary for equipping teachers with the necessary knowledge and skills to meet the diverse needs of students in inclusive classrooms.

**Discussion for Research Question 3b**

Research Question 3b asked: According to what teachers say about their school's leaders and their leadership practices related to inclusion, how do school leaders' actions influence teachers' beliefs and values and, ultimately, their professional identities related to teaching students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms? This section discusses the multifaceted factors that influence teachers' agency in supporting students' needs, encompassing aspects such as identity, self-advocacy, influence by colleagues, and influence by school leaders. Through personal anecdotes, participants' responses start to explain the intricate interplay between these factors and how they impact teachers' professional practices in inclusive education settings.

Early in each interview, participants were asked if they believed they were inclusive educators and, if they believed they were, why. It was evident early on that teachers and school leaders' professional identities as inclusive educators were deeply intertwined with their personal experiences with struggles they had themselves when they were students in the past. For example, School Leader A and Learning Support Teacher A4 shared poignant narratives of overcoming barriers in their own education, which fueled their commitment to advocating for students with diverse needs. Similarly, Class Teacher B2 reflected on her journey of self-discovery by recognizing her undiagnosed anxiety disorder and ADHD, and then expressed how this revelation helped her channel these experiences into empathetic teaching practices. These personal narratives shared by participants demonstrated the

emotional resonance of inclusive education and highlighted the transformative power of educators' lived experiences in shaping their professional identities.

Frost (2006) suggests self-efficacy and agency "can either be enhanced or diminished" with experience and later explains that teachers with a higher sense of self-efficacy are more resilient and able to problem-solve based on their experiences (Frost, 2012). The findings indicated that all of the case participants were more inclined to enhance their agency and self-efficacy through recognizing the limitations of their initial training and proactively seeking further education and professional development opportunities. For instance, Class Teacher A1 decided to pursue additional studies in educational psychology. This action exemplified a proactive approach to addressing gaps in her training in order to enhance her ability to better support students with diverse needs. Similarly, participants from School C shared how their experiences as shadow teachers propelled them to advocate for their own career advancement and deepened their understanding of inclusive practices. These narratives illustrated the importance of continuous learning and self-advocacy in fostering effective support for students' needs.

In addition, Tschannen-Moran and Gareis (2004) focus on how important school leaders are in leading the change process in schools and how leaders can influence teachers' agency for the benefit or detriment of their schools. Consistent with this insight, the findings suggest that participants applauded their school leaders, especially the leaders' decisions to create structures for collaboration, while providing personal guidance and support, and prioritizing student well-being. For instance, Learning Support Teacher B4 commented on the strength of teamwork and collaboration cultivated by their school leaders, which they felt helped foster a culture where every staff member felt valued and empowered to support students to be successful in their learning. Similarly, Class Teacher B1 praised the principal's prioritization of student mental health and felt this action demonstrated the school's

commitment to holistic well-being. Not only were school leaders thought to have a positive influence on teachers, but the influence of colleagues and mentors also emerged as a significant factor in shaping teachers' beliefs and practices related to inclusive education.

Participants acknowledged the transformative impact of collaborative interactions with peers, whether through informal exchanges or formal mentorship programs. For example, Learning Support Teacher A3's used her adoption of phonics strategies that she learned from a colleagueto highlight the practical value of peer collaboration and its ability to enhance teaching practices, self-efficacy, and agency. Similarly, Class Teacher A2's indicated her evolution from skepticism towards inclusive practices to embracing classroom inclusivity reflected the profound influence a colleague can have on challenging and reshaping a teacher's beliefs.

Finally, the examples recounted above about the influence school leaders and, also, colleagues can have on individual teachers emphasizes the co-construction between leadership, organizational culture, and teacher agency, and signifies how these factors can get combined to promote inclusive education in schools (Hubbard et al., 2023).

## Implications

### Implications for School Leaders

Participants in this study developed trusting relationships with their school leadership teams and were able to specify how their school leaders have either developed structures that promote inclusion that helped them personally or how school leaders have helped them solve problems to better support students with identified learning needs in their classrooms. The results of this study can be encouraging for International School Leaders with similar staffing resources to continue their efforts towards developing inclusive policies and practices, as well as supporting teachers in their goals to create inclusive classrooms.

In Chapter 3, the Theoretical Framework for Leadership Efficacy was discussed (Hanna et al., 2008). Figure B3 (see appendix D) indicates when behaviors of school leaders and followers align, an efficacious culture is developed, which can lead to collective efficacy, then collective agency, and, finally, collective performance (Hanna et al., 2008). In the context of education, garnering a sense of collective efficacy and agency to achieve collective performance is the goal for school leaders who are trying to implement school-wide goals and reform initiatives, or even to implement new policies. Therefore, with the inclusion of students with disabilities on the rise (The U.S. Department of Education, 2021), and knowing teachers are the most important factor contributing to student achievement (Hattie 2009; OECD 2005), school leaders should consider what factors contribute to helping them connect, support, and develop their teachers' efficacy and agency towards supporting students with identified learning needs. School leaders have several factors to consider when facing this challenge. It was evident in this study that School Leaders A, B, and C created systems and structures to elicit change and to further improve their teachers' inclusive practices programs.

All three school leaders prioritized staffing to create interdisciplinary teams but did not just stop there. They purposefully included learning support specialists in their inclusion policy development process to ensure their policies incorporated the voice of their experts. The school leaders also offered opportunities at the beginning and end of the process for class teachers and other staff members to provide feedback before their inclusion policies were finalized. This created a sense of trust and alleviated a feeling of not having a voice in school decision-making processes. All of this suggests that other school leaders should create opportunities for meaningful participation of both class teachers and learning support specialists in the development of school-wide goals and policies related to inclusive practices.

And they should prioritize collaboration and feedback from all stakeholders to ensure everyone has an opportunity to have a voice at some stage in the process.

In addition, School Leaders A, B, and C implemented consistent opportunities for interdisciplinary teams to have collaborative discussions. These discussion venues included student support team meetings, child study team meetings, and weekly collaborative planning meetings that focused on the topic of inclusion and how to best support students with identified learning needs through a multi-tiered systems and supports (MTSS) framework. The teachers and learning support specialists valued this time for problem-solving and Learning Support Teacher B4 expressed that these collaborative structures made it feel like colleagues had "become team members, who were open and responsive to feedback and suggestions." Moreover, it was evident in this study that teachers, as a collective, can have a positive or negative impact on the collaborative structures implemented by school leaders. Consistent with this study finding, Archer (2000) argues that agency is ultimately a collective phenomenon, albeit one that can lead to individuals shaping structures through their interactions with others within those structures. Other research underscores the importance of how teachers' emotions play a key role during reform initiatives (Hargreaves, 2005; van Veen et al., 2005).

The results of this study appear to support these claims. For instance, the elements of teamwork and trust in the school leaders were critical findings that showcased how collaborative structures on their own would not be sufficient in creating a team culture, but that school leaders should prioritize building trust among staff by demonstrating empathy and support. Having a foundation of trust will foster collaborative opportunities and build capacity for class teachers and learning support specialists to have effective student-centered dialogue. Smylie and Hart (1999) and Rowan (1999) describe something similar in their

research, which highlights that capacity building is not so much about changing organizational structure but about changing professional culture within the structures created.

Additionally, by building trust through empathy and support, school leaders focus on building an organizational culture that empowers educators to advocate for students' needs, which will, in turn shape their professional identities as inclusive educators. This involves providing personal guidance and support, prioritizing student well-being, and creating structures for professional growth. For example, School Leader C developed and implemented an effective mentorship program for all teachers. Case participants found this structure to be effective and supportive. Interestingly, three out of the four teachers that were interviewed had initially started their career at School C as shadow teachers (a.k.a. paraprofessionals or individual learning assistants) and then eventually furthered their careers by becoming teachers and middle-level leaders. They attributed their career development to the mentorship program. It was evident that other school leaders should promote these types of peer collaboration and mentorship programs among educators to enhance teaching practices, self-efficacy, and agency. By facilitating collaborative interactions and formal mentorship programs, school leaders can create opportunities for educators to learn from each other in ways that will challenge and potentially reshape their beliefs about inclusive education.

**Implications for Class Teachers and Learning Support Specialists**

Every year, teachers face the challenge of adapting their skills, perspectives, and approaches to teaching as they welcome new cohorts of students. This continual evolution places a heavy burden on teachers, often requiring them to adapt quickly without adequate background knowledge or educational training. Naraian and Schlessinger (2018) argue teachers feel the tension between their preservice training and the realities of their

classrooms, while noting that this dissonance can lead to positive or negative actions by teachers.

Similarly, this study found that all but one case participant felt their pre-service education and training did not adequately prepare them for the practice of inclusion as it is defined today. For example, Class Teacher A1 expressed, “It wasn’t even called inclusion when I was in school…the mental health needs of today are very different from ten years ago when I was learning about it.” Many participants had similar experienced and, consequently, they expressed a commitment to self-improvement and sought additional training through master’s degree programs, professional development courses, or learning from colleagues and mentors. These actions should serve as models for other teachers. In short, educators should engage in continuous professional development opportunities focused on topics such as inclusive pedagogy, social-emotional learning, and behavior management. This continuous learning enhances their knowledge, skills, and confidence, thereby building their capacity to support students with diverse learning needs in inclusive classrooms. It is imperative that school leaders actively make these professional development opportunities available to educators, ensuring accessibility and support for their ongoing growth and effectiveness in fostering inclusive environments.

Collaboration and collective agency are crucial for implementing inclusive practices, with co-teaching between class teachers and learning support specialists being highlighted as supportive structures both in this study and in related literature (e.g., see Tiwari et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2013). However, research also suggests that staffing and financial constraints can impact the feasibility of consistent co-teaching in schools (Tiwari et al., 2015). In this study, while participants in this study expressed positive attitudes towards interdisciplinary teams, some mentioned a lack of staffing and resources to adequately meet the needs of students with more severe learning difficulties. Therefore, instead of focusing solely on co-teaching,

participants emphasized the importance of having time for collaborative discussions about inclusion and student needs between class teachers and learning support specialists.

Furthermore, collaboration enables teachers to develop a sense of collective agency, providing opportunities for reflection, support, problem-solving, and sharing new ideas (Kugelmass 2006; Lyons, Thompson, and Timmons 2016). Consistent with this insight supported by prior research, participants in this study valued collaborative planning sessions, where they learned new strategies and collectively enhanced their sense of agency in meeting student needs. Therefore, schools should prioritize creating opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration among staff.

Building strong learning environments based on trust and effective communication structures is also crucial for positive teacher identity learning (Geijsel & Meijers 2005, Sleegers, Bolhuis & Geijsel 2005). Teachers should be involved in the development of school-wide goals and policies, advocating for inclusive practices within their schools. This study found that class teachers valued effective feedback mechanisms during the policy development process and trusted learning support specialists to be involved in creating their school's inclusion policies. This trust echoes a sense of collective efficacy and agency, representative of an inclusive school culture. Educators should actively seek opportunities to participate in the development of school-wide goals and policies related to fostering inclusivity to ensure their perspectives are represented in decision-making processes.

**Implications for Policymakers**

Internationally, inclusive education has emerged as a crucial factor in improving education systems (Tiwari, Das, and Sharma, 2015), despite persistent challenges such as segregating students with disabilities in separate special education settings (Morningstar & Kurth, 2017; Harry & Klingner, 2014). Research has consistently shown the positive impact of inclusive education on learning (Heinrich et al. 2016), academic engagement (Rangvid,

2018), and post-school outcomes (Test et al. 2009). Therefore, policymakers must recognize inclusive education as a benefit to schools and prioritize its implementation to enhance the learning experiences of all students.

One key consideration for policymakers is to ensure equitable allocation of staffing resources across schools based on the diverse needs of their student populations. This study's findings highlight the importance of staffing interdisciplinary teams, which fosters trust among staff and school leaders, facilitates professional conversations around inclusion, positively influences the professional identities of teachers, and contributes to a positive school culture. Collaborative school culture and participation in decision-making processes have been identified as significant drivers for implementing inclusive practices (Sleegers et al., 2002, Geijsel et al., 2007). Therefore, policymakers should encourage collaboration among class teachers, learning support specialists, and school leadership in policy development and implementation. Inclusive decision-making processes that prioritize input from all stakeholders and foster a culture of trust and collaboration should be promoted.

It is essential for policymakers to recognize that teachers may not have the necessary knowledge, skills, training, or experience to implement inclusive practices immediately (Leithwood et al. 2004). Therefore, they should consult with school leaders and teachers to provide the resources and training required to equip educators with the skills and knowledge necessary for effective implementation. This may involve developing tailored professional development programs and allocating resources to support teachers in implementing new reform initiatives or school-wide policies and practices.

Moreover, effective implementation of new inclusion policies requires building the capacity of school leaders and teachers. Policymakers should invest in promoting collaborative structures between class teachers and learning support specialists, as well as providing diverse and inclusive professional development opportunities for educators. This

investment may involve allocating time and financial resources for collaborative planning and professional development programs to address the evolving needs of students effectively.

In summary, policymakers play a crucial role in fostering inclusive education by ensuring equitable resource allocation, promoting collaborative decision-making processes, and investing in the capacity-building of school leaders and teachers. By prioritizing inclusive practices and providing the necessary support and resources, policymakers can create a conducive environment for schools to implement inclusive initiatives effectively, thereby enhancing the educational experiences and outcomes of all students.

**Implications for Future Research**

The findings of this study highlight the need to bridge research, theory, and practice in the context of inclusive education. Future research endeavors could consider broadening the scope of individual theories of agency, inclusion, and efficacy to gain a deeper understanding of their interconnectedness. Conducting comparative studies across different school settings, such as public schools in the USA where inclusive policies are mandated, could provide valuable insights into how teacher efficacy and agency are developed in diverse educational contexts. Such comparative research could also explore perceived cultural differences in agency among teachers and administrators, thereby contributing to a more inclusive understanding of agency in education.

Moreover, future research could delve deeper into the process of teacher identity formation related to inclusive education. Investigating how personal experiences, struggles, education, and professional development opportunities shape educators' beliefs, values, and identities as inclusive educators would provide valuable insights into the factors influencing teacher attitudes and practices in inclusive classrooms.

Additionally, there is a need to further explore the specific leadership strategies employed by school leaders to foster inclusive environments. Research could focus on

identifying effective leadership practices that promote interdisciplinary collaboration, establish consistent collaborative structures for inclusion-focused dialogues, and facilitate inclusive policy development procedures. Understanding the factors influencing teacher participation in the development of school-wide goals and policies related to inclusive practices would also be valuable. This may involve examining barriers to participation, such as logistical constraints and competing demands on teachers' time and identifying strategies to enhance teacher involvement in decision-making processes.

Overall, the lessons learned from this study could inform future research endeavors aimed at better understanding how school leaders can promote and build capacity for teachers to effectively meet the needs of students with disabilities in inclusive classrooms. By bridging research, theory, and practice, educators and policymakers can work collaboratively to create more inclusive and supportive learning environments for all students.

## Conclusion

In summary, this chapter has provided a comprehensive discussion of the results of the research questions, outlining the implications for various stakeholders including school leaders, educators, and policymakers. The findings emphasize the critical role of school leaders in promoting and building capacity for teacher agency to support the inclusion of students with identified learning needs in inclusive classrooms.

The study identified several key factors through which school leaders can enhance teacher agency:

- Developing trusting relationships: School leaders play a crucial role in fostering trust and empathy among educators, which positively influences their perceptions of the structures and initiatives implemented within the school.
- Prioritizing interdisciplinary teams: By allocating resources to establish interdisciplinary teams consisting of class teachers and learning support

specialists, school leaders can facilitate collaborative efforts to address the diverse needs of students.

- Establishing consistent collaborative structures: School leaders should ensure the implementation of consistent collaborative structures, such as regular meetings and dialogues focused on inclusion, to support ongoing professional development and problem-solving.
- Including learning support specialists in decision-making processes: Involving learning support specialists in the development of school-wide goals and policies related to inclusion ensures that their expertise is leveraged and that the perspectives of all stakeholders are considered.
- Providing consistent and meaningful professional development: School leaders should prioritize providing educators with professional development opportunities that are relevant, engaging, and tailored to their evolving needs in supporting students with diverse learning needs.

These findings emphasize the importance of proactive leadership in creating inclusive school environments and supporting educators in their efforts to meet the needs of all students. Moving forward, future research should aim to further explore and compare the relationship between leadership, teacher agency, and inclusion across diverse geographical contexts. By continuing to investigate these dynamics, policymakers and school leaders can make informed decisions to improve inclusion practices and ultimately enhance the educational experiences and outcomes of all students.

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APPENDIX A

**Glossary of Terms**

*General Education Setting:* k-12 education of non-disabled students who can access the general curriculum without support from special educational services (Lilly, 1998).

*Inclusion*: A service delivery model supporting students with disabilities in general education or mainstream settings with non-disabled peers with the aim of providing students with disabilities access to the general education curriculum with the required supports (Praisner, 2003).

*Mainstreaming:* The process of integrating students with disabilities in general education settings with non-disabled students (Lietz & Kaiser, 1979).

*Attitudes:* A reaction to stimuli resulting in complex feelings and beliefs (Anastasi, 1957).

*Teacher Agency*: agency refers to the capacity to which a person takes action within a social setting (Calhoun, 2002).

*Self-Efficacy:* According to Bandura (1977a) self-efficacy is described as "people develop[ing] domain-specific beliefs about their own abilities and characteristics that guide their behavior by determining what they try to achieve and how much effort they put into their performance in that particular situation or domain."

*Students with Disabilities:* The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (2004) describe thirteen categories for diagnosed disabilities, these are: 1) Autism spectrum disorder; 2) deaf and blindness; 3) deafness; 4) emotional disturbances; 5) hearing impairment; 6) intellectual disabilities; 7) multiple disabilities; 8) orthopedic impairment; 9: other health impairment; 10) specific learning disability; 11) speech language impairment; 12) traumatic brain injury; and 13) visual impairment including blindness.

APPENDIX B

**Interview Protocol:**

## Protocol 1 (Classroom Teachers)

**Background**

For my first question I'd like you to talk about your current role at your school, what is your title, how long have you been in this role, and what are your responsibilities?

1. I want to shift gears a bit and have you think about the amount of time you spend on various activities at your school during an average week using the most recent full week as your guide. If you don't engage in any of these activities just say so. Let's get started, how much time is spent on:

a. Planning for differentiation or modifications?
b. Teamwork and dialogue with colleagues within your school?
c. Providing feedback to students? e.g., progress on goals, verbal feedback, written feedback
d. Providing or receiving feedback from colleagues/administrators?
e. Participating in school meetings with administrators?
f. Professional development?
g. Communication with parents/guardians?
h. Student counseling, behavior guidance?
i. Learning support related tasks (ILP's, meetings, accommodations)?
j. Developing school policies (inclusion guidelines, handbooks)?
k. Developing school-wide goals?

**Identity - Inclusive Educator**

2. As we get into questions, I'd like to preface the next sets of questions with sharing that this research is geared towards teaching/supporting students with identified learning needs. It would be helpful to know what terminology you and/or your team describe this population of students, e.g., learning support students, disabled, identified learning differences, etc.

Thank you for sharing, I'll try to incorporate that into my questions.

Now, I want to know more about your identity as an educator and your thoughts on the inclusion of students with identified learning needs in your school.

First, take a minute to describe what you believe an inclusive education is?

Do you think being an inclusive educator is important for student learning and well-being? If so, why?

Would you consider yourself to be an inclusive educator? Why or why not?

Would you describe your school as being inclusive? Why or why not?

**Formal education and training (general)**

3. Now, let's step back in time before you started your career as I'd like to find out about your formal education or training (Define formal education and training). Were special education, learning support, behavior management, promoting/creating an inclusive classroom/school, or something related specifically included in your formal education or training? Can you first tell me about your education or training, and then share about any courses related to inclusion?

- Did your formal education or training in (whatever they told you) prepare you to teach in an inclusive school setting? If so, do you feel you were well prepared, somewhat prepared, or only minimally prepared?

- Did your formal education or training in (whatever they told you) prepare you to identify as an inclusive educator? If so, in what ways?

- Has professional development beyond your formal education and training prepared you to identify as an inclusive educator? If so, in what ways?

4. Now I'd like to have you discuss your beliefs and values toward the inclusion of students with disabilities in your class and in your school.

a. Have your beliefs changed or adapted over your experience as a teacher, if so, what experiences influenced this change?
b. How are your values and beliefs toward the inclusion of students with disabilities influenced by your colleagues?
c. How are your values and beliefs toward the inclusion of students with disabilities influenced by your administrators?
d. Do you have opportunities to reflect on this as a staff? If so, what does that look like?
e. At your school, how do you practice inclusion of students with identified learning needs?

**Professional Development**

5. Thank you, now I'm interested in knowing more about how you've professionally developed beyond your formal education and training, specifically the kinds of professional development you've participated in since the beginning of spring semester 2022 including the summer. By professional development I mean…….

- First, did you participate in any professional development from the beginning of last school year (Fall 2021) until now, including the summer?
- If so, what were they related to?
- Did you have any professional development related specifically to teaching students with (identified needs) at your school?

*If none: In thinking about your current role in teaching students with identified learning needs, what professional development opportunities do you feel you need now or in the future so you can better support these students or work to create an inclusive learning environment in your school?

Additionally, when would be an optimal time and where would be an optimal place for this kind of professional development? Do you have any particular professional development in mind for better supporting these students?

If yes, skip to item 6

6. Now I want to focus a bit on professional development you took part in over the past 12 months related specifically to teaching (classroom teachers) or supporting (special educator) students with diverse learning needs, teaching or supporting disabled students, or promoting and working to create an inclusive learning environment in your school.

- What topics were included in your professional development training?
- During your professional development, what kinds of activities did you engage in related to teaching or supporting students with diverse learning needs, teaching or supporting disabled students, or promoting an inclusive learning environment at your school?
- Which professional development topics have had the greatest positive impact on your teaching or support of students with diverse learning needs, teaching or supporting students with disabilities, or promoting an inclusive environment in your school?
- Which professional development activities have had the greatest positive impact on your teaching or support of students with diverse learning needs, teaching or supporting students with disabilities, or promoting an inclusive environment in your school?

7. Related to the last question, in thinking about professional development that had the greatest positive impact on your teaching or support of students with diverse learning needs, teaching or supporting students with disabilities, or promoting an inclusive environment in your school, did any of the professional developments you attended have the following characteristics? A yes or no answer will suffice.

a. Did it build on your prior knowledge and experience about….?
b. Did it adapt to your own professional development needs?
c. Did it provide opportunities for active learning?
d. Did it provide opportunities for collaborative learning?
e. Did it provide opportunities to practice or apply new ideas and knowledge immediately in your classroom?
f. Did it provide follow up activities such as……?
g. Did it take place at your school?
h. Did it involve colleagues from your school?
i. Did it involve administrators from your school?
j. Did it focus on inclusion of…….?
k. Did it take place over an extended period of time (e.g., several weeks or longer)?

8. Moving on from professional development, I would now like to know about your relationship with your colleagues and administrators (or school leaders/senior leaders).

a. If you felt you were not meeting the needs of students with identified learning needs, who would you reach out to for support and professional advice? Why those people/that person?
b. If you have received advice on… from…, what did you do with that advice or how was it useful to you and why?

9. In some schools' educators are required to receive formal feedback, such as appraisal, performance evaluations or reviews, or written documented feedback that would be saved on your personnel file from administrators/school leaders, or department heads, or curriculum leaders, and there may even be occasions where educators request or pursue this level of feedback. Can you share what the process is at your school?

a. In thinking about more formal feedback, was a part of the feedback related to teaching students with identified needs or differentiation, or building an inclusive environment?
b. Who provided this feedback? Did you feel it was a supportive dialogue?
c. What did you do with the feedback, and what did you feel was the most useful, and why?

10. In thinking about working with your school's leaders, please tell me about a school leader who made a positive contribution to the inclusion of students with disabilities in your school:

a. What kind of atmosphere did this leader create for teachers, parents, and students?
b. What decisions made by that leader landed well?
c. What do you think was the main reason it went well?

11. Now, I want you to think about working with a school leader who made a negative contribution to the inclusion of students with disabilities in your school. If such a leaders exists:

a. What kind of atmosphere did this leader create for teachers, parents, and students?
b. What decisions made by that leader landed flat?
c. What do you think was the main reason they went poorly?

**School Culture**

12. Now I'd like to find out about your school's culture as it relates to a shared expectation of including students…

What are the expectations in regard to meeting the needs of students with identified learning needs in your school?

a. Where do these expectations come from (e.g., school leaders, staff, other faculty, parents, students, or yourself)?
b. If you felt you weren't meeting these expectations for inclusion…. What steps would you take to meet those expectations?
c. What do you believe are your colleagues and school leader's roles in creating these expectations?

13. Continuing on with your thoughts about your school's culture, what structural factors (e.g., collaborative meetings, planning time, communication processes, PD, etc.) do you feel benefit you the most in regard to teaching students with identified needs in your classroom?

a. What opportunities have you had to lead out or share your knowledge of inclusion with your team, or the whole staff? If so, in what ways, how often, to whom specifically?

14. Now, these next questions are more about decision making structures and their impact on school culture and whose voices are included in decision making processes related to the inclusion of students with identified needs.

a. What documents, policies or procedures would you look to in regards to teaching students with needs (i.e., learning support handbook, inclusion policy, referral guidelines…)
b. Who do you believe were involved in developing these (docs)?
c. Do teachers have a voice in the development process? At what point are teachers able to provide feedback on procedures, policies, etc.?
d. What structures promote or limit teacher voices in decisions made regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities?

**Leadership Decisions**

15. Now, slightly shifting gears, please consider a decision (implementing policy, procedure, etc.) that a school leader of yours has made that you feel has helped or improved your ability to teach students with identified learning need; please describe their decision.

a. Have some related decisions (inclusion: identified needs) been received better than others among the Staff? Why?
b. What if you disagreed with a decision regarding inclusion, what would you do?

16. This is my last question for today. At some schools' teachers and leaders collaborate on developing school-wide policies and procedures (goals/strategic intentions) related to the inclusion of students with diverse learning needs or disabilities, or other policies and procedures directly related to those students. In your time at your school, have you had opportunities to collaborate with leaders, other faculty, and staff on creating such policies and procedures? If so, how often? What was your experience?

a. If you have not had opportunities to collaborate on developing school-wide policies and procedures, do you have other ways of contributing your knowledge/opinion/providing input about including students…. such as talking with school leaders or colleagues?
b. If you disagree with policies and procedures…, who would you reach out to/what steps would you take to provide your input?

## Protocol 2 (Learning Support Specialists)

**Background**

For my first question I'd like you to talk about your current role at your school, what is your title, how long have you been in this role, and what are your responsibilities?

1. I want to shift gears a bit and have you think about the amount of time you spend on various activities at your school during an average week using the most recent full week as your guide. If you don't engage in any of these activities just say so. Let's get started, how much time is spent on:

a. Planning for differentiation or modifications?
b. Teamwork and dialogue with colleagues within your school?
c. Providing feedback to students? e.g., progress on goals, verbal feedback, written feedback
d. Providing or receiving feedback from colleagues/administrators?
e. Participating in school meetings with administrators?
f. Professional development?
g. Communication with parents/guardians?
h. Student counseling, behavior guidance?
i. Learning support related tasks (ILP's, meetings, accommodations)?
j. Developing school policies (inclusion guidelines, handbooks)?
k. Developing school-wide goals?

**Identity - Inclusive Educator**

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Thank you for sharing, I'll try to incorporate that into my questions.

Now, I want to know more about your identity as an educator and your thoughts on the inclusion of students with identified learning needs in your school.

First, take a minute to describe what you believe an inclusive education is?

Do you think being an inclusive educator is important for student learning and well-being? If so, why?

Would you consider yourself to be an inclusive educator? Why or why not?

Would you describe your school as being inclusive? Why or why not?

**Formal education and training (general)**

3. Now, let's step back in time before you started your career as I'd like to find out about your formal education or training (Define formal education and training). Was special education, learning support, behavior management, promoting/creating an inclusive classroom/school, or something related specifically included in your formal education or training? Can you first tell me about your education or training, and then share about any courses related to inclusion?

- Did your formal education or training in (whatever they told you) prepare you to teach in an inclusive school setting? If so, do you feel you were well prepared, somewhat prepared, or only minimally prepared?

- Did your formal education or training in (whatever they told you) prepare you to identify as an inclusive educator? If so, in what ways?

- Has professional development beyond your formal education and training prepared you to identify as an inclusive educator? If so, in what ways?

4. Now I'd like to have you discuss your beliefs and values toward the inclusion of students with disabilities in your school.

a. Have your beliefs changed or adapted over your experience as a teacher, if so, what experiences influenced this change?
b. How are your values and beliefs toward the inclusion of students with disabilities influenced by your colleagues?
c. How are your values and beliefs toward the inclusion of students with disabilities influenced by your administrators?
d. Do you have opportunities to reflect on this as a staff? If so, what does that look like?
e. At your school, how do you practice inclusion of students with identified learning needs?

**Professional Development**

5. Thank you, now I'm interested in knowing more about how you've professionally developed beyond your formal education and training, specifically the kinds of professional development you've participated in since the beginning of last school year (Fall semester 2021) including the summer. By professional development I mean…….

- First, did you participate in any professional development from the beginning of last school year (Fall 2021) until now, including the summer?
- If so, what were they related to?
- Did you have any professional development related specifically to teaching students with (identified needs) at your school?

*If none: In thinking about your current role in teaching students with identified learning needs, what professional development opportunities do you feel you need now or in the future so you can better support these students or work to create an inclusive learning environment in your school?

Additionally, when would be an optimal time and where would be an optimal place for this kind of professional development? Do you have any particular professional development in mind for better supporting these students?

If yes, skip to item 6

6. Now I want to focus a bit on professional development you took part in over the past 12 months related specifically to or supporting (special educator) students with diverse learning needs, teaching or supporting disabled students, or promoting and working to create an inclusive learning environment in your school.

- What topics were included in your professional development training?
- During your professional development, what kinds of activities did you engage in related to teaching or supporting students with diverse learning needs, teaching or supporting disabled students, or promoting an inclusive learning environment at your school?

- Which professional development topics have had the greatest positive impact on your teaching or support of students with diverse learning needs, teaching or supporting students with disabilities, or promoting an inclusive environment in your school?
- Which professional development activities have had the greatest positive impact on your teaching or support of students with diverse learning needs, teaching or supporting students with disabilities, or promoting an inclusive environment in your school?

7. Related to the last question, in thinking about professional development that had the greatest positive impact on your teaching or support of students with diverse learning needs, teaching or supporting students with disabilities, or promoting an inclusive environment in your school, did any of the professional developments you attended have the following characteristics? A yes or no answer will suffice.

a. Did it build on your prior knowledge and experience about….?
b. Did it adapt to your own professional development needs?
c. Did it provide opportunities for active learning?
d. Did it provide opportunities for collaborative learning?
e. Did it provide opportunities to practice or apply new ideas and knowledge immediately in your classroom?
f. Did it provide follow up activities such as……?
g. Did it take place at your school?
h. Did it involve colleagues from your school?
i. Did it involve administrators from your school?
j. Did it focus on inclusion of…….?
k. Did it take place over an extended period of time (e.g., several weeks or longer)?

8. Moving on from professional development, I would now like to know about your relationship with your colleagues and administrators (or school leaders/senior leaders).

a. If you felt you were not meeting the needs of students with identified learning needs, who would you reach out to for support and professional advice? Why those people/that person?
b. If you have received advice on… from…, what did you do with that advice or how was it useful to you and why?

9. In some schools' educators are required to receive formal feedback, such as appraisal, performance evaluations or reviews, or written documented feedback that would be saved on your personnel file from administrators/school leaders, or department heads, or curriculum leaders, and there may even be occasions where educators request or pursue this level of feedback. Can you share what the process is at your school?

a. In thinking about more formal feedback, was a part of the feedback related to teaching students with identified needs or differentiation, or building an inclusive environment?
b. Who provided this feedback? Did you feel it was a supportive dialogue?
c. What did you do with the feedback, and what did you feel was the most useful, and why?

10. In thinking about working with your school's leaders, please tell me about a school leader who made a positive contribution to the inclusion of students with disabilities in your school:

a. What kind of atmosphere did this leader create for teachers, parents, and students?
b. What decisions made by that leader landed well?
c. What do you think was the main reason it went well?

11. Now, I want you to think about working with a school leader who made a negative contribution to the inclusion of students with disabilities in your school. If such a leader exists:

a. What kind of atmosphere did this leader create for teachers, parents, and students?
b. What decisions made by that leader landed flat?
c. What do you think was the main reason they went poorly?

**School Culture**

12. Now I'd like to find out about your school's culture as it relates to a shared expectation of including students…

What are the expectations in regard to meeting the needs of students with identified learning needs in your school?

a. Where do these expectations come from (e.g., school leaders, staff, other faculty, parents, students, or yourself)?
b. If you felt you weren't meeting these expectations for inclusion…. What steps would you take to meet those expectations?
c. What do you believe are your colleagues and school leader's roles in creating these expectations?

13. Continuing on with your thoughts about your school's culture, what structural factors (e.g., collaborative meetings, planning time, communication processes, PD, etc.) do you feel benefit you the most in regard to teaching students with identified needs in your classroom?

a. What opportunities have you had to lead out or share your knowledge of inclusion with your team, or the whole staff? If so, in what ways, how often, to whom specifically?

14. Now, these next questions are more about decision making structures and their impact on school culture and whose voices are included in decision making processes related to the inclusion of students with identified needs.

a. What documents, policies or procedures would you look to in regards to teaching students with needs (i.e., learning support handbook, inclusion policy, referral guidelines…)
b. Who do you believe were involved in developing these (docs)?
c. Do teachers have a voice in the development process? At what point are teachers able to provide feedback on procedures, policies, etc.?
d. What structures promote or limit teacher voices in decisions made regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities?

**Leadership Decisions**

15. Now, slightly shifting gears, please consider a decision (implementing policy, procedure, etc.) that a school leader of yours has made that you feel has helped or improved your ability to support students with identified learning needs; please describe their decision.

a. Have some related decisions (inclusion: identified needs) been received better than others among the Staff? Why?
b. What if you disagreed with a decision regarding inclusion, what would you do?

16. This is my last question for today. At some schools' educators and leaders collaborate on developing school-wide policies and procedures (goals/strategic intentions) related to the inclusion of students with diverse learning needs or disabilities, or other policies and procedures directly related to those students. In your time at your school, have you had opportunities to collaborate with leaders, other faculty, and staff on creating such policies and procedures? If so, how often? What was your experience?

a. If you have not had opportunities to collaborate on developing school-wide policies and procedures, do you have other ways of contributing your knowledge/opinion/providing input about including students…. such as talking with school leaders or colleagues?
b. If you disagree with policies and procedures…, who would you reach out to/what steps would you take to provide your input?

## Protocol 3 (School Leaders)

**Background**

For my first question I'd like you to talk about your current role at your school, what is your title, how long have you been in this role, and what are your responsibilities?

1. I want to shift gears a bit and have you think about the amount of time you spend on various activities at your school during an average week using the most recent full week as your guide. If you don't engage in any of these activities just say so. Let's get started, how much time is spent on:

a. Administrative Tasks and meetings (e.g., reports, budget, timetables, class compositions, responding to requests from parents, teachers, administration
b. Leadership tasks and meetings (e.g., strategic planning, developing school improvement plans, school-wide goals, policy development, human resources)
c. Curriculum and teaching-related tasks and meetings (e.g., developing curriculum, observations, feedback, professional development)
d. Student interactions (behavior, communication)
e. Teacher interactions
f. Providing feedback to students
g. Providing feedback to teachers

**Identity - Inclusive Educator**

2. As we get into questions, I'd like to preface this interview by sharing that this research is geared towards supporting teachers to effectively teach and support students with identified learning needs. It would be helpful to know what terminology you and/or your team describe this population of students, e.g., learning support students, disabled, identified learning differences, etc.

Thank you for sharing, I'll try to incorporate that into my questions.

Now, I want to know more about your identity as a school leader and your thoughts on the inclusion of students with identified learning needs in your school.

First, take a minute to describe what you believe an inclusive education is?

Do you think being an inclusive educator is important for student learning and well-being? If so, why?

Would you consider yourself to be an inclusive educator, or would you say you value an inclusive education at your school? Why or why not?

Would you describe your school as being inclusive? Why or why not?

**Formal education and training (general)**

3. Now, let's step back in time before you started your career as I'd like to find out about your formal education or training (Define formal education and training). Was special education, learning support, behavior management, promoting/creating an inclusive classroom/school, or something related specifically included in your formal education or training for becoming a school leader? Can you first tell me about your education or training, and then share about any courses related to inclusion?

- Did your formal education or training in (whatever they told you) prepare you to support teachers in an inclusive school setting? If so, do you feel you were well prepared, somewhat prepared, or only minimally prepared?

- Did your formal education or training in (whatever they told you) prepare you to identify as an inclusive educator, and an inclusive leader? If so, in what ways?

- Has professional development beyond your formal education and training prepared you to identify as an inclusive educator? If so, in what ways?

4. Now I'd like to have you discuss your beliefs and values toward the inclusion of students with disabilities in your school.

a. Have your beliefs changed or adapted over your experience as a school leader, if so, what experiences influenced this change?
b. How are your values and beliefs toward the inclusion of students with disabilities influenced by your colleagues (staff)?

c. How are your values and beliefs toward the inclusion of students with disabilities influenced by your fellow administrators?
d. Do you provide opportunities to reflect on this as a staff? If so, what does that look like?
e. At your school, how do you practice inclusion of students with identified learning needs?

**Professional Development**

5. Thank you, now I'm interested in knowing more about how you've professionally developed beyond your formal education and training, specifically the kinds of professional development you've participated in since the beginning of last school year (Fall semester 2021) including the summer. By professional development I mean…….

- First, did you participate in any professional development from the beginning of last school year (Fall 2021) until now, including the summer?
- If so, what were they related to?
- Did you have any professional development related specifically to teaching students with (identified needs) at your school?

*If none: In thinking about your current leadership role, what professional development opportunities do you feel you need now or in the future so you can better support teachers to teach students with identified learning needs or to create a more inclusive learning environment in your school?

Additionally, when would be an optimal time and where would be an optimal place for this kind of professional development? Do you have any particular professional development in mind for better supporting these students?

If yes, skip to item 6

6. Now I want to focus a bit on professional development you took part in over the last school year until now, related specifically to or supporting teachers to effectively teach/support students with diverse learning needs, teaching or supporting disabled students, or promoting and working to create an inclusive learning environment in your school.

- What topics were included in your professional development training?
- During your professional development, what kinds of activities did staff engage in related to teaching or supporting students with diverse learning needs, teaching or supporting disabled students, or promoting an inclusive learning environment at your school?
- Which professional development topics have had the greatest positive impact on your staff's ability to teach students with identified learning needs, teaching or promoting an inclusive environment in your school?
- Which professional development activities have had the greatest positive impact on your staff to effectively teach/support students with diverse learning needs, or promoting an inclusive environment in your school?

7. Related to the last question, in thinking about professional development that had the greatest positive impact on your staffs' ability to effectively meet the identified learning needs, or promoting an inclusive environment in your school, did any of the professional

developments you attended have the following characteristics? A yes or no answer will suffice.

a. Did it build on staff prior knowledge and experience about….?
b. Did it adapt to your staff's own professional development needs?
c. Did it provide opportunities for active learning?
d. Did it provide opportunities for collaborative learning?
e. Did it provide opportunities to practice or apply new ideas and knowledge immediately in classrooms?
f. Did it provide follow up activities such as……?
g. Did it take place at your school?
h. Did it involve colleagues from your school?
i. Did it involve administrators from your school?
j. Did it focus on inclusion of……..?
k. Did it take place over an extended period of time (e.g., several weeks or longer)?

8. Moving on from professional development, I would now like to know about your relationship with your colleagues (staff)

a. If you felt, as a school, that you were not meeting the needs of students with identified learning needs, who would you reach out to for support, or professional advice? Why those people/that person?
b. If you have received advice on… from…, what did you do with that advice or how was it useful to you and why?

9. In some schools, school leaders provide formal feedback, such as appraisal, performance evaluations or reviews, or written documented feedback that would be saved on your personnel file by administrators/school leaders, or department heads, or curriculum leaders, and there may even be occasions where educators request or pursue this level of feedback. Can you share what the process is at your school?

a. In thinking about more formal feedback, is a part of the feedback related to teaching students with identified needs or differentiation, or building an inclusive environment?
b. Who provides this feedback? Did you feel the process of Evaluation allows for supportive dialogue on this topic?
c. What did teachers do with the feedback, and how do you know?

10. In thinking about your work with inclusion, or another school's leaders, please tell me about how you or a school leader has made a positive contribution to the inclusion of students with disabilities in your school:

a. What kind of atmosphere did this leader create for teachers, parents, and students?
b. What decisions made by that leader landed well?
c. What do you think was the main reason it went well?

11. Now, I want you to think about working with a school leader you have worked with before (whether current or previously) who made a negative contribution to the inclusion of students with disabilities in your school. If such a leader exists:

a. What kind of atmosphere did this leader create for teachers, parents, and students?
b. What decisions made by that leader landed flat?
c. What do you think was the main reason they went poorly?

**School Culture**

12. Now I'd like to find out about your school's culture as it relates to a shared expectation of including students…

What are the expectations in regard to meeting the needs of students with identified learning needs in your school?

a. Where do these expectations come from (e.g., school leaders, staff, other faculty, parents, students, or yourself)?
b. If you felt you weren't meeting these expectations for inclusion…. What steps would you take to meet those expectations?
c. What do you believe are your colleagues and school leader's roles in creating these expectations?

13. Continuing on with your thoughts about your school's culture, what structural factors (e.g., collaborative meetings, planning time, communication processes, PD, etc.) do you feel benefit you the most in regard to teaching students with identified needs in your classroom?

a. What opportunities have you had to lead out or share your knowledge of inclusion with your team, or the whole staff? If so, in what ways, how often, to whom specifically?

14. Now, these next questions are more about decision making structures and their impact on school culture and whose voices are included in decision making processes related to the inclusion of students with identified needs.

a. What documents, policies or procedures would you look to in regards to teaching students with needs (i.e., learning support handbook, inclusion policy, referral guidelines…)
b. Who is involved in developing these (docs)?
c. Do teachers have a voice in the development process? At what point are teachers able to provide feedback on procedures, policies, etc.?
d. What structures promote or limit teacher voices in decisions made regarding the inclusion of students with disabilities?

**Leadership Decisions**

15. Now, slightly shifting gears, please consider a decision (implementing policy, procedure, etc.) that you or another school leader has made that you feel has helped or improved teacher's ability to support students with identified learning needs; please describe their decision.

a. Have some related decisions (inclusion: identified needs) been received better than others among the Staff? Why?
b. What if a teacher disagreed with a decision regarding inclusion, what would you do?

16. This is my last question for today. At some schools' educators and leaders collaborate on developing school-wide policies, goals, and procedures (goals/strategic intentions) related to the inclusion of students with diverse learning needs or disabilities, or other policies and procedures directly related to those students. In your time at your school, have you had opportunities to collaborate with teachers, or other faculty on creating such policies and procedures? If so, how often? What was your experience?

a. If you have not had opportunities to collaborate on developing school-wide policies and procedures, do you have other ways of contributing your knowledge/opinion/providing input about including students…. such as talking with school leaders or colleagues?
b. If you disagree with policies and procedures…, who would you reach out to/what steps would you take to provide your input?

APPENDIX C

**Interview Guide**:

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for my study. Here is some background information for you to read prior to our interview:

This study seeks to understand how teacher agency is developed by school leaders in international schools. I will follow a semi-structured interview protocol with the aim to collect qualitative data from primary (elementary school) class teachers, special education learning support teachers, and principals. Please find the areas of focus and potential questions below for you to read over and reflect on prior to the interview. I intend for the interview to feel informal and conversational. My goal is to gain first-hand knowledge and experience of agency, how it is developed, and how it may or may not influence inclusion of students with disabilities in your schools and classrooms. I want to thank you in advance for sharing your experiences with me.

Your responses will be voice recorded and will not include your name. As some of the questions will be related to your school leader(s), do not feel you have to speak directly about them. You can refer to your leader, as "leader," instead of by name, or speak of experiences with previous school leaders instead. The interviews will be around 45 minutes each and held in person at your school, or virtually via google meets or Zoom, whichever is preferred.

| **Focus Area** | **Examples of Possible Questions** |
|---|---|
| **Beliefs/values of inclusion** | ⇒ Describe your beliefs and values toward the inclusion of students with disabilities in your class or school?<br>⇒ How have they changed over time? |
| **Collaborative relationships** | ⇒ If you needed support to figure out how to meet the needs of a particular student, who would you reach out to for professional advice and why? |

| | |
|---|---|
| **Action** | ⇒ Describe any opportunities you have had to lead out in the area of inclusion in either a team meeting, or with the primary school? What did this look like and how did it come about? |
| **Ownership** | ⇒ How are decisions made regarding students with disabilities or school wide goals to support inclusion? Are teachers involved, if so, how so? |
| **Voice** | ⇒ Describe a time where you have used your voice to discuss inclusion with school leaders or staff, or when you felt that your voice was not included or allowed? |
| **Policy** | ⇒ In the development of inclusion policy, what was that process and who was involved, or who do you think should have been involved? |

APPENDIX D

| *Code(s) Structural (S) or Individual (I)* | *Example(s)* | *Categories* | *Theme(s)* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Physical Artifacts (S) | I definitely feel like I have a larger toolbox to address sensory needs after we created our sensory room to support students with Autism. | Resources | Communication |
| Work Cultures (S) | I have a very motivated and conscientious team, and they're passionate. We talk with the classroom teachers daily about our students and we talk with other professionals and our educational psychologist. | Commitments, ideals, motivations, interests, goals of structure | Trust and Relationship Building |
| Collaboration (S) | My colleagues have really been influential and helping me shape my beliefs. | Meetings focused on inclusion, inclusion focused dialogue amongst interdisciplinary team members | Inclusion focused Collaboration |
| Leadership Decisions (S) | Our school leaders and our team worked together to develop our inclusion policy and learning support handbook for our families. | Structural factors, meetings, decisions | Structural Decisions |
| Professional Development or Training (S) | I think every Professional Development that I've done for the past year and a half has definitely been around inclusion and learning support. And it's been pretty quality. Everything that I've received, I've been able to take at least one to five things away from and integrate it into my teaching into the systems and procedures of our learning department. | Professional development or training specific to inclusion | Professional Development |
| Professional Identity (I) | I still feel like there are times I don't know how to support a study, but I know I can turn to my team and school leaders | Commitments, beliefs related to inclusion of students with | Teacher Identity |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | for support. Students with needs is always going to be growing. So, I think people I have to embrace it. Our school leaders are embracing it as they go and learn, so I have too as well. | disabilities, motivations, goals of individual | |
| Professional Knowledge and Competencies (I) | My training had three or four sessions about learning support. Once I started working, I knew that was not enough, so I went on to get my master's in special education. | Information and applying information into action | Structural Requirements |
| Work History and Experience (I) | When I was at public schools, I would say we did not have as many resources and specialist staff as we have at our school now. | Oriented in the past | Staffing |

Date: 3-3-2024

IRB #: IRB-2022-525
Title: Leadership and Teacher Agency for Inclusive Classrooms: Insights about Integrating Students with Disabilities into Inclusive Classrooms from Teachers and School Leaders in Three International Schools
Creation Date: 8-9-2022
End Date:
Status: Approved
Principal Investigator: Chad Wood
Review Board: USD IRB
Sponsor:

## Study History

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Submission Type Initial | Review Type Expedited | Decision Approved |
| Submission Type Renewal | Review Type Expedited | Decision Approved |

## Key Study Contacts

| | | |
|---|---|---|
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