

K–12 Administration of Inclusive Schools in Canada: A Literature Review of Expectations and Qualifications of Formal School Leaders

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Abstract

The formal educational requirements for principals in Canada vary significantly between educational jurisdictions. Principals are typically unprepared to lead inclusive schools upon graduation from educational leadership programs, despite the importance of formal education and experience in inclusive education in order to lead inclusive schools. Being unprepared includes lacking knowledge about students with exceptionalities and how they can and should be accommodated. Whether administrators value and support inclusion is imperative to schools being inclusive. Support of inclusion can include the use of teachers' varied and extensive skill set through distributed leadership. The utilization of a leadership style focused on distributed leadership can be addressed through educational leadership programs, but also through professional development programs such as locally developed programs on mentorship. Educational leadership programs need to change in order to develop leaders for inclusive schools. Until such change occurs, principals are in significant need of professional development on inclusive education and how to lead inclusive schools.

School principals, also known as school administrators, have a number of responsibilities. Of these responsibilities, the most important involve supervision of curriculum delivered by classroom teachers in their schools (Cobb, 2015). Given the importance of their role, it is worth examining whether school administrators possess the qualifications and expertise to carry out those duties as they apply to inclusion on a day-to-day basis.

Educational Jurisdiction

There is no federal department of education in Canada, where K–12 education is a provincial or territorial responsibility (Cobb, 2015; Constitution Act, 1982; Graham & Winzer, 2011; Yarhi, 2016). Consequently, each Canadian jurisdiction, understood as the ten provinces and three territories, is tasked with establishing regulations and policies regarding all things education, including what constitutes special education and what steps schools and school districts must take to ensure the educational needs of students with exceptionalities are met. The sole exception to this jurisdictional oversight is First Nations schools, for which funding and educational quality has traditionally been overseen by the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (Assembly of First Nations, 2012), now Indigenous Services Canada (Government of Canada, 2019). Each educational jurisdiction is tasked with the responsibility of establishing the criteria and educational threshold required for being a school principal. The principal, in turn, is tasked with overseeing the educational programming of students with exceptionalities because this is considered curriculum delivery, an educational responsibility under the administrative umbrella.

In a number of jurisdictions, policies and regulations outline the responsibilities of the principal when it comes to students with exceptionalities. *Principal*, a term used interchangeably with *administrator* and *building administrator*, refers to the person “responsible for the implementation of educational programs” at the individual school level (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 18). For definitional purposes, *principal* also refers to the role of vice-principal, since principals and vice-principals can have overlapping responsibilities. Policies and regulations include ensuring in-school support is available (Nova Scotia Department of Education, 2008; Ontario Ministry of Education, 2017), sometimes specified as being provided by specialist teachers (Alberta Education, 2004; British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2016). Throughout this article, *inclusion* is understood as students with exceptionalities not only having access to education “but to active and productive involvement” in their education, with the required supports to make this a success (Bennett, 2009, p. 2), which includes “meaningful participation and the promotion of interaction with others” (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2016, p. 2). Some consider inclusion “as special education renamed,” although the concept arguably presents definitional challenges and has been subject to debate (Florian, 2014, p. 287). *Special education*, on the other hand, is often used synonymously with inclusion but does not necessarily constitute active and productive involvement. Instead, special education is focused on educational programming for students whose needs necessitate “resources different from those which are needed by most students” (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2016, p. vi), without an emphasis on the active and productive involvement associated with inclusion.

This article examines expectations of principals in inclusive schools, current educational requirements for principals in Canada, and whether the training that prospective administrators receive in educational leadership programs is sufficient to successfully lead inclusive schools, given the role administrators play in successful or unsuccessful inclusion. Finally, the implications of these findings are discussed, along with recommendations for future research.

Expectations of Administrators: The Importance of Formal Training

Administrators are a crucial piece in the attempt to create inclusive schools in which the needs of students with exceptionalities are met (Bateman, Gervais, Wysocki, & Cline, 2017; Billingsley, McLeskey, & Crockett, 2014; DiPaola, Tschannen-Moran, & Walther-Thomas, 2004; Pazez & Cole, 2012; Waldron, McLeskey, & Redd, 2011) and administrators must have a solid understanding of inclusion in order to adequately lead inclusive schools (Lyons, 2016). Consequently, the extent to which schools adhere to the principles of inclusive education depend on the leadership of local principals and whether they support inclusion in their leadership style. Without the support of the ultimate decision-maker in the school, inclusion is unlikely to be established.

Powell's (2009) assertion was even more critical, arguing that effective principals must know and understand not only special education law but also its policies and how to practically implement these in their schools. Howell (2016) stressed the crucial role administrators play in ensuring inclusive practices take hold, and highlighted the importance of both attitudes and behavior. This is an important distinction, emphasizing the need to *walk the walk* in addition to *talking the talk*, which is also essential (Jorgensen, McSheehan, Schuh, & Sonnenmeier, 2012). While an argument can be made that actions speak louder than words and that leading by example can be successful, Howell found that a combination of the two worked best, and that these are key competencies for principals to possess.

Bateman et al. (2017) conducted a literature review on important competencies for principals and highlighted the competencies of building relationships and having a vision for the leadership. While leadership styles come and go, distributed or shared leadership has been promoted as leadership that involves more people in the decision-making process working together as a whole to make sound decisions (Spillane, 2005) and that can be linked to increased student achievements (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2020; Heck & Hallinger, 2009; Leithwood & Mascall, 2008). There is also a meaningful connection to be made between distributed leadership and the leadership of inclusive schools: If the purpose is to establish an environment that is safe, inclusive, and educationally sound for disabled and non-disabled students alike, teachers should be included in the process. Excluding teachers from the decision-making process, unintentionally or not, to shape a more inclusive school should be avoided (Howell, 2016). Inclusion in this sense is a more significant endeavour seeking to ensure all members of the school community are included, such as students of various ethnic and cultural backgrounds, various sexual orientations, and various socio-economic backgrounds—wider than inclusion of disability (Sider, Morvan, Maich, Specht, & McGhie-Richmond, in press). When the whole community is engaged and included as the proverbial village needed to raise a child, this serves to develop inclusive schools and classrooms, together.

Being an administrator supportive of inclusion is thus tied to ensuring effective instruction for all students. However, without the knowledge of what students with exceptionalities may need and how these children can be supported, students with exceptionalities are unlikely to be held to the same academic standards as neurotypical students. A defeatist attitude that would involve settling for “good enough” because the student is exceptional would work counter to the inclusive philosophy, and counter to that

of a “no excuses” policy (Lyons, 2016). Without at least a basic knowledge of how students with specific exceptionalities learn and what they are capable of, an administrator would be hard pressed to not fall into such a trap of good enough, rather than setting high, yet achievable, expectations for students with exceptionalities (Templeton, 2017). Furthermore, Abawi, Bauman-Buffone, Pinda-Báez, and Carter (2018) completed a study comparing inclusive practices in Australia, Columbia, and Canada, more specifically Ontario. They found that the Canadian school in the study placed a significant focus on ensuring all students were included and placed at the centre of decision making. The motto of the school, “All Students Can Succeed” (Abawi et al., 2018, p. 8), was a motto in which the principal of the school took immense pride. Having the inclusive attitude as part of a school’s motto is an important indicator of an inclusive school (Jorgensen et al., 2012). Teaching staff members at the Canadian school studied by Abawi et al. also expressed strong support for such an approach, one expressing that the attitude was “engrained” within them. While it is beyond the focus of this article to explore school improvement or processes to make schools more inclusive, it is worth noting that the process of changing or enhancing the culture and attitude of a school is one that takes time (Mortimer, 1988). Nevertheless, the principals in the schools discussed by Abawi et al. (2018) saw it as their responsibility to ensure that teachers were both engaged in practising inclusive education, which required a commitment of the whole school, through shared leadership. Contributing to—and sharing in—the decision making allowed teachers to be part of the community that made decisions and gave ownership over decisions made for the support of students. By clearly valuing and genuinely encouraging teachers to participate in the leadership processes regarding inclusive practices and inclusive classrooms, the principals in Abawi et al.’s study enabled teachers to gain ownership over the process and the practices to enact in their own classrooms. The practice of shared leadership was also evident through how the school implemented Universal Designs for Learning (Katz & Sokal, 2016): While the process was led by the principal as the formal educational leader of the school, the implementation was carried out by teachers at the school, who worked and planned together through collaboration, all made possible by the principal (Abawi et al., 2018).

Given the effectiveness of collaboration between educators, administrators must know that properly supporting children with exceptionalities involves a team, and that such a team requires collaboration time to plan the best and most suitable instruction and to measure the progress made through this instruction (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; Lyons, 2016; Mendels, 2012; Pazez & Cole, 2012; Waldron et al., 2011). Creating a climate of collaboration requires an active process (Bertrand, Roberts, & Dalton, 2009; Billingsley et al., 2014), another responsibility of the principal. While efforts to ensure a collaborative climate may seem to fall outside the need for specific training in special education, it is important to note that principals also have to be aware of the immense workload and caseloads of special education teachers (Billingsley, 2004; Loeb, Elfers, Knapp, Plecki, & Boatright, 2004). Inasmuch as special education teachers are considered specialists with a valuable and specific skill set not possessed by classroom teachers, this puts a premium on the specialists’ time. An inclusive principal would have to recognize this specific skill set and ensure that specialist teachers’ time is not spent primarily on administrative and clerical tasks. Such tasks include the paperwork

associated with filing Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and diagnostic documentation for compliance purposes, which can easily happen unless there is support for spending time primarily on developing programs and delivery of service (Billingsley et al., 2014). Leading an inclusive school would thus require a concise and clearly developed vision for what an inclusive school should look like and be (Lyons, 2016; S. Sider, personal communication, December 5, 2018). In fact, Billingsley et al. (2014) argued that principals are responsible for establishing the vision, and consequently the direction, for their schools and also for ensuring teachers are working toward fulfilling this vision in their work (see also Waldron et al., 2011).

One way the school vision can be established is by fostering the critical development and nurturing of specific skills needed to effectively teach current and anticipated students with exceptionalities. School principals thus require extensive knowledge not only about the current skill sets of classroom teachers in the building (Mendels, 2012), but also about the needs of current and future students (Bertrand et al., 2009; Waldron et al., 2011). Merging the two would be a way to develop and grow a culture of inclusion (Billingsley et al., 2014) and building the skill set of classroom teachers to ensure successful inclusion can take place. However, without knowledge and understanding about students with exceptionalities and a cohesive staff that is also working toward inclusion, a culture of inclusion is unlikely to come to fruition.

Any Experience Matters

Despite the situations depicted above, there is evidence to suggest that even small exposures to special education in administrator preparation programs can improve principals' abilities and comfort level around special education (Angelle & Bilton, 2009), and a broad, varied, and relevant teaching experience has also proven beneficial (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013). Emerging research also points to unique critical incidents that principals experience with individual students and to how such situations can be crucial in shaping and changing principals' perception of inclusive education for the better (Sider, Maich, & Morvan, 2017). Any events or experiences that can enhance principals' understanding of inclusive education are crucial because principals themselves have indicated they require an essential understanding of special education rules and regulations, as well as how special education programming can be implemented (Templeton, 2017). Knowing rules and regulations might be important in order to avoid lawsuits because Canadian jurisdictions are by no means immune to legal action, as lawsuits based on human rights violations of not providing adequate educational support have demonstrated (see for instance *Moore v. British Columbia*, 2012). A solid understanding of the law may be important, but knowledge and skills around special education procedures and guidelines might be more valuable in order to effectively serve students with exceptionalities. Principals with thorough knowledge and skills from the field of special education use these skills to serve students with exceptional needs, which leads to more involvement and consequently builds trust between schools and the exceptional students' families (Templeton, 2017; see also Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013). By using these skills and continually supporting teachers by shielding them from distractions, caring for them individually, and supporting individual professional progress (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013), principals can foster

further growth among both classroom teachers and themselves so that they become comfortable and competent to educate students with exceptionalities. However, if principals lack specific skills in special education, these professionals are unlikely to know what students, both current and future, will require, and be ill-prepared to identify what the classroom teachers in the building require for skills and support when working with exceptional students. Any attempt at fostering growth among classroom teachers in such a setting is unlikely to be fruitful.

The Importance of Specific Training and Skills

Despite indications that continuous information gathering and exposure to critical incidents assist principals' understanding of inclusive education, the need for a specific skill set remains. Duncan (2010) explored the skill set needed for leading an inclusive school and found that principals who demonstrated exceptional leadership in special education knew how to participate in the IEP process, were able to collaborate with families, used data to drive decisions, and carefully planned for student supports and their delivery. She argued that these themes encompass having both leadership skills and the pedagogical knowledge to support the education of both exceptional and neurotypical students. Others (Dickenson, 2017; Florian & Black-Hawkins, 2011; Friesen & Cuning, 2018; Kurniawati, de Boer, Minnaert, & Mangunsong, 2017) have demonstrated that a belief that all students can learn is crucial for successful school inclusion, and the culture that fosters such a mindset starts with the principal (Sider et al., 2017).

Even with this skill set and mindset, however, no administrator can know everything. Like any skilled person, principals, including those well versed in special education, must know and understand their own limitations and make educated decisions about when to rely on the skills of specialist teachers such as special education teachers (Templeton, 2017), as long as such a decision does not entail a complete shift in responsibilities, from the formal school leader to the specialist teacher (Pazey & Cole, 2012).

Shifting the responsibility to special education teachers may be associated with the view of the principals in Templeton's (2017) study, described as having typical skills and knowledge around special education, who viewed special education as a last resort and hoped to avoid referring students for special education services. Viewing special education as a last resort demonstrates a lack of understanding regarding the rights of students to access education, but also regarding accommodations that ought to be provided in order for students to access their education. If students present signs of having learning difficulties and referrals for a psycho-educational assessment could identify these learning challenge and accompanying means to address them, it would be morally and ethically questionable to not refer them for special education services. The importance of such knowledge once again illustrates the need for a thorough education in special education for administrators. Bertrand et al. (2009) suggested that new building administrators must familiarize themselves with the needs of students with exceptionalities, their educational programming, and how they are progressing toward goals set forth for them in their IEPs. Without at least some background from special education, it would be extremely challenging for new principals to accomplish this goal.

As summarized by Pазzy and Cole (2012), providing equal educational opportunities for all students necessitates a thorough understanding of the needs of students with exceptionalities. Most principals could benefit from enhanced skills in these areas, which would serve them well in developing a culture of inclusion in their schools.

Principal Training in Canada

The qualifications required for school principals vary from jurisdiction to jurisdiction in Canada. Each jurisdiction sets its own requirements, and there are no federal standards outlining qualifications or the level of education required to be a principal, since K–12 education is the responsibility of individual provinces and territories (Constitution Act, 1982; Graham & Yarhi, 2016). Jurisdictional differences in required qualifications range from possessing a valid teaching certificate, such as Saskatchewan and Yukon (Government of Yukon, 2020; Saskatchewan Teachers' Federation, 2020) and some years of successful teaching experience, from three years and up, such as British Columbia, Quebec (English language schools), although graduate degrees in educational leadership are often required in these jurisdictions despite not being a formal government requirement (British Columbia School Act, 1996; S. Murphy, personal communication, December 5, 2018; Québec Ministère de l'Éducation, 2000). Other jurisdictions, namely Alberta, and Nunavut, require their principals to hold a valid teaching certificate and/or complete a locally developed program in order to hold the position of principal (Government of Alberta, 2019; Nunavut Department of Education, n.d.).

Manitoba requires principals to have a minimum of three years of successful teaching experience; New Brunswick and the Northwest Territories, five. All three jurisdictions require the completion of a locally developed program, while Manitoba also requires principal to complete post-baccalaureate-level coursework in educational leadership, with a preference for the completion of a graduate degree in educational leadership (Manitoba Education and Training, 2014; New Brunswick Teachers' Association, n.d.; Northwest Territories Teachers' Association, 2019).

More rigid requirements for principals also exist, with four jurisdictions standing out in this regard. Nova Scotia requires its principals to have completed a graduate program in educational leadership, after five years of successful teaching experience and after spending a minimum of three years as vice-principals (Halifax Regional Centre for Education, 2016; Province of Nova Scotia, n.d.). Ontario requires its principals to have completed five years of successful teaching and a certificate for one of three teaching levels, in addition to specialist training in two distinct areas or the completion of a Master's degree (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2020). Prince Edward Island requires its principals to have completed seven years of successful teaching, possess a graduate degree in educational leadership, and complete a locally developed program on school leadership (Prince Edward Island Department of Education, 2015). Finally, principals in Newfoundland and Labrador are required to be in possession of a graduate degree with a focus relevant to school leadership, as well as the completion of a locally developed program (Eastern School District, n.d.; S. Murphy, personal communication, December 5, 2018).

Given that many jurisdictions have few formal academic requirements for their principals (outside possessing valid teaching certificates), none of which explicitly list inclusive education, it should come as no surprise that many principals are under-qualified to handle the task and responsibility of ensuring students with exceptionalities receive the quality education they deserve in an inclusive school setting. Such an assertion is well supported by the literature. Research indicates that few newly trained principals are well equipped to successfully support inclusion of students with exceptionalities in their schools (Angelle & Bilton, 2009; Bateman, et al., 2017; Bertrand et al., 2009; Burton 2008; Lyons 2016; Pazey & Cole, 2012; Sider et al., 2017). Part of the challenge around preparation rests with post-secondary institutions. Cusson (2010) found that the professor's research interests, which generally align with professors' expertise, played a large role in post-secondary course offerings. Interest, rather than educational needs in schools, was the driving force when university courses in programs for administrators-in-training were created and offered. A brief examination of some educational leadership programs offered by Canadian post-secondary institutions revealed that neither special nor inclusive education is currently a focus of such educational programs. For instance, the University of Alberta and the University of British Columbia Faculties of Education each offered two Master of Education degrees for which educational leadership is the focus (University of Alberta, 2020a; University of British Columbia, n.d.c). Neither of the programs required candidates to complete coursework in special education, although the Educational Studies program at the University of Alberta offered an elective in Differentiated Instruction (University of Alberta, 2020b; University of British Columbia, n.d.a, n.d.b). Furthermore, the faculties of education at the University of Manitoba and the University of New Brunswick each offered one program in Educational Administration (University of Manitoba, 2019; University of New Brunswick, n.d.). None of the required courses of the programs offered any focus on special education, nor were electives on the topic found (University of Manitoba, 2019; University of New Brunswick, 2019). As a final example, the University of Prince Edward Island offered a Master of Education in Leadership in Learning, with the intent stated as offering leadership training in a number of fields, including education (University of Prince Edward Island, 2020). One cohort of the program was focused on Inclusive Education. However, this cohort was aimed at preparing teachers for work as resource room or special education teachers. Beyond the cohort on inclusive education, there was no requirement to complete a single course focused on special education as part of this program (University of Prince Edward Island, 2020).

The findings from the small sample of the post-secondary institutions above were underwhelming. Not a single program of the universities in the examples above required candidates to complete coursework in special education. Finding electives in special education available to candidates in these programs also proved difficult, with the lone exceptions being the University of Alberta, when excluding the University of Prince Edward Island program aimed specifically at resource room teachers-to-be.

Changes may be underway, however. It is worth highlighting that one of the University of Prince Edward Island's cohorts does focus on special education. This may present a path for administrators to obtain valuable formal education in special education

and may be a program to build from in moving forward. Furthermore, the Principal's Qualification Program (PQP) in Ontario, a graduate-level program for prospective principals in Ontario, does include a module on equitable and inclusive schools, as well as a practicum component working under the supervision of a previously trained administrator (Ontario College of Teachers, 2017a). Additionally, a program entitled Special Education for Administrators Qualifications Program is also offered in Ontario, with a specific emphasis on leadership for special education with inclusion and the formation of an inclusive and equitable school culture as one of the foci (Ontario College of Teachers, 2017b).

An increased focus on inclusive education for administrators would be helpful because the consequences of not being fully aware of students' rights, nor being able to implement appropriate programming, could be dire. Administrators may believe their academic programs have prepared them well for the job until faced with such a challenge, and since school boards and administrators may be best served by avoiding lawsuits, it would make sense that educational leadership programs focus on developing leaders with these skills in the field of special education (Pazey & Cole, 2012). Based on these findings alone, it is concerning that principals or prospective principals are not required to undergo significant training in the area of special education. Such training would be particularly applicable to formal training that goes beyond the topics of legal requirement, an area that is often given at least some attention in academic programs for prospective administrators (Christle & Yell, 2010). A focus on special education programming, however, often received the least focus in educational programs geared toward school leadership personnel (Cusson, 2010), findings consistent with the brief examination of Canadian post-secondary programs in educational leadership.

Administrative Training in Special Education

Principals tend to have little formal education in special education prior to taking on a principalship, and tend to do most of their learning in this area while on the job (Burton, 2008; McHatton, Boyer, Shaunesy, & Terry, 2010; Rodriguez, 2007; Sider et al., 2017). This lack of focus on inclusion is also in line with previous research in the area of the formal education of administrators; yet, this focus is contrary to the recommendations of Lyons (2016), who suggested formal education in special education as part of educational leadership programs. Such a focus may be lauded and even beneficial, although little is known about the personality traits that make up good principals (Bergner & Kanape-Willinghofer, 2015). On the other hand, many teachers who choose to become principals do so to do "good"; to help student progress through changes principals make at their schools (Armstrong, 2009), efforts and ideals that would arguably align well with inclusion of students with exceptionalities.

To meet the needs of students with exceptionalities, however, Lyons (2016) demonstrated through action research that new courses designed specifically for equipping principals-to-be with appropriate knowledge and skills in inclusive education were needed. Her conclusion echoed Pazey and Cole (2012), who stated that school leaders "must possess an understanding of not just what needs to be done but *how to do it*" (p. 258, emphasis added). Lyons further argued that information in such courses

should include a history of treatment of people and students with disabilities, how disability is a social construct, and pre-existing beliefs toward people with exceptionalities and inclusion held by the candidates.

Suggestions for the Future—Are Improvements Possible?

According to the literature, many, and potentially most, participants in educational leadership programs leave such programs under-prepared to lead inclusive schools. Special education programming, including that of students with exceptionalities, is given little, if any, attention in educational programs for administrators and, at least in Canada, there are few educational standards focused on inclusion or special education for professionals being awarded a principalship. Without the knowledge of how to plan for or accommodate students with exceptionalities, these educational decisions are left to others; particularly special education teachers who are often overworked due to large caseloads and significant requirements around paperwork. At the same time, special education teachers are often the people most qualified to make these appropriate educational decisions but without the formal authority to do so. Lyons (2016) proposed changes to educational leadership programs to ensure they include coursework in inclusive education, specifically in “belief systems, knowledge, and skills” (p. 46) as broad categories. The challenge, however, “is to infuse content across courses while remaining vigilant to ensure that issues related to students with disabilities and inclusive pedagogy and leadership practices receive requisite attention” (p. 47). This emphasis on knowledge cannot be stressed enough. While there is emerging research focusing on the benefits of what learning results from “critical incidents” experienced by administrators (Sider et al., 2017; Yamamoto, Gardiner, & Tenuto, 2014), the literature I have reviewed indicated that formal education and preparation in inclusive education cannot be replaced by such experiences alone.

Most principals thus lack the formal training and experience to effectively lead inclusive schools. Steps must be taken to close this experience gap considering how principals are instrumental in the establishment of a school culture, and specifically a school culture of inclusion (Abawi et al., 2018; Bettini et al., 2017; Sider et al., 2017; Waldron et al., 2011). Administrators’ lack of formal education in inclusive education points to the need for professional development in this area. Professional development could help update and align administrators’ skill set around special education and inclusion, which could include approaches such as mentorship and collaboration while also including specialists such as special education teachers and learning support teachers. However, to develop truly inclusive educational leaders, significant changes are required in educational leadership programs. Research building on Lyon’s (2016) findings to fully develop an inclusive educational leadership program that could be implemented at universities across the country would be a great addition to this end. Further examination of educational leadership programs across Canada and their impact on school-level inclusive leadership should also be considered.

Furthermore, how, or even if inclusion is valued as an educational approach depends on administrators and the school culture they work to establish and enforce in their schools. Initiatives in working toward creating inclusive schools can benefit from

distributed leadership in which teachers are included in the decision process (Stein, Macaluso, & Stanulis, 2016). From a strength-based perspective, distributed leadership would acknowledge the immense human capital possessed by teachers with a multitude of specialized skills and knowledge, all of which can be utilized to create the best school possible.

An examination of leadership styles may also be worthwhile. Leadership styles emphasized in education leadership programs could be explored, but school districts hiring principals for individual schools would have considerable clout in pursuing candidates with a leadership style well aligned with support for inclusion, such as distributed leadership. Similarly, new classroom teachers and new special education teachers rely on their administrators for support, and are provided support through various mentorship programs (Bettini et al., 2017). Furthermore, principal-to-principal mentorship could be another option to enhance the skills of new principals (Fullan & Hargreaves, 2016; Grissom & Harrington 2010; Miller, 2018). Given the multitude of responsibilities resting with principals, it is unlikely that they are fully prepared to expertly carry out their responsibilities when taking on the formal role of school leader, especially when it comes to leading inclusive schools. The professional development approach of mentorship is frequently used to enhance teachers' skills, and it seems plausible that educational authorities, either with local or central jurisdiction, could establish principal mentorship programs. Such programs could ensure that principals receive the support they need in order to support the teachers they supervise. Presumably, such professional development would help administrators gain further skills in the specific needs of classroom teachers and special education teachers and how to utilize individual teachers' skill set through distributed leadership. A distributed leadership approach that utilizes and appreciates the input from special education teachers would enhance inclusion efforts and be of significant benefit to students with exceptionalities. However, very little work has been done on schools with a distributed leadership approach simultaneously working toward inclusion and whether these approaches would work together to create inclusive schools faster than other approaches on their own remains to be seen, and could be a focus of further research.

On the other hand, what is clear from the literature is the vastly important role administrators play in supporting educational outcomes for all their students when it comes to fostering school cultures supportive of the inclusion of all students, including those with exceptionalities. While existing research supports such a stance, less is known about the practical steps administrators can take to facilitate the process of including all students, which could be another focus for future research. Ensuring teachers have the knowledge and skills necessary to teach students with exceptionalities within inclusive classrooms is one part of this equation, with teacher preparation programs working toward this end (Dickenson, 2017; Friesen & Cuning, 2018; Kurniwati et al., 2017). At the same time it must be noted that many teacher still report being ill-equipped to teach in inclusive classrooms and meeting the needs of all learners (Dickenson, 2017). Consequently, improvements are also needed in the special education components of teacher education programs, just as they are in educational leadership programs.

Progress on inclusion is not possible without action, and action is unlikely without principals first committing to embrace inclusion. Such a commitment could then be

fostered among their staff to ensure this becomes a shared commitment, through what Lyons and colleagues described as both individual and collective agency: “intentional actions aimed at producing a desired result” (Lyons, Thompson, & Timmons, 2016, p. 892), namely the result of inclusion. Inclusion is not something that merely happens. Inclusion requires planning, forethought, and commitment before direct action aimed at desired results can take place. Without school leadership with this goal in mind, successful inclusion is unlikely to take place, highlighting the role of principals in the success or failure of inclusive schools (McLeskey, Waldron, & Redd, 2014). Given the current status of educational leadership programs, professional development for administrators, focused on inclusion of students with exceptionalities, may be the best way to address the skill gap currently.

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