Leadership for Inclusive Practices: Discipline Decisions That Support Students' Opportunity to Learn

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LEADERSHIP FOR INCLUSIVE PRACTICES:
DISCIPLINE DECISIONS THAT SUPPORT STUDENTS' OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN

Dissertation in Practice

by

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Abstract

Student discipline practices evolved significantly in recent decades, yet pervasive use of out of school suspension persists. Such exclusionary discipline practice negatively influences students' opportunity to learn and restricts inclusion within the school environment. Wide belief and extensive research speaks to the benefit of alternative practices, yet a gap in research remains specific to what leadership practices influence such opportunities. The purpose of this individual study nested in a larger case study focused on leadership for inclusive practices, was an examination of leadership perceptions of how student discipline decisions can support a student's opportunity to learn. This study, conducted in a diverse urban school district in Massachusetts, Northside Public Schools, included interview data from fourteen district and school leaders as well as examination of publicly available and locally provided documents as data for analysis. Findings indicate that fostering relationships between school, student, family, and community members is integral to inclusive practices as a whole, specifically when related to discipline situations and pivotal to effective implementation of alternatives to suspensions, such as Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports and Restorative Practices. Recommendations include intentional tiered systems development and implementation of instructional interventions as alternative to exclusionary discipline through a culturally responsive perspective.

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"*Have you ever had friends like the ones you had when you were twelve?*" – Stand by Me

Not until Cohort V who will always have a special place in my heart,

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Dedication

For my dear husband; my soulmate ~ Todd Fitzmaurice. A man who sacrificed more than any

wife should ask of him. You supported me unceasingly and read every word I wrote through this

entire journey. This accomplishment is as much yours as it is mine. I am abundantly grateful and

I love you forever.

Raised a child of a serviceman and a teacher, I learned the value of committing to something

greater than self. I was blessed with unconditional love in my family and remarkable role models

in my parents. I only wish they were here to experience this with me. My brothers celebrated all

of my endeavors, whether silly or serious, and they always picked me up when I fell down.

I could not have asked for more.

My daughter, Casey, who is a picture of strength and now an amazing mom herself.

I admire you. I love you. And I like you.

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Problem Statement

The challenges of educating students have always been complex, but as reducing inequity becomes one of the utmost duties facing schools, educational leaders must grapple with existing concepts of exclusion and inclusion to ensure academic success for all (Dei & James, 2002). An evolving understanding of the impact of difference on experiences in the school setting and educational outcomes heighten these demands (Bar-Yam et al., 2002). The intersection of multiple contrasting identities and the political call to eliminate achievement disparities that exist in American schools because of race, ethnicity, and language demonstrate that current approaches are inadequate to meet the expanding requirements of leading schools (Milner IV, 2015). Equitable access for all provides a rationale for creating an inclusive educational experience for students regardless of disability or special needs (Ainscow, 2005; Frattura & Capper, 2008). Technical demands include the capacity to engage increasingly diverse student populations to prepare them for globalized networks of knowledge, integrate their skills within the context of a local community, and meet the individual needs of students (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010; Cheng, 2003). Major implications for leadership include the transformation of schools as communities of learning that can overcome the barriers caused by the marginalization of students to advance social justice (Grandi, 2018; Jones et al., 2013; Ryan, 2006).

Just as leadership for inclusive practices necessitates a common understanding and a shared vision, this study applies the same approach. At the outset of this study, we forged a

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[1] This chapter was jointly written by the authors listed and reflects the team approach of this project: Beth N. Choquette, William R. Driscoll, Elizabeth S. Fitzmaurice, and Jonathan V. Redden.

definition of inclusive practices and offered a perspective of leadership for inclusive practices that are reflective of our experiences and beliefs. Our definition expands beyond special education and includes consideration of all learners.

We define leadership for inclusive practices as a mindset cultivating an opportunity of access for all. Such access, approached with fidelity, requires a relentless pursuit of equity creating structures and perspectives that are socially just, based on respect, and are welcoming to all. Ideally, inclusive practices should respond to continuous efforts to embrace the diversity of learners by promoting a sense of community to establish a safe, supportive culture. Leaders must encourage educators to provide flexible and meaningful learning opportunities as well as make intentional efforts to create a school environment where students are welcome, and their characteristics are valued. This approach necessitates a collaborative atmosphere between educators and families to design structures and implement policies that reinforce inclusive opportunities in schools.

We view persistent incongruities in the equity of educational opportunities available to students in Massachusetts as a call to action as the needs of our students become ever more diverse and the importance of fostering inclusive learning environments continues to grow (Massachusetts Department of Elementary & Secondary Education, 2016).

Gap Statement

Given the moral imperative to ensure access to education for all learners, this study aimed to explore how district and school leaders support inclusive practices to address the diverse needs of students. Scholars have sketched frameworks for inclusive leadership practices directed towards eliminating injustices (Ryan, 2006; Shields, 2004), creating structures that support learning for all students (McLesky et al., 2014), and shifting perspectives to sustain

inclusive cultures and climates (Villa & Thousand, 2017), yet we found limited research at the

district level. Although emerging evidence provides some insights derived from using the school

district as a unit of analysis to determine the impact of school change in general (Daly &

Finnegan, 2016; Rorrer et al., 2008), scant research has interrogated how leadership for inclusive

practices is systemically supported across the district.

Purpose

Educational leadership for inclusive practices supports the common good by promoting

beliefs and practices that are inclusive of the individuals served by schools (Shields, 2004). This

study was not undertaken to measure accountability or improve test scores. Rather, our focus was

to uncover the public good served through robust and genuine leadership for inclusive practices

by researching *with*, not on, practitioners who are doing good work in the field with the aim of

promoting the belief that education is a basic human right and the foundation of a more just

society (Theoharis, 2007).

The intent of this study was to explore how district and school leaders are supporting

systems of learning for all students, so they thrive in a nurturing environment that values their

unique assets. We studied the "leadership style and practice that facilitates the creation of an

inclusive school culture" (Carter & Abawi, 2018, p. 51). The true aspirational goal of our study

is to save lives. Students who are refugees may join schools traumatized by their experiences and

suffer many types of emotional difficulties, which can lead to suicide or put them at risk of abuse

by adults. Students disproportionately disciplined out of school or who suffer trauma are at risk

for similar outcomes. Relatedly, outcomes for students with disabilities not offered the

opportunity to robust access to content instruction derive social exclusions and lower

achievement. An inclusive school is the place in the community where students can feel safe,

access educational opportunities and form relationships with community and outside organizations, resulting in outcomes that enhance the quality of their lives (Dei & James, 2002). There is a public good inherent in inclusive practices.

The approach in this study was influenced by our positionality as researchers and practitioners. We examined how school leaders might promote asset-based, trauma-informed, inclusive practices to benefit a vast array of students, especially through the design of support systems and equitable disciplinary practices, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1

Leadership for Inclusive Practices: Overview of Group Study

Individual Research Topics	Investigator	Conceptual Framework	Research Questions
Trauma-informed schools	Choquette	MTSS/Social Justice Leadership	*In what ways do district and school leaders support inclusive practices for students who have experienced trauma?*
Leadership practices to support refugee students	Driscoll	MTSS	*In what ways do district and school leaders support inclusive practices for refugee students?*
Leadership decisions about student discipline	Fitzmaurice	MTSS	*In what ways do district and school leaders make discipline decisions that support students' opportunity to learn?*
Inclusive practices for students with disabilities	Redden	Universal Design for Learning	*In what ways do district and school leaders utilize UDL services to support inclusion for students with disabilities in the general education classroom?*

Literature Review

As the preservation of rights and liberties depend on spreading the opportunities and advantages of education…it shall be the duty of legislatures and magistrates, in all future periods of the Commonwealth, to cherish the interests of literature and the sciences, and

all seminaries of them; especially the university at Cambridge, public schools and

grammar schools in the towns. (Part II, c. 5, Section 2, of the Massachusetts

Constitution, 1780)

As revealed in the passage above, John Adams conceived of education as a right of all

Massachusetts citizens. The tension between the ideal and reality dominates the literature. A

fundamental belief that democracy is dependent upon educational access continues to resonate

with educational leaders practicing in the Commonwealth, as was evident during recent

testimony at the Massachusetts Legislative Joint Session on Education (March, 2019) while they

debated that the budgeting process favors the affluent. The interplay between the legal

obligations of the profession and a sense of moral duty to provide educational opportunities for

all students continue to influence leaders (Pullin, 2008). Skrtic's (1991) immanent critique of

public education pointed to the failure of democratic ideals because of exclusive practices within

the structures and cultures of schools. The literature on inclusive practices reveals a history of

leaders attempting to overcome exclusive structures and mindsets.

As we explored the evolution of thought on inclusive practices, we struggled to discover

a shared definition of inclusive practices, primarily because of their origin in special education

literature (Billingsley et al., 2018). Conversely, Ekins (2017) argued that the use of "inclusion"

as a term has become commonplace in education, policy, and literature which has created a

perception of a shared understanding. Dyson and Gallannaugh (2007) warn practitioners to avoid

looking for a blueprint or script of inclusive practices as it can only be determined via the school

setting itself.

Our intent is not to adhere to a narrow interpretation of inclusive practices. Instead, we

point the reader towards a growing focus on cultural diversity, disciplinary practices, trauma-

informed schools, Universal Design for Learning, and a Multi-Tiered System of Support. Our analysis of the literature sheds light on three thematic units that helped guide us through our research question: first, there is an *evolving understanding* of what education leaders mean by inclusive. Second, this expanded meaning focuses on *access*: providing opportunities, designing programs, and implementing structures that are intentionally accessible for all students. Third, we find *leadership perspectives* are crucial to inspiring a shift in teacher beliefs and guiding the development of the school culture and climate necessary to sustain inclusive practices.

Evolving Understanding

Discrimination and exclusion based on gender, race, religion, ethnicity, ability, language, and gender identity are an unfortunate legacy of education that we must confront if we are to realize the kind of pluralism envisioned in the corpus of literature on inclusive practices (Fine, 2018). An inclusive philosophy aimed towards erecting multi-tiered supports extends beyond the needs of students with disabilities to frame a system of accessible instruction, and positive behavior supports that generates positive outcomes for all students (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2016). Inclusive practices have not always conveyed this meaning because the term has been viewed exclusively as a strategy for students with special needs (Mittler, 2005).

Misunderstanding about inclusive leadership practices is rooted in the pragmatic approach of school leaders to comply with special education legislation. According to Pullin (2008), legislation about special education, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, and the Americans with Disabilities Act, exert tremendous pressure upon educational leaders to design their schools to implement models that comply with these statutes. However, Pullin revealed that even in special education, the

interpretation of these laws and models vary across regions of the United States. The variegated implementation of modes of learning that attempt to create the least restrictive environment lead to the "continued misinterpretation of special education as a specific location, rather than a set of supports and services to be delivered in any location" (Rydnak et al., 2014, p. 67). Ekins (2017) suggested inclusion is not a specific thing, but rather involves a "web of supporting and conflicting values and practices which go together to make up the inclusive practices which support pupils within a school" (p. 7). The vantage point presented by these scholars has prevailed throughout educational leadership circles and we present the progression of a more expansive viewpoint, especially outside of the United States.

According to Bradley-Levine (2019), inclusive leadership practices emerged from the concept of "critical consciousness," developed by the groundbreaking Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire. During his work with literacy education in Brazil in the early 1970s, Freire recognized the importance of culturally sustaining practices. He advanced an educational pedagogy of liberation which cautioned leaders that their actions could oppress students when they impose their own decisions, rather than engaging them and the community within the context of their unique realities. Freire envisioned the leader's role as liberating facilitator who must develop a critical consciousness by guiding oppressed learners to fully participate in shaping school decisions that capitalize on the assets of language, ethnicity, and race to overcome the "culture of silence" imposed on them by the dominant culture (2000). This notion was echoed by Shields (2004) who coined the phrase "pathologies of silence" to refer to how schools perpetuate the logic of racism and exclusion. Shields describes:

> the term pathologizing to denote a process of treating differences as deficits, a process
> that locates the responsibility for school success in the lived experiences of children

(home life, home culture, SES) rather than situating responsibility in the education system itself (p. 112).

Bearing this in mind, interpretations of such thinking suggested that inclusive education cannot seamlessly cross different school contexts but should be determined by localized context to uncover the appropriate practices to address the diversity in a school (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010). This understanding is further encouraged by Senge's (1990) proposed framework, "Levers for Change," which promoted the concept of learning organizations, where everyone in a school is a contributor to enhancing knowledge. The framework influenced educational researchers to argue that moves towards inclusion are about the development of schools, rather than solely attempts to integrate vulnerable groups of students into existing arrangements (Ainscow, 2005). Furthermore, "this framework differentiates that in order to move towards inclusion, the focus should be on building the capacity within the school to support the participation and learning of an increasingly diverse range of learners" (p. 112). Similarly, Skrtic's (1991) theory of action involved programs, staff roles, and classrooms devised as flexible entities, in such that school principals lead efforts to customize the overall environment to meet the need of each learner.

At the same time, we identified a historical shift in thought promoted by leaders who feel a duty to advance social justice. Over the past three decades, Ladson-Billings (1995), Theoharis (2007), and Scanlan (2011), integrated concepts of social justice into inclusive practices. Their work demonstrated that leaders could reorganize the curriculum to be reflective of the students enrolled in the school community. They advance that leaders cultivate a school culture that promotes the inherent dignity of all people and embraces the opportunity to overcome the biases,

misconceptions, and fallacies that people hold about others, especially populations that are vulnerable because of emotional, linguistic, cultural, ethnic, racial, and learning differences.

Relatedly, international researchers viewed leadership that facilitated multi-tiered inclusive practices as a possible pathway to meet the complexities of learning within the context of the current educational landscape (Jones & Cureton, 2014; Ainscow et al., 2013). The findings of Dei and James (2002) argue that a shift to inclusive practices offered promise as a discursive framework to promote cultural pride, global awareness, and meaningful connections with a society that overcome exclusionary practices that are institutionalized by schools. Also, the implementation of systems and policy changes has prompted schools to restructure service delivery models to help all students access the general education curriculum and achieve learning outcomes in a more inclusive environment (Turnbull et al., 2010). Beyond structural supports, Ainscow and Sandill's (2010) study focused on the importance of staff relationships in supporting the development of inclusive practices. Relationships between educators underpin the work necessary to creatively and effectively review and continuously develop inclusive practices in schools.

Given the strengths and tensions discussed in this section, we explain that research is now emerging beyond the narrow focus of earlier conceptions of "inclusion" and its special education connotation, confronting existing paradigms that erect barriers to learning, and reimagining inclusive practices as a means to meet a multiplicity of needs (Theoharis, 2007). We traced the genealogy of thought on inclusive practices throughout the years, acknowledging that it extends deep roots in special education, but now branches into a more comprehensive approach to learning. We share the distinction made by Ainscow et al. (2013) between "special education needs" and "non-special education needs" as antiquated. We stake out a position that leaders

view systems of support as a way to benefit *all* learners, not just students with special education needs.

Access (The Opportunity, Programs, Structures)

Integral to the success of leadership for inclusive practices is the provision of access to education and, thus, the opportunity for all students to learn. Research consistently demonstrates that high quality, inclusive environments are associated with positive outcomes for students. Creating heterogeneous classes that mix abilities, academic performance, behavior, and other learning needs, enable the principal to utilize the collaborative time of teachers to engage in learning that expands an educator's differentiation and instructional practices (Villa & Thousand, 2017).

Vision to Support a Unified Approach to Access

A component of ensuring an inclusive environment is for leadership to articulate and share their vision to cultivate a robust climate to support expectations for such structures. Research shows that inclusive schools share a vision of meeting the needs of all students. Hehir's (2012) study of three Boston public elementary schools identified that a shared vision of inclusion within the school is the driving force behind success and sustainability. Educators in these schools did not think of inclusion as a means to engage only students with disabilities. When educators align decision making and resource allocation with a commitment to prioritizing the differences all students bring as individuals, inclusive learning environments flourish.

Waldron et al. (2011) conducted a qualitative study at an elementary school in Florida to identify themes that would help them determine the actions a principal has in designing and sustaining an inclusive school environment. Themes in the data acknowledged that teachers viewed principals as the keepers of the vision due to the principal's ability to communicate a

coherent direction for inclusion in unison with high expectations for all. Observation data consistently showed high quality instruction and collaborative data analysis best informed the practices of teachers in the classroom.

Diverse Populations and Complications to Access

Considerate of the multicultural habitat that is our public schoolhouse, embracing such rich opportunities is essential to the success of leadership for inclusive practices. Carter and Abawi (2018) conducted a six-month case study in Australia that focused on how a principal and director of special education worked to embed practices within a multicutural school. Their conceptual framework of how leaders embed and sustain inclusive practices was influential in shaping our thinking as we explored the literature because of its emphasis on shaping organizational architecture. Their findings, rooted in a social justice perspective, suggested that the deliberate creation of structures aimed at inclusive practices and sustained by cycles of quality assurance were able to achieve high quality educational outcomes for all students.

Existing educational disparities suggest that the education system in the United States systematically denies equal access and opportunity to marginalized populations based on race (National Association of Social Workers, 2015). Fisher et al. (2000) analyzed the structures and support that a principal implemented at a large urban elementary school to integrate students from diverse backgrounds. Furthermore, Fisher's research team found barriers such as principal turnover, cuts to the budget, teacher turnover and a teacher strike. These contributing factors thwarted even the most robust attempts to lead from an inclusive perspective. Principals found the most success when they stayed true to their vision and committed resources to put personnel and services in the classroom to support all student learning.

Structures and School Initiatives

Inclusive leaders put structures in place that support a whole school approach to inclusive practices. Ryan stated that inclusive leadership is educative (as cited in Evans, 1999; Smyth, 1989). He concluded that educating the whole school community about inclusive issues is important because administrators, teachers, students, and parents, particularly those in more diverse settings, generally know too little about each other, about exclusive practices such as racism, and how to approach and implement inclusive practices (as cited in Ryan, 2003). Whole school initiatives require a leader who has a vision and is willing to facilitate discussions to help change the mindset of those who may not share the vision. In order to establish a culture that accepts and engages all learners, regardless of the diversity of their needs, a leader must be prepared to develop a vision that will provide the foundation for this to happen (Sharma & Desai, 2008; Fauske, 2011). Ainscow and Sandill (2010) reviewed international literature about inclusive practices and concluded that it is important for leaders to recognize their role in making structural changes, especially those that alter the behavior of adults, to make it possible for all students to learn.

MTSS Implementation

Utilizing a tiered structure to organize and systematically deliver differentiated supports to students provides for an environment where access to inclusive practices can thrive. In 2015, Sanetti and Collier-Meek (2015) conducted a study in six elementary schools across three suburban districts in Connecticut and Massachusetts. The study focused on classroom management utilizing a tiered approach. Findings supported the importance of faculty coaching and development needed to increase the teachers' individual professional practices. Sanetti and Collier-Meek found that in classrooms where techniques, taught during professional learning and

coaching sessions, were implemented with fidelity, student behavior and access to learning opportunities increased.

Similarly, in a more recent study conducted within an urban elementary school in the southeast, McDaniel et al. (2018) found that systematic decision making specific to the provision of tiered supports was essential to the success of providing an inclusive culture within the school and directly related to more positive student outcomes. This study specifically focused on the provision of social emotional and behavioral tiered supports to measure student outcomes in response to tiered interventions. They attributed the success of a tiered support model in careful assessment and a consistent system where students continue with their Tier I support while participating in Tier II support and continue with Tier I and II support while participating in Tier III support as necessary.

Furthermore, tiered academic supports were the focus of the study conducted by Marshall (2016) in pursuit of her doctorate. She outlined the importance of formal assessment structures within a tiered support model to assess Response to Intervention (RtI) specific to reading in elementary schools. Also, universal screening and the systematic use of existing curriculum-based measures as Tier I strategies proved effective to support middle school reading access in a case study of Michigan middle school reading data (Stevenson, 2017).

The body of literature we examined led us to synthesize tiered supports as most beneficial to student learning when faculty are properly trained, the leadership team maintains a consistent vision and allocates available resources to the endeavor and all school personnel utilize existing assessment data to make good decisions for students. Given this research, providing a systemic structure, which includes MTSS as well as the creative and diverse scope of teaching and learning environments within the school, is paramount to this success. Structures of this type can

support a positive culture, enhance student access to learning and improve alignment with inclusive practices.

Perspectives (Beliefs, Culture, and Climate)

To implement inclusive practices and ensure that all students receive a socially just education, we claim that all leaders and educators must begin with the belief that all students have the right to equal educational opportunities regardless of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, or disability. Fisher et al. (2000) discovered a common theme identified after teacher interviews that involved the belief that successful inclusion is a "fundamental right" of all students. The diversity of the students' learning ability necessitated the need for educators to continuously collaborate about pedagogy and to equitably share resources to better ensure students receive necessary supports. Embracing these beliefs and values establishes a pattern of expectations for all educators to follow. In addition to having strong beliefs surrounding inclusion and inclusive practices, creating a vision that mirrors the beliefs, and creating an environment where these beliefs come to life are the first steps in providing practices that educate all students without discrimination. Inclusive schools or districts require leaders who have a strong belief in inclusion, looking beyond students with disabilities.

To address classroom practices, Villa and Thousand (2017) view students' access to the curriculum as the measure to evaluate successful inclusion. Teachers who are equipped to differentiate when there is evidence that an instructional approach was not successful, possess the necessary skills to utilize students' strengths to address challenges. Leaders who work to better understand the diverse needs of their community realize greater success at putting sustainable policies, systems and structures in place that meet the needs of students (Booth & Ainscow, 2002).

Zollers et al. (1999) conducted a study of the culture of an elementary school located in a large northeastern city that successfully implemented and sustained a model of inclusive practices. They attributed this success to "having an inclusive leader with a broad vision of school community and shared language and values which in combination created an inclusive school culture" (p.157). The principal in this study had a strong belief in inclusive practices and viewed inclusion as a way of thinking about students of color, linguistic differences and social class. For schools to implement successful inclusive practices, a leader must embrace inclusive practices and lead with values and beliefs (Sergiovanni, 1994 as cited in Zollers et al., 1999). Bradley-Levine contends that school leaders must not only identify that injustice exists but work toward eliminating that injustice through action (as cited in McLaren, 1998).

Leaders at the district or school level must have more than just structures in place for inclusive practices to flourish. In 1994, educators at the Salamanca World Conference on Special Needs endorsed the idea of special education (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010) and argued that regular schools with an inclusive orientation are ''the most effective means of combating discriminatory attitudes, building an inclusive society and achieving education for all" (p. 402). This statement influenced the belief that interventions are at the school level, not the individual teacher level. In other words, policies and practices must change mindsets.

In his article, *"The Special Education Paradox: Equity as a Way to Excellence,"* Skrtic (1991) analyzed and critiqued the policies, practices, and grounded assumptions of the special education system in the United States. He argued that the very structure of a school could be a barrier to teachers who have students with diverse needs. Expecting one educator to be able to deliver appropriate differentiated support that is ideal for individuals across content areas is not realistic, yet the success of students in many schools is contingent on a single teacher's ability to

do just that. Continuous professional learning around collaboration, co-teaching and differentiated instruction are how schools operate as problem solving organizations. Skrtic recognized that structures built upon erroneous assumptions are embedded in cultural views that children are defective. He concluded that "the failure of schools, both culturally and structurally, to accommodate diversity, leads to segregation" (p.155).

Finally, to provide an environment that supports inclusive practices, systematic cultural changes need to take place. Many studies have identified principals and district administrators as the most important people to establish a clear vision and approach to including all students. Villa et al. (1996) conducted the *Heterogeneous Education Teacher Survey and the Regular Education Initiative Teacher Survey* to highlight the importance that perceptions of educators have about their ability to include students successfully. The principal's role includes identifying the benefits for all learners by establishing equitable learning opportunities for students and engaging educators in a process that enhances the conditions necessary to maximize students' social and academic growth (Theoharis, 2007). Findings indicated that teachers need the most assistance, as they are on the front lines of providing supports to all students within the inclusive setting. Whole school initiatives focused on increasing meaningful, inclusive policies and practices are an ideal scenario for sustained positive school change (Jones et al., 2013).

Research Question

Our research approach to understanding inclusive leadership practices was guided by the three themes of *evolving understanding, access*, and *perspectives* presented in our literature review. This collective synthesis of the literature helped us to understand how school leaders use an asset-based approach to respond to the needs of students according to our individual studies: trauma-informed practices through a social justice lens, refugee students, students' opportunity

to learn impacted by discipline, and the learning structures for students with disabilities in schools. Our guiding question at the intersection of these convergent inquiries was: *In what ways do district and school leaders support inclusive practices?*

<div align="center">**Conceptual Framework**</div>

Multi-Tiered System of Support

Our research team utilized the current Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) Framework from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education as our conceptual framework for our group case study. Born of the obligation in the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) (2015) for each state to develop a tiered model of intervention considerate of academic, behavioral and social needs, Massachusetts revised their already existing framework. Given the complexities and nuances integral to considering a broader definition of leadership for inclusive practices, this strategic consideration of multiple existing research-based frameworks is essential. Figure 1 illustrates an adaptation of the Massachusetts MTSS framework. In our model, the green circle that encompasses the blue triangle is representative of how MTSS incorporates three focus areas: academic, behavioral, and social emotional learning. The two blocks at the bottom of the figure depict a foundational framework of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) with a focus on Equitable Access. The three tiers of support represented at the center of the figure are universal (Tier I), targeted (Tier II), and intensive (Tier III). It is important to note Tier II supports are supplemental to Tier I. As illustrated by the arrows, Tier III is supplemental to both Tier II and Tier I supports. Tier III is not specific to special education and can be used to support any student with or without disabilities. Critical to a Multi-Tiered System of Support are the system drivers that leaders provide in order for MTSS to be effective. These drivers include leadership, competency, and implementation.

Figure 1

Multi-Tiered System of Support (Adapted from Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2019)
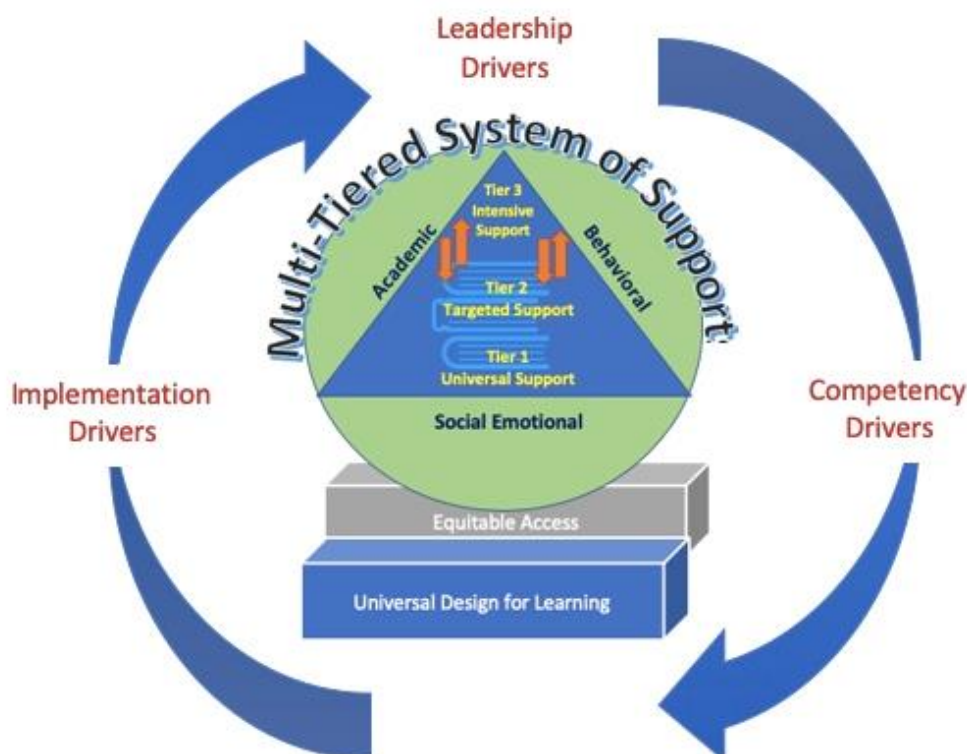
Foundation

First designed by David Rose, EdD of the Harvard School of Education, UDL calls for

implementing a curriculum that provides multiple means of engagement, representation, and

expression. (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2019). Each

component of UDL contributes to the "organizing mechanism" of the framework across three

learning domains: affective (why), recognition (what) and strategic (how). These components

provide students with "multiple means to gain information" for learning through representation,

action and expression and engagement (Novak & Rodriguez, 2016, p. 6). The purpose behind

UDL is to increase access and engagement by reducing the barriers that can impede upon the

success of students in school. "The three principles of UDL are based on the philosophy that 1) there are multiple ways of representing knowledge, 2) multiple ways students can demonstrate their understanding, and 3) multiple ways of engaging students" (Capp, 2017, p. 793). These UDL principles lend themselves to implementing inclusionary practices in the classroom, including behavioral and social emotional teaching and learning (p. 6). UDL provides MTSS a system-wide decision-making strategy to improve student-learning opportunities (Novak & Rodriguez, 2016; Hehir et al., 2014). Such strategies are best calculated to provide benefit when they are evidence based, that is, supported as effective through research and experience (Harlacher et al., 2014).

Using the principles of UDL, understanding that there are multiple ways to represent information, demonstrate learning, and engage students, all students have equitable access through tiered supports to academic, behavioral, and social emotional curriculum and instruction. Piper et al. (2006) define access as the ability to obtain a seat in a classroom or access to services, whereas equity is the ability to obtain that seat or service regardless of "ethnicity, language spoken at home, gender, rural or urban location, or regional differences" (p. 2). All students, regardless of disability, English language proficiency status, income, race, or academic performance can receive Tier I, II, and III services (p. 7). For MTSS to be successful, schools must address three focus areas to reduce barriers: Academic, Behavior, and Social Emotional Learning.

Three Focus Areas

There are three focus areas to the MTSS framework in which tiered supports should be applied to best support students.

Academic. Students' opportunity for equal access to all curriculum and standards is integral to inclusive practices. *The Resource Guide to the Massachusetts Curriculum Frameworks for Students with Disabilities* (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2018) describes the use of entry points for educators to begin interventions. Careful analysis of such evidence-based universal screenings and curriculum-based measures are calculated to provide a systematic starting point for providing supports (Stevenson, 2017). Also, using the principles of UDL by providing multiple means of engagement, representation, and expression for students to attain their goals makes learning equitable by removing barriers that may be preventing a student from reaching their goals.

Social Emotional. The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL), formed in 1994, leads the field in research on Social Emotional Learning (SEL), having developed the most recent structure adopted in ESSA. CASEL's SEL Framework provides five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. These components are an organizational strategy that promotes SEL as a school wide initiative that creates a climate and culture conducive to learning (CASEL, 2015). This framework and the related research contribute to MTSS in an instructional vein, articulating the value of instructing social emotional learning skills that support students' understanding of these core competencies with similar instructional pedagogy evident in traditional content instruction with further articulation of the value of embedding such instruction in traditional content areas and the overall life of the school.

Behavioral. Behavior is a vehicle of communication, even undesirable behaviors. These behaviors may communicate a student is not getting what they need to access their education successfully. Schools are poised for successful intervention when they view behavior similar to a

content area, deserving of instruction. Behaviors are learned. Therefore, it is understood when using an MTSS approach to learning, lagging behavioral skills must be explicitly taught, modeled, and positively reinforced (CASEL, 2015). Schools can maximize success for all students when they:

> a) develop tiered behavioral systems that are evidence-based, data-driven and responsive to student needs, b) emphasize that classroom management and positive behavioral supports must be integrated and aligned with effective academic instruction, and c) establish a positive, safe, and supportive school climate (p. 23).

Tiered Supports

Access to education through MTSS (academic, social emotional and behavioral) is accomplished through structured supports. These tiers are both iterative and fluid, ensuring that all students have what they need.

Tier I (Universal). Universal supports are valuable to all school personnel and students alike. Such universal supports, present in all educational settings, create a structure where students have choice and voice in their educational access and teachers have flexibility and creativity with lesson planning and instructional delivery. Additionally, schools utilize universal screenings to identify what structures or options are best to use within their schools and classrooms.

Tier II (Targeted). Targeted supports provide additional interventions to already existing and continued universal Tier I supports. They are a supplemental, preventative option to continually support the opportunity to learn. Such targeted supports may be provided in small group settings or during enrichment times during the day or even before and after school hours.

They are an "opportunity to practice skills necessary for core instruction or strategies for enrichment" (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2019).

      Tier III (Intensive). Students needing more supports to access their education can participate in intensive interventions, designed to occur individually or in very small groups. Individual supports are supplemental to targeted and universal supports available in Tier I & II. Such skill-based and focused opportunities are not synonymous with special education but can include students with disabilities and are typically identified through assessments, careful consideration and collaboration between school and family and provided by specially trained personnel.

System Drivers

      MTSS outlines certain conditions and systems to be in place for the framework to be effective. A Multi-Tiered System of Support must be supported by leadership, competency, and implementation drivers to ensure that district resources and efforts are focused on supporting all students, who can and will learn and succeed with our support (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2019).

      Leadership Drivers. Leadership drivers provide for structures that enable collaboration and input from all stakeholders. Leaders address adaptive issues such as consensus building and identifying/removing barriers that interfere with the development of an effective multi-tiered system paired with technical support such as finding time for teachers to collaborate and providing curriculum resources (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2019). Leadership drivers include shared responsibility and collaboration, resource allocation, and student, family, and community engagement. An effective Multi-Tiered System of Support includes bringing stakeholders into the decision-making process, prioritizing

resources in such a way that optimizes a tiered system of support, and collaboration between students, families, and community partners (pp. 11-14).

Competency Drivers. Building educator capacity is at the heart of creating positive student outcomes. Leaders are thoughtful in staff recruitment, selection, and onboarding and require a mindset that all students can learn at high levels. (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2019). Districts create a professional development plan that is sustainable, high-quality, delivers on-going support, and provides coaching both at the individual level and team level (p. 16). Finally, this driver stresses the importance of aligning MTSS with the Massachusetts Educator Evaluation Framework. For effective MTSS to occur with fidelity, leaders need to support educators with feedback that supports implementation that is academic, social emotional and behavioral learning focused (p. 18).

Implementation Drivers. The implementation drivers are organizational systems that leaders create for tiered instruction and interventions to take place (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2019). These drivers include tiered continuum of evidence-based practices, implementation fidelity, data-based decision making, and high-quality curriculum and instruction (pp.18-21).

Connection to Purpose

The foundational framework of UDL with a focus on Equitable Access contributes to the overall MTSS framework in a coordinated manner that reflects its purpose of organizing our schools to utilize evidence-based, data-driven decision-making so we can meet the needs of all learners, which supports an expanded view of inclusive practices. A tiered approach, as outlined in MTSS, helps educators identify what types of supports are most beneficial to reduce barriers to education. A framework complete with universal supports, tiered, targeted, or individual, with

systems and structures in place within the school setting can facilitate inclusive practices in the

least restrictive environment, thus appropriately supporting our study. Through the lens of the

MTSS framework, we endeavored to answer our research question: *In what ways do district and*

school leaders support inclusive practices?

Chapter 2[2]

Methods

Table 2.1

Case Study Methodology

Step	Summary
1. Research Question	*In what ways do district and school leaders support inclusive practices?*
2. Literature Review	We conducted literature reviews of leadership for inclusive practices to discover themes and methods used by previous studies conducted in our areas of interest.
3. Site Selection	The research team considered the recommendations of college professors, district superintendents, and state education officials to identify a K-12 School District in Massachusetts which was: • Nominated by experts as commendable for inclusive practices, especially special education • Provided access to one K-8 (Newcomer school) and High School • Was home to a sizeable population of refugees and students who experience trauma
4. Participants	We interviewed the following district and school leaders and teachers (See Table 2.2): • Superintendent and Assistant Superintendents • Directors of Special Education, School Counseling, Technology & Student Services • One High School and One Elementary School Principal and 6 Assistant Principals; 3 in each school • Six elementary school teachers in a focus group
5. Data Collection	We collected multiple sources of information: • Document review of school enrollment data, school websites, newspapers, archives, memos, and policy statements • Semi-structured Interviews (24 in total) and Teacher Focus Group (6 participants) • Informal Site Observations of District Schools studied
6. Crafting Protocol	Interview questions and observation tools are presented in Appendices F and G.
7. Entering the Field	We visited the site during a three-month period using the protocols to survey the district's level of inclusive practices, MTSS supports, and to understand the underlying values and beliefs of the leaders at various levels of the system, both upstream and downstream.
8. Data Analysis	We completed a four-phase approach to analyze the data: • *Phase 1.* As individual interviews and observation data became available, we identified essential elements that we used to define possible emergent themes that related directly to our conceptual frameworks. • *Phase 2*. Following the completion of all of the interviews and observations, we coded for themes according to the components in our conceptual framework. • *Phase 3*. We concluded comparative analysis by reviewing the variation of themes connected across conceptual frameworks and emergent themes discovered through a grounded theory approach. • *Phase 4*. Collaborated and coordinated data impressions from our individual studies to develop common themes across the group case study, relating to the overarching theme of inclusive practices

[2] This chapter was jointly written by the authors listed and reflects the team approach of this project: Beth N. Choquette, William R. Driscoll, Elizabeth S. Fitzmaurice, and Jonathan V. Redden.

Our conceptual frameworks furnished us with a prism to inform our exploration into the logic and actions of school leaders while they provide supports to promote inclusive practices. Our case study design is presented below as a "reflexive process operating through every stage of [the] project" (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1983, p. 28). We conducted a heuristic case study for our group project, designed to examine how school district leaders utilize support systems to enhance inclusive practices within the school environment. The study received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Boston College before interviews were conducted. Steps 1 (Research Question) and 2 (Literature Review) were discussed previously, but we present an eight-step outline of our case study methodology in Table 2.1 shown above, and then expand upon each step in the paragraphs that follow.

Site Selection

The unit of analysis for this case study is based on Merriam and Tisdell's (2016) definition that case study research is "a focus on a unit of study known as a bounded system" (p. 27). The bounded system in this case included a school district, with a particular focus on the high school and one elementary school in the district. We identify our district and the participating schools through the pseudonyms Northside Public Schools, Northside High School and Southwest Elementary School which is identified as the newcomer school. Additionally, our research was conducted as a team project interrogating how leaders support inclusive practices. In our quest for a district which might utilize tiered supports, we were guided to select the Northside Public School District in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts. Four prominent state educational leaders provided us with a short list of districts commended for their inclusive leadership practices. As illustrated in Figure 2.1, Northside Public Schools includes a population of approximately 6,500 students consisting of 29% white, 23% African American/Multi-race,

25% Asian, and 25% Latinx students. This distribution, as illustrated in Figure 2.1, makes

Northside one of the most ethnically and racially diverse school districts in the Commonwealth

(Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2019).

Figure 2.1

Racial and Ethnic Composition of Students at Northside School District (Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2019)
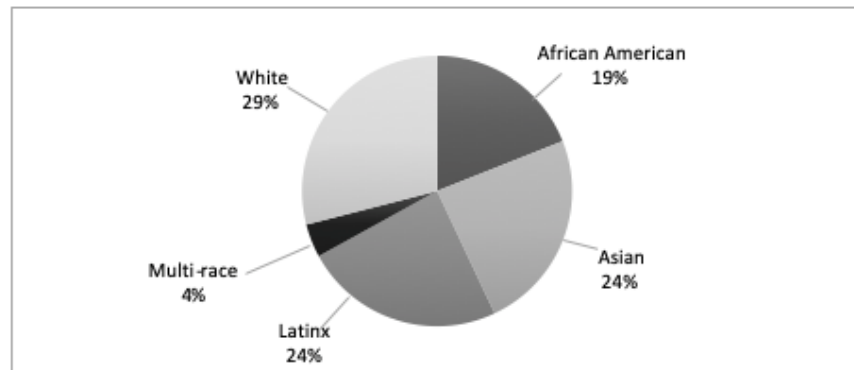
Northside is located in a racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse small urban

city that has long attracted immigrants from around the world. Local political leaders have been

outspokenly critical of current national policies regarding immigration, asylum-seekers, and

refugees. Due to these dynamics, many students and families in the district experience trauma or

contend with disabilities. Additionally, the district designated a "newcomers' school" to serve

elementary students arriving from multiple countries and speaking more than 60 languages at

home.

Document analysis uncovered that the district strategy to send newcomers to one

particular elementary school created a distinctive community. As Figure 2.2 shows, the

intersectionality of high needs, ELLs and low socio-economic status of students at the

"newcomer" school, formally known as Southwest Elementary School, differs from the rest of

the district and makes it idiosyncratic from other schools in the Commonwealth. The data further

illuminates why leadership decisions were directed towards increased supports to meet the needs of students.

Figure 2.2

Selected Population Comparison of Southwest Elementary School with District/State; Figures presented in Percentages (Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2019)
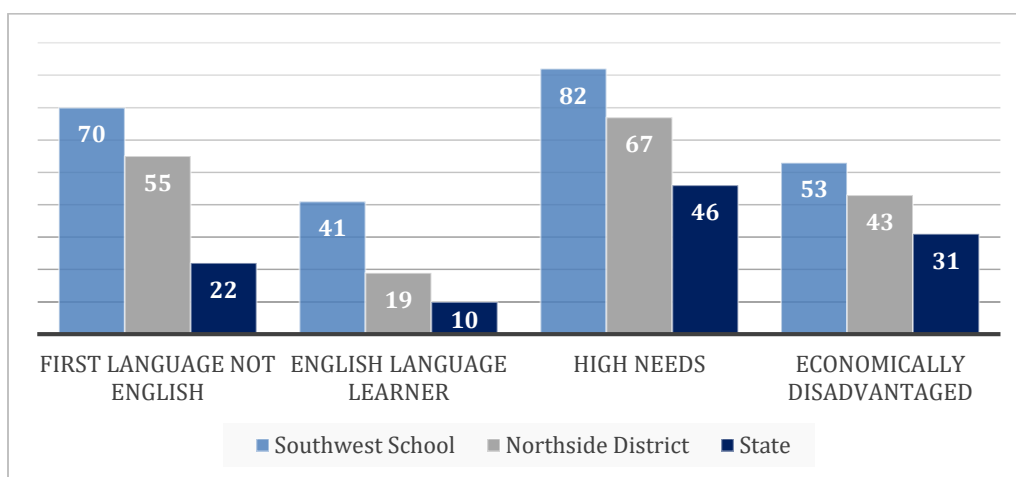
The district has been recognized by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education for inclusive practices specific to students with disabilities and for its efforts to forge creative alternatives to student discipline. The diverse composition of the district provided rich data to explore the phenomenon (Mills & Gay, 2019) we sought to understand through our group research question: *In what ways do district and school leaders support inclusive practices?*

Participants

During the next phase of the study, we applied purposive sampling to identify and enlist study participants (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). This strategy emerged as the result of interviewing district leaders who directed us to visit two schools and to speak to their leaders, as they were responsible for supporting inclusive practices related to our areas of study. Those interviews included principals and other leaders responsible for the design and implementation of academic,

behavioral, and social emotional support structures (See Table 2.2). Finally, the identification of

research participants concluded with six white female elementary school teachers from

Southwest Elementary School who volunteered to participate in a focus group. We utilized the

trauma-specific questions in Appendix F to guide the focus group interview. We favored this

purposive case sampling to "yield the most information and have the greatest impact on the

development of knowledge" (Patton, 2002, p. 236).

Table 2.2

Participant Data for Northside District: Group Study

Position	Gender	Race	Years in District
District Level			
Superintendent	M	W	3
Assistant Superintendent Student Services	M	W	>2
Assistant Superintendent Curriculum	F	W	2
Director Instructional Technology	F	L	>2
Director of Data and Assessment	M	A	>1
Title I Specialist	M	W	30+
Director of English Language and Title III	F	L	2
Director STEM	M	W	>2
Director Athletics, Health and Wellness	M	W	18
Director Nursing	F	W	20+
Elementary Level (K-8)			
*Principal	F	A	20+
Assistant Principal #1	F	W	20+
Assistant Principal #2	M	AA	>1
Assistant Principal #3	F	W	10
Special Education Manager	F	W	>2
Adjustment Counselor	F	W	20+
High School (9-12)			
*High School Principal	M	W	20+
House Principal #1	M	W	8
House Principal #2	F	W	8
House Principal #3	F	AA	>2
Special Education Manager	F	W	10
Special Education Program Manager	M	W	25+
Special Program Teacher	F	W	7
Social Worker	F	W	15

Note. F= Female; M=Male; A=Asian; AA=African American; L=Latinx; W=White

   *Key leaders veteran to their district and new to their roles (>2 years)

We conducted a total of 24 semi-structured interviews with district and school

leaders (District, n=10; School, n=14). This sampling of administrators was intended to learn

about the implementation and management of inclusive programing (e.g. Superintendent,

principals, adjustment counselors, and administrators who worked directly with planning teams,

such as EL Director). Table 2.2 further illuminates how the participants varied according to

gender (females, n=14, males, n=10), ethnicity (African American, n=2, Asian, n=2, Latinx, n=2,

White, n=18), leadership role (District, n=10, School=14), and their longevity in the system (a

few months to 30 years). We point to these factors here because the positionality of leaders

within the district was discussed at length by the participants themselves.

Questions were designed to probe how district leadership conceptualize and support

inclusive practices, while interviews with school leaders were designed to verify reports from

district leaders and learn more about how inclusive practices were in their schools (see

Appendices E & F). Each participant was interviewed once. The duration of interviews ranged

approximately 45 to 60 minutes.

Figure 2.3, shown below as a comparison of the racial/ethnic composition of teachers and

students, illuminates just how much work is needed in the district to attain their stated goal of

creating a staff that is reflective of the student body. The district contains a full-time workforce

of approximately 450 teachers of which 88 percent are White, while the racial and ethnic

composition of the approximately 6,500 students in the district is equally distributed among four

major racial groups. Figures 2.4 and 2.5 further illustrate the racial/ethnic composition of

students and teachers at both Southwest Elementary School and Northside High School.

Figure 2.3.

Racial and Ethnic Composition of Students and Teachers at Northside School District (Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2019)
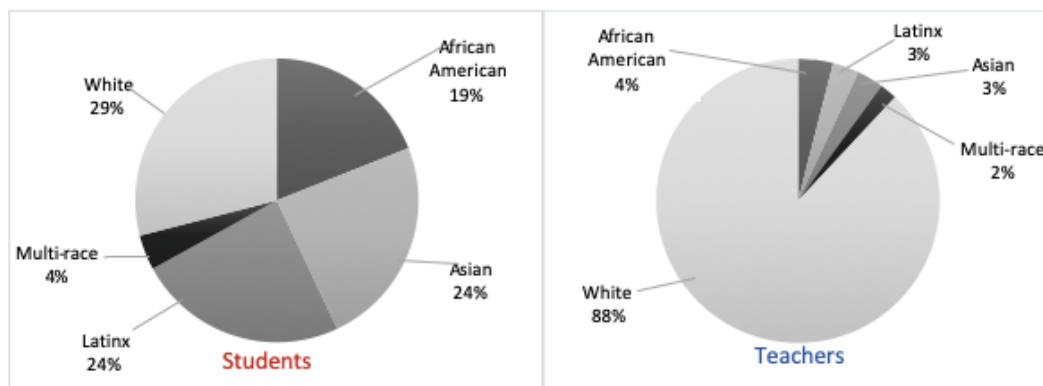

Figure 2.4

Racial and Ethnic Composition of Students and Teachers at Southwest Elementary School (Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2019)
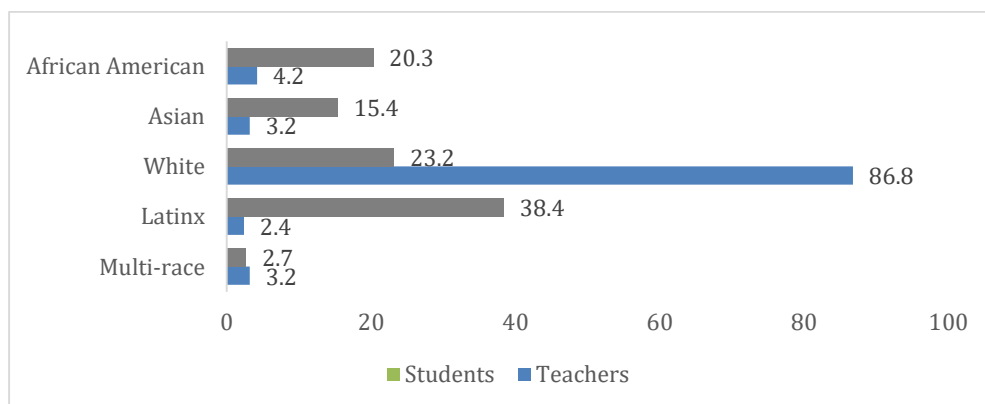
Figure 2.5.

Racial and Ethnic Composition of Students and Teachers at Northside High School (Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2019)
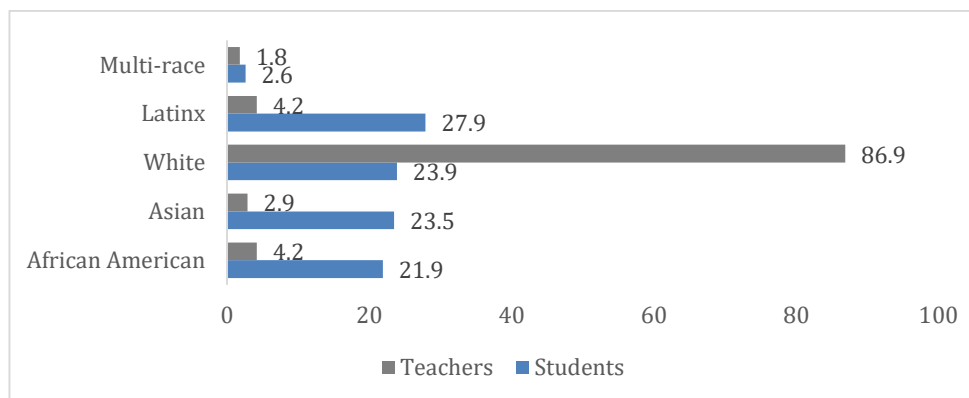
Data Collection

Yin (2003) suggests six variants of information for research: documents, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observations, and physical artifacts. The *first phase* of data collection involved in this study included the collection of publicly available documents which outlined district policies about inclusive practice, culturally sustaining pedagogy, the promotion of linguistic, ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity, professional learning for faculty, interventions for students and families experiencing trauma, the continuum of special education services, and discipline practices. We expand upon documents reviewed below.

The *second phase* consisted of interviewing the participants as described above. Additionally, we conducted informal observations of schools before, during and after typical operational hours in the *third phase* of our study. The purpose of observation was to understand the natural environment as lived by participants, without altering or manipulating it (Mills & Gay, 2019). We documented field notes about our informal observations of school entrances, cafeterias, playgrounds, ballfields, drop-off areas, school hallways, gymnasiums, classes, study halls, and the central office in order to carefully consider the interactions between students, teachers, parents, office staff, and school leaders. Another rationale for these informal observations was the triangulation of data derived from interviews.

Observations of district offices offered little data regarding our research question, but we looked for congruence between professed beliefs with the instructional approaches and grouping practices that were occurring in the schools. The observation protocol in Appendix G was used to record both field notes and reflections on the interactions, support systems and school cultures that we observed.

Document Review

Document review was conducted in three phases. Initially, we collected all publicly available documents which relate to the context of the district with regard to our respective areas of study before we entered the field. We focused on DESE school profiles to determine the size of the district and student and teacher enrollment data by school to identify demographic trends by race and ethnicity of students and teachers, as well as discipline and achievement data. Newspaper articles helped to gauge community engagement and support, videos produced by the school and the district to promote initiatives and programs, and social media postings about community satisfaction with schools, including a rally about political dissatisfaction with a lack of teachers of color, and public statements on mission, strategy, and beliefs. Our review of documents was aimed specifically towards how leadership viewed inclusive practices and to shape our interview questions.

The second phase of the document review included an analysis of documents provided by district leaders. Documents explored during this phase included electronic slideshows provided to parents at social events and on the school district website, literacy programs, school memos, policy documents, and teacher and principal professional development programs that were available on the websites of local consultants hired by the district. Northeast shared internal professional development documents utilized in the delivery of Restorative Practice and Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports opportunities. Southwest Elementary also offered internal discipline tracking documents. Documents outlined services supporting refugee students, students contending with disabilities, students experiencing trauma and discipline and they were embedded in the district-wide approach to ensure equitable access for students.

Third, we searched additional information available through local, state or federal agencies to contextualize how the Commonwealth supports the district's inclusive practices. For example, this included state discipline reporting and information from state refugee centers such as the Office for Refugees and Immigrants (ORI) as well as the federal Office of Civil Rights (OCR) and Office of Refugee Resettlement (ORR). Figure 2.6 illustrates the multiple variants of data we researched during our field work, listed in the order of importance for our findings. The primary source for our findings were derived directly from the perspectives of the participants themselves revealed during semi-structured interviews.

Figure 2.6

Data Collection Variants During Field Work
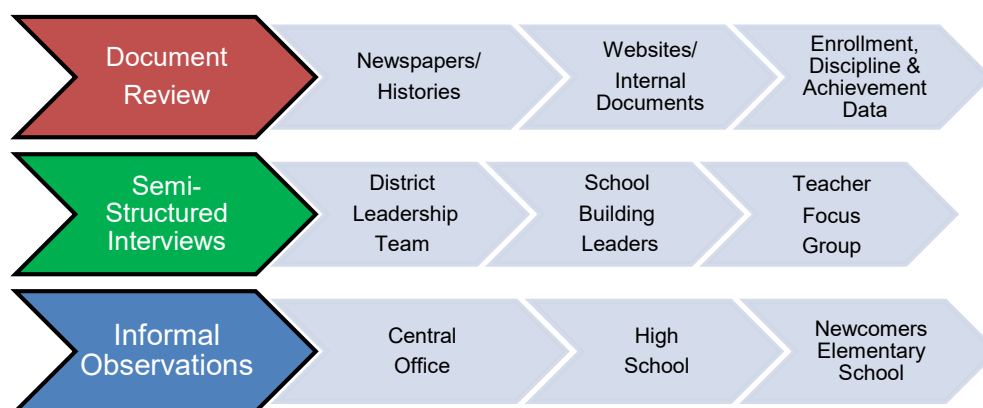
Interview Questions

Interview questions (See Appendices F) asked participants to reflect on how district and school leaders support students in an inclusive manner. Questions initially explored the motivation and challenges leaders faced when implementing inclusive practices across the system or in a school. Follow up questions asked participants to examine how these approaches support services for all students within the areas of our individual studies. The interview

transcripts and field notes from observations were reviewed to identify emergent themes using a four-phase analytical process.

Data Analysis

We applied a *four-phase* analysis to make sense of the data we collected, implementing the first three phases individually in our own studies. Individual interview recordings constituted the *first phase* of our analysis. As we reviewed transcripts using artificial intelligence software from *Temi*, identified elements that exposed emergent themes (Patton, 2002) and coded responses for Universal Design for Learning, Equitable Access, Social Emotional, Academic, Behavioral and Tiered Responses. Individual researchers also comparatively analyzed data against complementary frameworks used in their individual studies. Such complementary frameworks were Social Justice Leadership and Opportunity to Learn. As we listened to transcripts, we found this conceptual framework sharpened our focus on how district leaders were enacting inclusive practices and helped us to make sense of the data. Researchers utilized a combination of the coding software *Quirkos* and *Microsoft Office* tools to organize and make sense of our data.

During the *second phase* of analysis, we comparatively analyzed (Miriam & Tisdell, 2015) themes that emerged across multiple individual responses from all 24 interviews. We traced common responses by calculating how different individuals referenced their approaches to inclusive practices.

Recognizing the limitations of any conceptual framework, we concluded our individual analysis with a *third phase* by applying a quasi-grounded theory approach to make sense of the data (Miriam & Tisdell, 2016). We identified emerging themes and considered these nascent

themes in light of our conceptual framework to formulate conclusions that shaped the findings

we present in our individual studies.

Finally, the *fourth phase* of our analysis involved a comparative analysis of the themes

discussed in our individual studies. We looked for connections across our individual topics that

related to inclusive practices in the group study.

Each research team member utilized the above described methods in a similar fashion for

their individual study. Chapter 3 features the individual research questions, a literature review

related to those questions, and any methods that were unique to the individual study.

Additionally, the findings and discussion sections of the individual study are included.

Chapter 3[3]

Individual Study

This individual study is an examination of leadership perceptions of how student discipline decisions may support a student's opportunity to learn. Embarking on a study with a focus on leadership perceptions about student discipline decisions directly connects with the group's larger question about leadership for inclusive practices. I examined student discipline from a strength-based approach, illuminating effective practices that might inform the development of inclusive leadership practices specific to student discipline decisions in the future.

Leadership decisions that encourage alternative discipline options remain an important focus of leadership for inclusive practices as externally suspending students for misbehavior effectively denies them the opportunity to learn (Curran, 2017). Explicit instruction of social-emotional and behavioral deficit skill areas are major tenets of our overarching conceptual framework of MTSS (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2019) and are foundational to supporting alternatives to exclusionary discipline. Moreover, careful consideration of universal, tiered, and research-based supports, such as Positive Behavior Intervention Systems (PBIS) or Restorative Practices (RP), can provide a foundation for leaders to support culture change within their schools.

A gap in the research exists specific to how leaders work to incorporate alternatives to exclusion and, consequently, shift the culture of their schools. By exploring leaders' thinking about the decisions they make regarding student discipline and further uses of alternatives to

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discipline, we can better understand how inclusive leadership practices support a student's opportunity to learn. This individual study interrogated leadership decision-making related to student discipline that is inclusive to answer the question: *In what ways do district and school leaders make discipline decisions that support students' opportunity to learn?*

Conceptual Framework and Related Literature

Consistent with our group conceptual framework, in this individual study I examined leadership discipline practices through Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) with considerations of Opportunity to Learn (OTL).

Multi-Tiered System of Support

I used MTSS as a framework to examine leadership decision making specific to student discipline, with a focus on out of school suspension and the related creation of exclusion situations versus supporting inclusive opportunities. MTSS reform efforts are a multi-faceted and complex process, requiring interdisciplinary efforts from schools in implementation of evidence-based practices (Eagle et al., 2015). The framework, outlined in detail in Chapter 1, illustrates a three-tiered access structure with which all students can receive what they need to be successful in their educational endeavors. Empirical data for MTSS as a tiered structure to support positive outcomes is growing and integrated approaches are frequently associated with such practices (Menzies & Lane, 2011).

Opportunity to Learn

When students experience exclusionary discipline, they are not physically present for instruction where they are learning, which results in a diminished opportunity to access tiered supports to develop academically, socially and behaviorally (Stevens & Grymes, 1993). Opportunity to Learn (OTL) as a secondary lens for this research is complementary of MTSS as

the purpose of such a framework is to facilitate more robust learning. Of the seven components in the OTL framework, the most relevant and integral to this research are *Content Exposure* [being present for learning opportunities] and *Content Coverage* [quality of instruction and decisions about which content to teach] (Stevens & Grymes, 1993).

Inclusive Practices

Inclusive practice is a timeless concept to educational philosophy. More than 120 years ago, Dewey espoused inclusive practices in his Pedagogic Creed (Dewey, 1897). Relatedly, early Middle English educators between 1175-1225 understood the definition of discipline as "to train by exercise or instruction" and is still used as an operating definition today (Merriam-Webster Dictionary, 2019). This section explores the contribution that legislation lends to leadership discipline decisions and examines the data regarding disproportionality within discipline decisions. The second section provides an overview of research on alternatives to exclusionary style discipline. Finally, this literature review will conclude with an overview of leadership influences.

Data, Disproportionality and Legislation

Policy Issues

Since the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 as part of President Reagan's war on drugs, the implementation of zero tolerance policies in schools has led to increased use of school suspension and expulsion as disciplinary consequences for students with varying degrees of infractions (Skiba, 2008). Administrators began to apply this zero tolerance approach to behaviors such as cigarette smoking, cheating, swearing, disrupting class and other forms of non-violent school misconduct (Monahan et al., 2014). While an emphasis on student safety at school is necessary, little evidence exists that zero tolerance policies create safer or more

functional school environments (Olley et al., 2010). Moreover, zero tolerance policies typically do not provide rehabilitative or supportive services to help students change their behavior in positive ways (Skiba, 2008).

In 2012, a shift in school discipline reforms resulted in many states making changes in their discipline laws with reforms relying heavily on tiered student supports, school-police partnerships, and collaborations among schools, courts, law enforcement, juvenile justice, and health agencies that focus on the analysis of disaggregated data, changed policies, and training (Report: The Continuing need to Rethink Discipline, 2016). In Massachusetts, school discipline reform was formalized with the passing of Chapter 222 of the Acts of 2012 (An Act Relative to Student Access to Educational Services and Exclusion from School. Ch 222, 2012). This Act articulates changes to Chapter 71 of the Massachusetts General Law, specifically in § 37H, 37H 1/2 and 37H ¾ and requires districts to provide continued access to learning to students during an out-of-school suspension, in the form of an "educational service plan." Further, the law acknowledges that these plans are not a robust substitute for education within the school house. Accordingly, school districts are encouraged to adopt preventative, evidence-based programs and strategies to address the underlying social-emotional and behavioral issues that are antecedent to the misconduct typically resulting in suspension out of school (Advisory on Student Discipline under Chapter 222 of the Acts of 2012, 2016).

Data and Disproportionality

In Massachusetts, every district reports discipline data via the School Safety Discipline Report (SSDR). Such data, as illustrated in Table 3.1, shows a significant disparity of student discipline rates for students with disabilities at least four percentage points higher than rates for their non-disabled peers over the last three years.

Table 3.1

Massachusetts Discipline Rates of Students with Disabilities

	2016-2017			2017-2018			2018-2019		
	Enrollment	Students Disciplined	Percent Students Disciplined	Enrollment	Students Disciplined	Percent Students Disciplined	Enrollment	Students Disciplined	Percent Students Disciplined
Students without Disabilities	795,575	23,350	3.2%	796,722	26,249	3.3%	976,789	41,501	4.2%
Students with Disabilities	180,858	13,675	7.6%	184,566	14,560	7.9%	187,717	14,657	7.8%

Viewing suspension as an attendance issue directly connects discipline to students'
opportunity to learn. Again, reviewing SSDR data, and deconstructing suspension data to
separate out minor (non-violent) infractions where students experience suspension, Figure 3.1
illustrates that approximately 34 days (per 100 students) of instruction are missed due to
disciplinary actions. Consistently, Black students and students with disabilities are missing
considerably more days of instruction than their White counterparts (Losen et al., 2017).

Figure 3.1

*Days of Lost Instruction Due to Discipline per 100 Students Enrolled Based on MA SSDR as Analyzed by
Losen et al. (2017)*
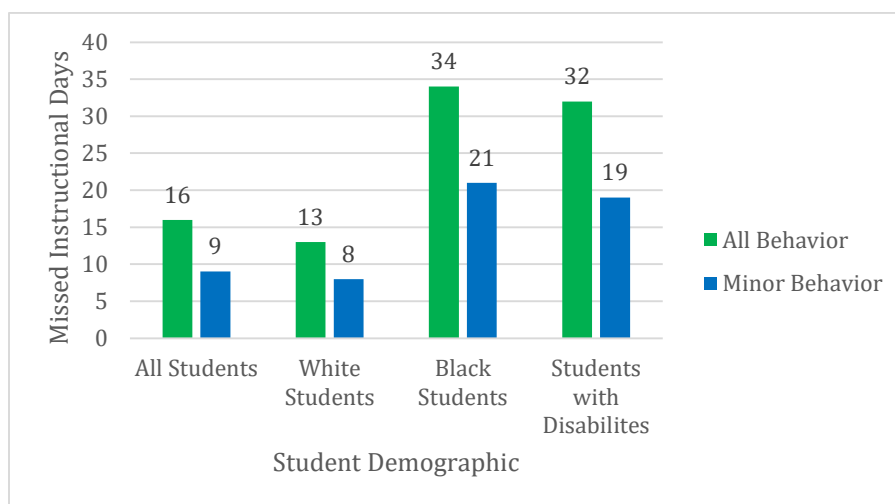
Outcome Influences

Studies examining the relationship between suspension and student outcomes illuminate a strong association between suspensions and dropout rates, thus affecting student achievement rates. Research supported that exclusionary style discipline eliminates students' opportunity to learn. This contributed to lower achievement, poor outcomes, increased involvement in the juvenile justice system, increased drop-outs, delinquency and acting out behavior, and contributes to the 'school to prison pipeline' (Skiba, 2008; Burkhardt, 2009; Monahan et al., 2014; Skiba, 2013; Okilwa & Robert, 2017).

These findings reflect on earlier studies that illuminate suspension as a constant and powerful negative predictor of student performance that is associated with poor achievement, indicating that inclusive supports may yield better results (Arcia, 2006; Burkhardt, 2009; Cobb-Clarka et al., 2015; Noltemeyer et al., 2015). Conclusive research is limited on which particular inclusive practice yields the most beneficial student outcomes over another due to multiple variants; however, overwhelmingly, researchers support attendance as the primary link between the opportunity to learn and student outcomes (Arcia, 2006; Cobb-Clarka et al., 2015; Noltemeyer et al., 2015; Losen et al., 2017) in any environment. Positive evidence concludes that Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and Restorative Practices (RP) are beneficial alternatives to suspension; however, more research is needed to connect directly to student outcomes (Noltemeyer et al., 2015). Researchers further posit that simply removing out of school suspension from the continuum of discipline practices is unlikely to be a complete solution. Ultimately, the impetus is on district and school leaders to support inclusive practices specific to discipline decisions within their environment.

Learning Environments and Alternatives to Suspension

Discipline reforms are driven by the desire to ensure school safety and balanced with the recognition that exclusionary and other punitive approaches simply do not work (Osher et al., 2010). Fair discipline creates positive conditions for learning and more broadly improves academic achievement (Osher et al. 2010). Osher further characterizes fair discipline as that which establishes clear and firm expectations for behavior with support structures built on a solid base of universal supports and a tiered implementation system. A critical underlying strategy for successful inclusive practices, including discipline decisions, is a whole-school approach; however, the pressure of time to build such an approach is a major threat to sustainability (Shaw, 2007). Shaw (2007) found that a minimum of one to four years is required for schools to reach expected benefits of creating a positive discipline system. Sustainability as a related benefit to student outcomes is strengthened when school personnel see themselves as part of a collective or cooperative decision-making body where each person plays an important role in the interventions (Shaw, 2007).

Schools do not exclude students who struggle with academic concepts; they develop other means to service students' needs through education. Therefore, we must think about discipline as a learning opportunity rather than a punishment (Skiba, 2013). This helps to shift thinking and practices within this realm. Taking a more educational approach to discipline and aligning behavioral expectations with learning opportunities provides more benefit to student learning and increases the students' opportunity to learn. As an extension of the literature outlined in Chapter 1, this section will explore the efficacy of tiered supports, which incorporate alternative approaches to discipline. Relatedly, inclusive structures to support relationship building initiatives and tiered supports improve the schools' climate and culture and positively

influence students' opportunity to learn by providing tiered preventative opportunities, such as

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and Restorative Practices (RP) to students

(Carter & Abawi, 2018; Mansfield et al., 2018; Simonsen & Sugai, 2013; Sparks, 2016). A tiered

approach using multiple methodologies, in an integrated manner, creates an opportunity to meet

students where they are and provide scaffolding interventions that help to build positive social

interactions, thus improving behavior and creating an emotionally positive learning environment

(Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2019).

Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS)

Knowing that students, regularly exposed to exclusionary discipline, receive restricted

opportunities to build behavioral and academic skills, multiple researchers have explored

alternatives to zero tolerance through the use of school-wide PBIS as a viable alternative to out

of-school suspension, yielding greater opportunities (Nese & McIntosh, 2016). PBIS is

associated with positive outcomes ranging from increased achievement for students (Mcintosh et

al., 2011) to an increase in school safety (Utley & Obiakor, 2015). With a focus on prevention,

Tier I supports also provide guidance to staff on what types of behavioral skill building should be

realized in the classroom and support to develop strategies to address them without

exclusion. By analyzing school-wide discipline data, Tier I teams are better equipped to identify

the misuse of exclusionary practices and are thus more likely to recommend re-teaching staff

about how best to address behavioral skill deficits when they arise (Nese & McIntosh, 2016;

Samerson, 2010; Simonsen & Sugai, 2013).

In a meta-analysis of multiple studies, conclusions indicate established trends in the

effectiveness of PBIS (Öğülmüş & Vuran, 2016). Findings amongst the studies are consistent

and indicate that schools are making efforts toward the implementation of this approach for both

academic success and development of behavioral skills (Öğülmüş & Vuran, 2016). PBIS

provides a significant benefit toward improving school climate by contributing to students' social

competence and academic achievement through systematic, tiered supports implemented with

fidelity within the school (Nese & McIntosh, 2016). Most data exist at the elementary level,

giving credence to the belief that the earlier the intervention, the better. Over time, as students

fall further behind their peers academically, instruction becomes aversive, triggering stress-

related behavior to escape instruction through exclusion. The behavioral skill building of PBIS

resulted in less behavior that typically creates discipline situations, including out of school

suspension (Sugai et al., 2016).

Restorative Practices

Restorative Practices (RP) in schools are a continuum of opportunities, across multiple

tiers, to create problem-solving situations in the form of peer mediation, classroom circles or

restorative conferences (Chmelynski, 2005) when challenging behaviors occur. RP is found to

reduce implicit bias and improve positive student-teacher relationships (Welch & Little, 2018).

Results of studies which examined the viable influence of RP suggested that in-school

suspension and restorative approaches were both promising. They outlined strategies to

addressing student discipline problems that kept youth in the educational environment and

brought educators and students together in the school setting for the purpose of goal-setting and

mutual conflict resolution (Anyon et al., 2014; Mansfield et al., 2018). Most notable is the

school-wide model of intervention from the International Institute for Restorative Practices

(IIRP) called *Safer Saner Schools Whole-School Change*, which is a preventative and responsive

program consisting of eleven elements and a two-year implementation plan targeted to support

relationship building, personal accountability, and inclusive opportunities (Mansfield et al.,

2018). In this 'from the field' article sharing community-engagement research, an examination of Restorative Practice implementation in Virginia High Schools, in partnership with the IIRP, outlined the benefit of such an alternative to exclusionary discipline (Mansfield et al., 2018). Participants believed RP contributed to a documented downward trend in suspension and recidivism, thus, a viable alternative to punitive discipline procedures. Initial signs were positive and calculated the benefit of RP to provide improved student outcomes. As this most recent study illustrates, this is an evolving and growing area for research, and a potential shift in pedagogy (Mansfield et al., 2018).

Leadership Practices

Leaders who pursued alternative structures, aligned with the research incorporated in MTSS, created school climates where students were more available for learning, in all capacities of development, not just academically. In its most simple form, these pursuits directly related to a students' opportunity to learn. A leader who embraced alternatives to out of school suspension created a culture and climate of supporting instruction and learning around social and behavioral skills, with similar fidelity to academic skills. The exploration of teacher classroom management in Portuguese middle schools identified that classroom behavior, and disruption emerged as major drivers interfering with students' opportunity to learn (Lopes et al., 2017). In this Portuguese study, leadership supported teacher efficacy surrounding management and teaching of social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students as a contribution to outcomes that were more positive. Another survey of 325 principals in a Midwestern state found that principal support for zero tolerance discipline directly aligned with the use of out of school suspension while the principals who supported individualization of discipline decisions more consistently utilized inclusive supports. Further analysis indicated that the perceptions principals bring with

them to these situations influence their student discipline decision-making (Skiba et al., 2014). Over time suspension rates persistently correlate most strongly with principals' attitudes toward the disciplinary process as indicated in follow up reports and analysis of publicly available data (Losen & Skiba, 2010; Skiba, 2013). To research the matter of relationships in school, Curran (2017) explored data from the *Schools and Staffing Survey*, a nationally representative survey conducted in approximately 7,000 schools, which surveyed administrators and teachers seven times between 1987 and 2011. Findings indicate that principals view themselves as holding the greatest influence over setting discipline policy, with teachers a near second. Considerable research exists on how to support the skill development of practitioners so students are more engaged in school, less disruptive and suspended less often, with a goal of reducing escalating suspension/expulsion rates and minimizing lost learning time (Olley et al., 2010).

The National Technical Assistance Center identified schools that created caring environments with high expectations for student academic engagement and success. These schools allowed for intellectual, social, emotional, and physical growth, where student behavior problems decrease and at the same time academic achievement increases (Olley et al., 2010). A Stanford University study examined student teacher relationships in 2,000 middle schools where half of the faculty participated in empathy training and overwhelmingly indicated the benefit of such training as a positive influence on decreased suspension (Sparks, 2016). Sparks argued that this finding illuminated the need for careful construction of discipline policies that prioritized relationship building. Relationships between leaders and faculty, between leaders and students, between faculty and students, and between schools and families matter. Further, evidence is strong for the importance of connection and cultural sensitivity within interventions as an alternate to exclusionary discipline (Gregory et al., 2017).

Methods

As described above, the MTSS framework, with considerations for aspects of OTL, furnished me with a prism to inform my exploration into the logic and actions of school leaders specific to student discipline. Given that leadership decisions about student discipline occur within the context of a school setting, this heuristic individual case study, layered within the group study, was designed to examine how school and district leaders make discipline decisions that support students' opportunity to learn. The study received approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Boston College before interviews were conducted. As discussed earlier, steps 1 (research question) and 2 (literature review) informed an eight-step methodological process as outlined in Table 2.2 in Chapter 2. I will provide an individualized explanation of each step unique to this study in the paragraphs that follow.

Data Collection

I collected evidence for this study in three forms: semi-structured interviews, informal environmental observations and the examination of documents.

Interviews

Interviews are outlined in Table 2.3 in Chapter 2. As illustrated in Table 3.2 and based on initial review of the 24 transcripts, I chose to use data from the 14 interviews which provided the most pivotal information on the topic of this study.

The interview questions for the group study are outlined in Appendix F. The discipline-related questions in our group protocol were designed to solicit leaders' perceptions of discipline decisions and how they believe those decisions support a student's opportunity to learn. I collected data primarily from the discipline questions and also drew data from the larger protocol. Each interview lasted between 45-60 minutes.

Table 3.2

Participant Data for Northside District: Individual Study

Position	Gender	Race	Years in District
District Level			
Superintendent	M	W	3
Assistant Superintendent Student Services	M	W	>2
Assistant Superintendent Curriculum	F	W	2
Title I Specialist	M	W	30+
Director of English Language and Title III	F	L	2
Director Athletics, Health and Wellness	M	W	18
Elementary Level (K-8)			
Principal	F	A	*20+
Assistant Principal #1	F	W	20+
Assistant Principal #2	M	AA	>1
Assistant Principal #3	F	W	10
High School (9-12)			
High School Principal	M	W	*20+
House Principal #1	M	W	8
House Principal #3	F	AA	>2
Special Education Manager	F	W	10

Note. F= Female; M=Male; A=Asian; AA=African American; L=Latinx; W=White

*leaders who are veteran in the district and new to their roles

Document Review

During document review, I initially accessed publicly available data including documents

which outlined district policies about inclusive practice, specific initiatives and professional

learning activities specific to creative options for suspension to address discipline decisions. Data

collected included the district's student handbook, federal Office of Civil Rights data and

Student Safety Reporting Data (SSDR), and district attendance data (U.S. Department of

Education Office of Civil Rights, 2018; Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary

Education, 2019) to connect data collected from district personnel with outcomes based on

federal and state reporting obligations. I further reviewed documents provided by the district

during the conduct of our research. These included the student handbook, materials utilized in

professional learning activities and locally held discipline data, which was not yet reported to

DESE as it was collected short of the reporting window. Such documents proved valuable to data analysis in the same fashion as interview and informal observational data as they furnished descriptive information (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Informal observations included witnessing interactions between leaders, faculty and students as well as students with one another in the milieu of the school.

Data Analysis

I utilized the group method of data analysis as outlined in Chapter 2. Initially, I analyzed for *a priori* codes of the eight components of MTSS: social-emotional, academic, behavioral, Tier I, Tier II, Tier III, Universal Design for Learning and Equitable Access as well as the two previously identified components of OTL: content exposure, content coverage. A second review using a quasi-grounded approach of the data illuminated emergent themes (Patton, 2002, Miriam & Tisdell, 2016) of *Fostering Relationships*, *Capturing Teachable Moments*, and *Creative Alternatives to Discipline*.

Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore leadership for inclusive practices with a focus on student discipline. Analysis of the data illuminated three main themes. First, I will explain the importance of relationships within the school (see Fig 3.1), then describe leaders' commitment to viewing discipline as instructional by capturing teachable moments, and finally, explore how creative alternatives to suspension contributed to students' increased opportunity to learn.

Fostering Relationships

Leadership decisions about student discipline that support students' opportunity to learn began with positive relationships within the school. Nearly every building leader interviewed spoke about how school leaders are unified in the belief of "not giving up on kids," "supporting a

positive culture to build trust," "celebrating and relying on student voice," and "seeing each students' difference as an asset to the school community." This integrated approach, outlined in Figure 3.2, of working to support relationships amongst all stakeholders was believed to create a most successful environment. These relationships are interconnected and dependent on one another.

Figure 3.2

Relationships and Connections to Support Students' OTL
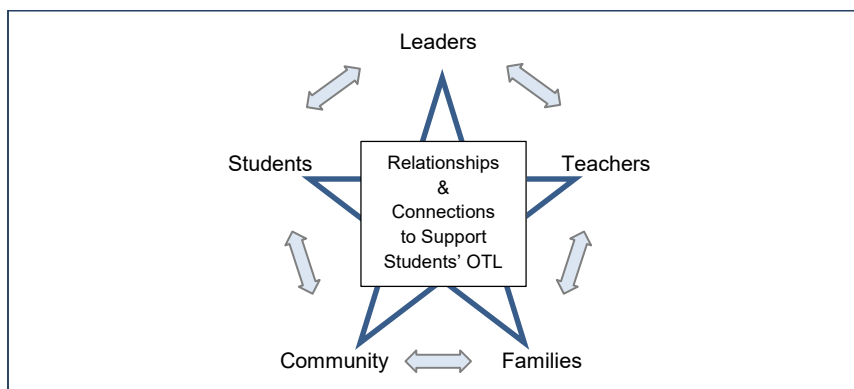
Faculty

Multiple building and district leaders spoke about a shared (internal) mantra: "assume trauma and approach all people and situations with gentleness." The leadership teams in both the K-8 and secondary schools spoke about knowing true change that benefits students' opportunity to learn begins with positive relationships with faculty, leveraged to build a positive school culture. Principals met faculty 'on their turf', as illustrated by one building leader revealing "I go to their classrooms and sit in a student desk across from them at their own desks for formal and informal conversations." The leadership team at both the K-8 elementary and high school acknowledged the struggle for faculty who experienced significant leadership changes in the last decade. One building leader shared

I focused so much in the last two years on healing faculty because one of my teachers said "you don't understand how much that knocked us on our backside" and one of my leadership team reminded me 'they are wounded too,' and I didn't realize the previous principal leaving mid-year just how much damage that did to the teachers.

Therefore, the principals interviewed, both new to their positions, but veteran in the district, reported approaching faculty with the same gentleness that they wished for faculty to use with student and family situations. Leaders also hosted 'Principal Coffee' sessions with faculty, which occasionally turned into large pot-luck style multi-cultural food festivals. Leadership not only encouraged faculty to engage in professional learning around cultural sensitivity, they also pushed them to view students' behavioral *misstep* as a learning opportunity.

Students

Student voice was evident in shaping leadership decisions within this district, as was adopting a "students helping students" approach. Leaders supported attempts to provide active cultural representation of all students within the school. One district leader shared, "because we serve as such a wide range of kids from all over the world, I think that's made us more sensitive." Working to create discipline that captures teachable moments was seen as respectful of students' culture.

More than half of the school-based leaders articulated "when students feel heard and represented, they are more likely to use the positive behavior they are learning about." One district leader opined "I want us to be able to look at discipline holistically" and supported this by saying "My experience with kids is they usually learn; they make a mistake, they admit to it, they learn."

One district leader reflected "I think our kids feel welcome here because they don't necessarily stand out as one, there are usually others like them and I think we have a pretty welcoming school for all its complexities." The leaders within the buildings see linguistic, cultural and racial diversity as an asset to be celebrated, not an obstacle to be overcome. As with most communities, and outlined in Figure 2.3 in Chapter 2, the faculty is not as diverse as the student body. To support student connectedness, the leadership team relied on students to help each other in a greater capacity. Leaders talked about "students welcoming new students who speak limited English or who are new to the country or new to a school setting." They continued, "students who speak his or her language step up to support each other." One secondary leader told the story of a scared dad bringing his newly adopted daughter to the school on her first day.

> The student didn't speak any English and had only been in the country for a week or so. So I yelled out in the cafeteria, 'I need help from Brazilian females!' He reported that 8-10 female students ran over, began speaking to her in Brazilian Portuguese, one putting her arm around her, another getting her breakfast, another fixing her hair and another giving her a notebook. So, she turns around and gives her dad a smile and a wave then turned to join her newly found 'friends' and began her school day.

Leaders shared that this type of student connectedness is a positive contribution which they claim results in reduced disciplinary situations.

Family

Leaders spoke to students about family contact as "communication, not punishment." Families were seen as "part of the team" and "integral to success" in the eyes of educators. Further, communication and connection with families allowed the school to address discipline needs within the schoolhouse or school day. Further, families were involved in the discipline

response, even when discipline or intervention wasn't carried out at home. As an example, a young student was consistently presenting with maladaptive behavior and was not responsive to interventions from the school. The assistant principal, a professional of the same cultural background as the family, was able to convince the family to open up to counseling even though it was not typical in their particular culture to access mental health supports. The principal shared

> Mr. [building leader], speaking Creole was able to say, 'I understand. And in our culture, we don't do counseling, but we really got to look into that. He needs some professionals to teach him. Because you just said you don't want to lose him, then give him the tools and we don't know how to do that as parents. So give the professionals the tools to teach him.' And the family opened up to accessing mental health supports for their child.

Community

Use of school-based community service, such as middle school students helping in the elementary cafeteria, was seen as a valuable alternative to traditional discipline. Community service within the school and in the city was frequently utilized and seen as a mechanism believed to contribute to finding each student's area of passion and cultivate successful experiences and avoid situations that typically result in discipline. It was also used in a responsive, restorative manner to help students experience rectifying situations they created in their poor decision making. Further, members of the recreation department are involved with school-based learning opportunities. As an example, the Southwest Elementary School Resource Officer was also a youth basketball coach with the recreation department. His unique connection to the school and community provided opportunities for the school to proactively connect intentional learning of expected social, emotional and behavioral skills as well as restorative opportunities for students to recover from a poor decision. At the Southwest Elementary School,

leaders spoke of working with groups of students to bring uneaten and unopened lunch food out into the community to share with the numerous homeless individuals near the school location. In totality, leaders report that they and the faculty see relationship building as integral to ensuring that discipline is a learning opportunity. "We are a family."

Capturing Teachable Moments

Tiered Supports

District initiatives of Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and Restorative Practices (RP) supported a tiered intervention approach. Successful re-introduction of a district Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) in spring/summer 2019, after a failed attempt five years' prior, was credited to the approach rolled out by a core group of early adopter teacher leaders. The new material contained research-based explanations including brain science and integrative methods, and was reportedly readily welcomed and accepted by many of the faculty and was adopted at Southwest Elementary. This different approach, outlined in Table 3.3, highlights PBIS, with a focus on culturally relevant strategies. This table was utilized as a training outline for the district PBIS initiative. The three-day intensive training of leaders and faculty coaches was received well with building leaders commenting, "even some skeptical faculty opened up when the current district leadership re-introduced the 2019 training." Leadership team members spoke about faculty readiness and excitement, with many teachers taking a lead role in full implementation, citing their belief in intentional instruction of behavioral and social emotional learning skills, and noting "the teacher-coaches took this and ran with it which helped with buy-in from other faculty."

Table 3.3

Elements of District-Wide PBIS Professional Learning – Spring 2019

Audience	Philosophy	Output
Leadership Training	Integrated Elements of Brain Research	Define and Teach Social and Behavioral Skills in a Tiered Format
Teacher Leader Coaches	PBIS as Framework Driving System Change (not a new curriculum) Logic Model - MTSS – PBIS – RtI Culturally … - Equitable - Knowledgeable - Valid - Relevant	Lesson Planning for Integrated Tier I Instructional Opportunities

Before to the re-emergence of PBIS practices, the district commenced a formal

Restorative Practices (RP) initiative during the 2017-2018 school year, by district leadership, as

outlined in Table 3.4.

Table 3.4

Social Emotional Learning/Restorative Practices Professional Learning Plan SY 17-18

Time Line	Professional Learning Opportunity
August	Restorative Practices School-Based Team Tier I Training for Staff
September – December	Commitment to incorporate two or more Tier I supports
January – March	Commitment to an additional two or more Tier I supports Restorative Practices School-Based Teams Tier II Training
April – June	Commitment to an additional two or more Tier I supports (total 6+) Restorative Practices School-Based Teams Tier III Training

A purposeful connection of RP with Social Emotional Learning (SEL), led by

Communities for Restorative Justice (www.C4RJ.com) in partnership with district leadership

was implemented in all schools and, reportedly, welcomed by many as evidenced by the

continued implementation during our visit years after this initial professional learning. The

implementation team used the graphic in figure 3.3 to help the greater school community look at

RP from a tiered perspective in an effort to meet students where they are and support greater

opportunity with fidelity.

Figure 3.3

District Published SEL-RP Tiered Service Model SY 17-18

**Tier III
(a few)
Restorative
Conferences**
Major Disciplinary
Issues
To Repair Serious
Harm

**Tier II (some students)
Restorative Circles**
For Minor Disciplinary Issues to Manage
Conflict
Student and Administrator (and possibly
others)
When 'situationally' appropriate

**Tier I (All Students)
Community Building Circles**
Led by Teacher or Student in all Classes
To Build Positive Relationships in all Classes
Either Imbedded into Lessons and/or at
Designated School-Based Times
Always 'situationally' appropriate

As a result of the training experience, leaders spoke of a faculty belief that PBIS frameworks were essential to providing an environment where restorative practices were most effective. This aggregate approach was perceived to create an instructional foundation of expectations, resulting in more effective awareness and acceptance of need to make amends and repair relationships. Building leaders tell of faculty believing the use of PBIS-style instructional lessons to teach students how to navigate restorative circles as an example of how both research-based frameworks complement one another.

Discipline as Instruction

Leaders spoke about viewing discipline situations as learning opportunities with one building leader stating "Discipline is a form of instruction, kids need to learn from their discipline and are better off when it can occur within the classroom." Building leadership team members firmly expressed that a deeper understanding of students' culture can inform opportunities to look at situations typically identified as discipline situations as learning opportunities, not as punitive. They saw the benefit of capturing learning opportunities within the school, rather than relying on exclusionary discipline, as directly connected to students' opportunity to learn. Leaders spoke about "helping teachers meet students' needs within the classroom", "creating Tier I supports for all students to learn", and situations where "teachers from previous years' partner with current teachers to build relationships with students." Elementary leaders commented that their teachers "create in-class supports and instruct Positive Behavior Interventions and Support (PBIS) Lessons during class time". Further, the classroom – school connection with PBIS is explicit. "With PBIS this year … we recognize individual kids, and … the community of that classroom … then the community of the school … at the end of the month, we celebrate as a school."

Direct teaching of behavioral and social emotional expectations with all the benefit of good teaching practices and instructional pedagogy that surrounds academic content instruction was essential to supporting growth in these skill areas and maintaining a culturally proficient and enriching opportunity for all learners and was evident in both schools we studied. From an analysis of my field notes it was apparent that PBIS, albeit in the first year of implementation, was structured and robust at the Southwest Elementary School, with a focus on community wide connectedness and success. A lesser emphasis was put on individual success or individual 'prizes' for following the rules. Each students' individual success contributed to classroom and school-wide celebrations and helped to build a culture where students supported each other's success. One building leader spoke about many teachers providing leadership with their colleagues to support a more robust implementation.

> It was tough to get some teachers on board. They report feeling "Oh well I'm just going to give it to all the bad kids the entire time" and the teacher leaders for PBIS would help "no, that's not the point of it … the kid … constantly out of his seat … as soon as they sit down, give them one [reward] … next time he's sitting down for five minutes, then give him one and he'll eventually learn that's what he should be doing."

Students who struggled with good decision-making or behaved in such a way, contrary to established rules or social convention, were supported to learn from these mistakes. One elementary building leader shares re-teaching of behavioral expectations and restorative opportunities to make amends or repair the ill created were a standard part of the school culture.

> I think being able to build relationships with the kids has been what's been helping us.
>
> For example, this kid had a couple minor things of like talking out of turn or not lining up

correctly to that, the teacher addressed it in the classroom. In that way we are being more

proactive this year.

Integrated Efforts

A disconnect existed between building and district leaders on the topic of behavioral and

discipline initiatives. The secondary level was perceived, by central office, as not fully

supporting PBIS, with one district leader saying "they [secondary school] sent a teacher to the

training but none of the leadership came – what message does that send?" They were viewed as

being more committed to their cultural proficiency and Restorative Practices (RP) work which

commenced in 2017-2018. Secondary leaders supported introducing PBIS at the elementary and

middle level and cited it as something best supported at the secondary level when students grow

into it. Secondary leaders further articulated a commitment to strong RP and other initiatives that

built Tier I supports within the building. The leadership team communicated that faculty believed

"using RP as Tier I support is seen as similar to Socratic seminars in ELA." Further

considerations for peers teaching peers and becoming positive role models, with sensitivity to

cultural perspectives, was seen as a valuable approach to both PBIS and RP.

Data Analysis

Careful data collection and analysis were seen as imperative to determining if

interventions were working as expected. For example, literacy screening data, reviewed

alongside behavior data, was believed helpful in exploring the function of behavior typically

seen as "acting out." Ongoing progress monitoring and discipline data analysis to catch issues

before they become too large to handle within the classroom are also seen as a valuable use of

time. One Southwest Elementary School leader spoke, "We maintain a google doc with ongoing

behavior and discipline referral data collection. I look at it every day and we look at it as a

leadership team at least weekly and the teachers have access to it as well." Since the inception of

PBIS in September 2019, Southwest saw a demonstrative shift in student discipline referrals with

a 57% reduction in referrals and nearly a 90% reduction in referrals for physical aggression as

illustrated in Figure 3.4. Southwest leadership attributed this to PBIS being widely accepted by

faculty, families and students, with one school leader commenting "now, with PBIS in place, RP

means more." This integrated approach was viewed as more effective.

Figure 3.4

Southwest Elementary School PBIS Impact on Discipline Referrals
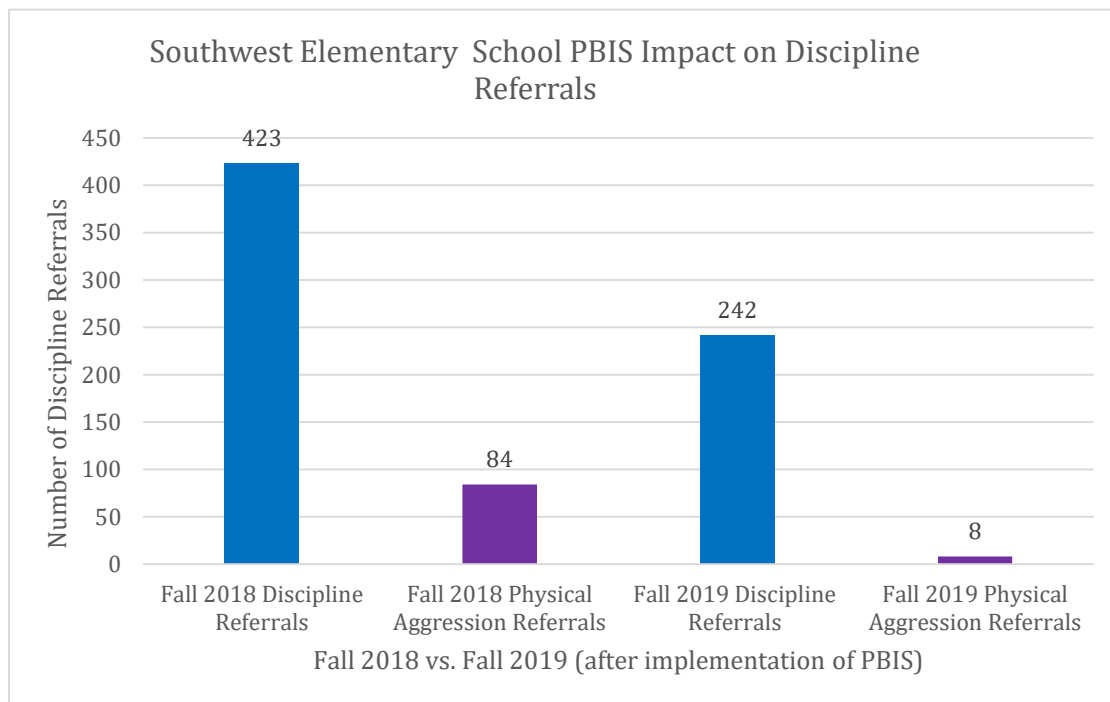
District discipline data is relatively comparable to the state averages. Figure 3.5 shows a

disproportion of discipline at the high school, likely connected to the vaping epidemic explained

in a section to follow. The elementary school discipline data shows suspensions prior to the

implementation of PBIS. Likewise, the discipline comparison data in Figure 3.5 shows that

Black, Latinx and disabled students are significantly more likely to experience discipline than are their White, Asian or non-disabled counterparts.

Figure 3.5

Discipline Percentage by Race State, District, School Comparison (data from 2018 MA SSDR)
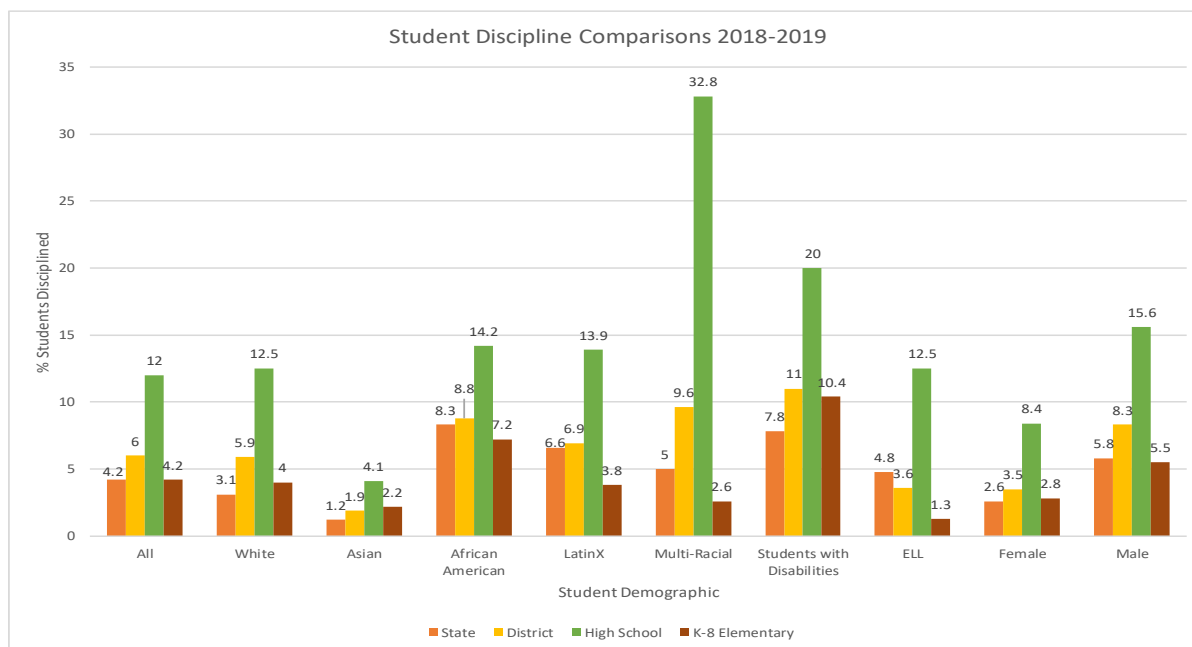
Code of Conduct

Many of the district leaders characterized the student handbook as a guide to discipline practices and acknowledged the need for revision. Building leaders reported that the Student Handbook was often a barrier to offering creative solutions to situations typically managed with punitive interventions, such as suspension. They further noted that the Student Handbook is not actually a Code of Conduct, explaining that, "a true Code of Conduct would offer explanations of beliefs about student learning and commitments of leaders, faculty, students and families to support student learning." When one district leader spoke about the desire to convene an interdisciplinary work group to revise and create a true code of conduct, this desire was quickly

balanced by reflection on how much can occur within the first couple of years of his tenure, especially with such leadership turnover.

> I would love to do some wholesale revision and create a code of conduct, not a handbook, where everybody has a role and responsibility, including students… outlining the commitment of all … with vision and philosophy … and related interventions and investments of all stakeholders and look at community service or creative options in lieu of suspension, … more structured or with options more formalized instead of building leadership feeling like their efforts are on the fly and feeling exhausted. I think that we need to get away from a handbook that's prescriptive.

Creative Alternatives to Discipline

Leadership creativity was a paramount contributor to a culture where adults "assume trauma and approach situations gently." Leaders engaged in creative alternatives to discipline in an effort to support students' opportunity to learn, namely being present for learning and feeling included in the school culture. More than half of the leaders interviewed expressly spoke of a deep belief that "students are better off in school than at home during the school day," often articulating student safety as a concern. Student strengths, skill sets, and interests were considerations when determining best course of action regarding alternative discipline.

Connections

Building leaders discussed efforts to connect with students based on circumstances. One example was student attendance.

> During a restorative chat, the student expressed a desire to become a special education teacher so we worked with the special education department, specifically the sub-separate autism program teacher and her counselor to create an incentive program and currently,

on days she arrives to school on time, she works in that classroom for 30 minutes; she

hasn't been absent since.

One district leader described an instance where a high school student who is a mother

herself and taking care of her ill parent is late to school and gets regular afterschool detentions, in

accordance with the student handbook. She asserts,

> When we get to know the kids, we learn they need a different approach. [We] discovered
>
> that a student was late because her family provides day care and they were ill, often
>
> making it difficult for her to leave the house on time. Further, due to family
>
> circumstances, after school detention created a burden on the family. Connecting with
>
> this student to learn about her situation resulted in better decisions. Her counselor helped
>
> her enroll her child in day care at the high school and connected her family with in-home
>
> services for her parent so she can attend school regularly. As a result, her attendance
>
> improved and detentions were no longer necessary.

School-based leaders at both schools cited efforts to analyze data to improve

interventions for students and discipline interventions are part of that consideration. In-school

suspension was one recent revision that both schools believed now provide more effective

opportunities for students. A district leader shared "we brought PBIS this year and are in our

third year with restorative practices. I want us to be able to look at discipline holistically to

reduce our discipline rates. We want to reduce the rates of recidivism."

Leaders at both schools work together to support restorative opportunities for students as

the need arises. One story shared was of a couple of high school students who were caught on

surveillance camera committing vandalism after school hours at an elementary school. The

leaders met with the students and provided a community service opportunity. Students reported

to their principal that they felt held accountable but also felt good about repairing the damage and expressed a new appreciation for the effort to upkeep a building. Another building leader shared,

> I had a student steal my phone and we used a restorative chat to talk about it and get it back. The student apologized, but it took time. If she just got suspended, I never would get my phone again and we never would have talked about it and I would've lost the relationship with the kid.

Alternatives for suspension that created a connection with community supports were seen as a valuable transition experience as well as building capacity amongst students and families. Leaders spoke of intentional efforts to connect students and families with community supports that were sustainable outside of their school life, such as a School Resource Officer who is a recreation league basketball coach and a school counselor who is connected with the local human services agency. All of these efforts were evidentiary of a more robust opportunity for student learning.

Safety

A common thread amongst leadership assertion was the belief that safety is a paramount consideration for all discipline decisions. Leaders were acutely aware of the safety issues that many students face on a daily basis, including long trips home using public transportation. As it was written, the student handbook prescribed an out of school suspension for repeated violation of the cell phone policy. On the surface, this seemed reasonable, yet leaders report careful examination of underlying issues telling another story.

> Students carry cell phones for many reasons … to stay connected with family who may not be documented or may be ill … especially in the newcomer school … use public

transportation to get home, often arriving after dark so safety is a consideration. The cell

phone policy in the student handbook is restrictive and counterintuitive to student safety.

We use it as a guide rather than something prescriptive. Considerations for safety is in the

forefront of any disciplinary decision, especially those which impact a student outside of

the school day. Students must surrender their cell phones or face external suspension …

then they lose their ability to stay connected with their families … result in increased

anxiety for students and families … alternatives are coordinated with families and we

now offer cell phone lockers for student use so they can avoid a consequence … they can

access their phone during the day by seeking support of a counselor.

Integration

An integrated nexus illustrative of findings was the influx of the vaping epidemic at the

secondary level a year ago. The Student Handbook prescribes a two-day mandatory out of school

suspension in response to substance/tobacco use/abuse. During the 2018-2019 school year, the

leadership complied with the prescribed zero-tolerance approach, following the handbook

explicitly. Secondary leadership team members said that OSS numbers "skyrocketed." An

increase in OSS resulted in many more missed days of school and teachers spoke to leaders

about having difficulty helping students learn all the content they needed to, given the

interruptions in class attendance. Further, leaders felt students were not learning from these

interventions. Two different building leaders reported that teachers initiated a conversation that

resulted in a shift of practice. The faculty and leadership quickly realized that, not only were

students missing crucial instruction, they were also still vaping. Together they created a

comprehensive intervention involving a single day of internal suspension where students

participated in an anti-vaping class offered by a counselor, watched instructional videos and

participated in interactive learning opportunities around the dangers of vaping. Students were

also able to access their work for the day or consult with their teachers so they were not behind

when they returned to classes the following day. The leadership stated that many students

reported to their counselors that they stopped vaping as a result of this intervention. Further, a

few students who completed the program partnered with the counselors to work with students

who were internally suspended for the same infraction. Leaders reported that students

intervening with students provide a much more impactful intervention.

> I tell people all the time we're not perfect and we're far from it but we strive to be better
>
> every day … our suspension rate is higher than I want it to be. The reason was higher last
>
> year is because we got hit by the vaping bug … we drew a hard line in the sand and it
>
> was a two-day suspension and we were bopping kids out of here, left and right last year.
>
> So we've changed our practice around that. It's more around an education piece we're
>
> looking to get at vaping … this time last year vaping incidents were probably 10 times
>
> more than they are this year.

Table 3.5

Approaching Student Vaping Epidemic from an Instructional Perspective

18-19 SY	Evolution of Practice	19-20 SY
Previous Intervention Model: • Mandatory two-day OSS • Zero-tolerance • No access to counseling as result of vaping infraction • No access to learning during suspension	Faculty share concerns: • Missed instruction • Student continue vaping Realization: • 18-19 SY method is punitive and unhelpful • Not instructional	Revision of intervention based on faculty feedback resulting in current model: • Single in school suspension day • Access to school work • Participation in instructional videos and activities focused on dangers of vaping • Students report reduction in vaping

The leadership team is looking at formal ways to expand this, believed to be a successful shift, to other situations. This example clearly illustrates the building-based leaders' commitment to consistently reflecting on the effectiveness of their interventions. Relationships between teachers, administration and students, based on mutual trust, were imperative in examining this approach and being open to a modification of practice.

Approaching any revision to practice from an approach that focuses on capturing a teachable moment and is respectful of student learning resulted in the above described intervention framework. The pride from leadership rested in not only reduced suspension and reported reduction in vaping but also in the process of realizing something needed work and then working together to "do the work to improve the situation."

Summary

These findings clearly illustrate that no one isolated approach is a solution for improving students' opportunity to learn with respect to discipline decisions. A natural nexus of PBIS and RP, as complimentary frameworks, coupled with a deep respect for students and a culture where relationships are paramount and faculty are committed to students being present for learning is most effective when facilitated with fidelity. This is a district whose discipline practices are emergent, with recent leadership turnover, where building leaders report faculty buy-in is evolving as they develop a school culture where trust is building.

Discussion and Conclusion

This case study is guided by the work of Skiba (2009) and Losen (2013) who studied discipline and the impact exclusionary practices had on student outcomes and McLesky et al. (2014) who investigated highly effective inclusive schools and leadership decisions about student discipline that support their opportunity to learn. In their Opportunity to Learn (OTL)

framework, Stevens and Grymes (1993) postulate that, of the seven components of OTL, paramount is *Content Exposure* (being present for learning opportunities). Exclusionary discipline practices eliminate this most basic opportunity. While being present for instruction is a key to OTL, the second most important component of the framework is *Content Coverage* (quality of instruction and decisions about which content to teach). This component of OTL outlines the teachers' use of teaching practices and varied strategies to meet the needs of all learners and to produce students' academic achievement (Stevens & Grymes, 1993, p. 8). Therefore, what educators and leaders do with the time students are present for learning also significantly contributes to learning. Ostensibly, the opportunity to learn begins with being present in the learning environment and extends to quality instruction calculated to provide a rich and comprehensive learning environment. School discipline is not solely about student misbehavior, it is more deeply considerate of how learning takes place within the classroom and school environment (Gregory et al., 2017). Themes from this study, including *fostering relationships*, *capturing the teachable moments* and *alternatives to exclusionary discipline* connect to the literature reviewed and frame this discussion.

Evidence presented in this study outlines the commitment of a leadership team, dedicated to an ever-changing student and community population who is at risk, with many previously described vulnerabilities. Leaders in Northside looked at relationship building as basal to any academic, social emotional or behavioral progress. PBIS implemented in the Southwest Elementary School connects skill-based explicit teaching of social emotional and behavioral expectations to community building within the school. Initial results are strong for the effectiveness of the school-wide intervention. Evidence from this study shows creating a structure where student voice, experiential learning, and relationship building are at the forefront

and provide more effective interventions than artificially applied punishments that are not related to the infraction. Northside High School supports student voice in the construct of clubs and activities and leaders attribute this opportunity with improved student connection and the reduction of discipline. Specific multi-cultural evidence of student voice is outlined more deeply in Chapter 4 of this study. Skiba (2013) and Sugai (2002) postulated an obligation to shift thinking and practice to consider social emotional and behavioral skill instruction and remediation of said skills commensurate with conventional pedagogy for academic skills. The leaders in Northside considered knowing students and connecting with families as integral to making progress or realizing a positive influence on discipline. Efforts to achieve a level of cultural responsiveness, evidenced by the outward signs of cultural inclusivity such as multiple languages or representation of countries of origin, were reported as supportive of positive relationships. Further, connections amongst students and between students and trusted adults from within the school or the community at large illustrated that all were committed to fostering positive relationships. Gregory et al. (2017) illustrated the complex relationship between student achievement and discipline. This finding connects to the philosophy of the leadership at Northside, where they are considerate of meeting students where they are and helping them accordingly.

A Multi-Tiered System of Support was an effective lens to examine this work. While not explicitly referring to MTSS, I found the leadership team at Northside considerate of this framework in their decision making around student discipline. Professional learning documents, which support discipline practices, illustrate a more explicit connection to tiered supports throughout. This data, coupled with leadership language "in the classroom," "if we need to get involved," and "thinking about individual needs of students" depict a tiered approach to student

discipline. Further commitment to finding connections to students' interest allow for more creative approaches to discipline that capture opportunities to learn. This is illuminated by the integrated manner in which they addressed the vaping epidemic. What began as a zero-tolerance approach received renewed consideration after faculty advocacy for an alternative path, illustrating Skiba's (2008) finding that zero tolerance practices do not provide rehabilitative or supporting services nor do they help students change their behavior in positive ways.

The evident 'ad hoc' approach to interventions resulted in this researcher needing to interpret much of the interview data and indirectly connect it to the framework. Skiba (2013) spoke about schools thinking about "discipline as a learning opportunity rather than a punishment." This message is alive and well at Northside, with the Superintendent being quoted as saying "we can differentiate instruction, we should also differentiate discipline," and both principals speaking about "finding learning opportunities" in discipline-related interactions. Osher et al. (2010) characterize fair discipline as that which creates positive conditions for learning and more broadly improves academic achievement. Northside utilized a number of alternatives to exclusionary discipline, most notably Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) and Restorative Practices (RP) which are more systemic in nature and based in a tiered framework. Purposeful integration of PBIS and RP effectively capture teachable moments and learning opportunities with regard to social emotional and behavioral expectations as well as provide opportunities to practice and revise and recover from mis-steps that occur through restorative circles or chats. Community service within the school environment and the community was also considered valuable to supporting students' opportunity to learn by allowing for deeper relationship building and individualized interventions based on student interest or passions. A detailed description of circumstances where integrated approaches yielded

the best results abound in the interview data. PBIS attempts to restructure disciplinary practices, social emotional learning targets misbehavior via teaching students social and life skills, and RP attempts to restore and repair relationships affected by misbehavior (Lane et al., 2014; Skiba et al., 2014; Mansfield et al., 2018; Welsh & Little, 2018). Integration of these approaches are an inexact science of integrating multiple options complementary of the school culture and require dedicated leadership with strong beliefs of inclusive practices. None of these approaches explicitly endorse culturally responsive teaching models which requires leaders to intentionally integrate such practices accordingly.

Welsh & Little (2018) speak of "a strategic confluence of interventions" as a contributor to "reduction of discipline." Gregory (2017) articulates the connection of RP with reducing implicit bias, an imperative benefit especially when the racial demographic of faculty and students differ. While PBIS and RP are systemic and constructed within a tiered approach, the overall discipline practice of Northside is still best described as 'ad hoc.' The leadership desire to revise the existing handbook into a comprehensive Code of Conduct may be a solution to addressing a more systemic approach to discipline, capturing the mission and role of all stakeholders, clearly outlining options to exclusionary discipline explicitly respectful of students' opportunity to learn and reflective of culturally responsive practices.

It is further evident that the district is emergent in positive discipline practices as a result of the passing of Chapter 222 of the Acts of 2012 (An Act Relative to Student Access to Educational Services and Exclusion from School. Ch 222, 2012) and the inception of the School Safety Discipline Report (SSDR). As school leaders, areas where we collect and report data are areas we focus on as we are accountable to The Department of Elementary and Secondary Education.

Recommendations

1. Establish alternatives to suspension with an intentional culturally responsive approach.

Discipline reform is beginning to take shape and deeper disaggregation of data identifying discipline disparities can fuel districts' efforts to address implicit bias and cultural responsiveness. A refined systemic approach to monitoring discipline data and a culturally responsive foundation as alternative to discipline may result in less disproportion in discipline decisions thus positively influence all students' opportunity to learn.

2.   Develop a Code of Conduct as a systematic approach to discipline procedures.

The leadership team appears to have good instincts yet hasn't articulated a plan to build a system of interventions, inclusive of a coordination of efforts to support students' opportunity to learn. While Northside characterizes themselves as "a work in progress" and some interviewees cite traditional punishment style discipline, the key leaders are new in their roles and have a vision for discipline in the future. They further spoke about the value of an integrated approach; where there are more than a single "tool in the toolbox" to support student learning. Creation of a Code of Conduct commensurate with the espoused vision may yield more consistent alternatives to exclusionary style suspension.

3. Establish a Student Advisory Council to support student voice in decision-making.

Leaders from Northside spoke frequently about knowing students, listening to students and caring about students. Evidence abounds of the opportunity for student voice to shape the school and it is not yet formalized. A student advisory council may positively influence an integrated approach.

Chapter 4[4]

Discussion and Conclusion

Universal Perspectives

The Northside Public School district was recommended by state educational leaders for their inclusive practices. Through our case study research, we discovered that the perspectives of leaders were underpinned by universal perspectives designed to provide equitable access for all students (Theoharis, 2007). Our findings rest upon our interpretation of the practices that district and school leaders shared with us as they did not refer directly to these practices in the language of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS). In our research we consistently heard district and school leaders express shared beliefs that inclusion was a "non-negotiable," relationships were paramount in creating access to learning, and that resources needed to be designated for staffing and hiring practices that enhanced opportunity for all. We elaborate on how leaders created the MTSS systems drivers (i.e. leadership, implementation, and competency) that supported these beliefs in the sections that follow.

First, we introduce the themes of *willingness to accommodate all students*, *consistent understanding of inclusion*, *relationships*, *external partnerships*, and *resources and human capital*. We further explain how leaders advanced universal perspectives to learning as pivotal to shaping and designing support systems to educate their students (Riehl, 2000). Next, the analysis of these themes led us to the realization that the district nested its support of students with trauma, refugee students, and students with behavioral needs in the same inclusive approaches they employed to support students with disabilities. We argue that the MTSS System Drivers

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[4] This chapter was jointly written by the authors listed and reflects the team approach of this project: Beth N. Choquette, William R. Driscoll, Elizabeth S. Fitzmaurice, and Jonathan V. Redden.

(i.e. leadership, implementation, and competency) are integral to leadership effectiveness. This supports the implementation of an informal tiered framework within a district or school to meet the needs of all learners. Finally, we suggest choices made to invest in human capital development and staffing that further support our claim that universal perspectives guided leadership practices.

Tiered Supports

The professed beliefs articulated in Northside's mission statement grounded how district and school leaders understood their roles and informed their approach to inclusive practices, including the design of what we refer to as an "ad-hoc" Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) for all students. District and school leadership in Northside adopted universal approaches to academic, behavioral and social emotional learning that were nested in an evolved understanding that universal perspectives about learning were applicable outside of special education. Moreover, we emphasize the term "ad-hoc" because we did not uncover a sequential or explicit process that unfolded because of an adopted framework. Instead, their structural supports were contingent upon an inclusive culture that leaders promoted through a web of beliefs, norms, and values that conveyed to the public what was important (Carter & Abawi, 2018). When reviewing the supports available for all students at Northside, many fell into tiered supports as outlined in MTSS, however, the district did not explicitly label them as such. Table 4.1 outlines examples of supports provided to students in Northside. This table is not an exhaustive list but intended to illustrate the continuum of services available for students.

Table 4.1

*Examples of Northside Multi-Tiered System of Support*

Component	Tier I (Universal/All Students)	Tier II (Targeted / Small Group)	Tier III (Intensive/Individualized)
Academic	Summer Enrichment, literacy programs, & backpack school supplies Chromebook 1:1 MS and HS Counselors review grades to see who is progressing and who isn't Co-Teaching 9ᵗʰ Grade Academy with common planning time Data meetings & turnaround plan addresses Asian performance in math Newcomer school	Interpreter services – in person and technology-based WiFi hotspots for student use Girls Who Code Student Support Teams Small-group special education pull-out supports iPads for special education including communication Newcomer school	Summer School BRYT Program Pathways Program Newcomer school Revised approach to vaping IEP Team reconvene as needed
Social-Emotional	Breaks, cool-down spots, flexible seating Building trusting relationships Support students emotionally, educationally, and physically in order for them to be fully present Journaling in health class Newcomer school Food and clothing distribution Responsiveness to the diversity of religious backgrounds Leadership respect for student voice	School-based counselors looking at absenteeism-meeting with students to make sure it isn't getting in the way of their education Teach/provide lessons in life skills, social pragmatics, and self-reflection Newcomer school Interpreter services – in person and technology-based Food and clothing distribution	Outside counselors work with students in school School-based counselors looking at absenteeism-meeting with students to make sure it isn't getting in the way of their education Provide food-hunger having a traumatizing effect on students Individual counseling Teach/provide lessons in life skills and self-reflection BRYT Program Newcomer school Revised approach to vaping
Behavioral	Counselors look to see if students have behaviors in class Conversations with students whose behavior is declining Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) Restorative Practices (RP) Newcomer school District practices in hiring for diversity New leadership positionality	PBIS & RP Newcomer school Interpreter services – in person and technology-based Check-in / Check-out (CICO) Small-group special education pull-out supports	In-School Suspension (ISS)-students can leave ISS if needed to take a test Access to a device for testing only if in ISS & self-reflection activities PBIS & RP Safety & Support Plans Functional Behavioral Assessments (FBA) Pathways & BRYT Program Newcomer school Creative, individualized discipline practices including a revised approach to vaping

Willingness to Accommodate *All* Students

As described in our individual studies, leadership for inclusive practices enacted at Northside was oriented around relationships, culture and beliefs. Having a leader with a vision to create a culture of acceptance and engagement for all learners regardless of the diversity of their needs (Sharma & Desai, 2008; Fauske, 2011) is essential in promoting access and opportunity to learn for all students which is at the core of MTSS. Although district leaders in Northside Public Schools set a vision for inclusive practices, school leaders were primarily responsible for the implementation of systems that support teachers in creating learning access for students in schools. This is transformative given the leadership turnover and indicative of an iterative process.

The professed beliefs articulated in Northside's mission statement grounded how district and school leaders understood their roles and informed their approach to inclusive practices. Figure 4.1 reveals that the Northside Public Schools proudly post their beliefs for all students, faculty and staff, and families to see. We observed this in multiple locations in both schools and district offices.

Figure 4.1

Northside Public Schools Adopted Beliefs
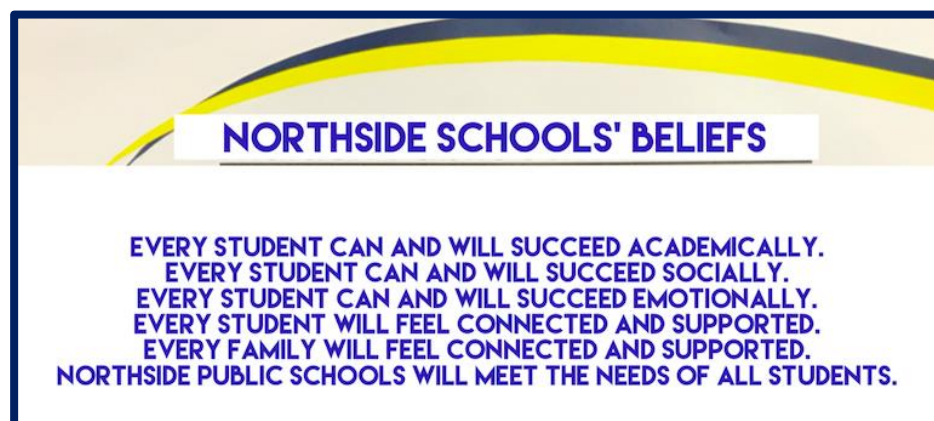
The belief that all students should have access to learning provided the foundation for the structures the district set in place, shaped its aim to establish a culture that accentuated the importance of forging relationships with students and families, and motivated them to reach out to community agencies when they realized their own limitations (Arnot & Pinson, 2005). Educators framed this inclusive leadership approach as a method of eliminating potential academic, social and behavioral barriers to learning to meet the needs of diverse learners. A district leader illuminated the approach in this way:

> The supports you can put into place, if you pay attention to what you're doing, if you pay attention to the results, you can make adjustments and you can do things each day differently to make sure that your child is going to be more successful than they were the day before.

> For education, UDL's purpose is to undergird inclusive environments measured by the ability of all students to access equitable learning opportunities. The commitment to meet the needs of all students was a general theme shared by all the participants who were interviewed, including the teacher focus group. Leaders in the district emphasized their organizational structures as the primary approach to ensure access.

Our conclusion was not the result of finding an explicitly expressed or written strategy of the district uncovered through data analysis or document review. In fact, we could not locate any process that revealed that the district classified students as refugees, screened students with trauma, or discussed quantifiable data about the discipline of high school students, beyond the Student Safety Discipline Report (SSDR). Rather, we noticed that when we pressed participants about how they support the learning of students, they reflexively responded by describing UDL

structures that value classroom accommodations, teacher creativity and classroom flexibility (Novak & Rodriguez, 2016).

Consistent Understanding of Inclusion

Inclusion is an ongoing practice and the leaders recognized that efforts to build a culture of belonging was at its foundation. Chapter 1 discusses the evolution of the understanding of inclusion and how from the onset, inclusion was only thought of as a strategy for students with disabilities (Mittler, 2005). As stated in Chapter 1, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education and our research makes clear that an inclusive philosophy that builds a Multi-Tiered System of Support goes beyond the needs of students with disabilities (2016). Rather, leaders should frame a system that provides access to instruction and positive behavior support for all students.

Our findings indicate that the adage that "we don't do pull outs here" was central to the belief system that Northside leaders used to inform the implementation of MTSS. A district leader was descriptive of the shared norms around beliefs in inclusion when he characterized a collective motivation to provide opportunities for all students:

I do think we have an amazing belief system of inclusion here. Almost to the extreme, you know, we believe in inclusion, everybody goes into inclusion…when they work and everybody is on board, it's really amazing to watch. Yeah, it really is. To see kids and hear kids advance and see the success that they're having. It really just has a magical feeling to it.

Another district leader summarized the district belief to creatively find solutions for students because "a one size fits all approach is ineffective." This same belief in inclusion was

echoed by multiple educators, especially when discussing discipline. For instance, the

Superintendent widely shared his perspective; "we differentiate instruction, why not discipline?"

Northside High School was proactively engaging their students to intentionally create a

culture of inclusiveness. Figure 4.2 reveals photos of inclusive practices that were observed

while in the field, including a gallery of flags representing the home countries of students

enrolled in the school and a mural painted with the word welcome in the languages represented

in the community. Leaders expressed this as an effort to create a welcoming environment.

Figure 4.2

Photos of Inclusive Practices Observed at the High School. (L, Welcome Mural; R, International Flags Which Represent Students' Home Countries)

Further, the engagement with student voice was a significant factor in shaping inclusive

leadership practices at the high school. Leaders referred to student advocacy as the vehicle which

drove the formation of most of the high school clubs and activities illustrated in Table 4.2.

Table 4.2

Student Clubs and Activities at Northside High School

American Red Cross	Animation and Cartooning	Asian Culture
ACC Lion Dancing	Badminton Club	Band
Biology Club	Black Culture	Newspaper
Book Club	Captain's Council	Chemistry Club
Chess Club	Choral Arts	Computer Club
Craft Club	Crew	Culture Connection
Debate	Feminism Club	Figure Skating
Fine Arts Club	Gay Straight Alliance	Greenroom Dramatic Society
Guitar Club	Haitian Club	Henna Club
Interact (Rotary)	Key Club (Kiwanis)	Life Club
Literary Society	Math Team	Mock Trial Team
Model UN	Multicultural Club	Music Club
National Honor Society	Northside's Workshop	Northside Against Cancer
Northside Yearbook	Philosophy Club	Ping Pong Club
Psychology Club	Recycling Club	Relay for Life
Robotics	Science National Honor Society	Social Activism Club
Southeast Asian Club	Step Team	Students of the Fells
Swim Clinic	Techno-vision Club	Tornado Travelers Club
Unified Sports	Visual Arts Society	YMCA Leaders Corp
Youth Leadership and Mentoring		

Findings from Wang (2018) reveal that using student voice to redress marginalization, inequity, and divisive action in schools can have a positive impact on creating a culture of inclusivity. Our research discovered that the use of student voice was used to empower students. Leaders can provide opportunities for students on how they can contribute to change as actors and leaders by promoting student voice in changing policies and practices that perpetuate injustices in schools (Wang, 2018).

Although leaders did not explicitly screen for refugee students or students with trauma, it was evident that the belief in inclusion for all students informed their strategies for vulnerable students. District and school leaders often expressed the mantra of "assume trauma, treat all with gentleness," and the adage "you are not alone." Consider this response from a district leader who explained how his beliefs related to his practice: "it's vitally important for us to make sure that

every single individual feels supported because we understand that each individual and their cultures … have certain things that are non-negotiable."

Relationships

Another significant theme that emerged across our findings was the importance of fostering relationships. Ainscow and Sandill (2010) reveal the importance of staff relationships in supporting the development of inclusive practices. Inclusive leaders build trust and forge relationships with families and educators by promoting a shared vision in creating a culture that is inclusive for all. Both of the schools in our study expressed that vision as a belief that "all students belong." Leaders with an expansive vision of school community shared language and values to generate an inclusive school culture (Zollers et al., 1999). The leaders in our study sought to create an inclusive school culture by not only promoting a shared vision of inclusive practices, but by expanding relationship building with multiple stakeholders. MTSS focuses on shared responsibility and collaboration through its *leadership* driver. The leaders at Northside articulated a vision for inclusive practices and spoke about meeting the needs of all learners and fostering positive relationships amongst all contributors.

Leaders created cultures of inclusivity by thinking creatively to engage students in their learning and support students to make better choices and providing them with alternatives to punitive discipline. Leaders recognized that relationships provided the underpinning to structures for students with disabilities such as the co-teaching model, offered supports for students who have experienced trauma by shaping a transition program that supports their academic and social emotional needs, ensured non-discriminatory discipline practices, or constructed a welcoming and supportive environment for refugee students. Sparks (2016) stresses the importance of prioritizing relationships when creating discipline policies. The integration of Positive Behavior

Intervention and Support (PBIS) and Restorative Practices (RP) at the elementary school as well as the use of RP to repair damages and preserve relationships at the high school are intentional tiered relationship building initiatives at Northside. Further, community service within the school or in the greater external community connect student learning in the social emotional and behavioral realm in a functional and meaningful way.

Our study, conducted in one of the most diverse districts in the Commonwealth, uncovered that fostering relationships is key to creating an environment that is welcoming and provides equal access and opportunity to learn for all students. For example, teaching coping skills and social emotional learning strategies to students who have experienced trauma to help overcome the resistance and fear they have in building relationships with peers and adults is central in order to not jeopardize positive development and success in life (CDC, 2013).

External Partnerships

An inclusive school is the place in the community where students can feel safe, access educational opportunities and form links to community and outside organizations, resulting in outcomes that enhance the quality of their lives (Dei & James, 2002). The district engaged in an ongoing process to provide supports for all students by reaching out to community partners to meet the needs of students as they learned about problems and responded with the supports they deemed best in the moment. The alacrity that the district demonstrated in building partnerships with community agencies to deliver services is rooted in the identification that the multifarious barriers facing refugee children extend beyond what can be addressed by educators because of lack of resources and lack of expertise.

An overwhelming strength of the Northside district is the interconnectedness it forged with local agencies, including religious, mental health institutions, government, homeless

advocacy groups, universities, and immigrant organizations to meet social emotional, behavioral, and academic needs. One leader expressed their approach as "resource rich" as he described a myriad of "stakeholder involvement, including academic supports, such as a dual enrollment program with a local community college," social emotional support from a crisis center, mental health partnerships with hospitals and therapists, behavioral supports provided by the mayor's office, police and fire departments, grants from the state and local foundations, churches, an immigrant center "run by a survivor of the Holocaust who is exceptional at advocating for families," Title I Literacy Programs, and a professional development initiative with Harvard University.

The narratives participants shared began to weave a tapestry that illustrated that the high level of supports being provided for students were dependent upon external relationships. School leaders exercised their own social capital to connect with outside agencies as both building principals shared vignettes about how they formed networks based on relationships with families. See Figure 4.3 for evidence of how school and district leaders interwove their beliefs about MTSS with their outreach to the community to address the academic, social emotional, and behavioral needs of their students.

Figure 4.3

Three Focus Area Approach to Developing Community Supports for Students (adapted from Eagle et al., 2015)
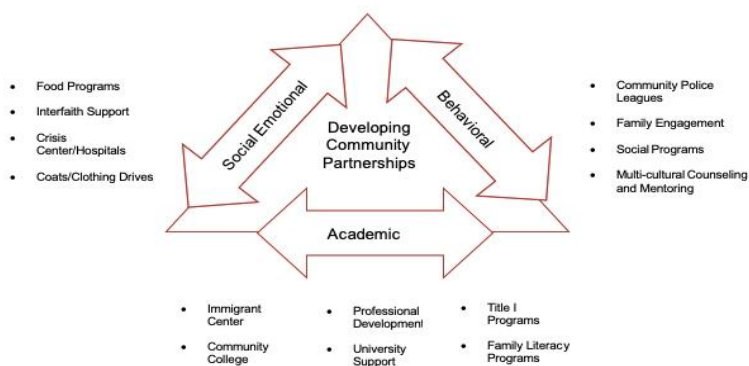
Resources and Human Capital

Effective cultivation of beliefs in inclusion and relationships within the school community and the community at large requires careful allocation of resources. Resources defined as financial, human and structural, reflective of the System Drivers of MTSS, provide for intentional decisions which can be made to support said allocation (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2019). Further, a process where data can be collected and analyzed as part of a feedback and evaluation mechanism ensures continued effectiveness of allocations in all areas.

Finance

The Northside Public School district leadership made intentional decisions to use their resources in an effort to meet the needs of all learners. Fisher et al. (2000) found principals had the most success when they stayed true to their vision and committed resources to put personnel and services in the classroom to support all student learning. Northside's decisions are resultant of careful examination of multiple contributing factors. As a small urban district with meager resources, they purposefully steered allocations toward the building level and invested in the social emotional and mental health needs of their students by providing robust counseling supports. This caused lean operation management at the central office and required each district leader to be responsible for multiple areas, thus limiting their feeling of effectiveness. Further, while the decision to route immigrant students to the Southwest Elementary School, thus creating a "newcomer school" superficially appears to be a decision contrary to the espoused belief in inclusive practices, it may be a fiduciary decision allowing the district to concentrate specialized services for this vulnerable population.

The district invests in professional learning in a variety of topics, including cultural responsiveness, restorative practices, positive behavior interventions and supports as well as many curricular areas. However, teacher focus group feedback illuminated a concern about the efficacy of professional learning opportunities in the district and the effectiveness of sustainable implementation, largely due to leadership turnover.

Staffing and Hiring

The superintendent discussed the recruitment, hiring and retention of faculty of color with intention and as a goal of the district. This hiring is more beneficial and sustainable if done with intentionality, and embedded with effective onboarding. Despite this focus on hiring for diversity and social emotional learning needs at Northside, we question whether hiring for the purpose of implementing MTSS is occurring. Paulo Freire (2000) discussed the leader's role as one who must guide oppressed learners to fully participate helping to make decisions that build on the assets of language, ethnicity, and race. Northside Public Schools are home to a racially balanced student body, but cultural disproportionality exists with the faculty (See Chapter 2, Figure 2.3). District and school leaders discussed the need to hire faculty with the skills and background necessary to meet the needs of their students. They recognize this inadequacy and are attempting to address it through new district initiatives.

Further, at the elementary school, building leaders have increased the number of counselors to support the social emotional needs of their students and some counselors are also licensed social workers. Hiring more counselors was based on the need of its students, but not with MTSS in the forefront. The hiring of licensed and trained counselors gave us an opportunity to examine if the Northside District conceptualized these staff members as Tier II and Tier III intervention structures essential for students who struggle with behaviors and social emotional

challenges. A proactive staffing design and intentional deployment to support the needs of students is just as critical. We found the district leadership may have sacrificed the staffing at the central office (i.e. no human resources officer) in order to meet the needs of its students because that was their priority.

In 2019, Northside Public Schools endured a 75% turnover amongst their principals. Both of the schools we studied were amongst the schools with newer leadership. Due to the high turnover rate of principals, it was challenging for teachers to invest in a relational culture. Skrtic (1991) found that school principals lead efforts to customize the overall environment to meet the needs of each learner. Our research revealed that the customization of individual learning is compromised when educational leaders are not in place long enough to establish deep connections with students, families, or community organizations. The mindset and belief that all students can learn at high levels is in place, in accordance with the *Competency* Driver in MTSS, and the leaders are continuing their ongoing effort to hire more diversely so as to effectively meet the needs of all students. If leaders purposefully recruit and hire staff who have a shared belief and vision that all students can learn, are providing high quality, sustainable professional learning and are imparting quality feedback and evaluation to educators, it contributes to the implementation success of MTSS (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2019). These conditions create a system of trust, support, and ownership that meets the needs the students, faculty and staff (McLeskey, 2014).

Structures

Staffing design and deployment to support the needs of students is just as critical. Northside enacted extensive Title I programming (especially at the Newcomers school), co-teaching models for students with disabilities, licensed social workers as counselors, a program

for students who have experienced trauma, a behavior program, and the specialized autism program. Senge's *Levers for Change* (1990) shares that in order to move towards inclusion, leaders need to focus on building capacity with the school, which is also part of the competency driver. Our study examined the Northside High School and Southwest Elementary School known as the "newcomer" school. At this school they expanded their resources. However, by having all "newcomers" attend this school, the district is not building capacity to meet the needs of refugee students at its other K-8 schools. When focus group participants were asked if there had been any discussion about building capacity for other schools, one teacher responded with, "there has been no discussion about it." Even when tension was divulged, district and school leaders described the success of existing structures of co-teaching models with general and special educators sharing classrooms, including built-in time to discuss what is working for students. Study participants focused on defining educational structures that were developed to increase learning for *all* students, not specific subgroup populations.

The Southwest Elementary School saw the elimination of their extended day in the last contract negotiations. Leaders articulated contradictory perspectives with concern that it limited their continuum of services to students and yet allows more opportunity for faculty consultation and training. Further, examination of the effectiveness of policies and procedures as they become obvious is essential to effective leadership for inclusive practices. Representative of this obligation is the intentional and iterative process of pursuing a wholesale review and revision of the Student Handbook into a comprehensive Code of Conduct. From Hehir (2012) who espouses "special education as a service and not a destination," to Sugai & Horner (2002) and Skiba (2013) who discuss the value of preserving the sanctity of the classroom through tiered supports,

we can see the value of intentional utilization of resources to create proactive structures calculated to meet the needs of all students.

Recommended Actions for Leaders

Based on our research of the Northside Public Schools, we offer a number of recommendations to inform both policy research and the development of professional practice. Northside operates from an ethos of care that animates their leadership practices. Although professionals in school district did not articulate their inclusive approach in clinical sophistication or in academic nomenclature, this is not to be interpreted as a lack of care or dedication to effective educational service. Individuals within the school district advocated strongly for the needs of students. A more intentional approach to intervention, inclusive of purposeful student voice and choice may result in a more effective systematic approach to universal supports for all students. Resultantly, theory and practice are not seamlessly aligned for this district. The district realizes it is not evolved in this area, however, there is a dedication to working toward inclusive practices. Northside is an urban district that struggles with meager resources yet makes selfless decisions to staff buildings with adequate personnel in order to support students' needs. This leaves little for district staffing, resulting in an exhausting dynamic where each district leader carries multiple duties.

The findings in this study lead to the following recommendations:

1. **Create data collection and reporting obligations for students experiencing trauma, including a screening requirement**

Districts prioritize English Language Arts and Mathematics instruction over non-tested content areas likely due to the public accountability associated with such data. Special education is not lacking in compliance monitoring standards and, relatedly, discipline law reform and the

inception of School Safety Discipline Reporting (SSDR) creates an environment ripe for data driven efforts to overcome discipline disparities. This circumstance invites a recommendation that state-wide data collection and reporting for identification of students who experience trauma and who are refugees will sharpen a focus on these at-risk populations.

Beyond data reporting, the use of universal screeners for trauma, similar to other mental health/social emotional screening initiatives within schools, can help identify student need and shape policy poised to provide resources and guidance on servicing this vulnerable student group. Screening could potentially be conducted biannually. Our research highlights significant connections amongst our target study populations of refugee students, students who experience trauma and disproportionate discipline, and students with disabilities. Screening, ongoing assessment and data reporting can help facilitate integrated approaches to serve all of these populations.

2. **Create a systemic manner of tracking refugee students to support more effective access to education**

Our legislators would serve our refugee population well by examining how the Commonwealth tracks refugee students and families, thus positioning schools to be more well prepared to anticipate and meet their needs. Such reporting can accelerate the efforts district leaders, like those at Northside, are taking to build supportive environments that are responsive to the academic, behavioral and social emotional needs of newcomers. Community efforts to identify refugee students can help district and school leaders implement newcomer centers or programs that connect students with other members of their cultural and ethnic communities, develop social friendships, and strengthen the bonds of religious identity. Furthermore, state-wide tracking of transience may provide schools with motivation to create stronger entry point

programs with teachers trained in cross-cultural communication and lead to deeper engagement across districts to determine why students are leaving to find other communities. Such efforts could foster relationships with like-districts to realize coordinated efforts to assist refugee students to remain within schools to reduce the number of Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE) across the state. It may also help district leaders identify and address practices of implicit bias that may drive students away from host schools or communities. Northside should examine its practice of operating a newcomer school to determine if it best meets the needs of students. These researchers recognize the importance of marshalling limited resources to establish enduring support systems, but we question how this practice aligns with the strong belief in inclusion across the system.

3. **Require professional learning obligations in the area of trauma-sensitive practices and mental-health services for licensure requirements**

A focus on strong professional learning provisions is essential. One-time workshops and events not supported with leadership attention are ineffective. Currently MA DESE requires faculty to engage in a certain number of professional learning hours for Special Education and Sheltered English Immersion (SEI) to remain eligible for re-licensure. Expanding that to require professional learning hours in mental health, trauma-sensitive practices and/or tiered supports provides more systemic access to information that can support inclusive practices at the classroom level.

In addition to a re-licensure requirement, the district is encouraged to consider replicating the success of the professional learning of PBIS and RP. A brain-science approach which cultivates teacher leaders and ongoing coaching to support implementation of training is calculated to be more beneficial than event-style single lectures or presentations. Further,

consideration for providing specific training on connecting Universal Design for Learning

(UDL) and Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) will deeply enrich the implementation of any

professional learning experiences. An example of possible benefits of such a provision may be a

purposeful opportunity to address the racial disproportion in the district's discipline data.

Resource allocation to schedule co-planning for faculty to work together from an integration

perspective would help ensure the success of this professional learning.

4. **Integrate tiered supports and services in a culturally responsive and systematic**

   manner

Further policy considerations include a careful articulation of inclusive practices,

expanding beyond the current prevailing belief that inclusion is either a destination to be realized

or a title reserved to describe education for students with disabilities (Hehir, 2010). UDL sees

difference as an asset and sanctions an integrated approach which overcomes department siloes

with discreet roles and missions. A UDL approach to policy development and guidance on

implementation avoids alienating, excluding or restricting access to certain populations and

furthers integrating approaches, ensuring that research-based methods are considerate of a

culturally responsive perspective. For example, PBIS and RP are both research-based approaches

calculated to provide benefit, yet they are race-neutral. When delivered as a whole school

initiative, where there is likely a disproportion between the race of the students and faculty,

integrating a culturally responsive lens to these interventions may enhance their effectiveness. A

closer connection between learning and data may be realized with a deeper analysis of current

needs and learning opportunities which connect inclusive practices and culturally responsive

teaching. District leaders are encouraged to partner with building leaders to continue the deep

work of integrating culturally responsive professional learning and tiered supports for the vulnerable populations studied.

5. Cultivate a comprehensive leadership team, resourced to unite in a common vision for inclusive practices and implementation of MTSS

Jones et al. (2013) indicate whole school initiatives focused on increasing meaningful, inclusive policies and practices are an ideal scenario for sustained positive school change. An integrated approach where the leadership team is united in communicating their vision will facilitate discussions necessary to change the mindset of those who did not share their vision. The current district and building leaders we interviewed are relatively new and apparently coalescing as a leadership team. We noted a commendable vision and positive beliefs about students' access to learning. Working together to channel this positive energy into a systemic MTSS structure which capitalizes on current provisions will provide for a more effective system of supports.

6. Create an integrated approach to support the district vision of inclusiveness

Cultivating a culture of inclusiveness requires sustained effort in an environment where all voices are heard and all contribute to the model. Northside provides many tiered supports, within their school buildings, on an ad hoc basis. They may be well served to create a systemic tiered framework to guide the intentionality of their interventions. A nested tiered structure within special education to complement the tiered structure for the entire building or district will be poised to make more intentional, and least restrictive decisions for students. With UDL as foundational to all educational structures and practices (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2019), research-based professional learning focused on

integration must be an ongoing endeavor. An integrated approach is not a checklist or recipe. It is a toolbox approach and an intentionally planned initiative with input from all stakeholders.

In summary, Northside's leaders at the building level make tiered (albeit ad hoc) decisions to provide co-taught class experiences for general education students who struggle but are not eligible for special education. Additionally, Title I provides services in creative, family friendly ways which are reported to connect families to their child's educational experience through literature and literary skill development. Finally, a single-minded commitment to fostering relationships with families, students and amongst faculty is considered pivotal to supporting more effective access to the educational setting. This context may or may not provide structures or approaches valuable to implementing MTSS. While these practices are not an exemplar, checklist or recipe (Dyson & Gallannaugh, 2007), they frame considerations for other districts to develop their own integrated approach to achieving inclusive practices which are robust enough to result in improved educational experiences for students.

Areas for Further Study

Future studies may focus on learning about Northside's student and teacher perspectives on inclusive practices and providing them with a voice in the research. Such studies could examine the influence of teacher practices, specialized programs, and psychological supports for the student populations which were the foci of our individual studies. Finally, many questions remain with regard to this study informing leadership practices:

1. While Northside characterizes themselves as "a work in progress," key leaders are new in their roles and have a vision for inclusive practices in the future. True systemic change in a school district as large as Northside does not occur in a mere year or two, it takes time.

Early evidence shows this leadership team coalescing. Will data show increased inclusive practices over time if this team continues to work together for years to come?

2. How might the district faculty benefit from ongoing, integrated professional learning in the specific areas of this study?

3. Does the creation of a newcomer school which pools resources for refugees contradict a voiced leadership commitment to inclusive practices?

Limitations

As with any study, this study is not without limitations that impact its validity. Case study research provides for many strengths, however, there are also weaknesses. One weakness that we encountered was the reliance on the "researcher [as] the primary instrument of data collection and analysis" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 52). As a research team, we carefully explored our bias and experiences about inclusive practices.

Further, we conducted only informal observations of the two schools in the district where we conducted our research. Such informal observations could lead to more subjective interpretations that inform the group's conclusions. The duration of our study was limited to the semester allotted for this work as part of our doctoral studies. Time constraints limited how deeply we were able to explore the impact of district efforts to implement MTSS approaches in multiple schools. Long-term studies may better measure the quantitative benefits or shortcomings of inclusive practices. Given the significant turnover and emergent coalescence of the current leadership team, an ethnographic type study might illuminate the sustainability of many of the promising practices we learned about.

During a short period of time, we conducted 24 interviews and one focus group over the span of five days. We reserved 45 minutes for each interview, with some exceeding an hour. As

a research team, we interviewed in pairs and asked questions from a pre-planned compilation of questions spanning all aspects of our individual studies. Imbedded in this time saving measure is the limitation in being able to ask organic follow up questions in our area of interest. Given the time constraints, the ability to conduct follow up inquiries was limited. Further, the focus group was not comfortable providing permission to record the session so the researchers relied on personal memory notes of the session. Finally, Massachusetts, historically a progressive Commonwealth, can contribute to outcomes that may differ dramatically from other areas of the country.

Despite these limitations, we hope the findings uncovered in our research inform leaders, educators and researchers alike, as they attempt to improve supports and inclusive educational experiences that contribute to the academic and emotional development of all students.

Conclusion

True systemic change related to positive inclusive practices can take many years to accomplish and many districts in the Commonwealth are just beginning to respond to research and initiate these processes. The leadership turnover experienced in our study district may slow any progress. Leaders refer to this turnover as "turbulence in positions" and, in using such language, expose the stress they feel to meet the needs of students and build collegial relationships at the same time. Given the significant turnover and emergent coalescence of the current leadership team, an ethnographic type study might illuminate the sustainability of many of the promising practices we learned about in subsequent years. We wonder; if the district enjoyed some leadership stability and we were to return in three years, what we would find. By conducting this asset-based study, we have hope that our findings illuminate some high leverage

inclusive practices suitable for implementation within districts committed to the relentless pursuit of equity of all students.

Each of our study areas illuminates significant factors contributing to our overarching study. Discipline data is comparable to state averages. Given that demographics are not comparable; this is not considered an indictment of the district's discipline practices. Additionally, the partnering of alternative practices and the districts' cultural responsiveness work may support longer-term integrated success. The district is to be commended for welcoming newcomers and supporting their learning, while the practice of galvanizing limited resources in one school should be examined in favor of building capacity across the district. Given that the district does not have a formal way to screen for students who have experienced trauma, the amount of social, emotional, and behavioral support that they provide for their students, both within the school and outside, is laudable.

As collaborating colleagues, we integrated findings from our individual studies to tell a more complete story as many students are represented in more than one of the foci represented by each of our individual studies. Such coordination can also inform policy that supports creating environments where schools provide all students equitable access to education. The true aspirational goal of our study is to save lives by providing guidance to facilitate districts' learning from one another to support *all* students.

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Appendix A

Table of Individual Studies

Leadership for Inclusive Practices: Overview of Group Study

Individual Research Topics	Investigator	Conceptual Framework	Research Questions
Trauma-informed schools	Choquette	MTSS/Social Justice Leadership	*In what ways do district and school leaders support inclusive practices for students who have experienced trauma?*
Leadership practices to support refugee students	Driscoll	MTSS	*In what ways do district and school leaders support inclusive practices for refugee students?*
Leadership decisions about student discipline	Fitzmaurice	MTSS	*In what ways do district and school leaders make discipline decisions that support students' opportunity to learn?*
Inclusive practices for students with disabilities	Redden	Universal Design for Learning	*In what ways do district and school leaders utilize UDL practices to support inclusion for students with disabilities in the general education classroom?*

Appendix B

Structured Abstract for Beth N. Choquette

Leadership for Inclusive Practices: Supporting Students Who Have Experienced Trauma

Background

According to the American Psychiatric Association (2013), trauma is defined as exposure to actual or threatened death, serious injury or sexual violence in one or more of four ways: (a) directly experiencing the event; (b) witnessing, in person, the event occurring to others; (c) learning that such an event happened to a close family member or friend; and (d) experiencing repeated or extreme exposure to aversive details of such events, such as with first responders (Jones et al., Cureton, 2019). Public schools are seeing increased populations of students who have experienced trauma. Leaders need to help foster a shared vision for inclusive practices, create structures that can support the needs of students, and provide teachers with the support and training they need to support all students.

Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to focus on district and school practices used to support an inclusive environment for students who have experienced trauma. The research question for this study was, *in what ways do district and school leaders support inclusive practices for students who have experienced trauma?* Using an integrated framework of MTSS and Social Justice Leadership, I examined how leaders support inclusive practices in supporting students' academic, behavior, and social emotional needs while at the same time encouraging leaders to look at trauma through a social justice lens.

Methods

This research was conducted using a case study design in a Massachusetts school district. District and school leaders were interviewed through the semi-structured interview process and a teacher focus group was conducted. Informal observations helped to gain insight of the school culture and climate, as well as a document review concerning policies, discipline data and academic achievement.

Findings

The findings revealed two themes as strengths for this district, creating community and providing services for students and families. The third theme, professional development, was an area of weakness for this district. Leaders are on their way in providing inclusive practices for students who have experienced trauma, especially in the areas of social emotional learning and behaviors. If Northside strives to develop a shared understanding of trauma and provides ongoing professional development in trauma-sensitive practices as well as a systematic approach to MTSS through the lens of Social Justice Leadership, they will ensure appropriate tiered interventions for this population of students while at the same time providing them with a socially just inclusive education.

Appendix C

Structured Abstract for William R. Driscoll

Leadership for Inclusive Practices: Border Crossing to Support Refugee Students

Background
The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees estimates that more than half of the 22.5 million refugees worldwide are children. Among the consequences of fleeing their homes because of violence, war and persecution, families and children face a crisis level of interruption to their educational opportunities. As the United States continues to lead the world in welcoming asylum seekers, educational leaders must prepare for an increasing population of transnational students (Bajaj & Bartlett, 2017).

Purpose
The urgency of studying inclusive practices is intensified when one considers that refugee students in America face acculturation challenges that include the reversal of parent-child relationships, (Koyama & Bakuza, 2017), being unaccompanied by parents (Tello, et al., 2017), racial discrimination (Taylor & Sidhu, 2012, Roxas & Roy, 2012) and educational barriers (Ladson-Billings, 2003).

Research Question
The guiding question to this research is: *In what way do district and school leaders support inclusive practices for refugee students?*

Methods
Methods for this heuristic case study, nested within the group study, are designed to examine the dynamics that influence school district and school leaders and how they construct support systems to meet the diverse needs of their students. Methods include 16 semi-structed interviews of district leadership teams and school principals, observations of schools, and document review of school, district and state websites, newspapers, archives, achievement data, memos, and policy statements.

Findings
A Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) approach for inclusive practices offers leaders a framework to meet the needs of diverse leaders by focusing on strategies that support academic, social emotional well-being, and partnerships with community organizations. Leaders use inclusive practices to support the needs of their refugee students by (I) Identifying Barriers to Learning, (II) Aligning Structures with Universal Design for Learning, and (III) Shaping Culture for Equitable Access. Implications of this case study highlight how leaders might balance equity and access in response to the forced migration of millions of students arriving in their districts.

Appendix D

Structured Abstract for Elizabeth S. Fitzmaurice

Leadership for Inclusive Practices:
Discipline Decisions that Support Students' Opportunity to Learn

Background

Student discipline practices evolved significantly in recent decades, yet pervasive use of out of school suspension persists. Such exclusionary discipline practice negatively influences students' opportunity to learn and restricts inclusion within the school environment. There is wide belief and extensive research speaking to the benefit of alternative practices yet a gap in research remains specific to what leadership practices influence such practices.

Purpose

This study closely examined this gap in research, providing an overview of the importance of alternative discipline practices, in lieu of out of school suspension (OSS), and explore leadership practices and decision-making about discipline situations and the effect on Opportunity to Learn.

Research Question

This study was guided by the following question: *In what ways do district and school leaders make discipline decisions that support students' opportunity to learn?*

Methods

To address this research question, I conducted a qualitative case study in a district within the Commonwealth of Massachusetts where the schools' purport utilization of alternative to OSS methods of discipline and the district focus includes leadership for inclusive practices. I conducted semi-structured interviews of district and building leaders to gain information about leadership perspectives on their student discipline decision-making practices. In addition, I examined archival data such as available Office of Civil Rights (OCR) discipline data, Massachusetts School Safety Discipline Reports (SSDR), and locally provided discipline data. Informal observations contributed to assessment of the overall inclusive culture of the school environments.

Findings

Findings indicated that fostering relationships between school, student, family and community members is integral to inclusive practices as a whole, specifically when related to discipline situations and integral to effective implementation of alternatives to suspensions, such as Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports and Restorative Practices. Recommendations include intentional systems development and implementation of instructional interventions as alternative to exclusionary discipline through a culturally responsive perspective.

Appendix E

Structured Abstract for Jonathan V. Redden

Leadership for Inclusive Practices: Supporting Special Education Needs of Students in the General Education Classroom

Background
Despite many studies and a general belief that students should not be excluded from learning with their peers, there is no consensus on a definition of inclusion. Leaders' conceptual understanding of inclusion drive their visions and practices. Lacking a standard definition creates a void naming universal practices that ensure effective and inclusive schools (Ainscow et al., 2006). Since IDEA laws, an increasing number of students with disabilities are being educated in the general education classroom. Clarity around specific practices leaders take based on their district's context will help guide educators to design, structure and sustain schools where inclusion is a schoolwide reality.

Purpose
This study examined the policies, structures and practices that directly impact students on an IEP who are placed in the general education classroom. I studied the ways leaders support removing social and academic barriers to maximize the achievement potential of students in the general education classrooms.

Research Question
In what ways do district and school leaders utilize UDL practices to support inclusion for students with disabilities in the general education classroom?

Methods
The research was conducted through a qualitative case study that relied on interviews, informal observations and document analysis. I utilized the responses from 17 individual leaders in a Massachusetts school district and responses from a focus group of six teachers. I also used publicly released state assessment and school demographic information to help determine the impact specific practices had on the student achievement of students with disabilities.

Findings
Inclusion as a concept started with embracing diversity. Barriers to learning were not seen as being inherent in the capacities of students. Leaders felt responsible for sustaining learning environments where providing academic accommodations or modifications were not viewed as extra but rather viewed as the work of educators. Next steps involve using staff and technology resources effectively to drive student achievement based on academic measures.

Appendix F

Interview Protocol

Overarching Questions:
1. What motivates you to work to provide opportunities for all students?
2. What so you find most challenging about your position?
3. As you think about helping every student learn, what types of things do you do? What Types of programs are beneficial to that end?
   - -probe for tiered supports
   - -probe for family and community engagement

Questions about Trauma:
1. There are so many ways to describe trauma, how do you describe trauma in your school?
2. Can you tell about how your school is supporting these students? What services do you provide?
   a. Probe for tiered supports (Academic, Social Emotional, Behavior)
   b. Probe for mental health care
   c. Probe for wrap around services
3. When it comes to supporting students who experienced trauma and their families, what supports do you need?
   a. Probe for training
   b. Probe for resources

Questions about Refugees:
1. Just like trauma, there are many ways to define multi-cultural practices. How do teachers reach students from different cultures?
2. Being from one of the most diverse districts in The Commonwealth, how do you go about serving students from so many different cultures?
   a. Probe for speaking so many languages
3. How did you come up with this approach and why did you do it?
   a. Probe for origin of approach – Internal? External?
4. What types of things are happening to help your refugee students?
5. To what extent do you rely on partnering with outside agencies to support students?

Questions about Student Discipline:
1. We've been talking a lot about the kinds of things that help kids make the most of their education, can you talk to us about school discipline and how it fits into that? How do you, as a leader, decide what to do about student discipline?

2. I hear you say you want to make sure every kid gets the most out of school, tell me how the Student Handbook/Code of Conduct factors into that. Can you share a story about why you are feeling that way?
3. Tell me about how the school uses creative solutions for student discipline. Do you find these successful?
4. Do you ever do anything that is not suspension? If so, what? How does it work?
   a. Probe for tiered support, alternatives to discipline i.e. PBIS, Peer Mediation, Restorative Practices etc…
5. We came here because of your district's reputation around inclusive practices, including discipline practices. Is it real? What is working and what is not?
6. Given what you shared about your philosophy and practice around student discipline, how do you support faculty to adopt your philosophy?

Questions about Structures for Students with Disabilities:
1. We've been talking about making sure every kid does well in school. How do educators in the school define and support inclusion?
2. What does inclusion mean to you?
   a. Probe for any particular strategies?
   b. Probe for any particular training?
3. Are there school-based systems of supports?
4. How are educators supported to stay current on 'best practices' and the latest policies specifically for successfully including students with disabilities.
5. Can you tell me about the collaborative / co-teaching structures you have in place that support inclusion?
   a. Probe for what the interviewee sees as next steps
6. What, if any instructional and assistive technology are being used for students with disabilities and other special needs by educators in the classroom?
7. When it comes to allocating resources for students with disabilities, what is the process?
   a. Probe for how make sure every student does well.
   b. Probe for resource allocation to support inclusive practices.

Closing Questions:
1. If you were to provide advice to another district, what might you offer?
   a. Probe for collaboration, mentoring, support groups.
2. Is there anything that we did not ask that would be helpful to our study?

Appendix G

Observation Protocol

Observation Notes

Setting: _____

Observer: _____

Date of Observation: _____

Time & Duration of Observation: _____

	Observations	Thoughts/Reflections
Physical Setting		
Participants		
Activities & Interactions		
Conversations		
Subtle Factors		
Observers' Contributions		

Diagram of Classroom/School: