Editorial
Educational Leaders and Student Diversity:
Leading the Way to Inclusion

Jessica Whitley
University of Ottawa

This special issue focuses on the role of educational leaders in facilitating the inclusion and participation of students with diverse needs and from diverse backgrounds. The initial spark for this special issue was lit during a symposium at the 2009 conference of the Canadian Society for the Study of Education. The session brought together the fields of educational administration and leadership with special and inclusive education and generated exciting and thoughtful discussion from a variety of perspectives.

This issue brings together a group of authors with expertise in inclusive and special education, democratic education, educational leadership, and educational administration. The varying perspectives that each brings to the topic are complementary but clearly distinct, shedding a unique light on the issues related to leadership and inclusive education. Authors also represent a broad Canadian outlook drawing from experiences in provinces including Alberta, Ontario, Quebec, and Newfoundland.

The themes explored in this special issue represent the diversity and complexity inherent in the terms ‘inclusion’ and ‘inclusive education.’ Conceptualizations are broadened by authors from a view of inclusion as focused on students with exceptionalities and disabilities to all students who are members of diverse school communities (Ainscow, 2005; Lupart, 1998; Slee, 2001; UNESCO, 2001). Many students may face exclusion from full participation in the school community, whether for reasons of social class, cultural and/or linguistic differences, sexual orientation, or simply learning or social differences. While students with exceptionalities—those with mental health issues, those who are culturally and linguistically different—receive particular attention in this issue, implications extend to students broadly.

Along with the expanding of our conception of *who* is included in our schools is a shift in *how* we include students. Ainscow (2005) spoke of a shift away from simply fitting students into schools and maintaining the status quo, to promoting ongoing development of schools that “support the participation and learning of an increasingly diverse range of learners” (p. 112). Skrtic, Sailor, and Gee (1996) stated that a “*successful* inclusive learning community fosters collaboration, problem-solving, self-directed learning, and critical discourse” (p. 150); similar to the democratic principles also described in the first two articles in this issue.

The role that educational leaders, particularly school administrators, play in creating and fostering inclusive policies and practices is clearly key (Ingram, 1997; Lupart & Porath, 2009; Lupart & Webber, 2002; Stanovich & Jordan, 1998). According to Riehl (2000), leadership tasks that respond to diversity include those focused on (a) fostering new meanings about diversity, (b) promoting inclusive practices within schools, and (c) building new connections between schools and communities. All of the articles in this issue speak to elements connected to these tasks.

The first two articles speak to democratic practices required for students to be truly included in their school communities. Ryan describes his view of inclusion for students as comprising equal participation and the opportunity to have a voice in their education. Many students may be typically excluded from this process by virtue of differences due to disability but also culture, class, gender, and sexual orientation. Ryan puts forth school principals as the individuals most influential in terms of setting a direction for the school and promoting inclusive and democratic practices. However, the efforts of even the most dedicated and resourceful principals can be hampered by existing institutional cultures that promote homogeneity and traditional hierarchical structures.

Ryan describes a unique opportunity for a newly built school, led by a principal who was an advocate of inclusion, to introduce and entrench inclusive practices. The experiences of the school leadership as well as other members of the community throughout the early years of the school shed light on the successes and struggles that took place. Ryan's case study highlights the need to view inclusion as an ongoing process and provides insight for administrators and educators who are working towards inclusive practices in their own context.

Bader, Horman, and Lapointe draw on critical pedagogy to inform their exploration of the perspectives of a group of students taking part in a project focused on civic engagement within their school. The democratic principals espoused in Ryan's article are echoed by Bader and her colleagues as they describe a project initiated by students, located within a low-income, multicultural school. The goals of the particular project created by students were to engage the community and shift the negative perception that the broader community had of the school in question and students attending the school. Students involved in the project speak of the development of their identity as members of the school community; of being included in all aspects of their schooling that often extended far past traditional teaching and learning situations. Through a lens of cultural studies, Bader and her colleagues present the voices of students speaking to the culture of democratic engagement in their school and the practical ways in which this is fostered.

The third article by Philpott, Furey, and Penney speaks to the need for professional development of educators with respect to teaching diverse classrooms, and in particular, effectively including those with varied cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The role of educational leaders in facilitating, delivering, and engaging in professional development is put forth as key. Drawing on extensive research, much of it Canadian, Philpott and his co-authors describe the many areas where such development can empower educators and administrators to make change. These include the creation of policies that support inclusion, building awareness of culture and disability, nurturing positive attitudes, and focusing on evidence-based teaching strategies that are both collaborative and meaningful. Philpott and his co-authors deftly bring together larger philosophical ideals with policy papers and empirical research to shed light on a topic of interest to educational stakeholders across the country and beyond who are all engaged in the challenging work of preparing educators to create inclusive schools.

In the fourth article, Whitley speaks of a specific group of students struggling in Canadian schools—those with mental health issues. Whitley outlines the pressing need for

educational leaders and educators broadly to recognize their role in preventing mental health difficulties and intervening in the case of mental illnesses. Drawing on research, Canadian policy and framework papers, Whitley outlines how the inclusion and full participation of students with these difficulties in schools can be limited by prejudice and stigma, lack of knowledge and training, and policies and practices that limit the collaboration of educators with professionals and families. Educational leaders who implement policies and practices that consider these barriers and seek to overcome them have the potential to make a major difference in terms of promoting well-being for all students.

The final paper in the issue, authored by Irvine, Lupart, Loreman, and McGhie-Richmond, uses a mixed-methods approach to explore the views of school administrators in an inclusive rural school district. Like other authors in the issue, Irvine and her colleagues recognize the importance of the beliefs, attitudes, and skills of front-line professionals working in inclusive schools, particularly school principals. The perspectives of administrators working within inclusive settings provide unique insight into the elements viewed as facilitators of inclusive practice. As in the other articles in this issue, key elements included collaboration and communication largely through school-based teams; leaders facilitated this by providing time for educators to plan together. Leaders also spoke of the need for support in terms of professional development and partnerships with families.

The articles in this special issue explore the philosophical underpinnings and practical elements that characterize leadership that promotes the effective inclusion of students with diverse needs. Authors outline the need for leaders to challenge existing practices and attitudes; collaborate to set a philosophical direction; develop professional development opportunities; create and sustain inclusive policies and practices; and build inclusive school community by including the authentic participation of students, staff, families, and communities. It is clear that the heavy burden placed on leaders to implement, facilitate, and sustain inclusion is one that should be shared with the broader school community. As is made clear in the articles in this issue, inclusion cannot be mandated or established strictly through top-down policies; it is a long-term, challenging, exciting process that requires leaders with inclusive philosophies, passion, and perseverance.

References

- Ainscow, M. (2005). Developing inclusive education systems: What are the levers for change? *Journal of Educational Change*, 6, 109–124.
- Ingram, P. D. (1997). Leadership behaviours of principals in inclusive educational settings. *Journal of Educational Administration*, 35(5), 411–427.
- Lupart, J. L. (1998). Setting right the delusion of inclusion: Implications for Canadian schools. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 23(3), 251–264.
- Lupart, J. L., & Porath, M. (2009). Building a better future for Canadian students. In J. L. Lupart, A. McKeough, M. Porath, L. Phillips, & V. Timmons (Eds.), *The challenges of student diversity in Canadian schools: Essays on building a better future for exceptional children* (pp. 1–14). Markham, ON: Fitzhenry and Whiteside.
- Lupart, J. L., & Webber, C. (2002). Canadian schools in transition: Moving from dual education systems to inclusive schools. *Exceptionality Education Canada*, 12(2 & 3), 7–52.
- Riehl C. J. (2000). The principal's role in creating inclusive schools for diverse students: A review of normative, empirical, and critical literature on the practice of educational administration. *Review of Educational Research*, 70(1), 55–81.

- Skrtic, T. M., Sailor, W., & Gee, K. (1996). Voice, collaboration, and inclusion: Democratic themes in educational and social reform initiatives. *Remedial and Special Education, 17*(3), 142–157.
- Slee, R. (2001). Social justice and the changing directions in educational research: The case of inclusive education. *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 5*(2/3), 167–177.
- Stanovich, P. J., & Jordan, A. (1998). Canadian teachers' and principals' beliefs about inclusive education as predictors of effective teaching in heterogeneous classrooms. *Elementary School Journal, 98*(3), 219–236.
- UNESCO. (2001). *The open file on inclusive education*. Paris: Author.

Author's Note

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Dr. Jess Whitley, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Education, University of Ottawa, 145 Jean Jacques Lussier, K1N 6N5.
Email: jwhitley@uottawa.ca.