PRINCIPAL PRESERVICE EDUCATION FOR LEADERSHIP IN INCLUSIVE SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

Principal leadership has been identified as the key to successful implementation of inclusive education for students with disabilities. Prospective principals require knowledge, skills, and dispositions to equip them to work with key stakeholders to initiate and sustain inclusive practices within their schools. The purpose of this action research study was to (a) examine principals’ perspectives on their preservice education needs to prepare them for a leadership role in an inclusive school; (b) to develop and implement an experimental graduate-level course in Educational Administration focusing on leadership in inclusive education; and (c) collect data on student and instructor experiences and perspectives throughout the course. This paper reports on the course development and implementation within two settings in subsequent semesters. Findings indicate agreement on the need for preservice education to prepare principals for leadership within inclusive schools and recommendations for course content and delivery are discussed.

KEY WORDS: Inclusion; Leadership for inclusion; Principal education

The move to educate all students, including students with disabilities, within general education classrooms requires a transformation from traditionally separate systems of general and special education to inclusive schools focused on meeting the needs of all students within general education classrooms through high-quality instruction and collaborative team work (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2014). It is widely agreed that the role of the school principal is paramount in facilitating and sustaining inclusive practices (Billingsley & McLeskey, 2014; Boscardin, 2005; Capper & Frattura, 2009; Waldron, McLeskey, & Redd, 2011). Case studies involving successful inclusive schools report that
(a) principals have a clear commitment to inclusion that is non-negotiable and (b) they employ a range of key practices and activities as they lead and participate in the change process (Hehir & Katzman, 2012; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013). At the outset, principals are central to establishing inclusive culture and “setting the tone” within their schools. Principals build commitment among school personnel though discussions about the meaning of diversity, understandings and beliefs related to dis/ability, and the values associated with an inclusive approach (Boscardin, 2005; Causton-Theoharis, Theoharis, Bull, Cosier, & Dempf-Aldrich, 2010; Rice, 2006; Riehl, 2000).

Secondly, the process for establishing the path for successful inclusion within each school is collaborative and involves extensive discussion and intentional efforts to build relationships characterized by trust and respect (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; Riehl, 2000). Research on successful inclusive schools reports that principals employ shared decision-making and distributed leadership that typically includes the establishment of teams such as a planning team (Capper & Frattura, 2009; Hehir & Katzman, 2012; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; 2014). The principal continues to work with the team(s) to facilitate ongoing collaboration and communication with multiple stakeholders throughout the process of planning and implementation (Billingsley & McLeskey, 2014; Hehir & Katzman, 2012; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013; Irvine, Lupart, & Loreman, 2010). Principals also provide leadership in assessing current service delivery, staffing, and resource allocation, and reconfiguring staffing and supports as needed (Causton & Theoharis, 2014; McKenzie et al, 2008). Further, a fundamental component of successful inclusion is building teacher capacity to meet the range of student needs within diverse classrooms (Hehir & Katzman, 2012; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2014). Principals work with staff to (a) identify professional development needs and preferences; (b) facilitate and access teacher-centered professional development opportunities; and (c) create schedules and school structures to enable teachers to work together to plan, implement, and evaluate inclusive practices (Carrington & Robinson, 2004; Furney, Aiken, Hasazi, & Clark/Keefe, 2005; Hehir & Katzman, 2012; Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013). Finally, principals have a central role in monitoring, evaluating, celebrating, and revising practices and resources as needed (Billingsley & McLeskey, 2014).

Given the extensive and complex role of principals, it follows that principals require knowledge, skills, and dispositions to equip them to work with key stakeholders to initiate, sustain, and continuously improve successful inclusive practices. It may be argued that foundational knowledge is already included within courses on educational leadership and administration as many of the practices for leadership for inclusion are consistent with successful leadership practices in general. For example, based on research summaries, Leithwood (2010) identified four broad categories of practice: (a) setting direction which includes building a shared vision, fostering acceptance of group goals, and setting high expectations; (b) developing people through support, intellectual stimulation, and modeling; (c) redesigning the organization by building collaborative cultures, restructuring, and building relationships with families and community; and (d) managing the instructional program (pp. 42-48). On one hand, it is encouraging to note the common
ground; on the other hand, explicit and rigorous efforts may be required to ensure that equitable educational opportunities are available for students with disabilities.

It may also be argued that leadership for inclusion is integral to the broader context of leadership for social justice; however, it is questionable whether, and to what extent, students with disabilities are considered within content of courses focusing on leadership for social justice. Capper, Theoharis and Sebastian (2006) reviewed 72 pieces of literature pertaining to preparing educational leaders for social justice and found no reference to educating students with disabilities; further, Theoharis and Causton-Theoharis (2008) report “there is surprisingly minimal literature suggesting a connection between leadership for social justice and inclusive schooling” (p. 231). The absence of issues related to children with disabilities within social-justice-oriented discourse points to the need for preservice education to explicitly prepare principals for leadership in inclusive schools (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013).

Given that effective leadership for inclusion falls within the purview of principal roles and responsibilities, it may follow that the requisite education should be offered within graduate programs in Educational Administration/Leadership. However, in the current context, content related to students with disabilities and inclusive practices for students with disabilities is generally included within the areas of Educational Psychology and Special Education and is not generally included within administrator preparation programs (Pazey & Cole, 2012). To that end, this action research study involved planning, implementing, and evaluating a graduate level course entitled Leadership for Inclusive Education within the Master of Education in Educational Administration (EADM) at a Western Canadian university. The purpose of the study was to (a) examine principals’ perspectives on their preservice education needs to prepare them for a leadership role in an inclusive school; (b) to develop and implement a graduate-level course in EADM focusing on leadership in inclusive education; and (c) to collect data on student and instructor experiences and perspectives throughout the course.

METHODS
Action research involves taking action for the dual purposes of generating knowledge and facilitating positive change (McNiff & Whitehead, 2006; Reason & Bradbury, 2006; Somekh & Zeichner, 2009). This study involved taking action to prepare prospective principals to implement and sustain inclusive practices and to generate research knowledge on preservice education to prepare developing leaders for inclusive education. The action research process typically begins with an issue or concern and proceeds through spirals or cycles involving thinking and planning, acting, observing and reflecting, analyzing data on our actions, modifying the plan as needed, and continuing with the cycles (Lewin, 1946; McNiff & Whitehead, 2006; Mills, 2007; Stringer, 2007). The study began with two focus group discussions to gather perspectives from principals, school division administrators, and graduate students regarding what they view as essential knowledge and skills to provide effective leadership in inclusive schools. Based on the results from the focus groups and a review of relevant literature, the experimental graduate course Leadership for Inclusive Education was developed and submitted for approval. This initial planning phase
was followed by two cycles of acting (course implementation), observing and reflecting throughout course implementation, analyzing data, and modifying the plan as needed.

During the first cycle, the course was offered in a Community-Based Master of Education (CBMEd) program in a northern community in July 2013. The CBMEd provides graduate education to a cohort of educators in an off-campus location. The 36 hours of instruction were delivered within a two-week time frame. The course was offered a second time at the University Campus with weekly three-hour classes extending over the Fall 2013 semester.

Participants
Participants in focus groups during the initial planning phase included graduate students and currently practicing school and division administrators. The researcher contacted the Deputy Director of a local school division to discuss development of a course focusing on leadership for inclusive education. The Deputy Director subsequently extended an invitation to principals within the Division to attend a focus group discussion to explore perspectives on course content and delivery. The group included the Associate Director, Superintendent, Coordinator of Student Services, and five principals. The second focus group was conducted with graduate students in the Master of Educational Administration program. Students enrolled in an EADM course were invited to participate, and two students volunteered.

Course participants included a total of 28 graduate students. There were some notable differences in enrollment and composition for the two course offerings (see Table 1). The off-campus CBMEd course was provided to a cohort of 19 students who were completing a Master of Education in Curriculum and Instruction and all students took the course; conversely, only 9 students enrolled in the on-campus offering. This included students completing a Master’s Degree in EADM, Curriculum and Instruction, Educational Psychology and Human Resource Development. The difference in enrollment may, in part, be accounted for by circumstances. The CBMEd program offers 10 courses on-site in a northern community. Although students may choose to take an alternative elective at the University campus, it is an 8-hour drive and would require taking a course at considerable additional expense. Thus, they may be considered somewhat of a “captive audience” while the on-campus students were able to choose from multiple course offerings. Data from the initial questionnaire also revealed a range of student background experience. The CBMEd class included six general classroom teachers, four assistant principals, and five students with special education experience whereas the on-campus offering was comprised of six students with special education background including three students with extensive consulting experience and two student support/resource teachers. In addition, less than half of the students were enrolled in the Master of Educational Administration program. Given that this was the initial offering of an experimental course, we cannot draw conclusions based on the data collected; however, there may be cause to further investigate the level of interest among students in EADM programs.

Students were asked to indicate if they plan to continue with, or apply for, a leadership position within the future; 16 respondents from the CBMEd course and 8 students from the
on-campus course indicated that their future plans include a leadership position such as assistant principal/principal, teacher leader, consultant, or coordinator. Thus, it appeared that the majority of students were preparing for a leadership role.

### Table 1

**Students’ Teaching and Administration Experience**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Teaching Experience</th>
<th>CBMEd Participants</th>
<th>On-Campus Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Current Position:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>General classroom teacher</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resource/Student Services teacher</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special class teacher</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combined general classroom &amp; resource or Special class</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant principal</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counsellor</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consultant</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>2&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>3&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Grade level(s):</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elementary</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Years</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Years &amp; Secondary</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K-12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Response</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total years teaching experience:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11-15</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;15</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Response</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>a</sup>Adult Educators. <sup>b</sup>Human Resources Manager, Facilitator in Post-Secondary Inclusive Education Program, and International Student.

### Data Sources

Data sources included initial focus group discussions and multiple sources of data throughout the two cycles of implementation including: (a) student questionnaire prior to beginning the course, (b) instructor/researcher log of observations and reflections throughout the course, (c) student questionnaires after the course had ended, and (d) an online course evaluation that is routinely administered by the University at the conclusion of each course. The questionnaire administered at the beginning of the course asked students to (a) provide background information such as years of teaching experiences, role, and grade level(s) taught (reported in Table 1); (b) identify the instructional arrangements/placements currently provided for students with disabilities within their school (e.g., full-time regular classroom, part-time special class, full-time special class); (c)
indicate whether they thought university education should include content to prepare school leaders for leadership in inclusive education; (d) rate course topics; and (e) provide additional comments. Similarly, the final questionnaire asked students to rate course content and provide comments on readings and assignments. For each course, student participation in completing the questionnaires was voluntary. The questionnaires were administered by another faculty member or sessional instructor who submitted the sealed questionnaires to the Office of the Associate Dean of Education where they were stored until final marks were approved. Similarly, a report of aggregated data from the online course evaluation is routinely made available to the instructor after final marks have been approved. Finally, students in the on-campus course participated in focus group discussions following the final class. Focus groups were not conducted with the CBMEd class as potential discussion leaders were unavailable or unable to travel at the required time. The on-campus focus group discussions were conducted by two faculty members who were not involved in the project. Discussions were recorded and verbatim transcription was facilitated by the discussion leaders who verified the transcripts and retained transcripts until final marks were approved.

Data Analysis
Focus group discussions during the initial planning phase were recorded and transcribed verbatim and data was aggregated into topics recommended for course content. Questionnaire data related to participant characteristics (e.g., grade levels taught, years of experience) were aggregated into tables. Similarly, mean ratings for student ratings of course topics were calculated and summarized in tables. Qualitative data from multiple sources (i.e., responses to open-ended questions on questionnaires and course evaluation forms, instructor/researcher log, and final focus groups) were analyzed using a combination of coding methods as outlined by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). This included: (a) descriptive coding of data related to course content, activities, resources, and instruction; and (b) evaluation coding of data that represented a judgement. A second level of coding was used to cluster qualitative data into topics and themes within topics, and verbatim text was transported into a matrix to retain original data.

FINDINGS
Do We Need this Course?
Focus group participants and students in each course were asked whether they thought university education should include content to help prepare principals and other school leaders for leadership in inclusive education. All focus group participants agreed that EADM programs should include content specific to leadership for inclusive education. Following participation in the course, students were asked to provide their thoughts on the value of the course for prospective administrators and instructional leaders. All participants indicated that the course would be beneficial as exemplified in the following comments: “The course would benefit all educators and administrators so that everyone realizes the complexity of inclusion”; “This course should be mandatory for all administrators and instructional leaders”; “A very important course; made me question the structure of our schools even more. Now I have the knowledge to solidify my arguments”; “Anyone thinking of administration/leadership should be required to take this course”; and
“Amazing! I would take it again”. Further elaboration was offered within the on-campus focus group discussion. Students were clear in their assertion that it is important for leaders to understand inclusion in order to be able to effectively lead in inclusive schools. They provided specific examples such as having knowledge of (a) service delivery; (b) the individual program planning process; (c) RTI; and (d) processes for facilitating change and developing a common vision, commitment, and collaboration within the school. Finally, participants suggested that, in addition to offering the course within the Educational Administration graduate program, it should also be offered within graduate programs in Curriculum and Instruction and Educational Psychology.

**Perspectives on Course Content, Activities, and Assignments**

Data sources for perspectives on course content included initial focus group discussions as well as student questionnaires and instructor log. Administrators and students within the initial focus groups identified the following as important content for the course:

- “Foundational knowledge” of inclusion including research on outcomes;
- Exploration of beliefs and development of personal commitment to inclusion;
- Discussion to promote understanding of “how to implement inclusion” and “how to support teachers”. Participants suggested including examples of inclusive settings to “show what it actually looks like” and to “showcase examples of successful inclusion”;
- General understanding of differentiated instruction, the Response to Intervention (RTI) model, and “inclusive classroom structures”;
- Knowledge of provincial policies and codes of ethics relative to educating all students within general education classrooms and schools;
- Knowledge of the range of professional supports and how to access and work with support professionals;
- Knowledge and skills to facilitate ongoing communication and build relationships among teachers, students, and families;
- An understanding of collaboration and actions to facilitate a collaborative team approach and collaborative problem solving; and
- Recommended practices for facilitating professional learning.

Suggestions were generally consistent with recommendations within the literature on education for developing leaders (e.g., Billingsley & McLeskey, 2014; McKenzie et al., 2008; Pazey & Cole, 2012; Theoharis & Causton-Theoharis, 2008). In addition, participants talked about the importance of “holding teachers accountable” and having a “no excuses policy” They commented that principals need to understand that commitment to inclusion means “having the courage and conviction to advocate for students” which may include working through resistance and having “tough conversations with teachers”. Participants also made recommendations for instruction and emphasized the importance of “practical knowledge” and suggested the use of case studies, content relevant to the local context, and to “showcase successful examples of inclusion”.

At the conclusion of each course, students were asked to rate the importance of including a range of topics within the course using a scale ranging from 1 (not at all important) to 6
(very important). In general, students from both courses considered all topics to be important to very important (see Table 2). While students rated all topics as important, some students in the CBMEd course also noted that they would like more time for discussion and reflection. In addition, some students in the CBMEd course commented that more information on cultural implications specifically pertaining to Métis and First Nations students would be helpful.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student Ratings of Course Topics</th>
<th>Mean rating from CBMEd course</th>
<th>Mean rating from On-Campus course</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beliefs about disability</td>
<td>5.56</td>
<td>5.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>History of disability and special education</td>
<td>4.44</td>
<td>5.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philosophy of inclusive education</td>
<td>5.89</td>
<td>5.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research on outcomes of inclusive education</td>
<td>5.56</td>
<td>5.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy and legislation on inclusive education</td>
<td>5.00</td>
<td>5.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective leadership in inclusive schools</td>
<td>5.89</td>
<td>5.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning, implementing &amp; sustaining change</td>
<td>5.72</td>
<td>5.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building and supporting collaboration</td>
<td>5.83</td>
<td>5.88</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Differentiated instruction</td>
<td>5.67</td>
<td>5.63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership for professional development</td>
<td>5.78</td>
<td>5.13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School-wide positive behaviour supports</td>
<td>5.61</td>
<td>4.75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Topics were rated using a scale ranging from 1 (not at all important) to 6 (very important).

Resources, Activities, and Assignments

Students expressed appreciation for the range of resources and activities to facilitate engagement with course content and emphasized the importance of opportunities to relate theory and research to practice. Students in the CBMEd course specifically commented on the value of class discussions, discussions of case studies, micro-teaching, and discussions within group projects. Ongoing observations and comments within my log also noted the
rich and extensive conversations that took place within the CBMEd course as students explored beliefs and practices and worked together to envision and plan for change within their schools. For example, during the first session, students were asked to write their own definition of disability. This was followed by a presentation outlining different discourses of disability and the history of societal beliefs about, and treatment of, individuals with disabilities including infanticide, eugenics, institutionalization and educational segregation. This lecture is intended to engage students in discussion of how and why students with disabilities have been historically excluded and to provoke reflection and discussion on societal and personal beliefs. My notes indicated that the presentation generated “sober thought”, “lots of good discussion” and that “it had the effect that I was hoping for”. I also noted that “this group appears to be very comfortable with each other” and that they spoke freely from the outset. The students had already taken four courses together and also knew each other from within their communities. I also recorded that the students seemed particularly interested in the discussion of positive behavioural interventions and supports, and lectures and activities that emphasized that effective instruction for students with exceptional learning needs benefits all students.

There was a noticeable difference in the level of engagement of students within the CBMEd and on-campus courses and my instructor/researcher log noted that it was often difficult to generate discussion with the on-campus group. The difference between groups may be attributed, in part, to the relationships that had developed among the CBMEd cohort as they had time to develop familiarity and perhaps a level of trust with each other. In addition, there were simply more students to engage within the CBMEd course and their experience and education in the area of inclusive education was not as extensive as that of several students within the on-campus course; thus this may have been their first opportunity to engage in extensive discussion on some of the topics. Students in the campus-based course valued presentations from principals and teams comprised of principals and teachers who are currently working within inclusive schools. They indicated that the presentations were one of the most valuable aspects of the course as they provided the opportunity to discuss successes and challenges in implementing change and maintaining commitment and momentum. Students commented that the presentations were “inspiring” and provided opportunity to discuss “real-life struggles” and I noted similar comments within my log.

The questionnaire and course evaluation also asked students to comment on the readings and assignments. The CBMEd students commented that readings were relevant and useful and some indicated that they found them to be “excellent”; however, several students commented that the reading requirements were somewhat arduous given the limited time frame. Throughout my log, I made similar observations and acknowledged that I was initially somewhat over-zealous in selection of readings and detail in course content for a two-week intensive course offering. As the instructor, a major challenge in the development and implementation of the course was to keep it manageable for the students and allow for sufficient time for student reflection and discussion yet still cover processes and “tools” and resources that would give prospective principals a starting point. Similarly, students in the on-campus course indicated that the readings were a “great source of
information”, “useful and relevant to discussions in class”, and that they “promoted discussion”. Although the reading list had been reduced, there were still some students who felt there were too many readings.

Students commented that the assignments were “beneficial”, “relevant”, “meaningful” and “effective”. Several students made positive comments about the group work such as: “Working in groups helped me understand that we must all work together to have an outcome of success” and “I was skeptical of the group work but it was very effective”. One student had a different viewpoint and related some difficulties “getting along” within the group. Students in the CBMEd course indicated that they found the assignments to be somewhat demanding given the time frame. Although assignments were due two weeks after the last class, some students indicated that additional time was needed. Overall, students in both course offerings valued the leadership plan assignment over the research paper.

**Defining Inclusion**

At the outset of each course, students were asked to describe current instructional arrangements for students with disabilities in their schools. In the CBMEd course, 17 students were currently working within K-12 education: three respondents indicated that students received their education within full-time regular classrooms and the remaining respondents described part-time regular class in combination with pull-out instruction or part-time special class. Six students from the on-campus course were currently working within K-12 education and reported a variety of instructional arrangements including full-time regular classroom, full-time special class, and a combination of regular and special class or pull-out instruction. All students indicated that they felt that their school/division could move to a more inclusive approach.

Students were also asked to describe “what inclusion means to you” on the questionnaire at the beginning and conclusion of the course. Responses on initial questionnaires included receiving instruction within the regular classroom, teacher adaptations and differentiated instruction. Some respondents also qualified their response indicating that students should receive instruction in “the most appropriate environment” and that “inclusion can vary from child to child”. Responses on the final questionnaire included some similarities; however, much more detail was provided suggesting a broader understanding and some students commented “my beliefs about inclusion have changed”. Students referred to “a philosophy of change”, collaboration, and team work as reflected in comments such as: “Teachers, administrators, resource room teachers need to work together to develop quality education for all students”; “supportive culture built through professional relationships, a common vision, a passionate commitment to education of all individuals”; and “an all-encompassing process that promotes a high standard of education for all within a learning environment that celebrates diversity”.

Some of the participants from the on-campus course commented that they entered the course with an understanding of inclusion and that the course provided a “refresher” on inclusion. Others went on to comment that their perspective of leadership for inclusion
changed as a result of the course; that their understanding broadened from the classroom to “what an inclusive school looks like collectively” and inclusion as a team approach. As one student stated, “Inclusion isn’t just one teacher doing certain things in a classroom with a group of students; it’s a team approach in that there’s so many people involved in making inclusion actually happen”.

**Discussion**

This study was undertaken to explore experiences and perspectives of students enrolled in two offerings of a graduate-level experimental course focusing on leadership for inclusive education. Although the course was offered in two distinctly different communities, findings are considered within the local context of graduate program within one university in a Western Canadian province. In addition, administrators within the initial focus groups were from one local school division and the second focus group included two graduate students within an EADM course.

Findings reveal agreement among initial focus group participants and students within the two course offerings on the need to include coursework within graduate programs in Education Administration to prepare prospective principals for leadership within inclusive schools. Participant recommendations for, and ratings of, course content parallel many of those identified within the literature (Capper, Theoharis, & Sebastian, 2006; McKenzie et al., 2008; Theoharis & Causton-Theoharis, 2008; Riehl, 2000) and topics may be broadly categorized as belief systems, knowledge, and skills (Theoharis & Causton-Theoharis, 2008). Students valued the opportunity to explore the history of societal actions toward individuals with disabilities, to discuss social construction of dis/ability, and to reflect on their personal beliefs about disability and inclusive education. As the instructor, I believe it is important to begin this discussion at the outset to provide sufficient opportunity for students to (a) begin to develop a “critical disposition” (Theoharis & Causton-Theoharis, 2008) in which they explore issues of inclusion in the broader context of social justice and equity for all students including students with disabilities, and (b) continue to reflect on beliefs, values, and commitment within discussions of theory, policies, and practices throughout the course.

Students also valued topics focusing on knowledge of policies, supports, and evidence-based practices such as differentiated instruction, positive behavioural supports, and collaborative processes. In addition, students in the CBMed cohort identified the need to include content specific to Métis and First Nations culture and ways of knowing. Finally, content focusing on skills for putting knowledge into practice was also rated highly; for example, leading the change process, fostering commitment to a shared vision and goals, establishing collaborating cultures, developing and maintaining relationships among stakeholders, restructuring services and supports, and providing teacher-directed professional development. Overall, student priorities were consistent with literature that suggests developing leaders require knowledge of school change processes (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013) and “must possess an understanding of not just what needs to be done but how to do it” (Pazey & Cole, 2012, p. 258).
Some students - notably those who had experience in special and inclusive education - repeatedly expressed frustration with what they viewed as a lack of effective leadership within their respective schools and, at times, appeared to become somewhat entrenched in a deficit discourse focusing on lack of leadership, resources, and time. Although the course content included readings, discussions, and presentations that addressed issues of allocating resources and time, in retrospect, there is also need to expand the definition of leadership for inclusion beyond the principal role and to discussions of “situated agency” (Danforth & Naraian, 2015). Danforth and Naraian acknowledge that teachers who may be committed to equitable and inclusive practices may be working within contexts, organizational structures, and prevailing philosophies that are incongruous with an inclusive approach and refer to “situated agency” as taking action to achieve goals within discordant realities (pp. 80-81). While the course in this study is intended to prepare developing principals, there is also need to explore actions that teachers may take to promote inclusive practices and leadership within their classrooms and schools.

As previously discussed, it is argued that opportunities to develop knowledge and expertise related to inclusive education are lacking within educational leadership programs and, despite the increased focus on social justice discourse within educational administration programs, issues related to inclusive education and students with disabilities receive disproportionately minimal attention (Pazey & Cole, 2012). The course developed within this study attempts to address the gap in a leadership preparation within a local context. While it may serve as a starting point, there is much work to be done. The extensive literature on inclusive education takes up discussion of the complexities and challenges associated with transformation of educational systems. In particular, inclusive education is often referred to as a special education initiative as the theoretical, research, and practice basis for inclusive education stems from the field of special education (Brantlinger, 2006; Danforth & Naraian, 2015; Slee, 2011). Yet successful implementation requires a broader transformation of school cultures, organizational structures, and instructional practices to provide equal opportunity and benefit to all learners (Ainscow, 2005; Scanlan & Theoharis, 2015). Given my background in special and inclusive education and educational psychology, and the course focus on inclusion of students with disabilities, I question to what extent I may be perpetuating a fragmented or separate approach. Inclusive education and disability issues are germane topics within courses focusing on leadership development, effective leadership practices, human resources, supervision, educational legislation and policy, ethics, instructional leadership, and leadership for social justice, to name a few. The challenge 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. A dedicated course on leadership for inclusive education focusing on issues of disability and inclusive practices may be a reasonable starting point (Pazey & Cole, 2012). Moving forward, there is need to engage with colleagues across programs to develop a vision for pre-service principal education that explicitly addresses inclusive education within the broader context of leadership for social justice, and to collaborate in developing and implementing a plan to provide content across courses and programs.
REFERENCES


**Biographical note:**

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