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

Author: Jonathan Velvet Redden

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Jonathan Velvet Redden

with William R. Driscoll, Elizabeth S. Fitzmaurice Beth N. Choquette

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By

Jonathan Velvet Redden

Dr. Lauri Johnson (Chair)
Dr. David Scanlon (Reader)
Dr. Daniel Gutekanst (Reader)

Abstract

Understanding how leaders in school districts develop, implement and sustain effective inclusive practices in schools that continuously enable students with disabilities (SWDs) to be consistently immersed in appropriate learning environments is a complex task. Research indicates that successful inclusive policies, structures, and beliefs are developed contextually and are not always transferable. More research needs to be done on inclusive practices that are implemented by district and school leaders and their effects on students with disabilities. As part of a group qualitative case study about inclusive leadership practices in a diverse urban school district in Massachusetts (Northside Public Schools), the purpose of this individual study was to examine leadership practices that undergird inclusion for students with disabilities in the general education classroom. Interview data from 16 district and school leaders, six teachers in a focus group interview, and public documents provided data for analysis through a Universal Design for Learning (UDL) framework. Findings indicate that strong welcoming school environments and the leader's vision for inclusion are important but will not necessarily lead to improved achievement outcomes for SWDs. Leaders should build from inclusive values and determine appropriate steps to intentionally remove barriers to the curriculum for SWDs in the general education classroom.

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Dedication

The one person who supported me every day and put their life on hold while I completed the program was my girlfriend, Kristen Goncalves. Kristen has been with me through two graduate programs and her support never wavered. Even through the pain of Covid 19, she found the energy to review my notes for my Defense and virtually support me right alongside my family, friends and colleagues. There were many days where I felt I did not see her at all, despite living in the same one bedroom apartment, yet she always made herself available when I needed support. As a principal herself, she did not mind the late nights and early mornings needed to help with editing and revisions. She always made herself available for the group to practice our presentations and her feedback was always spot on. It is currently strange to call someone who has made so many sacrifices for me all in an effort to support my academic growth, my girlfriend. My experience in the PSAP was truly amazing and I would do it all again in a heartbeat. However, I am currently very excited knowing that when Kristen reads this dedication, she will be reading it as my fiancé, and it will officially mark the beginning of a new chapter in my life.

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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)
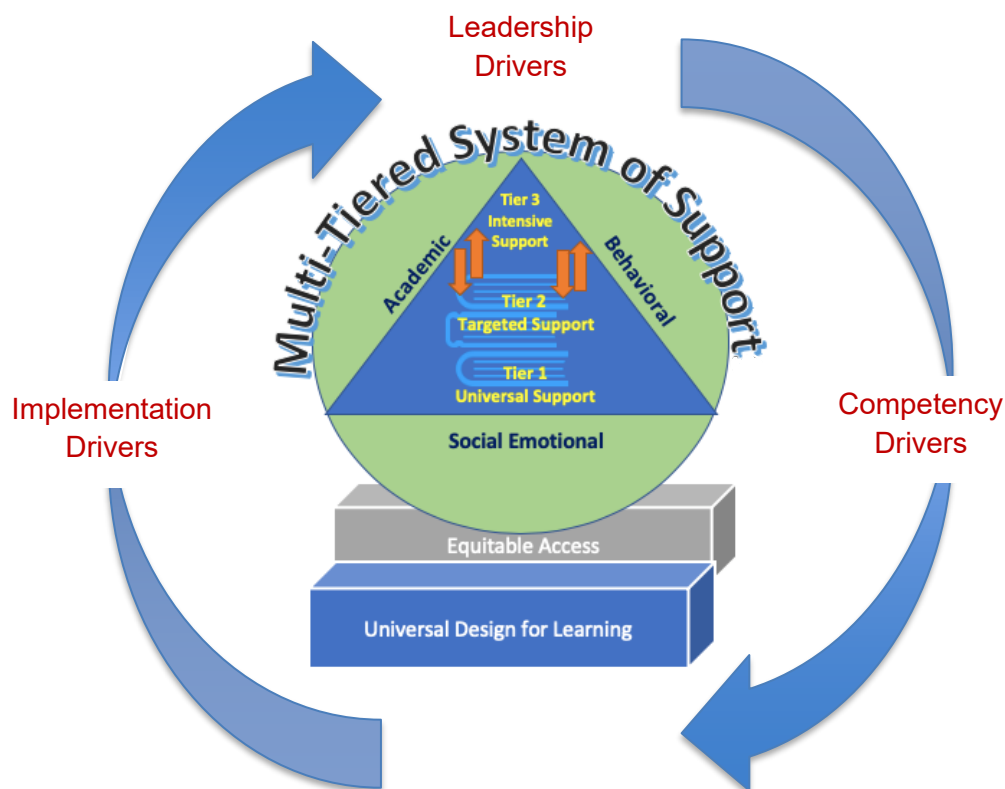
Foundation

First designed by Dr. 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?*

<div align="center">

Chapter 2[2]

Methods

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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

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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)*
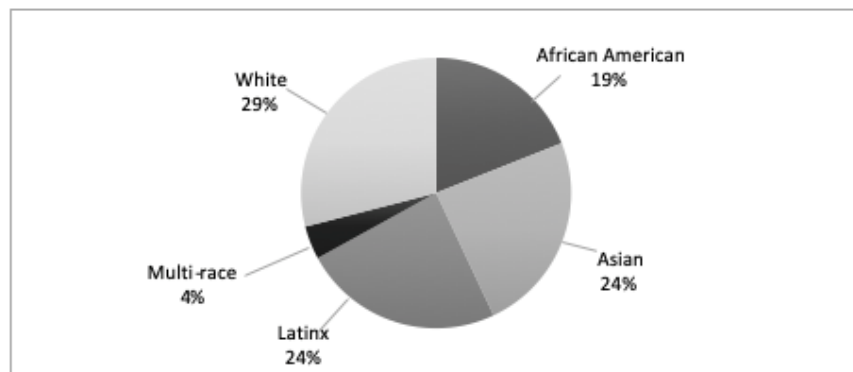
Northside is located in a racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse small urban

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)
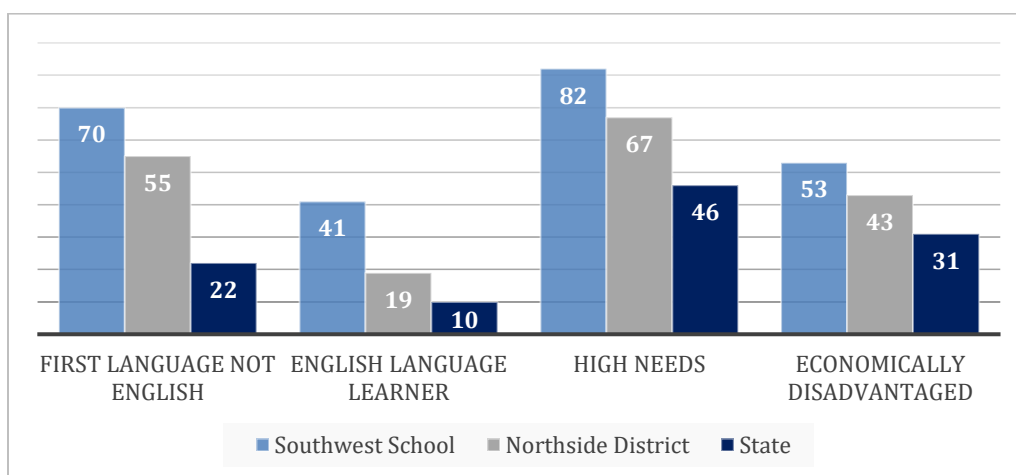
The district has been recognized by the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education for inclusive practices specific to students with disabilities and for its efforts to forge creative alternatives to student discipline. The diverse composition of the district provided rich data to 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)
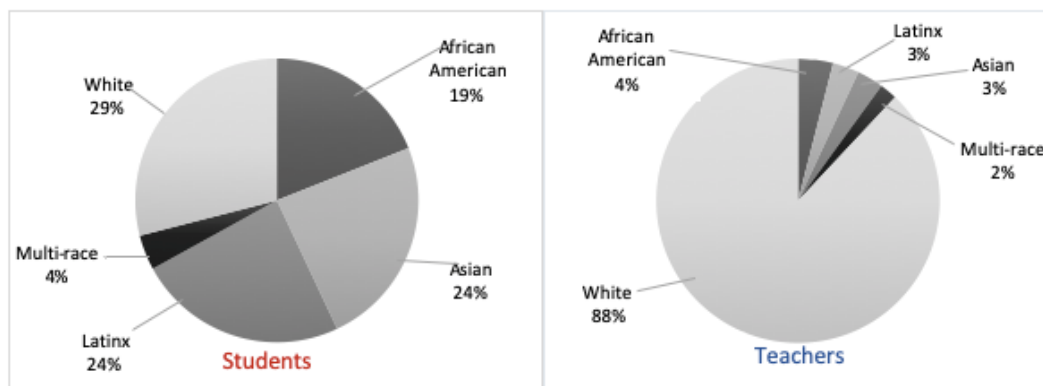
Figure 2.4

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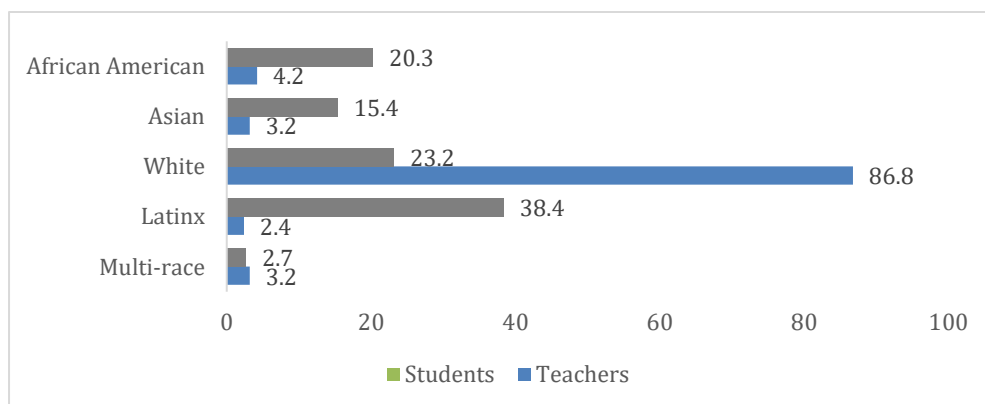
Figure 2.5.

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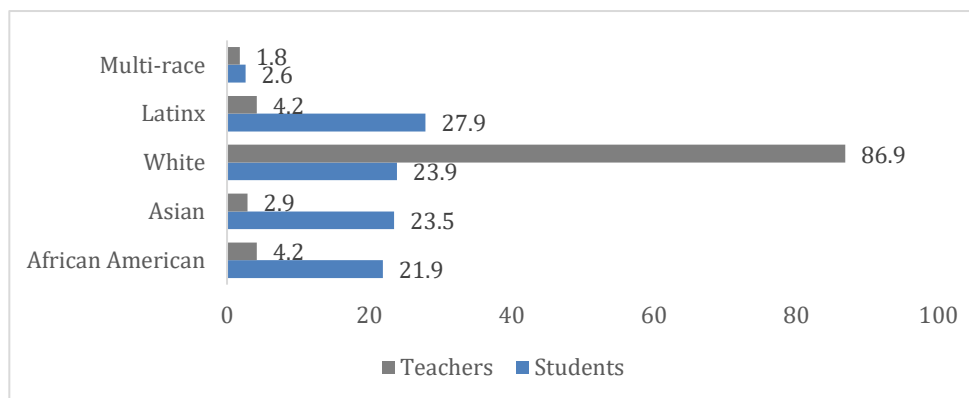
Data Collection

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 Support 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

Document Review	Newspapers/ Histories	Websites/ Internal Documents	Enrollment, Discipline & Achievement Data
Semi-Structured Interviews	District Leadership Team	School Building Leaders	Teacher Focus Group
Informal Observations	Central Office	High School	Newcomers Elementary School
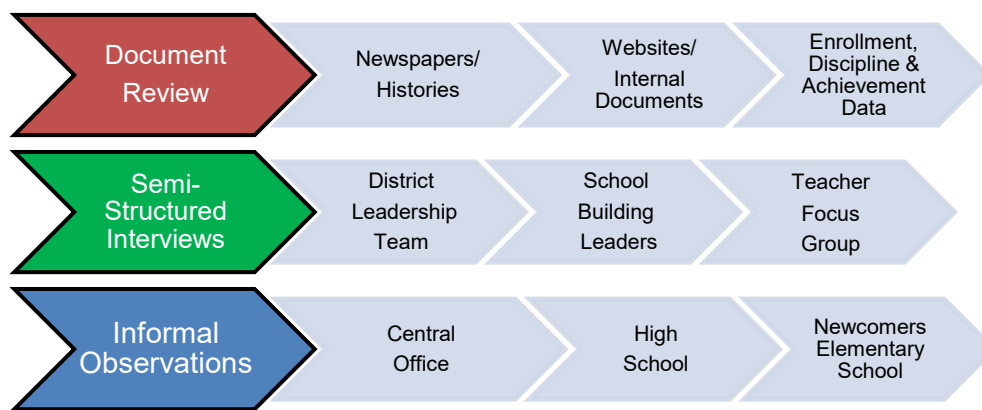
Interview Questions

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

Summary of Team Project

Exclusive practices and stigmas associated with specific minority labels impact whether and how students are included, valued, and successful in school. If leaders view education as a fundamental human right, eliminating forms of exclusion embedded in schools and fostering an inclusive educational environment is a necessary goal to achieve (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010). Insufficient attention to developing and sustaining inclusive practices may breed inequity due to the reinforcement of practices that perpetuate exclusion, especially for typically marginalized populations of students (Ruairc et al., 2013). Legislation such as IDEA provides districts with the infrastructure to develop a system for educators to appropriately respond to the diversity of learners in schools. According to Reindal (2010), educators must move beyond attempts to address structural limitations prevalent in schools and see inclusion as the necessary philosophical approach to education. To establish a culture of inclusion, inclusive practices should be embedded in a school's values, vision, and professional development. Further studies are needed to explore the decisions leaders make to undergird the cluster of inclusive practices that are assessed and deemed appropriate and meaningful to establishing an inclusive environment.

Literature has identified how the diversity of each school or district is unique which ultimately makes any definition of inclusion contextual rather than universal. Our group study addressed how leaders successfully identify, design, and sustain effective inclusive practices with specific subgroups of students in a Massachusetts school district. We aimed to isolate the

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[3] Author: Jonathan V. Redden

specific actions and processes undertaken by district and school leaders who claim to fundamentally believe in including the students in these subgroups. Our findings and recommendations will contribute to the identification and understanding of best practices regarding the inclusion of students who have experienced trauma and disproportionate discipline practices, refugee students, and students with disabilities. Ekins (2017) acknowledges that schools that implement policy and engage in inclusive practices allocate resources, sometimes disproportionately, to a small subgroup of students to enable equitable classroom learning opportunities. In other words, successful inclusion is based on the contextual needs of students in the classroom. Hehir (2012) evaluated the perceptions and activities of teachers, administrators, and parents coupled with classroom observations to determine if all students were provided with a high-quality education in a supportive learning environment. He determined that the consistency rested in the inclusive vision of the school leader.

The Individual Research Study

Inclusive initiatives are often centered on students with disabilities and how they can be incorporated into mainstream classes (Huberman et al., 2012). States have begun implementing federal mandates, alongside improved performance goals, to have disabled students take part in the regular education curriculum (Hoppey & McLeskey, 2013). However, federal mandates do not guarantee successful outcomes for students (McLeskey et al., 2014). Relatively recent federal and state laws have resulted in more schools that practice inclusion. However, their existence on its own has failed to translate to achievement for all students. For example, in 2011, there was a significant achievement gap in reading and math between students with and without disabilities on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). The data showed that 11% and 17% of students with disabilities reached proficiency in reading and math, respectively. Simply

having students included in a general education classroom without leveraging instructional practices to meet students' complex learning needs compromises successful student outcomes. These outcomes can be further compromised by negative attitudes that focus on the disability as something to help a student overcome rather than effective instructional practices (Hehir, 2012).

Numerous research studies have been conducted on schools to identify the integral role that school leaders play in inclusion. Principals introduce, sustain, and institutionalize all of the inclusive programs within their school (Waldron et al., 2011). High-quality instruction and learner-centered development are the instructional attributes considered most salient. On the other hand, cultural and organizational qualities that are also important include conveying a unifying vision, using resources efficiently and flexibly, becoming a data-oriented problem-solving organization, and supporting collaboration (Hoppey et al., 2018). The school leader is also responsible for hiring staff and making sure they actualize the comprehensive programs. Effective school leaders promote staff partnerships as well as make decisions about curriculum and instruction (Cobb, 2015).

Educational researchers are called to examine more deeply how schools can provide inclusive education for students, regardless of differences, in a manner that achieves educational equity and results in academic and social gains (Cobb, 2015; DiPaola et al., 2004). Leaders play a critical role in helping to provide an inclusive experience for students. This research study examined how leaders promote inclusive school environments for students with disabilities, with specific attention to Universal Design for Learning [UDL] (Cobb, 2015; DiPaola et al., 2004). UDL was used as the lens to explore how structures and policies enable educators to receive and present content in multiple ways and provide numerous opportunities to demonstrate what they know and how they collaborate and engage their learners (Hehir, 2012). In summary, my

individual research question was: In what ways, if at all, do leaders utilize UDL practices to support inclusion for students with disabilities in the general education classroom?

Conceptual Framework

As a framework, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) concepts can support students on education plans in general education classrooms. At the core, classrooms need to be more welcoming of diverse learners by multiple means of representation, multiple means of expression, and multiple means of engagement (Meyer et al., 2014). However, UDL should not be reduced to a checklist. Removing barriers so students can access the curriculum can come down to deep structural inequities in a district related to things such as ableism (Hehir, 2012), class or race. Therefore, UDL needs to place emphasis on the practices that lead to equality and access. The physical environments and applied curriculums of a school or district are a reflection of particular values around belonging. Research shows that leaders strive to be culturally cognizant when leading inclusive schools by expanding on what it means to be a normal learner. Since UDL addresses exclusion and inequity which are not technical problems, it was important for me to understand the administrators' approaches to supporting students both academically and socially from the moment they enter their schools.

Historically, laws regarding education have been exclusionary and presented vast challenges to students with learning needs (Cobbs, 2015; Frattura & Capper, 2006). The concept of UDL in education challenged prior paradigms of education that favored limited integration. Initially, UDL was concerned with technological advancements with special attention given to the creation of devices and materials that improved accessibility. The primary goal of UDL in education is to merge empirically supported teaching strategies, including strategies identified on an educational plan for students with disabilities, to help a diverse set of learners achieve their

ultimate learning potential (Cook et al., 2017; Maheady et al., 2001). School leaders can promote

professional development opportunities and make informed curriculum decisions that focus on

accessibility for diverse learners.

      Hartmann (2015) explains that the UDL framework incorporates two ideas: (a)

understanding learner variability while (b) supporting expert learners and thus serves as a

structure to include all students. UDL supports the incorporation of students with emotional and

behavioral disorders (EBDs) so that the students are not taken out of their restrictive learning

settings. For example, self-monitoring, a key tenet of UDL, has helped EBD students to keep

track of where they are likely to be more attentive in a classroom (Cothren et al., 2017).

Although there are clear benefits, the push to have students with EBDs learn with the rest of the

students can be problematic as teachers have often not been equipped to handle the variety of

students (Cothren et al., 2017). Students with intellectual disabilities (ID) have also been found

to benefit from the UDL framework (Lowrey et al., 2017). IDEA (2004) defines intellectual

disability as just above average intellectual functioning alongside a deficit in generally learned

behavior seen during growth that adversely affects educational capabilities. These groups of

students are all bound to gain by being able to interact with the rest of the student group. For

example, students with ID, as identified in the Children's School Success case study, had

significant improvements in both academic and social outcomes at schools using UDL (Lowrey

et al., 2017). This was one of the first studies where educators came from schools in the United

States and Canada where UDL was a districtwide focus and classrooms consisted of at least one

student with a severe ID that was included. Teachers were asked a series of questions which

culminated in four themes: "(a) designing for learner variability, (b) talking about inclusion, (c)

teaming fosters success, and (d) differing descriptions of UDL" (p. 230). In this study UDL

practices centered on the curriculum, instruction, and materials as the potential barriers in the classroom and not on the individual students as the cause of the problem.

Other research supports the use of UDL to effectively include all students. In Canada, a study conducted by Katz and Sokal (2017) focused on a working model of UDL used to improve the learning process by targeting inclusive instructional practices, systems and structures, and social and emotional learning. According to Capp (2017), implementation of the UDL model achieved reduced stress, higher student confidence, and changes in perceptions toward learning. The variety offered by the UDL approach makes it easier to motivate students by using different test formats and representations of information (Morin, 2019).

UDL has been credited with improvements in the learning process. Capp (2017) supported claims that UDL makes education better for all. UDL as a framework is proving to be particularly beneficial in inclusive schools. As many schools become increasingly more diverse with students who have a variety of learning needs, the role of school leaders to foster the removal of learning barriers is essential. School leaders set expectations for education and can help to foster an environment of mutual responsibility, accountability, and collaboration that centers on supports for students with a specific learning disability. By focusing on UDL, school leaders provide a model that maximizes the learning opportunities of students with varying capabilities in an inclusive setting (Ainscow, 2005; Ainscow et al., 2004).

<div align="center">**Relevant Literature on School Leader Practices on Inclusion**</div>

The significance of school leaders in building and sustaining an inclusive learning culture can be identified by examining existing research on their roles as visionaries, organizers, and partners.

School Leaders as Visionaries

The idea of inclusive schools has not always been readily accepted. Success or failure to gain support for the idea has sometimes come down to a government leader or principal's goals (Barnett & Monda-Amaya, 1998). Many would frown upon and disregard the value of having students with disabilities learn alongside students in the general classroom setting. Rather than implement the strategy and fail, leaders may look to safety nets such as segregating students with special needs or even minority status (Frattura & Capper, 2006). However, for the leaders who envision the incorporation of all members of society within the same setting, implementing the concept of an inclusive school system becomes a norm to follow. Plans are made, and it is up to the principals to follow through with making the vision sustainable (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010). Principals are the ones who are subjected to criticism if anything goes wrong and praised if their vision benefits society. However, it takes the entire institution's efforts, input, and support for the inclusion concept to succeed (Fisher et al., 2000).

Simply having a vision may not alone result in positive school change. Villa et al. (1996) examined how a principal's vision fits in with the establishment of an inclusive school by conducting a survey of 690 educators from 32 schools, ranging from preschool to secondary. Respondents included educators with one to eight years of experience in inclusive settings who were licensed general education teachers with administrative endorsements; licensed special education teachers, including some with an administrative endorsement; and ten unidentified participants.

The survey included three questions that focused on relationships between administrators, teachers, and students. The results showed that teachers with administrative training have a positive response to a heterogeneous (inclusive) education (Villa et al., 1996). The survey also indicated that a tendency toward shared decision-making gave the program implementation a

better chance of succeeding. As important as vision is, this shows that success is not determined by vision alone; it is necessary for all stakeholders to share and nurture it.

School Leaders as Organizers

Schools cannot become inclusive or sustain full inclusion without the careful planning, support, and leadership of school leaders. Special education is not a place. Having students with disabilities in a general education setting without ensuring supports are in place to provide students access to the curriculum will prevent a positive educational experience (Hehir, 2012). Principals need to view special education as part of general education, be intentional about inclusive systems as well as the ability to set up the system and ensure that it runs effectively. As institutional heads, their mandate gives them leeway to organize the rest of the school in a way that enables inclusivity (Ainscow et al., 2004). Organizational skills are needed to determine a working formula on how resources can be redistributed. The principal should use funds allocated by the federal government to implement their policies without overspending or straining already meager resource allocations (Ainscow, 2005). Teachers must also be brought on board, and teams that meet frequently must be set up to discuss progress and proactively resolve issues (Barnett et al., 1998).

Studies show that inclusive leaders collaborate with both their staff and their students to engage in implementing high-quality instruction. Parents are also part of the plan and getting them on board is crucial. Cases exist wherein parents choose not to have their children learn alongside minorities or children with disabilities (Fisher et al., 2000). The most significant benefit is better performance from the variety of students in the institution (Demeris et al., 2007). Hehir's (2012) research on evaluating the practices of educators through a UDL lens underscores that practices that support the most severe learners will also benefit all students. Still, too few

schools see positive outcomes and decreasing achievement gaps between students with and without disabilities. Effective inclusive schools are professional learning communities that engage in collaborative problem solving and school-based professional development (Ainscow et al., 2004).

The organization can also utilize distributed leadership, under which roles are assigned to teachers in a bid to have "inclusive management" of inclusive schools. In this way, the implementation of UDL or similar inclusive frameworks is based on decisions made in unison by teachers and the principal (Capp, 2017). To implement inclusivity and accommodate all students, the organization of the institutions themselves must sometimes restructure and repurpose their resources (DeMatthews, 2015). Distributed leadership offers a vision for how to do that.

Principals are meant to take charge and streamline their inclusion transition. As evidenced by research data, Waldron et al. (2011) suggests that principals participate in activities that better the outcomes of teacher practices and student achievement. These activities include goal building, defining roadmaps, understanding people, restructuring, and managing.

School Leaders as Partners/Interpreters

It has long been acknowledged that school leaders can foster a learning environment that provides affirmation and respect for exceptional students (Griffiths, 2013). Emergent literature illustrates a recent evolution within the school leadership profession with scholars in the field of education focused on the need for school principals to become advocates who address issues of inclusion and social oppression in schools (Ainscow, 2005; Ainscow et al., 2004). In the UDL framework, the principal's role becomes multidimensional. To effect systemic change and promote inclusive concepts, principals must use collaboration, leadership, data, and consultation

to advocate for the success of all students, in cooperation with parents, teachers, and the students themselves (Ainscow, 2005; Ainscow et al., 2004).

Partnerships extend to parents, other schools, and entities willing to fund and support the inclusion program (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010). The principal must lobby for resources on behalf of the institution and simultaneously explain to the school community how they will be utilized (Griffiths, 2014). The framework is set up by those in leadership positions to partner with teachers and students (Ainscow & Sandill, 2010). Once in place, the system is expected to generate results in the form of student performance. Student performance is the primary metric that principals must use to lobby for funding and resources (DiPaola et al., 2004). One example is the California Department of Education's funding of a 3-year initiative to revise the service delivery model for disabled students through training and technical assistance partnerships between universities and local educational offices (Fisher et al., 2000).

Cobb (2015) alludes to how special education-oriented research is aimed at superseding the organizational framework, parameters of assessment, personnel network, and program-delivery model. Principals fit into this model by delivering the program to their school and explaining the concepts and system to potential partners (Cobb, 2015). Teamwork plays a part within the system, as teachers and institutions partner to implement a successful inclusion framework.

Principals continue to fulfill roles such as coach, conflict resolver, and advocate, which all maximize the potential gains of inclusive school systems (Cobb, 2015). The importance of these roles has been established through numerous studies about schools embracing inclusion. All can attest to the importance of the principal and the significant gains that can be made when the leader spearheads the program (Barnett & Monda-Amaya, 1998).

School leaders can enforce enacted laws, such as the IDEA Act and the NCLB policy. This legislation aims for inclusion for all students, regardless of their ethnicity, socioeconomic status, or abilities. Beyond developing highly trained educators, aligning the school around a paradigm of inclusion, and fostering mainstream participation in the school's academic and social aspects, school leaders also establish the school climate within which teachers perform. Studies have indicated a correlation between educator attitude and principal attitude towards inclusion (Ainscow, 2005; Ainscow et al., 2004). School leaders establish the school's value system and align teachers, parents, and community leaders around the school's values. Structurally, principals are responsible for the placement of students, scheduling, and the overall logistics associated with running a school. Hiring inclusive minded practitioners in both special education and general education is important to sustaining successful inclusion in the classroom. In short, the school leader is well positioned to foster effective inclusive environments for children.

Methodology

In order to answer the research question for this study, I conducted a qualitative case study that relied on interviews, informal observations, and document analysis. The focus of my individual study was to examine how school leaders support inclusive practices for students with disabilities in the general education classroom. See Chapter Two for discussion of the district selection process. In this individual study I focused on two schools in the district which were identified by the superintendent for inclusive practices.

District Context for Students with Disabilities

   I began by looking at the placement of students with disabilities in the participating

district based on statewide assessments. Figure 3.1 represents 1,033 students with disabilities

who are on IEPs (16% of the students in the district) and their placements in the Northside

school district. The majority of students in Northside are in full inclusion classrooms.

Figure 3.1
2019 Data on the Placements of Students with Disabilities in Northside
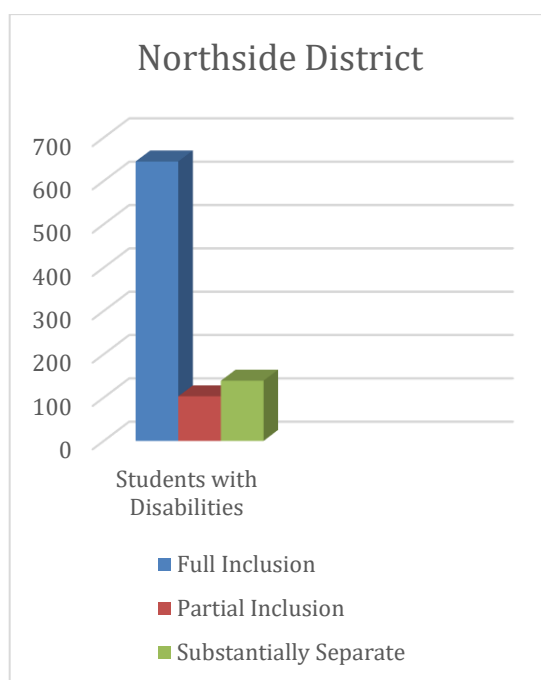
   It was equally important to find a district where structures, at some level, were in place to

support students on IEPs, specifically in co-taught classes. Having numerous co-taught classes

suggests that there will be special education educators and general education teachers who might

continuously engage in inclusive instructional practices to meet the needs of the learners in their

classrooms.

The district also made a substantial investment in hiring special education teachers. Figure 3.2 indicates that the overall staffing numbers for special education teachers in the Northside School District are significantly higher than the state average. In 2019 they employed 123.5 teachers who taught under a special education license. That number represents 12.5% of the overall teaching staff which was more than double the average for school districts in the state (5.2%). While this is likely attributable to the fact that co-taught classrooms are available at every school in the district and at each grade level, it represents a significant and consistent instructional resource for special education.

Figure 3.2
Special Education Staffing at Northside
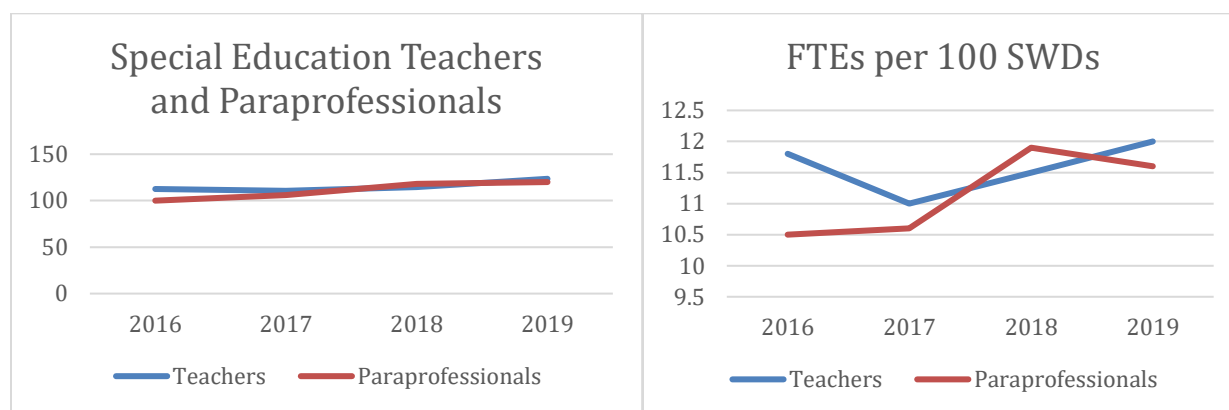
Research Design

I sought to understand leadership practices that effectively removed barriers for learning for students with disabilities. Maxwell (2005) states, "the main strength of qualitative research is its ability to elucidate local processes, meanings, and contextual influences in particular settings" (p. 90). Yin (1994) refers to case studies being ideal when looking into "how" or "why" questions. Also, he offers the following reasons to pursue a case study model:

1. To explain complex causal links in real-life interventions

2. To describe the real-life context in which the intervention has occurred

In designing my study, I analyzed the data, the relationships between the data, and the criteria with which to interpret my findings (Yin, 2009).

Participants

In the group study 24 semi-structured interviews were conducted with principals, school administrators (special education chairs, curriculum coordinators), and teachers in two school buildings. In my individual study I utilized 17 of those interviews with the following leaders and teachers who were identified as key informants about inclusive practices for students with disabilities. Table 3 shows the positions of the educators who were interviewed for this individual study and the number of years they have worked in the Northside district.

Table 3
Participant Data for Northside District

Position	Gender	Race	Years in District
District Leaders			
Superintendent	M	W	3
Assistant Superintendent for Student Services	M	W	>2
Assistant Superintendent for Curriculum	F	W	2
Director of Instructional Technology	F	L	>2
Title I Specialist	F	W	30+
Special Education Manager	M	W	25+
Athletic Director	M	W	18
Director of Data and Assessment	M	A	>1
Director of English Language and Title III	F	L	2
School Leaders			
High School Principal	M	W	20+
High School House Principal	F	AA	2
Elementary School Principal	F	A	20+
Elementary School Assistant Principal	M	AA	>1
Adjustment Counselor	F	W	20+
Social Worker	F	W	15
Coordinator of Transition Program	F	W	5

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

Data Collection

Semi-structured Individual Interviews

Interview responses from building and district leaders provided the core data that framed my findings. As suggested by Seidman (2013), interviews were conducted from a neutral standpoint to receive high-quality and honest responses. The interview questions (See Appendix F) were designed to compel participants to offer more details about inclusive practices in the general education classroom.

Focus Group

Six teachers from the K – 8 newcomer school were interviewed in a teacher focus group. Because one of the participants did not agree to be taped, detailed notes were taken during the focus group to record participants' responses. Focus group responses provided critical data about the challenges and barriers teachers experienced when including students at the elementary school.

Document Analysis

State-wide data analyzed included the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary (DESE) data from RADAR (Resource Allocation and District Action Reports). This included Northside district staffing data for special education teachers, the number of students with disabilities in the district, and a comparison of the academic performance of special education students in the Northside district in relation to state wide data.

Data Analysis

The eight-step case study design presented in Chapter Two was the foundation of my individual research methodology (see page 39). In the first-round data was analyzed by preexisting codes from the research literature such as collaborative planning and high quality

instruction to clarify the roles that school and district leaders play in inclusive practices for students with disabilities. In the second round of coding I looked for additional codes that emerged from the data.

Findings

This section addresses how educators in the Northside district develop and sustain inclusive practices that benefit all students, but specifically students who have been identified as needing specialized instruction. Due to the continuously changing needs of this diverse district, it became clear that the dynamic ways leaders responded to this diversity spawned the practices that fostered inclusion. In other words, their focus on inclusion did not narrowly respond to the needs of students on an Individualized Educational Plan (IEP). Success was not determined by the absence of challenges or their academic achievements. I found the strongest evidence centered on four themes that were constantly at play when supporting students. These themes were Attitudes and Vision on Inclusion, Emphasis on Relationships, Organizational Structures, and District Practices for Inclusion. Collectively, these themes encompass the values and beliefs of educators in Northside who provided evidence in their interview responses of multiple approaches to supporting learners in the classroom.

Each of the themes that emerged included barriers, tensions, and challenges that were either explicitly stated or implied by an educator. The leader's approach to the issues addressed under each of these themes was not always consistent. It was this interplay of different approaches to inclusion that framed the context for making sense from a UDL framework. The Northside leaders' understanding that a common, blanket way to implement inclusive practices should be contextual proved beneficial, albeit not apparent. Therefore, in each section I will provide evidence for the themes and identify contextual challenges that persist.

Attitudes and Vision on Inclusion

Educators in the Northside district spoke to many concepts about establishing inclusive and equitable education. Their attitudes and visions guided the policies, structures, and practices that were in place to create an overall inclusive learning environment for all students. It became clear that success was not only measured through academic or performance measures, but also based on their ability to positively impact students' social emotional needs. As one assistant principal explained:

> If students needed their space for a minute, we gave them that opportunity where I think previous admins, principals were not allowing that to happen. I think for us, we have been really building that relationship with the kids and that way they feel comfortable coming to talk to us about different things.

As a new administrator, she continued to view her role as an adjustment counselor who needed to build positive relationships with students.

When Northside leaders responded to the question about why they "do the work" as educators, most focused on how their efforts strengthen the overall welcoming environment for all students. As one principal stated, "We serve who is in our community whether they are rich or poor" regardless of their "documentation status, their abilities or challenges." She continued that education serves as the "leveler" for ultimately achieving "equality" in creating opportunities for students who may come from poverty. The success of individual students was dependent on how ready or prepared their schools were to accept all students. The ability to mitigate the impact of societal factors on students was viewed by administrators as essential.

Meaning of Inclusion

There were a variety of responses to the meaning of inclusion voiced by educators. Some educators spoke to inclusion as a concept with comments such as "we're here to serve all students, particularly in urban education" and "we're the 'Newcomer' School… we have kids who come in every day with a variety of needs that are also here to learn." Other educators spoke to the term inclusion by naming specific approaches or practices they take to support students. One principal stated, "the way that I speak about these kids just proves that I believe in it and I'm not just doing my job." She elaborated on the time commitment and late hours principals frequently must endure to be available for students and staff during the school day. The commonality was the student driven focus of the responses from most educators. Frequently the responses started with the recognition of students needing a variety of supports to be successful. This commitment to providing students appropriate supports for both academic and social emotional needs permeated throughout their responses. Additionally, there was an emphasis on meeting the needs of all students, including students with disabilities. The District Superintendent captured this best during his interview:

> I think I look at it as we're here to serve all students, particularly in urban education. We serve who is in our community. Whether they are rich or poor. Wherever they come from, their race, their documentation status, their abilities or challenges. I think it's important I've used education as the great leveler. I think it's the only proven way throughout history that we can achieve some equality. In many ways, it's been the schools that have done it.

The Superintendent's response speaks to meaningful inclusion where standards and expectations are not lowered for students. He sees inclusion as an opportunity that would otherwise be missed

to set students up for better future opportunities. This perspective about the role of education and thus the roles of educators, was common in many of the responses from the leaders who were interviewed. The assistant superintendent shared that she was once a special education teacher and saw the roles as a more fluid working relationship between special educators and general educators. She also acknowledged barriers. "I think sometimes it's a lack of time and that's something that we need to do better at providing that time." The importance of collaboration was shared by both the leaders as well as the teachers in the focus group.

Climate of Belonging

Efforts to foster students' identities was evident in my informal observations at the Northside K – 8 school. Twice I observed elementary students being greeted at the door by educators at the start of the school. These greetings took place under a display of small national flags that represented the countries of the students and faculty. In the hallways of the school there were multiple bulletin boards that showcased different cultures from around the world. The way cultures were highlighted differed on each bulletin board. For example, one focused on the famous musicians, actors and actresses from different Spanish speaking countries. Another bulletin board was titled "All About Me" and identified the different backgrounds of students in a particular class. It also celebrated students' varying religious practices with their writings which described unique traditions. On the bridge that led to the school's field house, there was another display of larger national flags that were placed on the glass in a way that allowed them to be viewed from inside and outside of the building. One administrator emphasized leadership by responding

> definitely from our leadership just being like everybody belongs, we all belong here and
> we're all trying to educate everyone. We all want you all to be successful and we're here

for you… no matter if we have to go out of the box to get you through, we will go out of the box. You know, so it's really just being flexible in terms of what the kid needs, depending on whatever their culture is.

The Assistant Superintendent also placed an emphasis on building community and the importance of including students in the school. "It's a hard thing, you know? I think one thing we always try to do is get them involved with a club or sport so that they can feel part of the school community…" This sense of belonging expanded beyond the classroom for each of the 12 leaders I interviewed. Regardless if the administrators were speaking to the needs of students who experienced trauma, refugees, those who were disciplined or on an IEP, the messaging was similar about ways to make students feel more comfortable. They only utilized "separate spaces or settings" for short stints as requested by individual students.

Another example involved empowering students to develop student initiated cultural programs. As one principal described it,

 our staff is very supportive of students bringing things to the forefront. They're very supportive of student driven programs, student driven clubs. I told them to come to me with the club and if it makes sense and you're organized, we'll do it. So, we have clubs everywhere, from a Haitian club to hardware clubs and computer clubs where students actually know how to build a computer.

Visual Displays of Inclusion

The walls and bulletin boards located at the main entrance of the K – 8 School and Family Center were all focused on diversity in a positive way. For example, one board had a drawing of the world surrounded by the words "Diversity is the one true thing we have in common." On the wall, there was a mural of eight students from different racial backgrounds

waving. To me, this was a representation of diversity and inclusion as foundational to the school's approach to educating students. At Northside High School, the headmaster took time to explain how he worked with teachers to make a stencil board that said "Welcome" in every language spoken by the students in the school. He explained how students appreciated the board and even brought to his attention that the Brazilian Portuguese word for 'Welcome' was missing when a new student from Brazil started at the school in last Fall. Similarly, there was a large rug at the entrance of the Northside K – 8 school that had greetings in multiple languages.

One final visual display that I observed was the district's Belief Statement that was located in the hallways of the schools and in every room in which I conducted an interview. The statement reads in all capital letters:

> EVERY STUDENT CAN AND WILL SUCCEED ACADEMICALLY.
> EVERY STUDENT CAN AND WILL SUCCEED SOCIALLY.
> EVERY STUDENT CAN AND WILL SUCCEED EMOTIONALLY.
> EVERY STUDENT WILL FEEL CONNECTED AND SUPPORTED.
> EVERY FAMILY WILL FEEL CONNECTED AND SUPPORTED.
> NORTHSIDE PUBLIC SCHOOLS WILL MEET THE NEEDS OF ALL STUDENTS.

While this statement was not translated into other languages on the school webpage or on any of the walls in the schools, evidence of the practices that support these beliefs were observable and set the tone for all to feel welcome to learn and be involved.

Emphasis on Relationships

Relationship building was emphasized as being essential to including students. An administrator spoke to how encouraging students to participate in afterschool activities as an opportunity to better ensure students "are taken care of and they have a place to be that is safe for hours." This educator was referring to the challenges of working in a community where gangs, social media, working parents, and the lack of after school activities can set the stage for students

to present with challenging behaviors during the school day. Another administrator commended her staff for their ability to "connect to kids as they walk in the door and throughout the day." Through this approach, educators increased opportunities to develop a more holistic understanding of students. One administrator mentioned that one strong approach to being successful with students who experienced trauma is when they "feel a connection to the classroom and teacher" to the point where they communicate "problems or issues with other kids" successfully.

Biases and Stereotypes

No educator interviewed directly shared personal biases but there were suggestions of how prevailing assumptions can impact students. One significant example involved how students were assigned to the lone K – 8 school in Northside. During the teacher focus group, educators referenced the practice of sending recent immigrant students to the newcomer school regardless of their proximity. In a district with no school buses and many students with limited to no English-speaking experience, teachers in the focus group questioned the benefits of the practice noting that it disproportionately affected English Language Learners in the district. In other words, a White student would be able to go to their neighborhood school with students who live near them. One administrator pointed out

> the need to get other administrators to recognize the potential bias that's in our
> instruction. And again, I'm phrasing that carefully, but you know racism exists. Anybody
> who says it doesn't, I think is ignorant or, you know, delusional. How can we make sure
> that we're conscious of it so we can address it in a way that's going to be appropriate and
> without lowering our standards…"?

Teachers in the focus group also mentioned that students who graduated from their Newcomer school did not have the same opportunity to be in an advanced placement course at Northside High School. When pressed to explain, they noted that there are only a limited number of seats in the classes and they typically get filled by "White" students who come from one of the other three elementary schools. One teacher described that this was not necessarily a bad thing because being the only "Haitian or Brazilian student in the class" may make them uncomfortable since they may have been in a diverse class since kindergarten. Regardless of their stance, the teachers agreed a streamlined process for placement is necessary and needs to be communicated to students and their families.

These prevailing ideals were also relevant to students on IEPs. The first grade special education teacher in the group shared similar experiences. She noted that students who needed "ELL, behavior, and/or academic supports" were placed in her co-taught classroom. The diversity of student needs made it harder to support specific groups of students because the barriers that made it difficult for them to access content were different. (For evidence of student achievement for students with disabilities see Figure 3.3 at the conclusion of this chapter).

Organizational Structures

When educators were asked specifically about how to support inclusion for students with special needs, the most frequent responses involved the use of staff. For example, when questioned about students who experienced trauma, educators named the benefits of having multiple guidance and adjustment counselors to support students both in and out of the classrooms. In special education, the cotaught structure was mentioned as the main way to ensure classroom success. One administrator who admitted they had "not gone in [the classroom] to see

how they do it" still referred to the coteaching structure as the strongest way to ensure student success. A second administrator described the district's move to co-teaching:

> We went co-taught about six years ago, maybe seven and it was rocky. It is still rocky. There are still some things we have to work out around the scheduling piece. I think every year we learn a little bit more. But we are settling in with the co-taught and we're able to reach more students. We're able to provide the services they need and we are getting closer to being where we want to be on that.

School based administrators recognized that the different approaches to supporting students with disabilities were based on the structures in place. One descriptive example was given by a special education administrator at the high school who spoke about the supports for inclusion:

> We have different co-teaching styles that happen. We have one teacher lead and the other teacher support…We'd separate the kids into two different groups. We had a mixture of kids mainstreaming including ELL and it didn't even matter who you were. If you passed a quiz, you stayed with one teacher. If you didn't, you stayed with the other teacher…It's just whoever needs that extra support.

In this example, the administrator was a former English as a Second Language teacher who supported students receiving ELL services in a similar way that the current coteaching model is structured with the special education teacher. Her understanding of inclusion involved focusing on the needs of students based on the specific assignment or task they were asked to do. The amount of scaffolded supports students needed would determine how they were grouped or which educator they would work with.

The principal spoke to inclusion differently. His focus was on how each of the "houses" at the high school were structured.

In terms of inclusion for the academics, we have four academies here. Two of them have more inclusion. They have two, two of each, two English, two History, two Science and two Math. Then one Academy is more English heavy and then the other one's more math heavy. We tried to do that this year so the kids could stay in Academies… A lot of our special education students would be placed in an Academy who were in the co-taught model just depending upon what teachers had the co-taught sections.

This response explains how the availability of having two teachers in the classroom impacts scheduling and placement. It is important to note that budgetary limitations were not mentioned by this principal as a reason for why "houses" were structured differently. Coupling this response with the responses from the teacher focus group, it seems students are placed intentionally based on the level of need they evidenced at the elementary and middle school. However, the following teacher's response notes that the cultural background of students may also impact their school placement in both the early grades and the high school.

The example I will give is our expectations as a school are White. They are filtered through being White. I am really appreciative when we have someone who is Haitian. When learning about how Haitians are viewed as being chatty, but culturally, it is being social and so much of their identity is social. So we say we want more Haitian kids in honors classes and we value collaboration, but then when I see high school classes and there really are no Haitians in honors classes, because their behavior is viewed differently, that is really what we need to change. We need to change how we do schooling.

This response emphasizes how the structure of individual houses or units at the high school can provide access to some students but also create inconsistent approaches to how educators meet

the needs of those students. This ultimately plays out in placement when decisions are made as to what "house" would be able to meet the needs of students. At the district level, this is evidenced in the elementary schools, where students with limited to no English proficiency are placed at one school (the Newcomer school) despite where they may live in the larger community.

District Practices for Inclusion

The previous three themes focused on the concepts, policy (beliefs), structure and systems in the Northside district that ultimately led to the practices that are implemented at the building level to support successful inclusion of students with disabilities. The educators shared many intentional practices that promote attendance and active participation. Two common areas that the leaders spoke about were how all educators, regardless of license or position, view their role to teach all learners in a diverse school. A second issue was that students needed to feel safe in school and the role of educators in making that happen.

Educators discussed how the lack of buses, poverty and students' challenges in their home life sometimes had an impact on teachers' work with students. A principal responded to district challenges by stating,

> For the leadership teams, I think it's important that we're all on the same page and then coming together with a plan of how we're going to address whatever needs that student may need. Whether it be housing, whether it be transportation or whether it be co-taught model classes.

Welcoming school environments and classroom structures were important elements to the school leaders in the two Northside schools we visited. Many of the administrators in these schools highlighted their vision for inclusion and community and family partnerships that were in place to help undergird safe and supportive environments.

> We have a before school and an afterschool care and that's huge for our working families. We also have the free breakfast… which is huge because some of them don't eat. We go one step further with the lunch. We've taught kids that whatever you didn't open, whatever you didn't eat, we save it. Then we teach the kids at the end of the day to pack it up…We do a lot of fun events with our families…

However, there was a strong emphasis on how the environments that administrators put in place helped to promote opportunities for teachers and support staff to be effective in the classrooms. The themes that emerged focused on instruction were collaboration, flexible grouping, and professional development opportunities.

Collaboration between General Ed Teachers and Special Ed Teachers

The interview responses from leaders made it clear that they valued opportunities to collaborate with peers to impact instructional practice. The special education director spoke directly to the opportunities of teachers and service providers that she oversees when working with students with special needs.

> I think common planning time for collaboration was huge. I also think that we offer teaching assistants, and everyone has their liaison… The general education teacher can always, you know, contact the liaison so that they can understand the IEP, how the child works. Liaisons will work with the general education teachers. General education teachers can reach out to me. We have reading days after school. It was actually yesterday, you know, where all the special educators were available for the general education staff to ask any questions about IEPs. So just setting that up in the schedule, you know, so that they can understand to please reach out to us, you know, and we need to collaborate so that these kids are successful.

This response about supporting students in a cotaught classroom emphasizes that the leaders understand that simply having two or more certified educators in the room does not make the classroom inclusive or guarantee a student's needs will be met. Time is needed outside of the classroom. Educators in Northside are willing to stay afterschool to collaborate so that they have a clearer understanding of how to best meet the needs of the students they are supporting.

Co-taught Classrooms

The special education director acknowledged that the model for cotaught classrooms looks different at the high school compared to the elementary and middle schools. Planning blocks for teachers are intentionally scheduled as a result since the special education teacher will not be in all content classes.

> Another thing that they do is the special educators go to all the content meetings which is important, especially for English content. So the English coteacher will go to the English content meetings. I think that's important for the content teachers to see them there because they are a part of the content, even though, they are a part of two departments (English and Math).

She later explained that during the common planning period, teachers are expected to "meet and talk" about students. However, to strengthen the use of this planning time, she would like educators to engage in "more observations, more people looking at differentiation. I think some people really do it well and I'd love for them to share what they do."

In the K – 8 school, where co-teachers were in more subject classrooms compared to the high school, the assistant principal also acknowledged the planning time is not always utilized in the best possible ways. She mentioned that the "cotaught model is working for us and I think that our teachers are vocal about that so it hasn't changed in a while." The change she was referring

to involved how the co-taught classrooms were structured at the school. Staff, including paraprofessionals, did not always work well together. She equated some fallouts to a "bad marriage" where educators need more support "cohabitating" and engaging in "uncomfortable conversations" if they come up. She continued by explaining how educators sometimes prefer to "work with the worst student than sometimes, you know, the staff." This assistant principal did emphasize, however, the underlying belief that co-taught classrooms work but there needs to be a continuous effort to support teachers collaborating effectively in order to improve classroom practices.

Leaders in the Northside district also placed an emphasis on technology use to support all learners, including students with special needs on IEPs. It was clear that technology access was a proactive approach to support student differences. One middle school assistant principal explained that "at middle school we have one to one Chromebooks. Elementary is not one to one, but they have many Chromebooks." She continued to acknowledge that she is unsure about how the model works for elementary school students, but for middle school students having access to technology is essential. She used the example of her own child to explain the importance of one to one access.

> Well, I have a middle schooler, myself, who hates school. I think he would do much better if they had one to one Chromebooks or some sort of technology because that would help the students so much with their organization. When he comes home, he can't find the paper or he left it or it is ripped. I think technology, maybe not everyday, and maybe not in every class the whole period, but I think the Chromebooks have helped middle schoolers anyways with the organization, with Google Classroom. They know where to find it.

Technology can make unfamiliar content more familiar which benefits how students are supported in inclusive classrooms. The Technology Director explained how some technology may also single out students.

> But then sometimes the kids are like, well, I don't want to be different in the other classes. So she was in that academic support class, so she used the iPad in that class, but the Chromebook when she was out with the other kids, so that was being what's best for the kid instead of making her feel different. And now it's a lot of the Google extensions. It's almost as robust as the iPad, but it's just they don't want to be seen as different and I understand that."

Three administrators interviewed referred to iPads as used primarily by students with "higher disabilities" while the Chromebooks were readily available to all students. The middle school special education chair explained that "autistic students get a lot of that adaptive technology that is shared in pull outs." She specifically referenced the occupational therapy room where students would be provided iPads. Only the Technology Director referenced the ability for a student to have fulltime access to an iPad as a communication device if required on their IEP. If the choice of using iPads were made readily available for all students to access, students likely would feel comfortable using the device that best meets their needs.

Discussion

As a researcher and former special education teacher, I gained a profound appreciation for how administrators in the Northside district emphasized the importance of including all students, their cultures, and universal access to supports at the heart of their work. Hehir (2012) emphasizes that while inclusion is not only about welcoming environments, these environments can set the conditions that promote or negate ableism. There was a clear consensus that many

students at Northside present with many complex needs regarding academic learning, social behavior, and language proficiency. In response to the diversity of the student population, the values and beliefs of leaders undergirded school cultures and were the foundation for the policies, structures and practices that were shared or observed during our time collecting data in the district. Using UDL as my conceptual framework, I analyzed meaningful ways leaders supported the efforts to include students with disabilities so that they are successful in the general education classroom. I was not surprised that many of the specific, intentional practices were often generally available for all students in the district. These universal supports showcased Northside's values to meet the needs of all diverse learners.

Research identifies that while there is no common agreed upon definition of inclusion due to the unique context or circumstances of individual districts, the roles of the school and district leaders are significant in any measurable and sustainable success (Salisbury, 2006). Ekins (2017) writes that "inclusive school cultures should be seen as a complex web of interconnecting principles, values, and actions which, when taken together, forms the underlying culture of the school or organization." (p. 59). This supports the notion that a universal checklist that is applicable to any district's unique circumstances is not feasible. Instead, leaders need to have a good understanding of individual factors that pertain to their schools. When analyzing the data, I did, however, experience frustration about the absence of responses that explicitly stated the beliefs, visions and roles of administrators to improve, evaluate and implement policies and practices concerning students with IEPs in the general education classroom.

The school and district level administrators from the participating district did, however, share some common responses about inclusion that applied to special education students. The theme of student belonging, not only in the classroom but as a part of the community, was

profound. There was also an emphasis on building strong relationships with students through both adult and peer supports. Administrators displayed positive attitudes and equated their philosophical approach to inclusion as an issue of social justice or equal opportunities for their diverse student populations (Theoharis, 2009). Diversity was viewed as a strength and a meaningful opportunity for educators to work collaboratively to support the needs of students. These responses highlighted the premise of UDL as an underlying approach to support all learners (CAST, 2018; Hehir, 2012). Each administrator that was interviewed, with the exception of the athletic director, discussed cotaught classroom structures in the schools. All but two of the administrators mentioned cotaught classrooms before they were questioned about services for students with disabilities. These supports were clearly available for all students. As a model, cotaught classrooms are not the only way to ensure strong inclusive practices are taking place. In fact, it is the opportunities embedded in a cotaught structure that undergirds educator collaboration around planning and implementation that are typically created when two teachers are assigned to a classroom that are essential. Researchers such as Hehir (2012) describe effective schools being problem solving organizations that are fueled by the expertise of the educators and the continuous collaborative learning that leaders base their school schedules around.

Participants spoke at length about the roles of classroom educators in supporting students with disabilities. Teachers were often mentioned as the primary resource to meet students' needs in the classroom. As a result, there was a shared belief in the importance of teachers having the opportunity to collaborate and plan together. This shared responsibility towards students helped to shape the overall culture of inclusion which is supported by researchers who note they are responsible for day to day instruction (Hoppy & McLeskey, 2013). In the same study,

administrators' success was measured based on their ability to provide opportunities for teachers to collaborate and make informed decisions about instruction. By empowering the teachers to be the primary decision makers, teachers were more willing to expand their practice to continuously improve and increase measurable outcomes for students. At Northside, this is evidenced in teachers' support for cotaught classrooms and PBIS that numerous administrators referenced.

Positive Behavior Intervention and Supports (PBIS)

The implementation of PBIS was discussed in many of the interviews. An assistant principal spoke expressed that "…the district is moving and that's where education is moving and you know, we've got to move forward. I was so proud of some of the staff that could volunteer to do the PBIS and they ran with it. They bought into it. It's not coming from admin." She goes on to explain that the "biweekly meetings" were additional opportunities for educators to collaborate and discuss realistic changes that could be implemented at the school.

The implementation of PBIS benefited students with disabilities because it was a practice that all staff, including the special educators, participated in with some fidelity. One assistant principal described the immediate benefit by stating, "…we're not just sending them out. It used to be that they would get out of my room pretty much. So, then the kid would just walk around" and not be part of the instruction. PBIS supports can be provided by all educators who work with students in the general education classroom. Even the Northside district's head nurse mentioned how administrators "pulled the nurses into their PBIS program." It was clear educators were trained by teachers in the district to respond to appropriate behaviors and not simply react to negative behaviors. The involvement of school leaders to develop and sustain inclusive structures and policies was discussed briefly by one high school administrator and the superintendent but it was omitted by other educators interviewed. It became clear that the

administrators who were interviewed had been grandfathered into the systems, structures and programs that were in place to support inclusion or had distributed or delegated much of the responsibility around the day-to-day decisions (Leithwood et al., 2008).

The lack of responses about specific curriculum or assessment initiatives that were in place to support inclusion was noticeable. While there was some discussion about how technology use helped with language barriers and access for students with disabilities, there were no intentional instructional methods described to improve outcomes specifically for students with disabilities.

In terms of UDL, the district and school leaders did not discuss specific aspects of the curriculum. The only mention of data cycles was from the high school principal who was suggesting it as a "next step" for strengthening the cotaught classroom models. There was significant emphasis on student placement couched in welcoming environments. The findings from Hehir's (2012) study of three public schools indicates that where students are taught is an important first step but there is complex work that needs to continue specifically around the curriculum, the roles of staff, and expanding teachers' use of technology.

The placement alone does not ensure access or equitable learning opportunities are taking place. Figure 3.3 outlines that despite the proportionately higher staffing ratios (more than double) and cotaught structures at every school, Northside students perform lower on average on state assessments compared to other SWDs in the state. Additionally, the gap between the performance levels has increased on both the ELA and the Math assessments from 2018 to 2019. It is also noteworthy that 2019 was the first year Northside saw their overall growth data decline since 2017.

Figure 3.3

Percent of SWDs in Grades 3 – 8 Meeting or Exceeding Expectations
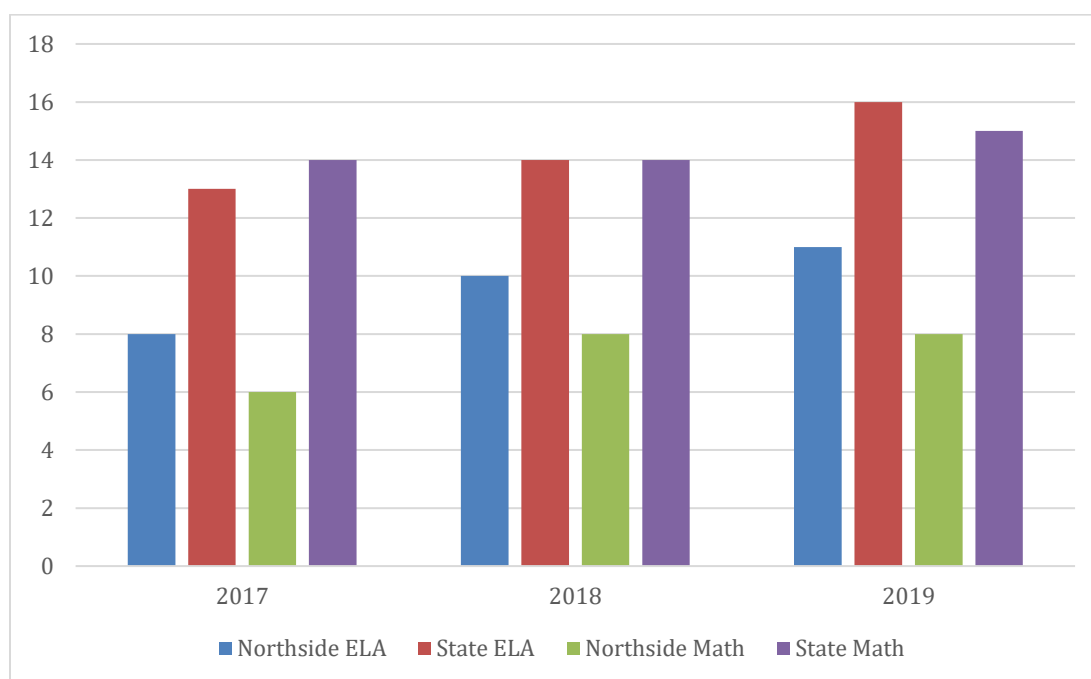
UDL, at its core, is about removing barriers that prevent access. This can be access to schools, learning, or other opportunities. Northside educators discussed many resources and supports that are available for all students, including SWDs, but there appeared to be a lack of concrete measures to establish specific resources, structures and instructional practices that would contribute to successful learning or achievement. I report this acknowledging that my research team did not interview individual teachers (other than the teacher focus group), observe classrooms or speak to students. The leaders we did interview, on average, were relatively new to their positions (See Table 3) and had yet to implement new initiatives beyond PBIS. Any future or sustainable success of UDL implementation will depend on how well the concepts of UDL are embedded in all aspects of Northside district's operations.

The two schools we did our research in were developed to support the needs of a diverse population of students. The next steps involve continuously developing equitable learning

experiences for all students by better ensuring access to the general curriculum and better

communication the uses of accommodations. Currently, there is a lack of focus on leaders

reflecting on or identifying specific inclusive practices. Without naming interventions that are

implemented, and the specific data used to evaluate the effectiveness those interventions,

Northside risks not making progress with their students on IEPs. Students may indeed be

included in the space but are vulnerable to being excluded from accessing the curriculum.

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

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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.

they employed to support students with disabilities. We argue that the MTSS System Drivers (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

NORTHSIDE SCHOOLS' BELIEFS

EVERY STUDENT CAN AND WILL SUCCEED ACADEMICALLY.
EVERY STUDENT CAN AND WILL SUCCEED SOCIALLY.
EVERY STUDENT CAN AND WILL SUCCEED EMOTIONALLY.
EVERY STUDENT WILL FEEL CONNECTED AND SUPPORTED.
EVERY FAMILY WILL FEEL CONNECTED AND SUPPORTED.
NORTHSIDE PUBLIC SCHOOLS WILL MEET THE NEEDS OF ALL STUDENTS.
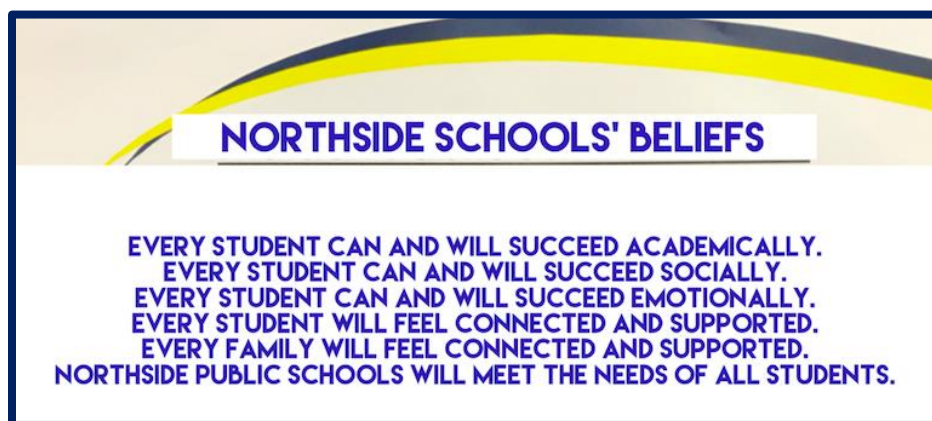
The belief that all students should have access to learning provided the foundation for the structures the district set in place, shaped its aim to establish a culture that accentuated the importance of forging relationships with students and families, and motivated them to reach out to community agencies 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)
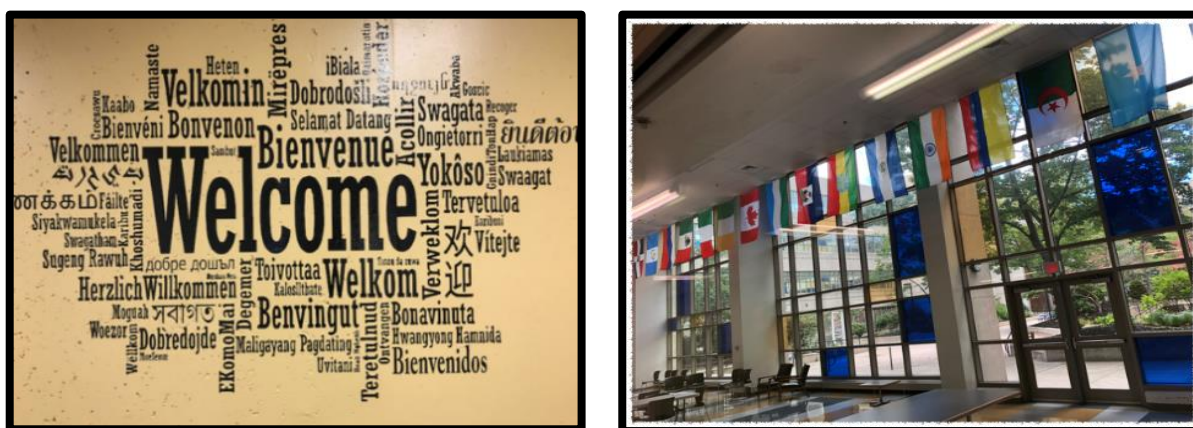
Further, the engagement with student voice was a significant factor in shaping inclusive

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)
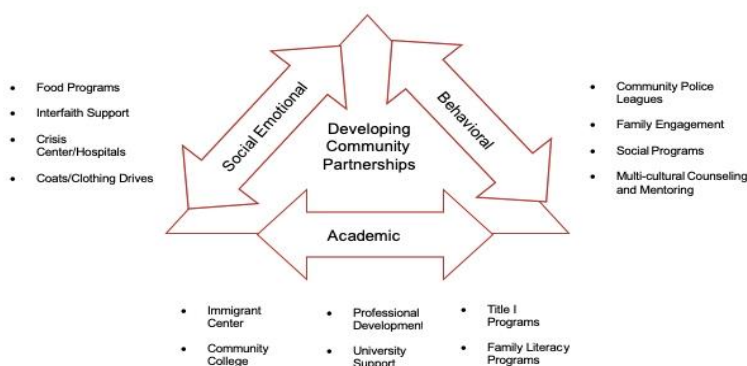
Resources and Human Capital

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.

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Appendix E

Structured Abstract for Jonathan V. Redden

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

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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: