'We are inclusive. We are a team. Let's just do it': commitment, collective efficacy, and agency in four inclusive schools

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ABSTRACT

Implementation of inclusive education for children with disabilities continues to vary across and within Canadian provinces and territories leading us to question why some schools move forward while others maintain traditional segregated approaches. Drawing from Appreciative Inquiry methodology, this study used semi-structured interviews to gather and document successful practices within four inclusive elementary schools within a Canadian province. Interviews were conducted with students, parents, teachers, educational assistants, and principals. Thematic analysis revealed a common belief in the central importance of learning and relationships for all students, shared commitment to inclusion, general classroom teacher responsibility, and collaborative team work characterised by a belief in collective efficacy. The predominant finding in this study was individual and collective agency that transcended themes. Participants reported ongoing and conjoint processes of planning, teaching, reflecting on current practice, sharing knowledge and ideas, solving problems together, and attending to relationships.

Three decades of professional literature and research in inclusive education provide a rich resource of theoretical perspectives, professional guidelines, and evidence-based practices to support inclusive education. The call for a merger of general and special education into one unified inclusive system began in the mid- to late 1980s (e.g. Gartner and Lipsky 1987; Stainback and Stainback 1984; Will 1986). Much controversy and debate ensued as proponents of traditional and separate special education raised concerns about potential outcomes and the feasibility of inclusive education (e.g. Fuchs and Fuchs 1994; Kauffman 1993). Over the years, support for inclusive education has been bolstered by studies examining outcomes for students educated in inclusive settings. The bulk of the findings indicate that students with and without disabilities do as well, or indeed slightly better, than their counterparts who are educated separately (Canadian Council on Learning 2009; Cole 2006; Demeris, Childs, and Jordan 2007; Kalambouka et al. 2007; McDonnell et al. 2003; Timmons and Wagner 2009).

The evolution of inclusive education is further supported and guided by international human rights agreements such as *The Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action* (UNESCO 1994) and the *United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (United Nations 2006). Taken together, these agreements frame inclusive education as: (a) all children learning together regardless of differences they may have; (b) equal access to inclusive education within home communities; (c) understanding and accommodating individual differences through appropriate curriculum, instruction, and resources; and (d) provision of supports as needed within the

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general education system. (UNESCO 1994, 11–12; 2006, Article 24). In Canada, education is influenced by the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* (1982) and governed by provincial and territorial legislation and policy. While there continue to be differences among provincial/territorial jurisdictions, inclusive education is increasingly required or recommended as the preferred approach (CMEC 2008).

Throughout the 1990s, 2000s, and into the 2010s, extensive research using a range of methodologies examined school-level structures for effective inclusion, inclusive instructional practices, processes for school-wide transformation, and challenges or barriers related to implementing an inclusive approach. Numerous school-wide studies report on structures and supports for effective inclusion (e.g. Ainscow, Booth, and Dyson 2006; Causton-Theoharis et al. 2011; Hehir and Katzman 2012; Howery, McClellan, Pedersen-Bayus 2013; Idol 2006; McLeskey, Waldron, and Redd 2014). While there is some variability in terminology, the bulk of the literature outlines several common key components and qualities of effective inclusive schools: (a) a clear vision focusing on all students that is supported by school personnel; (b) all students are valued members within classrooms and are educated together; (c) comprehensive supports for students and teachers; (d) a collaborative team approach; (e) efficient use of resources; (f) flexible curriculum and high-quality instruction using evidence-based practices; (g) supportive leadership that includes shared decision-making; and (h) quality professional development (Hehir & Katzman, 2012; Hoppey and McLeskey 2014; McLeskey et al. 2014). It is widely acknowledged that principals play a pivotal role in promoting, developing, and continuously improving inclusive approaches within their schools and a considerable body of literature outlines effective leadership practices and guidelines for leading the change process (Booth and Ainscow 2011; Capper and Frattura 2009; Causton and Theoharis 2014; Hehir and Katzman 2012).

A substantial body of literature outlines inclusive pedagogies such as (a) differentiated instruction (Broderick, Mehta-Parekh, and Reid 2005; Tomlinson 2001); (b) co-teaching (Hang and Rabren 2009; Murawski and Hughes 2009; Okilwa and Shelby 2010); (c) peer-assisted learning (Bowman-Perrott et al. 2013); and (d) positive behavioural interventions and supports (Sugai et al. 2014). Some researchers have focused on effective strategies and supports for inclusion of students with a particular disability or disorder such as autism (Crosland and Dunlap 2012; Johnson et al. 2004; Spencer et al. 2014) or intellectual disabilities (Nowicki and Brown 2013). Others have researched on inclusive pedagogy within subject areas such as math (Zhang et al. 2015), science (Simpkins, Mastropieri, and Scruggs 2009), or reading (Lane et al. 2007). Of necessity, this research synopsis represents a small sampling. Textbooks and scholarly articles summarising evidence-based practices abound (e.g. Friend and Bursuck 2014; Hutchinson 2013; Katz 2012; Loreman, Deppeler, and Harvey 2010; Mastropieri and Scruggs 2010). Perhaps some of the most hopeful research suggests that students with disabilities do not require a qualitatively different pedagogy (Davis and Florian 2004; McGhie-Richmond, Underwood, and Jordan 2007) and that effective teaching practices are beneficial to *all* students with/without disabilities (Jordan, Schwartz, and McGhie-Richmond 2009).

Certainly we know more than we ever have about how to teach and support diverse learners within general education classrooms and schools; nonetheless, implementation is lagging. Despite the extensive literature on evidence-based practices at classroom and school levels, and legislative and policy direction, there continues to be a great deal of variability in whether, how, and for whom, inclusive education is implemented (Statistics Canada 2008; US Department of Education 2014). Multiple and complex issues of implementation have been identified and taken up in theoretical discussions. Definitions of inclusion continue to vary and appear to be subject to interpretation (Ainscow and Miles 2008; Artiles et al. 2006). Secondly, the conceptual foundation for inclusive pedagogy stems from the field of special education and there is concern that, in some situations, special education may have been transferred to general education classrooms thus neglecting needed changes in instruction, roles, and responsibilities (Brantlinger 2006; Danforth and Naraian 2015). There is a call for transformative whole-school *processes* focused on increasing the capacity of classrooms and school to meet the needs of learners with diverse needs (Ainscow 2005; Artiles and Kozleski 2007; McLeskey et al. 2014). Thirdly, findings from studies exploring teacher beliefs and

attitudes towards inclusion indicate that while teachers are generally supportive of an inclusive approach, they feel ill-prepared to teach children with diverse needs within the regular classroom and express concerns about time and resources (Horne & Timmons, 2009; Idol 2006; Thompson, Lyons, and Timmons 2015).

Yet some schools and school divisions have successfully moved forward. Within our own province, we observe examples of the full continuum; that is, from general education classrooms in which all students are authentically engaged and learn together with the requisite supports, to separate classes for students with disabilities and/or behaviour disorders, to separate schools for students with intellectual and multiple disabilities. These differences exist despite similarities in student characteristics and demographics, teacher training, provincial policy and legislation, and funding structures that ultimately influence the extent and nature of resources provided. Incongruities raise multiple questions that may be explored. In this study, we chose to focus our research on schools that have moved forward with an inclusive approach and ask the question 'What are the values, perspectives, and experiences of teachers, students, parents, principals, and educational assistants in schools identified as successfully implementing an inclusive approach?' The study is part of a broader research project examining successful inclusive practices in early childhood programmes, elementary schools, secondary schools, and employment settings. This article reports on findings from participants within four elementary schools.

Conceptual framework

Historically, research on educating students with disabilities was encompassed within the field of special education; steeped within a deficit discourse intent on diagnosing individual pathologies and researching methods for remediating or 'fixing the problems' that were considered to reside within students (Terzi 2008; Winzer 2007). Over the past 30 years, the literature on inclusive education for students with disabilities has grown exponentially. The body of work includes theoretical papers and a range of qualitative and quantitative methodologies focusing on the challenges or problems associated with an inclusive approach, effective inclusive practices, and inclusive education in the context of school effectiveness and school reform (Erten and Savage 2012). Given the complexities of inclusive education and the methodological challenges, a range of research methodologies are needed (Slee 2007). Thus we endeavoured to use Appreciative Inquiry (AI) to explore values, knowledge, and perspectives of those actively involved in elementary schools that have been identified as being successful in the implementation of an inclusive approach.

AI is an action research methodology and organisation development process that was initially put forth as a paradigm shift for the fields of action research and organisational change (Cooperrider and Strivastas 1987). Similar to other forms of action research, AI is based on a central premise of social constructionism in which knowledge is co-constructed through interaction between individuals within a social system (Cooperrider, Whitney, and Stavros 2008; Gergen and Gergen 2008). However, Cooperrider and Strivastas (1987) challenged the traditional problem-oriented approach of action research and placed social constructionism in a positive context. The underlying assumption is that every organisation has something that is working well; that change will move in the direction of the questions asked; thus strengths can be the starting point for creating and sustaining positive change (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros).

Critics of the AI approach have argued that the appreciative stance may inadvertently silence critical voices thus limiting opportunities for learning and positive change that may arise from negative experiences and other types of conversation (Barge and Oliver 2003; Grant and Humphries 2006). Conversely, proponents suggest that the strength-based approach and positive stance of AI are an opportunity to 'counterbalance the perceived predominance of a deficit discourse as manifested in a focus on problem-solving, human pathology, and negative organisational performance' (Zandee and Cooperrider 2008, 191). We contend that the positive stance within AI provides a

complementary approach for research in inclusive education; it is put forward as *one* approach, not *the* approach.

AI uses a 4-D cycle of Discovery, Dream, Design, and Destiny (also referred to as the Deliver phase [Kozik et al. 2009]). Rather than beginning with a problem to be solved, the Discovery phase begins with appreciative questions to elicit participants' perspectives on what is going well within the organisation, why they think it is going well, and to explore core values. Within the Dream phase, participants envision a future that builds on success and the identified strengths. The Design phase focuses on co-constructing the future design and, in the final Destiny phase, participants identify how to sustain the vision (Cooperrider, Whitney, and Stavros 2008, 43). AI research ranges from the use of the complete 4-D process (e.g. Calabrese et al. 2010; Kozik et al. 2009) to the application of the initial Discover and Design phases (e.g. Ciuffetelli Parker, Grenville, and Flessa 2011); to the application of the positive stance in the design and development of interviews and focus groups (e.g. Giles and Alderson 2008; Lewis and Emil 2010; Underwood and Killoran 2012; Villeneuve and Hutchinson 2012). Drawing from AI, we used a 'positive stance' in the design of semi-structured individual and group interviews to explore perspectives and successful practices in inclusive elementary schools.

Our theoretical framework also draws on the *agentic perspective* within social cognitive theory (Bandura 1997; 2000, 2001) in which people are seen as the 'producers as well as the products of social systems' (Bandura 2001, 1). Human agency is conceptualised as intentional actions aimed at producing a desired result. Individuals form intentions, develop action plans to realise those intentions, take purposeful action, and examine and reflect on actions and outcomes (Bandura 2006). Social cognitive theory further acknowledges that many goals require interdependent effort and extends the concept of personal agency to *collective agency* characterised by shared knowledge, skills, and synergy among members (Bandura 2000).

The belief in *efficacy* is regarded as the foundation of human agency; that is, individuals are more likely to act if they believe they are going to be successful (Bandura 2006). *Personal efficacy* refers to an individual's belief in their capabilities while *collective efficacy* refers to people's shared belief in their collective power to achieve desired results (Bandura 2001). 'Group attainments are the product not only of the shared intentions, knowledge, and skills of its members, but also of the interactive, coordinated, and synergistic dynamics of their transactions' (Bandura 2001, 14).

There has been considerable attention to research on teacher self-efficacy in inclusive education with an emphasis on pre-service teacher efficacy (Forlin, Sharma, and Loreman 2007; Leyser, Zeiger, and Romi 2011; Savolainen et al. 2012). In addition, some researchers have examined collective agency in general school reform (Datnow 2012) and processes that impact collective teacher efficacy in general (Ross, Hogaboam-Gray, and Gray 2004). However, minimal, if any, research has studied agency and, in particular, collective agency and efficacy within inclusive schools. Application of this agentic perspective to inclusive education suggests that individuals can change practices through personal and collective agency; a contention that is supported by the findings of this study.

Methods

Settings and participants

The study began with *purposeful* selection of inclusive schools. A letter of invitation was sent to Directors of Education within each of the provincial School Divisions (commonly referred to as School *Districts* within the literature) inviting them to identify schools that, in their view, demonstrate successful implementation of inclusive education. For the purposes of this study, the definition of inclusive education was based on elements from UNESCO agreements (1994) and provincial policy documents (Saskatchewan Learning 2002):

> Inclusive education is defined as providing all children with the opportunity and supports to benefit from the educational program alongside their peers within general education classrooms in neighbourhood schools. An inclusive setting is a supportive, caring and responsive community where all students are included, regardless of socioeconomic status, cultural background, gender, sexual orientation, or abilities.

We further stipulated 'This project will focus on the inclusion of students with disabilities and students who are identified as having intensive needs'. Provincial legislation identifies a student with *intensive needs* as 'a pupil who has been assessed by a board of education … as having a capacity to learn that is compromised by a cognitive, social-emotional, behavioural or physical condition and includes students with a range of exceptional learning needs and identified disabilities' (*The Education Act* 1995, Subsection 178, subsection 1). We felt it was important to clearly articulate that the term 'inclusive' referred to all children. Students with intellectual and multiple disabilities and/or behaviour disorders continue to be vulnerable to exclusion (CMEC 2008) and are most likely to be educated in predominantly segregated settings (US Department of Education 2014). In addition, some studies report that teacher attitudes towards inclusion vary depending on the nature of the disability and that teachers are less positive about including students with behaviour disorders and intellectual and multiple disabilities (Avramadis and Norwich 2002; Subban & Sharma, 2006). Thus, we wanted to ensure that groups of students were not inadvertently excluded from the study based on the type and/or extent of disability.

Eight Elementary Schools were recommended by Directors from six different school divisions. The research team reviewed all submissions and contacted each setting to ensure that their understanding of 'inclusion' was consistent with that outlined in the letters of invitation and research proposal. Four schools were selected to include representation from a range of geographic and demographic settings within the recommended sites. Selected schools were from four different school divisions and were located in the southeast, central, and northwest regions of the province. Two schools were located in large urban centres, one within a rural town, and one within a small city. Grade levels within the schools varied and included Kindergarten to Grade 8, Prekindergarten to Grade 8, Kindergarten to Grade 6, and Prekindergarten to Grade 5. School enrollments ranged from 245 to 650 students and class sizes were typically in the range of 22–28.

School principals were provided with letters of information for parents and school personnel outlining the purpose of the project, what participation would involve, and inviting voluntary participation. Principals were asked to extend an invitation to students, parents, general education teachers, student support teachers (also referred to as *resource teachers* and *student services teachers*) in order to acquire a broad range of perspectives. A total of 68 participants were interviewed (see Table 1).

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews using appreciative questions were used to elicit participants' values, knowledge, and perspectives on inclusive practices within their respective schools. Interview

Table 1. Participants.

Schools	Parents	Students	General classroom teacher	Student support teachers	Educational assistants	Principals and assistant principals
School 1 (large urban community)	7	9	4	1	3	2
School 2 (large urban community)	4	6	6	2	3	1
School 3 (small urban community)	3		3	1		3
School 4 (rural community)	4	1	4*	1		2
Totals	18	16	15	5	6	8

Note: One general classroom teacher was also a parent and one general education teacher was also the vice principal; thus, the total number of participants was 68.

questions served as a guide and participants were also encouraged to share their experiences and viewpoints. Questions were worded positively and participants were asked a series of open-ended questions including (a) what participants find most meaningful or exciting within their work; (b) what they consider to be a 'high point' experience; (c) what they are most proud of; (d) what they feel is going well within the inclusive approach in their school; (e) what they think contributes to the success of inclusion in their school; and (f) what they value about the inclusive approach. They were also asked to describe an example of differentiated instruction that they felt worked particularly well.

Interviews were conducted within each school. Forty-five participants chose to be interviewed individually and nine interviews were conducted with pairs or small groups. The paired/group interviews were with parents, students, and in two situations, a student was accompanied and supported by an educational assistant. This included a student with autism and a student who required physical assistance. Interviews ranged from 10 minutes (some students) to 60 minutes (administrators).

Data analysis

All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. Data were analysed through multiple iterative cycles as outlined by Creswell (2013), Huberman and Miles (2002) and Roulston (2014). Data were grouped into roles for initial coding; that is, grade-level classroom teachers, support teachers, students, parents, educational assistants, and principals/assistant principals. A matrix of codes was developed to facilitate data aggregation, and verbatim text was transported into the coding framework to allow for ongoing thematic analysis of original text. Common themes were identified within roles followed by a second level of thematic analysis to identify themes that transcended roles. After identifying emerging themes, researchers examined the data to identify 'disruptions and contradictions' (Creswell 2013, 186) to be taken into consideration in thematic analysis. Analysis did not reveal major contradictions and any inconsistencies in responses are noted within the findings.

Investigator triangulation (Brantlinger et al. 2005) was used in the design of the study and throughout data collection, analysis, and interpretation. The three authors/researchers and two graduate research assistants maintained an audit trail of dates, times, locations of interviews as well as interviewers, interviewees and their roles. The research team engaged in repeated analytic discussion throughout the process to (a) review and compare initial codes and the coding process; (b) establish preliminary themes; (c) examine data for inconsistencies with the identified themes; (d) review and discuss matrices and revise coding framework as needed; and (e) review analysis and interpretation.

Findings

Analysis revealed central themes related to values and practices from the perspectives of participants. Firstly, learning and relationships were identified as the most meaningful and valued aspects of the school experience. Secondly, analysis revealed a strong commitment to inclusion at all levels. Thirdly, in terms of effective current practices, a predominant theme was classroom teacher responsibility for all students. Fourthly, all participants spoke extensively about the importance of a team approach to support students and each other. Finally, a predominant finding that permeated all themes was intentional individual and collective action to facilitate and strengthen commitment to inclusion, and to support effective practices at multiple levels. Findings reflecting this *collective agency* (Bandura 2000) are included within each of the four themes.

What is valued: learning and relationships

Teachers, educational assistants, and principals regarded student learning and progress as one of the most meaningful aspects of their work. Some teachers spoke about all student learning in general:

'I love getting the students excited about their learning and watching their confidence and their skills improve throughout the year'. Others also referred to the progress of students with exceptionalities and several attributed student progress to the inclusive approach. For example, one teacher commented 'I think that the best part is that sometimes you'll see abilities that you wouldn't have seen if you just based it on their diagnosis'.

Principals offered similar comments such as 'watching the kids, from when they were in kindergarten or grade two, to where they are now – in grade five and six. That has just been amazing to me'. Parents also spoke about their child's accomplishments at school with comments such as 'It's amazing what he's learning here' and 'He's so independent – it's just amazing some days how much he can do. . . . He learned so much and the kids just took him right in, and he's never looked back'.

While learning was clearly valued, comments on learning were frequently paired with, or embedded in, reference to the significance of relationships. Interviewees referred to a sense of 'belonging' for all students and relationships between and among all involved in the school experience. Teachers talked about prioritising interacting with students over 'the stack of paperwork on my desk' and made comments such as 'What I enjoy most and value most about teaching is the relationships I make with the people in my class' and 'Just that connection I have with them [students]; and making them all feel really important and valued. And we do that for each other'.

Parents and school personnel talked about the value of positive relationships among personnel and parents. As one principal summarised,

> It's not just about including the child; it's about welcoming the parents and families into this as well. And we couldn't do it without families' involvement. . . . It's just a critical part of everybody being welcomed into the school community.

Parents comments revealed that they indeed felt welcome within the schools and that the principal 'set the tone' for the school. They talked about principals being very 'approachable' and generally feeling comfortable with the principal and staff. Parents observed that school personnel 'just really make it their business to make the community of the school welcoming' and 'They're just so easy to be around. I'm not talking about one particular person here or there, I'm talking about everybody I've ever interacted with in this school'.

In addition to feeling welcome within the school, comments reflected respect and mutual trust between parents and school personnel. Parents made comments such as 'We've always gotten along well with everyone and had nothing but respect for what they do' and

> I think that everybody is approachable, everybody is open to suggestion. They trust me as the kid's mom and value my opinion and I, in return, value theirs, because they're with my kids a good chunk of the day and I have to trust that they're being well cared for and that's never, ever come into question … .I trust these guys – seriously – they know what they're doing and they know my kids.

Teachers, educational assistants, and principals also talked about the collegiality among staff: 'It's a great place to work' and 'We all really feel like we are a part of the team. No teacher feels like I'm in this by myself. No educational assistant feels like that'. They also talked about feeling valued: for example, an educational assistant talked about the warm atmosphere within the school and 'they [teachers] value what we do, and we value what they do, and I just think it's a mutual respect, I guess, between everyone'.

Student friendships and belonging

Extensive comments focused on the interactions and friendships among students and students' sense of belonging within the classrooms and schools. When students were asked to comment on what they liked about their school, they made some reference to activities, items, and subject areas; however, the predominant (and perhaps not surprising) response focused on friends: 'I like to have

friends', 'I like being able to hang out with my friends', 'I made a friend', 'the friends around me really help', and 'Me and my best friend played in the talent show'.

Parents also talked about the importance of friendships between their child and their peers as reflected in comments such as 'He does have a really good friend here, and he never had a good friend before so I would say that's a high point for him'. Several parents talked about the significance of their child being invited to birthday parties and one parent spoke about the lasting friendships her son developed:

> He has a fairly big class and they've had lots of new kids come over the years – and I've always thought, is this going to be the one that's going to upset the apple cart and say, 'Why do you hang around with him?' or 'Why do you invite him to your birthday?' But it wasn't like that – ever.

Staff talked about a sense of belonging within their classrooms in which students interacting and learning with their peers are simply the norm. As one educational assistant said, 'You watch the students interact with [student] and it's like there's nothing different. … It's something you don't even think about … To me, it's just like a normal day'. Similarly, a classroom teacher recounted:

> He only started after Christmas, and so he kind of joined this group right in the midstream, and to look over and see him and [peer] and [peer] sitting around at a desk chatting and passing each other stuff, just acting like normal kids. No weird thing going on; no EA having to hover over him and do the gluing for him; or no over solicitousness on behalf of the other kids that were working with him. He was just a part of the group.

Teachers referred to concerted efforts to facilitate interaction and relationships among students. 'I think I am good at fostering relationships between the kids. It is very important to me that they see each other as a family even if it's just for that one year that we have them altogether'. Educational assistants also observed that 'They [teachers] encourage the other students in the classroom to include that student in games, or group work, or whatever it might be, and the students are usually really willing to do that anyways'. Other teachers talked about the importance of partner and group work to facilitate interaction and relationships and several teachers also commented on having focused discussions regarding differences and friendships.

An interesting finding was that several interviewees from each school also gave credit to 'the kids in the school' for the sense of belonging within the classrooms and school. As one teacher commented, 'I feel like the kids don't leave people out because of differences or challenges, that they're very accepting and they're very helpful for those students. They find ways'. A teacher from another school commented 'The kids are so good with him. They genuinely care and it's so nice to see. It's not an act; they just care'. Several interviewees also commented on a sense of belonging within the community and one parent provided the following anecdote:

> The kids have been fantastic with him. I said to a parent one day how much I appreciate that group of kids and how wonderful they were with him and she said, 'Our kids have learned far more from [student] than he's ever learned from them.'

While many interviewees commented on the inclusiveness of the communities beyond the school, one principal also referred to the need for 'conversations' to educate the broader parental community and stressed the importance of being forthright yet maintaining relationships. 'You're educating not only the kids in the school; you're educating your broader parental community'. Another principal commented that when new students are enrolled, she makes a point of stating from the outset, that the school is inclusive and that parents can expect that their child's classroom will include children with a range of characteristics and needs.

Commitment to inclusion

Responses revealed a strong and unwavering commitment to inclusion in what was said and what was unsaid. When parents talked about their children, they often included information on the nature of their child's learning difficulties or disabilities, and school personnel made reference to a range of

exceptionalities. It became apparent that students with a wide range of needs were included and engaged within the regular instruction and activities of the classrooms and schools. Interview data were reviewed to determine whether any participants identified exceptions; that is, whether they commented that inclusion was not an appropriate or suitable option for some students. They did not: For these participants, it appeared that 'all children' meant all children. As one teacher stated:

> If I'm going to describe my class I wouldn't necessarily say 'I have two children with autism; I have one EAL and then 17 or 18 other students'. You don't talk about it like that. And I don't think anybody really does. I think that's what goes really well in our school because it's just the way it is.

Secondly, statements reflecting commitment to inclusion did not include the often-heard caveats related to time, resources, and training. In this study, with the exception of one interviewee, participants expressed strong support for inclusion and did not qualify that commitment. To be clear, participants spoke extensively about the importance of supports when discussing what is working well within their school. However, detailed analysis of comments revealed an absence of conditions; rather, inclusion was referred to as the 'norm' within the schools. Teachers, principals, and educational assistants made comments such as 'I think we see it as the norm. … The students don't see it as any other way and I think staff feel the same way', and 'It's so ingrained; it's just second nature. It would be nice to get to that point where you don't have to name inclusive education anymore – it's just education'.

Teachers and principals acknowledged that there may be challenges; however, potential issues were not used to question or negate the value of an inclusive approach; rather, responses reflected a commitment to joint problem solving to 'make it work' and doing 'whatever it takes'.

> I guess just that we all kind of work together and we, you know, if something goes well, we discuss it at the end of the day, or if it's not going well, we discuss and say, 'How can we change this?'

Parents also acknowledged the staff commitment to resolving concerns: 'No one's ever said, 'No, we can't do this', or 'No, we can't try this'. And I think that's huge' and 'Everybody, over the past couple of years that we've been at the school has just been amazing. Like they bend over backwards trying to find ideas'.

Analysis revealed that commitment was facilitated and strengthened from various and often multiple sources: through school division policy and direction; principal leadership within each school; parent and teacher advocacy; and by teachers who shared effective inclusive practices with each other, supported each other, and solved problems together. For example, one principal referred to a conversation she had as a teacher over a decade ago in which she challenged the current practice of educating students with disabilities in separate classes. In that same school, some interviewees related that commitment to inclusion was fostered through fortuitous circumstances. A teacher in the school who had a son with an intellectual disability wanted to have her son educated with his peers. Staff rallied to support their colleague and student, and the ensuing success of the student and teachers further strengthened their collective efficacy and conviction to include all students. In another school, teachers and the principal commented on a core group of teachers who advocated for an inclusive approach and shared instructional practices with their colleagues. As one student support teacher said 'We have some really phenomenal teachers here that help get it going'. Similarly, a principal commented on the need to 'seek out passionate people and support them and fire them up and make their passion and their visibility very evident and then that would become contagious'.

Participants from two schools referred to school division policy and, in one school, teachers and the principal referred to a division 'induction programme' that provides the opportunity to 'cultivate the beliefs of the division with regards to inclusion'. However, the main emphasis appeared to be on principal and teacher leadership within the schools to facilitate, strengthen, and maintain commitment to an inclusive approach. As one principal commented, 'Even though the Division has articulated [inclusion], it's still on me to come back to my school, and it's still on me to ensure that it's happening in my building'. Many participants referred to the principal's commitment to inclusion

and how that influences staff perspectives; for example, a support teacher commented 'When [the principal] believes in it like she does, you can't help but pick up on her enthusiasm. It's contagious'. Similarly, a teacher from another school commented 'If you know that your administrators value [inclusion], and if that's important to them, I think you, as a teacher, strive to also make it. I think that really sets a tone'.

Analysis of principal responses did indeed reveal a clear and unrelenting commitment from all principals and assistant principals as reflected in the following sample comments: 'I think that the best thing I can say is it's an expectation. It's not, '*If* we do this', it's '*When* we do it' and 'We can always be improving – I'm not saying we're there. But it's just – We are a team. Period. We are inclusive. Period. And let's just do it'.

Findings revealed that administrators' clear expectations for inclusion were paired with deep respect and support for teachers and an appreciation of the work that staff do to educate students with a range of needs and abilities within their classrooms. As one principal commented: 'I believe in every single person in this building; that they are here for the right reasons, and that we're all here to do our job, and that we need to help each other out'. Respect for teachers was also reflected in the following principal's comment:

> I appreciate the incredible passion that adults here have for kids and for this community and for their own ongoing learning. I am just many days still stunned by it. The lengths that they go to to establish authentic and credible relationships with kids and with parents and caring for families, and beyond just the educational curriculum but really caring for them in every way and advocating for students and relying on one another … . And when you get teachers congregating in the hallway after school to talk about something new they tried that may have gone well or talking about what all of them in Grade 1 might want to try the next day as some new activity; I just have a deep appreciation for the professionalism in this building.

What is going well?

Participants were asked for their perspectives on what is going well within their school and why they think it is going well. Analyses of responses revealed overarching themes of classroom teacher responsibility in the context of team work characterised by a belief in their collective capability to be successful.

General education teacher responsibility

When participants were asked what was going well within their school, many commented that all students are in the regular classroom for the majority, if not all, of their day. However, comments went beyond simply referring to location and revealed that classroom teachers consider all students to be part of the class and that differentiating instruction is integral to their job as a teacher:

> Everyone can learn and there's always a way for them to do it. It might look different from the way the other people are doing it but there's always a way and you just have to kind of figure it out.
> I think it's just that feeling of being in your class and doing a lesson and having the follow-up activities and looking around and realizing that every child is getting it one way or another. So I supplied them with the differentiated aspects that they needed in order for them to get it, but everybody's kind of all learning at the same time. And that's a really good feeling. That's the time where, you know, okay, I'm doing my job here. We're getting it.

While some teachers acknowledged and appreciated the support they receive to design instruction for students with diverse needs, others referred to teaching in an inclusive classroom as simply a part of good teaching. As one middle years teacher stated,

> This isn't a special thing that we're doing. This isn't a big event. … This is a normal classroom with normal things happening between kids who are feeling normal even though they probably don't feel like that most of the time. Those are the moments that I enjoy.

Teacher responsibility for instruction and active engagement with all students was also acknowledged by those who are in the classrooms; that is, students, educational assistants, and principals.

As one student commented: 'He [teacher] explains things nicely in class. He doesn't judge people for the way they are'. Another related that the teacher 'comes to me and calms me down'. Yet another student explained

> He's really good at teaching the subject. Like, if you don't understand something, he would go, like, out of his way to, like, make sure that you get it. Like on Thursdays he has, like, math help and stuff. So, yeah, he actually takes the time to spend some time with us.

While the classroom teachers who were interviewed expressed a sense of responsibility for teaching all students within their class, two principals also acknowledged that there are exceptions and teachers who are 'still learning'. Two principals referred to having individual 'conversations' with teachers as needed to promote acceptance of an inclusive approach. For example, one principal related a past conversation with a teacher who objected to having a child who was disruptive within the classroom:

> I've had teachers who have been less than eager on some of the things that we've done … and some of the change hasn't always been easily accepted. I got the comment, 'Why is this child in my classroom when he is disrupting the learning of others?' and I said, 'That's why we have supports, but they're not working right now if that's your view, so let's get on this; let's figure it out', and we can usually make it work.

Principals also spoke of the importance of supporting teachers through challenges that they may experience and referred to inclusion as an ongoing process:

> I think you need to walk that walk with them. You can't just say, 'Yeah, okay, check in on Friday'. You need to be there with them and understand how difficult it might be. And give them permission to ask questions and to not know … give them permission to understand that we don't have to learn this overnight, that there are going to be challenges that will be encountered and we'll learn from those and we'll continue to get better and to review where you've been and how far you've come.

Team approach

When interviewees were asked what was working well and their thoughts on why it is working well, the use of a team approach emerged as the dominant theme. Personnel talked about mutual support, sharing ideas, and solving problems together; parents and personnel commented on authentic parent engagement; and all participants made reference to principal leadership to facilitate team interaction and access resources.

We can do it together. Participants from all roles within the four schools commented that they felt supported by their colleagues and that they were able to tap into, and contribute to, a collective expertise among school personnel. As one principal stated 'Everybody's here to help you. Everybody has experiences from another year; things that work, things that don't, and we all try to share so that it helps everybody'. Classroom teachers talked about accessing support from their colleagues and working together:

> You can't do it all on your own, there's no sense in reinventing the wheel. We have so many different teachers that come from different backgrounds and have done so many things that I think it's so important to take advantage of the fact that we're not all the same and we all do things differently and we all have something to offer.

While teachers acknowledged potential challenges, they were not regarded as prohibitive. Comments throughout the interviews reflected individual and collective agency to seek and share ideas and information and that 'everybody is just such a resource for each other', and 'I think everybody's on the same level that we're all open-minded into learning something new and bounce ideas off each other'. They talked about observing each other, sharing practices, and 'hammering out strategies' together. As one teacher said 'We're always trying different things. We're always saying, 'Okay, this isn't working. What can we do differently?' In one school, several staff commented on their collective success with students with behaviour disorders and, as the principal said 'I don't

know that anybody leaves after teaching here for a year without knowing a whole lot about behaviour because we do behaviour well here'.

Participants expressed confidence in their collective efficacy; that is, they felt that *together* they could work through challenges and identify practices that would work best for their students. As participants spoke about their collective capability in meeting student needs, it became evident that parents were considered to be part of the team and that concerted efforts were made to involve parents in authentic and meaningful ways.

Meaningful parent involvement in the team approach. Analysis of responses revealed that parents feel they are meaningfully engaged in the team approach for developing and implementing educational programmes for their children; that there is reciprocity in sharing information on student characteristics and effective strategies; and that ongoing communication is central to facilitating mutual trust. Parents indicated that they had a voice in developing goals for their child and in solving any problems that may arise: 'I was happy that the school let me kind of decide, and decided with me, what would be best for him. So that really meant a lot to me and for his learning'.

Parent and teachers spoke about the open and ongoing communication. Parents made statements such as: 'The communication is really strong with this school'; 'There didn't seem to be any boundary with that communication. It was very open and honest and I was thankful for that', and 'What contributes to the success of his education would be the fact that administration and the teachers want the home information. They want the communication. They never, ever seem rushed, and I know they're busy'.

Teachers also commented on the value of open communication with parents in terms of gathering information and developing a trusting relationship:

> I think that collaborative feedback is so important and then you can have that relationship where they trust you. They trust your judgment. They trust that when their child comes to school everyday, that you are going to offer them the exact same opportunities that you're offering other kids. And I think that's so important to be able to allow them to know that it's okay, and that you get to just let go for that seven hours of the day and she's going to be okay or he's going to be okay.

Teachers and parents spoke about the importance of sharing their perspectives openly and acknowledged that they may need to work through differences in opinion to arrive at solutions. As one parent commented,

> You have to have a good relationship with the teacher, regardless of whether you like them or not. I don't always agree with them, but they're gonna know that so that we can work on something that we both agree on.

Similarly, a teacher commented

> I have to also be open to compromising what I think needs to be done. But when you have somebody who is willing to meet you half way and work together, then the probability for their kids being successful is so much better and your job gets so much easier.

Finally, one principal summarised the importance of family partnerships and communication:

> If we close our doors, we don't communicate, we don't send home regular updates on their children, then the parents are sort of lost and don't know what's going on with their children. You can't do it without them. And I don't think that they always appreciate how important their role is. And so, you need to have that collaborative relationship with your parents to be successful in what you're doing with the kids.

Range of supports. Interviewees commented on a range of supports within the school, Division, and community including (a) education support teachers, (b) educational assistants, (c) speech/language pathologists, (d) occupational therapists, (e) behaviour consultants, (f) general 'Division supports', and (g) availability of material resources.

Some respondents expressed an appreciation for specific supports within the school such as the education support teachers and educational assistants. Some spoke about the value of Division

supports such as occupational therapists, speech/language pathologists, and consultants. Others referred to coaches and mentors within the school division; for example:

> And then, within the division, there are coaches and mentors who are all very experienced teachers who have moved on to that position, who you can just email and say 'We're working on sentences and he's not getting it. I need some tips. What can I do?' And I get an email back with attachment after attachment of tips, things to try.

Similarly a new teacher referred to the value of meeting with other beginning teachers and Division mentors and coaches:

> When I first got here we had lots of days where we were able to go to Central with all the other beginning teachers in the division and work on lesson planning, and that's with these coaches and mentors. And in those moments, you can say, 'How can I differentiate this?'

It was interesting to note that, in the above two examples, classroom teachers were able to go beyond the traditional special education support personnel to explore options and instructional strategies for meeting the needs of students with exceptionalities. Similarly, participants in one school reported that each new teacher is provided with a teacher mentor within their school so that help is 'just down the hallway'. Further review and analysis of data revealed that, in two schools in particular, discussions on meeting the needs of students with disabilities were no longer entrenched within the roles of traditional special education personnel; rather, meeting the needs of students with exceptionalities appeared to be within the purview of personnel who are typically associated with curriculum and effective pedagogy in general.

Finally, participants acknowledged the role of the principal in accessing supports for students and teachers within the school and principals also indicated that they felt it was their 'job' to acquire supports for students and teachers. For example, one principal commented that when staff comes up with ideas, 'my job is to figure out how to make them happen'. Another principal summarised, 'Find good people and support them; give them money; get them what they need. We try to give them time'. The principal role in facilitating meeting time is further elaborated in the following section.

Structures to facilitate team interaction. Teachers, educational assistants, and principals referred to a range of team structures. Participants talked about working together to support individual students and typically referred to teams that included the classroom teacher, support teacher, parents, educational assistant and other supports who may be directly involved. In addition, participants in one school described a School Intervention Team that includes an administrator, counsellor, and teachers from a range of grade levels. Teachers reported that they are asked to do a survey of their class to assess how students are doing academically and socially to identify students who may be of concern. Then 'you can take your information and talk about a strategy'. Teachers in two schools also referred to weekly *Grade-Alike* and *Grade level* meetings to discuss a range of topics including planning, marking, grouping and sharing concerns such as 'Okay, I have a really low group of readers that I'm struggling with. How can I include them into the general class? What have you been doing?' Again, it was interesting to note that conversations about students who are having difficulties were embedded within discussions of teaching in general.

Teachers and principals also talked about team work for transition planning; for example, a principal described the process of having the sending teachers (e.g. Grade 2 teachers) meet and discuss class compositions for the receiving (e.g. Grade 3) teachers. Once they know who 'next year's teacher' will be, they provide opportunities for in-class observations and discussion between teachers.

Throughout the interviews, it became clear that teachers in all schools spend time talking and sharing ideas with each other as well as with educational assistants and parents. Participants talked about ongoing informal discussions and also referred to regularly scheduled meetings with student-centred teams, grade-level meetings, and support teacher meetings. In all schools, principals have a primary role in developing 'creative' arrangements and 'freeing up' teachers and educational assistants during the day. These included (a) having the principal and assistant principal cover classes;

(b) part-time teachers who teach across grade levels to provide teacher release time; (c) scheduling release time for educational assistants so that they can participate in meetings; and (d) using a portion of staff professional development funds to provide coverage so that teachers can learn from, and with, each other. One principal reported that they developed the master schedule so that grade-level teams can meet once every six-day cycle. As she explained, this was made possible through some teacher coverage as well as flexibility within the administrators' schedules so that one may be free to attend the meeting as needed, and the other may provide some class coverage. As principals talked about the challenges of scheduling, it became apparent that it can be a daunting task; however, as one principal concluded

> I had a principal once say to me, 'You have to be a master at scheduling'. Like that's a big thing but totally worth it – totally worth it – because they function better as a team in the classroom which means they're better for students. So the time is well spent.

Discussion

As researchers and educators with over 70 years of collective experience in inclusive education, we admit to feeling considerable frustration over lagging implementation particularly in contexts with common policies, funding structures, and demographics. Within some schools and school divisions, there appears to be a choice to maintain a segregated (specialised) approach while others choose to move forward. Our interest was in exploring the values, perspectives, and experiences of key stakeholders in inclusive schools. Rather than beginning with perceived problems of inclusion, we elected to adopt a positive stance within AI; that is, to explore perspectives on what is going well and why it is going well. This is not an attempt to deny, dismiss, or minimise the challenges of inclusion. We contend that, within the extensive research and literature on inclusion, there is space and need to explore positivity and success.

We interviewed participants across varying roles and settings to access multiple perspectives, yet we found some remarkable consistencies in beliefs and practices. When participants were asked about meaningful and 'high point' school experiences, they identified learning and relationships. Although some children provided very brief answers, a common response was that they like to be with their friends and they like teachers who help them. Parents, teachers, principals, and educational assistants shared common goals of wanting their children/students to learn to the best of their ability, to be happy at school, to have friends, and to feel a sense of belonging within the classroom and school community. Congruence in underlying values and beliefs is profound in its clarity. Most notably, these values were not limited on the basis of student characteristics or dis/abilities; rather participants clearly expressed commitment to learning and relationships for *all* students *together*. Further, findings revealed individual and, perhaps more importantly, collective intentional actions that reflected these underlying values and beliefs.

Participants' comments on what was working well within their schools were generally consistent with the literature on key elements of successful inclusion: clear vision and shared commitment (Capper and Frattura 2009; Hehir and Katzman 2012), classroom teacher responsibility (Florian and Spratt 2013; Stanovich and Jordan 2004), a collaborative team approach that includes authentic parent engagement and a range of supports (Idol 2006; McLeskey et al. 2014), and principal leadership (McLeskey et al. 2014; Riehl 2000). In terms of specific techniques and strategies to facilitate inclusion, our data revealed little that is *new*. What *is* new and noteworthy within these findings is individual and collective agency. Participants did not talk about discovering new methods to enact inclusion; they talked about what they *do* and perhaps more importantly, what they do *together*.

Participant comments and stories included examples of individual and collective agency across all themes. Given the centrality of intentionality in human agency (Bandura 2001), we begin with a discussion of the commitment to inclusion. Findings did not reveal a single linear path in the

development and enacting of commitment to inclusion within the four schools. Rather, there was evidence of *multicasuality* (Bandura 2001); codetermination of action from individual, group, and structural influences to develop vision and strengthen commitment throughout the process. Within each school, agency appeared to stem from an interrelated combination of three or more of the following: (a) strong principal commitment; (b) teachers who challenged past approaches to educating students separately; (c) teachers who entered the profession expecting that they would teach all students; (d) parent advocacy; (e) principal-led staff discussions and targeted conversations; (f) teachers who appeared to be adept at flexible planning and instruction to engage students of varying abilities and who shared with, and supported colleagues; (g) individual student success that strengthened beliefs in personal and collective efficacy; (h) school division policy and direction; and (i) division mentors and coaches who promoted division inclusive philosophy and embedded support and guidance for inclusive education within broader curricular areas and general pedagogy. Moreover, commitment was strengthened through engagement. Teachers and administrators commented that, as individual teachers demonstrated successful practices within their classrooms, the expectation for inclusion was strengthened. It became difficult for other teachers to argue that a particular student would not benefit from their class when they had been successfully included in the general education classroom the previous year. This pressure was paired with support from fellow teachers, education support teachers, principals, and, in some situations, educational assistants.

Participants spoke optimistically about their ability to successfully work through problems and develop solutions together. Their belief in their collective efficacy was most evident in discussions of teaching practices and practices to change or modify student behaviour. Teachers reported a myriad of examples of effective instructional practices within their classrooms and spoke about sharing practices with their colleagues, learning from and with each other, supporting each other, and, when problems arose, working through the issues and developing solutions together. At this juncture, it is important to note that critics of AI may suggest that the methodology may inadvertently neglect problems (Grant and Humphries 2006). Participants acknowledged problems and challenges and corroborated the contention that teachers working *together* can develop, implement, and share innovative strategies suited to their local contexts (Ainscow and Miles 2008; Datnow 2012). Parents also felt that they were engaged as authentic partners in the team approach and played an integral role in sharing ideas, developing goals, and solving problems. Finally, similar to other reports on inclusive schools (Hehir and Katzman 2012; Hoppey and McLeskey 2010), principals facilitated and supported the team approach through providing encouragement and support for teachers and families, helping the team access resources and a range of supports, facilitating team structures and scheduling time for teams to meet, and ongoing communication at all levels.

The literature on inclusive education increasingly and historically emphasises the need for transformation of educational systems to focus on effective instruction for all students (Ainscow 2005; Artiles and Kozleski 2007; McLeskey et al. 2014). In two schools in particular, participants made comments that reflected a shift in thinking and practice: from inclusion as a special education responsibility to discussion of effective teaching for all students. Teachers talked about improving practices through discussions with classroom teacher colleagues, curriculum consultants, coaches, and mentors in addition to personnel in traditional special education roles. Similarly, comments on collective efficacy and collective agency reflected a shift from teaching as a solitary practice to teachers working with each other, families, educational assistants, and administrators. Finally, as participants spoke about effective practices and successfully working through problems and challenges, there was a discernible sense of optimism. Participants spoke about inclusion as a way of being: 'just second nature', 'simply a part of good teaching', 'just a normal day', and 'the way it's always been', rather than a problem to be solved. Although the inclusive techniques and practices may not have been new, we found such attitudes refreshingly so.

The findings from this study illuminate the central importance of individual and collective agency in advancing inclusive education; indeed, progress and change are not possible without action. The schools in this study were nominated by their directors as school that have been successful in

implementing an inclusive approach and, although some participants acknowledged that inclusive education is a work in progress, they had already experienced success individually and collectively. Further research is needed to examine the development of personal and collective efficacy and exercise of individual and collective agency as schools move from traditional segregated practices to inclusive education. The complete 4-D cycle of AI may be applied as a framework for change and a research methodology to: (a) explore core values and beliefs and examine what is working well within existing arrangements; (b) envision an inclusive school that builds on strengths; (c) co-construct a plan of action that addresses challenges; and (d) implement and sustain inclusive practices. While it has been suggested that the appreciative approach may silence critical voices (Barge and Olvier 2003), do we not also need to question whether deficit discourses may stifle optimism and impede creativity? As we move forward, equipped with a wide array of successful practices for inclusive education and extensive analysis of barriers and challenges, is there not room to consider positivity and optimism as levers for change?

Funding

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