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The Administrative Climate and Context of Inclusive Elementary Schools

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ABSTRACT: ***Inclusive education has emerged as a schoolwide improvement approach for educating students with diverse abilities in general education classes. Despite the key role of principals in school improvement initiatives, few empirical studies have been reported of the administrative climate and context of inclusive schools. Five elementary schools actively engaged in inclusive approaches were studied using survey, observation, and interview methods. Findings revealed (a) commonalities in leadership practices and core principles across this diverse sample of schools, (b) consistent patterns in measured climate indices, and (c) a range of administrative strategies used by principals to promote inclusive practices. Implications for future research and practice are discussed.***

> Differences hold great opportunities for learning. Differences offer a free, abundant, and renewable resource. I would like to see our compulsion for eliminating differences replaced by an equally compelling focus on making use of these differences to improve schools. (Barth, 1990, pp. 514-515)

American public schools are serving a more heterogeneous population than ever before. Thirty-five percent of children in the U.S. are members of minority groups. Twenty percent of this country's children live in poverty, and the same proportion of children live in households headed by an immigrant (Olson, 2000). Despite the increasing diversity in our schools, the challenge of meeting the needs of diverse groups of students in public schools is not new. Riehl (2000) highlights over a century of such efforts in a recent analysis of the principal's role in creating schools that are responsive to diverse students. Described by Grubb (1995) as "the old problem of new students," it is clear that issues associated with diversity are familiar challenges for school administrators.

Currently composing over 10% of the school population (U.S. Department of Education, 1999), students with disabilities and those considered "at risk" represent one source of the increasing diversity in today's classrooms. The 1997 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, P.L. 105-17, 1997), as well as the 1994 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (i.e., The Improving America's Schools Act; ESEA, P.L.

103-382, 1994), emphasize the integration of supplementary services and instructional supports within general education classrooms to ensure that students have access to challenging and stimulating learning environments. Further, both federal laws require the participation of students served within these programs in all large-scale assessment activities. One of the greatest anticipated benefits of inclusive educational accountability systems is that schools will have access to a fully representative picture of student performance. This information, in turn, will better inform school improvement initiatives, helping educators critically evaluate whether all populations of students are benefiting from current instructional practices and school improvement initiatives (Thurlow, Elliott, & Ysseldyke, 1998).

While support for inclusive approaches to school improvement is evident in critical components of the current policy environment (Consortium on Inclusive Schooling Practices, 1996; Lipsky & Gartner, 1997), much remains to be known about the cultures, characteristics, and practices of settings in which this is actually occurring. With few exceptions (e.g., Fisher, Sax, & Grove, 2000; Keyes, Hanley-Maxwell, & Capper, 1999; Salisbury, Palombaro, & Hollowood, 1993), research about these issues has been implemented in settings in which the term *inclusion* describes approaches to education with school populations that are diverse in terms of ethnicity and race (e.g., Deering, 1996; Dei, James, Karumanchery, James-Wilson, & Zine, 2000), but not necessarily disability.

Regardless of the specific focus, the importance of the school leader in establishing and maintaining an ongoing focus on school improvement and support for change has been well established in theory and practice (Elmore, 1996; Fullan & Miles, 1992; Sergiovanni, 1992). Further, there is evidence of both the importance and complexity of the interrelationships between the principal's behavior, school climate, and school effectiveness (Hoy, Tarter, & Wiskowskie, 1992; Ouchi, 1981; Tarter & Hoy, 1988). Despite these findings, few empirical studies have been reported of the administrative climate and context of inclusive schools. To address this need, the current study was undertaken to better understand the school context and leadership practices of building principals who clearly articulate an agenda of school improvement that is inclusive of the needs of all students, including those with disabilities. By understanding the context and practices in such settings, it may be possible to leverage this information for the benefit of other schools seeking to use inclusion as a whole school change strategy.

METHOD

Design

A cross-site, case study design was used to study the administrative and contextual characteristics of elementary schools in which inclusive educational practices were being promoted by the building principal. Principals from five schools in three states participated as key informants and collaborators in this investigation. Participating districts and buildings were purposively selected for demographic differences (e.g., locale, socioeconomic status of community, enrollment). In addition, each school met a priori criteria designed to identify exemplary schools actively engaged in promoting quality instructional practices and an inclusive learning environment.

Settings and Participants

Table 1 provides an overview of the participating districts and elementary schools. The sample included two schools from a relatively poor, metropolitan district of 11,618 students in Missouri; two schools from a suburban district serving 4,600 students in Pennsylvania; and one school from a small rural district of 145 students in Maine. Consistent with their status as an inclusive elementary school, each school enrolled students with the full range of disabilities, including those with significant disabilities. The primary educational placement for these students was their age-appropriate, general education classroom. Additional detail about school staffing, student enrollment, and fiscal resources is provided in Table 1.

Schools within the participating districts were selected because they met the following cri-

TABLE 1
Description of Participating Districts and Schools

Variables	*Smith (MO)*	*Barker (MO)*	*Seaside (ME)*	*Franklin (PA)*	*Harper (PA)*
Number of Instructional Staff					
Gen. Educators	27	14	6	36	34
Sp. Educators	5	3	1	3	3
Paraeducators	10	7	3	5	9
Enrollment					
# students	570	236	90	412	389
# students with IEPs	27	16	12		21
Average class size	21	20	20	23	22
% non-White	10%	19%	8%	7%	5%
Fiscal information					
% students below poverty	33%	70%	41%	2%	15%
Average per pupil costs	$4,924	$5,697	$4,666	$10,600	$10,600

Note: Names of participating schools and districts have been changed.

teria: (a) At least one general education schoolwide reform initiative (e.g., accelerated school initiative, Goals 2000; schoolwide Title I program) was ongoing in the school; (b) the principal was willing to be actively involved as an action research partner for at least 2 years; (c) students with significant disabilities were enrolled in the school; and (d) the building was recognized for its exemplary or innovative building-based practices, as evidenced by its designation as a Blue Ribbon School by the U.S. Department of Education, membership in the National Diffusion Network, or current or prior involvement with a federally funded statewide systems change project focused on the inclusion of students with disabilities.

Each of our participating schools shared a commitment to an inclusive approach to special education service delivery. Each of the schools had participated in some type of externally funded project to support their efforts to adopt more inclusive schooling practices some time prior to their involvement in this project. In each case, this involved collaboration with some outside source (individual or organization) for onsite training and technical assistance to support the movement to in-class delivery of special education supports. For the larger schools in Pennsylvania and Missouri, the process began with reintegrating students with disabilities who had previously been served in cluster programs within or outside their own district. All participating schools describe their approach to special education service delivery as involving the following components: (a) evolution from resource room and self-contained classrooms to the delivery of special education support within the general edu-

TABLE 2
Description of Participating Principals

District/Building	*Gender*	*Years Experience as Principal*	*Years as Principal in This Building*
Smith Elementary (MO)	F	8	5
Barker Elementary (MO)	F	4	1
Seaside Elementary (ME)	F	30	30
Franklin Elementary (PA)	F	10	7
Harper Elementary (PA)	F	6	3

cation classroom, (b) movement from categorical-based delivery of special education supports to the involvement of special education personnel in grade-level teams, and (c) ongoing use of collaborative teaming practices between special and general education personnel to design classroom instruction in a manner that is responsive to the support needs of all students. Each school ensured that students with disabilities followed the general education schedule and were supported in their participation in classroom activities and extracurricular events. Depending on the students currently being served, schools described the use of paraprofessionals as a necessary in-class support for extremely challenging students.

Descriptive information about building principals in these schools is provided in Table 2. As reflected in the information presented in this table, this is an experienced group of female principals, with an average of 12 years of experience in the field and 9 years of experience within the building that was the focus of this case study. The principals in these schools share a common core of characteristics. Each placed a strong value on being visible in their schools and on promoting a culture of collaboration. Each principal voiced a clear vision that her school reflect the diversity of the local community and that all students be exposed to high quality teaching and learning opportunities. The culture of each school reflected the qualities of these principals and the collective efforts of parents, students, and staff to achieving high standards for all students (see Table 5 for expansion of principal qualities).

MEASURES

Multiple sources of data were gathered to create a comprehensive picture of these schools. Surveys and structured interviews were conducted to collect information about building climate, school restructuring activities, and reform initiatives prevalent in each participating school. Demographic data were also collected to characterize the district, school, and the principal. Each school participating was assigned a project staff person (critical friend) who coordinated data collection at the building level and was on site at least twice monthly for 18 to 24 months. Critical friends were master's level educators with public school and applied research experiences. All critical friends participated in a 6-hr training session on the measures and data collection procedures for this study. Monthly conference calls ensured consistency across sites and provided a forum for addressing procedural questions and interpreting emerging findings. The prolonged involvement of these staff members in each school enabled them to provide important insights into the work of the principal and the meaning of our data. For purposes of this study, data are reported that were collected during the first year of this project in each elementary school.

Organizational Climate. The Organizational Climate Description Questionnaire for Elemen-

TABLE 3
Definitions of Dimensions in the OCDQ-RE

	Dimensions of Principal Behavior
Supportive behavior	Reflects a basic concern for teachers. The principal listens and is open to teacher suggestions. Praise is given genuinely and frequently, and criticism is handled constructively. Supportive principals respect the professional competence of their staffs and exhibit both a professional and personal interest in each teacher.
Directive behavior	Rigid monitoring of teacher behavior. Principals maintain close and constant control over all teacher and school activities, down to the smallest detail.
Restrictive behavior	Hinders, rather than facilitates, teacher work. The principal burdens teachers with paperwork, committee requirements, and other demands that interfere with their teaching responsibilities.
	Dimensions of Teacher Behavior
Collegial behavior	Supports open and professional interactions among teachers. Teachers are proud of their school, enjoy working with their colleagues, and are enthusiastic, accepting, and mutually respectful of the professional competence of their colleagues.
Intimate behavior	Reflects a cohesive and strong network of social support among the faculty. Teachers know each other well, are close personal friends, socialize together regularly, and provide strong support for each other.
Disengaged behavior	Refers to a lack of meaning and focus to professional activities. Teachers are simply putting in time and are nonproductive in group efforts or team building; they have no common goals. Their behavior is often negative and critical of their colleagues and the organization.

Note: From *Open Schools, Healthy Schools: Measuring Organizational Climate* (p. 156), by W. K. Hoy, C. J. Tarter, and R. B. Kottkamp, 1991, Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications. Reprinted with permission.

tary Schools (OCDQ-RE)(Hoy, Tarter, & Kottkamp, 1991) was adapted and used early in Year 1 to assess the entering status of the buildingwide administrative and instructional climate. This 42-item instrument captures teachers' perceptions of their general work environment relative to six dimensions that describe principal and teacher behavior. Table 3 provides definitions of these six dimensions. Although no psychometrics were described by the authors, normative data from a large sample of elementary schools were provided as a referent for assessing school prototypes. A 6-point Likert-type rating scale was used to measure the extent of agreement or disagreement with each item. Climate measure scores across these six dimensions paint a picture of the "personality" of a school. In schools with an open climate, principals are highly supportive of teachers and are perceived by teachers as being both nondirective and nonrestrictive. Teachers are highly engaged, collegial, and have high levels of intimacy. Schools characterized by a closed climate score low on dimensions of support, intimacy, and collegiality, and high in the areas of disengagement, directiveness, and restrictiveness.

School Restructuring. The Criteria for School Restructuring was developed from Newmann and Wehlage's (1996) research on over 1,500 restructured schools. The 38-item scale was used to evaluate principals' perceptions of how closely their school reflected features found to be most directly related to buildingwide capacity to restructure and change. Items focus on dimensions of a school's operation: *Student Experiences* (13 items); *Professional Life of Teachers* (11 items); *Leadership, Management, and Governance* (7

items); and *Coordination of Community Services* (7 items). In this study, a 6-point Likert scale was applied to each criterion statement and used by principals midway through Year 1 to rate the extent they felt that each item was true about their school.

Principal Interviews. Individual, semistructured interviews were conducted over a 3- to 4-month period with each principal to obtain additional information about the school context. A protocol for the questions was developed and pilot-tested with nonparticipants. Protocol questions asked respondents to describe reform initiatives operating in their buildings, how these initiatives were implemented, and the extent to which all students were successfully included in these initiatives. Interviews lasted about 1 hr and were conducted by the critical friends at times convenient to the principal. Responses to the questions were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data Analysis

Organizational Climate Data. As described previously, the 42 items of this instrument fall within six dimensions that describe principal and teacher behavior. To analyze responses for each school, box plots (Tukey, 1977) were created for each school relative to the dimensions of principal and teacher behavior that constitute this climate measure. Box plots provide a simple graphic means of comparing school scores in terms of mean locations and spread (SPSS, 1988). The box represents the interquartile range (i.e., 50% of all values fall within the box). The whiskers extend from the box, representing the highest and lowest values, excluding extreme outliers. For this purpose, outliers are values between one and one-half and three box lengths from the upper or lower edge of the box. Box plots of each school's score on the six dimensions were created to facilitate visual comparison across schools. These scores were examined relative to the indicators and descriptors of school climate provided by Hoy et al. (1991).

The resulting cultures in these schools were ones that valued diversity, inquiry, collaboration, and the meaningful inclusion of students, teaching staff, and parents.

School Restructuring Data. Responses to the school restructuring measure were entered into a computer and verified using an established procedural fidelity coding system (Wolery & Holcombe, 1993). For each school, the mean and standard deviation of scores within each of the four dimensions were calculated. These descriptive statistics were also calculated for the entire sample of 5 schools.

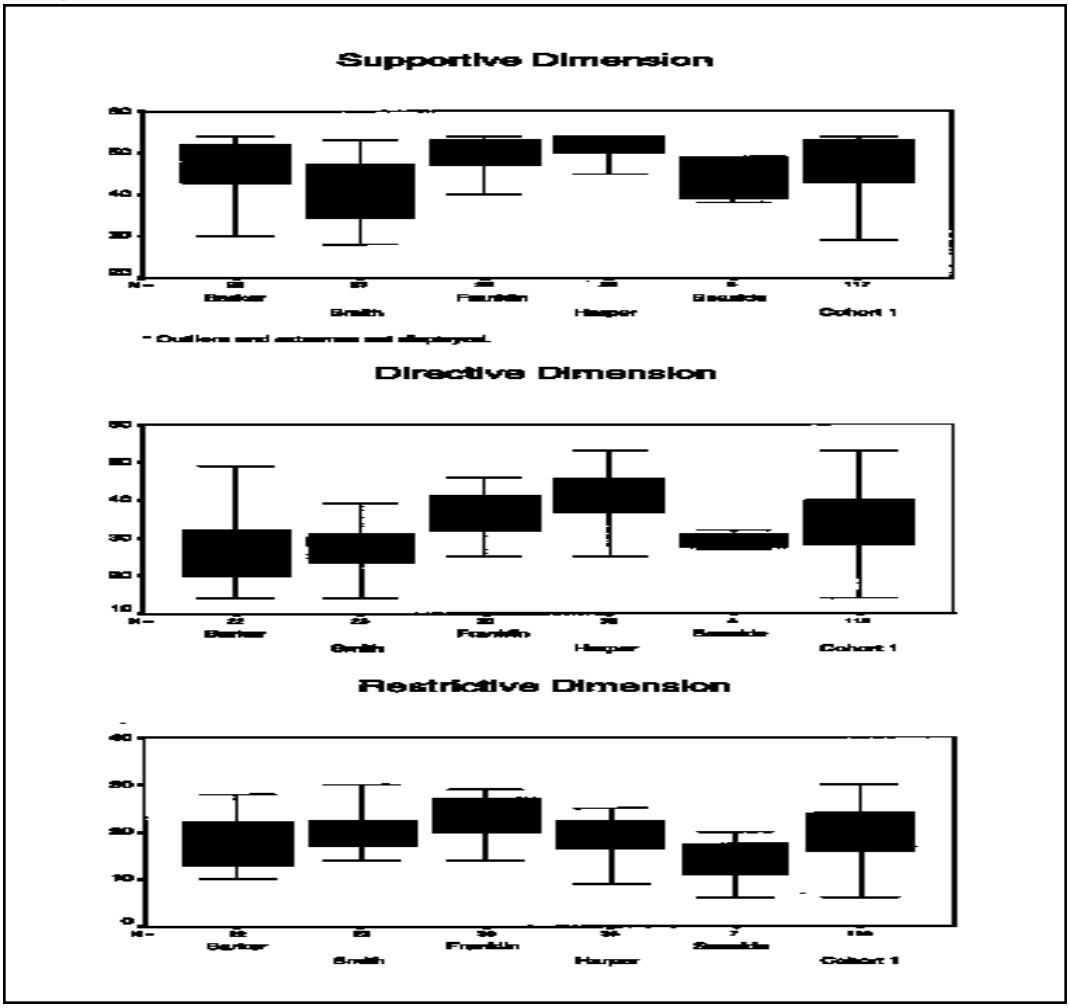
Principal Interviews. Principal interviews were transcribed verbatim, read by the critical friends and the authors, and coded for recurring themes within each protocol question (Patton, 1990). Themes were then interpreted by project staff and supported with evidence from the transcript. The interview data and our interpretations were shared with the principals to validate the representativeness of the data and the accuracy of our interpretations.

RESULTS

Organizational Climate

A box plot depicting each school's score on the three dimensions of the OCDQ-RE that describe principal behavior are presented in Figure 1. Figure 2 contains box plots that depict scores on the instrument's dimensions that describe teacher behavior. While there is some variation across the individual schools, a general pattern exists across all five schools that reflects an open climate (Hoy et al., 1991). In terms of the principal's behavior (Figure 1), high scores are evident across schools on the supportive dimension, while principal behavior that is directive and restrictive is rated substantially lower. Similarly, teacher behavior (Figure 2) across schools reveals patterns in which disengagement is low, while collegiality and intimacy scores are consistently higher. Such patterns provide insight into the characteristics of these inclusive schools and some of the administrative and contextual factors that contribute to their capacity to support diverse learners.

FIGURE 1
Principal Behavior



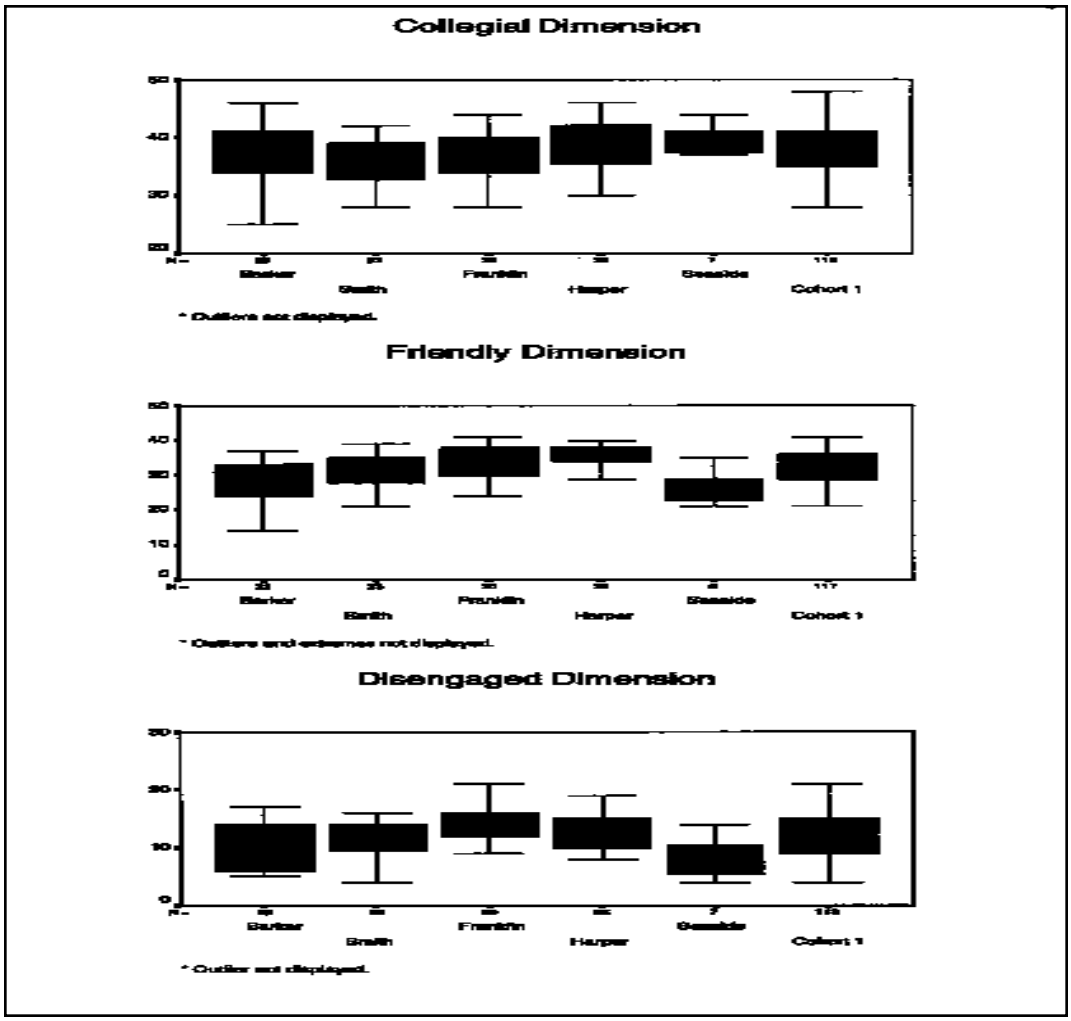
School Restructuring Activities

A summary of scores on the Criteria for School Restructuring measure is presented in Table 4. Three of the five schools had high mean scores on three of the four areas addressed by this survey, with relatively lower scores in the area of Leadership, Management, and Governance. The two Pennsylvania schools had consistently high mean scores across all four topical areas. Several items in the Leadership, Management, and Governance area involve funding. "The school receives financial rewards based on student outcomes" is one such item. The three schools with the lowest scores in the area also represent the least affluent schools in this sample. Similarly, questions that presuppose a relatively large school (e.g., "The school has been divided into schools within schools, divisions, or houses") were scored lowest by the rural school in this sample in which only 90 students were enrolled. The mean score on this instrument provides a general indicator of "how much" restructuring activity is occurring, but is not necessarily sensitive to variations in context that strongly influence the type of activity in which a school is engaged.

Principal Interviews

The critical friends were able to develop an understanding of how the experiences, perceptions, and actions of our partner principals influenced the culture and climate of schools from the interviews and their extended presence in each site.

FIGURE 2
Teacher Behavior



Each of the principals spoke about inclusion as a core value in her school, about the importance of reflection and inquiry as professional tools for change, and about how she tried to develop various ways in which teachers, parents, and students could be included in the decision-making process of the school. One principal illustrated the commitment to inclusive practice saying, "The kids are considered a part of the classroom. They're assigned to a grade, no matter what . . . . All of the initiatives in our school apply to all kids."

Reflection and inquiry were seen as important tools for change. One principal noted the link to her site-based management and to teacher teams: "I find myself asking guiding questions like, 'What do we need to know?' 'What data do we need?' It has helped me, as a building leader, to realize that it is OK not to have all the answers." It is also noteworthy that principals felt they functioned with support and with expectations to be progressive. As one principal indicated, "The school district has always been supportive . . . . When I was hired, the superintendent said, 'We want risk takers, not care takers.' We are expected to have new thoughts and ideas."

Table 5 identifies additional cross-site school-level themes that emerged from the interview data. These themes speak most directly to the characteristics of these principals and their influence on the inclusive culture of their schools. As is evident, the administrative style of these principals contributed to a climate in which change was expected, supported, and encouraged.

TABLE 4
Criteria for School Restructuring—Mean Scores Across Focal Areas

Focal Areas	*Smith*	*Barker*	*Seaside*	*Franklin*	*Harper*	*Aggregate Mean*
Student experiences	5.85	5.77	4.85	4.84	5.30	5.32
Professional life of teachers	5.18	5.45	5.0	5.36	4.6	5.12
Leadership, management, and governance	2.83	2.57	2.14	5.57	4.28	3.48
Coordination of community services	4.67	5.8	2.57	4.8	4.43	4.45
Mean across dimensions	4.63	4.9	3.64	5.14	4.65	4.6

Further, there is evidence of active efforts to create a sense of direction, shared leadership, reflective practice, and time for staff teaming and collaboration. Each principal tried to create the conditions necessary for their staff and students to be successful. The resulting cultures in these schools were ones that valued diversity, inquiry, collaboration, and the meaningful inclusion of students, teaching staff, and parents.

Demographic and interview data indicated that four of the five principals were involved with some type of significant change that affected their work during this study—one was planning to retire, two were in a district with a new superintendent, and one was new to the role of principal and to her building. These factors affected how these principals interacted with their staff, and in particular, how they approached the task of creating and sustaining an inclusive school environment. For example, Seaside's principal reported feeling "more directive" as she prepared to retire and transition her building to a new principal. She had served as principal of this school her entire career and had guided this school's development of an inclusive service delivery model as a model site in her state. She was proud of her accomplishments and the partnerships she had established to promote buildingwide change. Relinquishing this leadership position and transitioning her school to another principal were significant events for this principal. She was particularly mindful of how this transition might affect the sustainability of the inclusive culture she had worked hard to develop.

In contrast, Franklin's principal was new to her school and used the newness of that perspective to also see its needs. She viewed her role as a catalyst for change and as the "weaver," creating ways for her staff to see how initiatives connect and interrelate. She shared,

> I do see a lot of orbiting of things . . . but teachers haven't understood the connection . . . I kind of pushed my staff and I made some people unhappy . . . what needs to happen to make this work for all kids requires much more interconnectedness . . . It is like weaving a fabric and taking important threads and trying skillfully as an administrator to weave and create.

The buildingwide initiatives that were in place in each of the five schools at the inception of this project are described in Table 6. This information contributes to the picture of the context of these schools and describes the general education reforms into which students with disabilities were included. While each school had a formal initiative that focused on improving learning results for all students, there was also consistent reference among these schools to integrating general and special education initiatives within their buildings. Further, each district and building used data to inform decision making (e.g., Continuous Quality Improvement; school improvement plans, Accelerated Schools, Goals 2000 team). In each site, principals used information about where and how students with disabilities were

TABLE 5
Cross-site Trends from Principal Interviews

Themes	*Indicators from Interview Data*
Self-directed, risk taker	Not afraid to say "no," to try something different; all were actively engaged in professional development (publishing, presenting).
Invested in relationships	Reported willingness to "go the extra mile" to work with staff; proponents of resolving problems among and between staff rather than replacing personnel; actively engaged with parents and community.
Accessible	Genuinely interested in getting their "hands dirty" with issues in their schools; spend as much time as they can with teachers, staff, and among students; not a desk jockey.
Reflective	Had strong sense of direction that they attributed to self-reflection; used personal theories to initiate actions; used teams of teachers and parents to inform decision making.
Collaborative	Shared leadership with staff; optimized time for teaming; set aside time to discuss priority issues; delegated responsibility in ways that were meaningful; didn't just give them "busy work."
Intentional	Purposive hiring to lessen friction before initiating changes; strong sense of direction; stuck to their goals; infused core values into decision making and program development.

served to deploy resources and promote their inclusion in general education reforms. Each principal spoke about how teams were used to create instructional supports for all students and how they vested power in these teams for decision-making, particularly as it related to the incorporation of students with disabilities in general education.

It is noteworthy that each principal described existing, ongoing, and planned efforts to ensure that her school reflected an inclusive culture. Table 7 depicts many of the strategies described by these principals and observed by the critical friends, organized within four thematic areas. Importantly, these strategies were implemented within existing general education initiatives in each school (see Table 6) and were used by principals to change structures and practices. While many of the strategies produced incremental types of change (Fullan, 1993), others were designed to influence the core beliefs and operating principles of schools, and hence, deeper levels of change.

In Maine, a number of building-level strategies were used to support the delivery of inclusive services. Specifically, merged funding was used to provide noncategorical support to students with and without disabilities. Grade level, rather than individual student level, technical assistance was used to provide support to students and teachers. As with other sites, all students, including those with disabilities, were enrolled in age-appropriate, general education classrooms. The "inclusive mentality" and core values of this school were evident in their policy of providing small group instruction for any student who needed it, not only those with identified disabilities. In Pennsylvania, all students were assigned to homerooms, and educational support teachers were assigned to grade levels, not to groups of labeled students. Teams of teachers were involved in developing strengths-based interventions for students with and without disabilities. In Missouri, the schools in our project assigned paraeducators to grade levels rather than to students. Participating schools from this state also used action teams

TABLE 6
Ongoing School Improvement Initiatives in Sample Schools

School	*Ongoing School Improvement Initiative*
Smith Elementary (MO)	Accelerated schools model—provides a governance structure and building cadres that promote collaborative teaming approaches to instruction; Care Team (student support team); reading program based on phonetic awareness and multiple teaching strategies; recovery room provides safe place to process behavioral issues.
Barker Elementary (MO)	Accelerated schools model; Caring Communities—program that promotes community involvement; Missouri School Improvement Plan—sets specific goals focused on atttendance, reading, facilities, and student achievement.
Seaside Elementary (ME)	"Design team" formed that represented merging of an inclusion team with a Goals 2000 team; merged staff development; team teaching between special and general education teachers.
Franklin Elementary (PA)	Instructional support team; Continuous Progress Instruction, including components such as (a) mastery learning, (b) cooperative learning, (c) assessment-based instruction, (d) adaptive strategies, and (e) classroom management and community building.
Harper Elementary (PA)	Continuous Progress Instruction, including components such as (a) mastery learning, (b) cooperative learning, (c) assessment-based instruction, (d) adaptive strategies, and (e) classroom management and community building.

at the building level to design supports for students and used parents extensively to support school activities in the community.

DISCUSSION

The schools in our sample were selected because they shared characteristics of innovativeness, commitment to diversity, and a strong emphasis on school improvement. They were also selected for their demographic variability. Analysis of the administrative contexts of these schools suggested that principals shared common personal attributes as leaders. They tended to be leaders who shared decision-making power with their staff, led by example, extended the core values around inclusiveness and quality to initiatives throughout their buildings, and actively promoted learning communities. These findings are consistent with the work of Lambert (1998), Fullan (1993), and others who suggest that effective principals are those that promote change through practices that are collaborative, intentional, and supportive.

The strategies to promote inclusive practices adopted by the principals in this sample reflect primarily, though not exclusively, incremental types of change (e.g., Elmore, 1996; Fullan, 1993). Incremental or surface changes can often be made with relatively little expenditure of resources and time. Typically, our principals were able to initiate changes in schedules, deployment

TABLE 7
Schoolwide Strategies to Include All Students in General Education

Assignment	*Supports*	*Instruction*	*Big Picture*
Purposeful assignment of students to classrooms to maintain heterogeneity of classrooms	Instructional support team in building–care team	Team teaching between special and general education teachers	Building initiatives reference district policy on inclusive practices
All students assigned to age-appropriate grade-level classroom	Use of adult mentors in classrooms	Push-in approaches to Title I services	Effort focused on connecting initiatives to school improvement plan and results
Involvement of all students in extracurricular activities	Deployment of special education staff to grade-level teams	Flexible grouping and regrouping	School-based vision of a quality, inclusive school
	Regular, blended staff development opportunities are provided	Looping	Prevention-oriented reading initiatives implemented in early grades
	Principal leverages resources to support inclusive practices		Principal models inclusive attitude and expectations
			Reflective discussions; focus on core values

of personnel, or assignment of students within the existing structures of the school. These surface changes produced opportunities and supports for students with disabilities to be physically and academically included in age-appropriate classrooms. However efficient or effective, these administrative solutions did not necessarily address attitudinal and knowledge barriers that can affect participation and membership of students with disabilities in the school.

Changing attitudes, beliefs, and practices requires attention to factors that influence the culture of the school and imply deeper levels of change. Each of our principals used a process of reflective inquiry within existing teams and management groups to promote changes in the culture of her school. Each principal used information from her own school to engage her staff in discussions about the values and implications of diversity, inclusion, collaboration, and instructional practices. At Harper Elementary, where teachers were challenged to think about how students with diverse needs, including those with disabilities, could be academically and socially included in all aspects of the school, the principal noted, "The kind of instruction that children with IEPs need is the type of instruction needed by all children. We need to view all kids as individuals and realize the need to tailor instruction to the learner." Setting the stage with such commentary provides an important context for discussion and examination of traditionally held beliefs. Each of our principals created time and opportunity for discourse within her school to address issues that affected the development of inclusionary practices. Their attention to both process and content helped form the foundation for the successes they experienced in creating integrated, building-wide change.

Each of our principals used a process of reflection, discourse, and theory-testing to facilitate both personal and larger scale change. At Franklin, the principal observed that "The attitude and atmosphere has changed. Staff are aware that this is an atmosphere of growth and learning." Using a process of reflective inquiry targeted at communication and teaming helped the staff in this school learn how to collaborate more effectively, adapt instruction to support all learners, and document their effectiveness with different types of evidence. Taken together, these examples illustrate how principals can create con-

Incremental or surface changes can often be made with relatively little expenditure of resources and time.

ditions for deeper change to occur and increase the likelihood that the staff in their schools think and act inclusively.

This investigation was undertaken to characterize the climate and context in schools recognized for their exemplary practices and their status as an inclusive elementary school. It was not our purpose to directly investigate the administrative practices of principals, nor to investigate the outcomes of their work. We are, therefore, limited in what we can say about the link between the actions of our principals and the resulting impacts for teachers and students, particularly those students with disabilities. Further, using selection criteria focused on exemplary schools potentially narrows the generalizability of findings to the larger pool of elementary schools. We attempted to counter this limitation by sampling from a range of schools with differing demographic characteristics.

Future research is needed in at least two areas. First, it is important to understand more clearly what strategies principals find most useful for promoting inclusive practices and how best to leverage those strategies for the benefit of others. Reflective practice and participatory approaches to inquiry appear to hold great promise as strategies for promoting the inclusion of students with disabilities in general education settings (McGregor & Salisbury, 2000; Salisbury, Wilson, & Palombaro, 1998) and as whole-school change strategies (cf., Calhoun, 1994). What is not clear is how effectively an inquiry-based approach promotes positive outcomes for all students. Finally, further investigations are needed to identify what dimensions are salient and need to be present to develop and sustain a culture that supports diversity. Contextually grounded inquiry appears well-suited to address investigations of both form and function within diverse school contexts.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Our experience and role as outside partners in an inquiry process with these building principals suggests some implications for practice. First, the value and grounding that each of these principals found in a reflective approach to practice underscores the importance of these skills for those who are in building leadership roles. There is a growing recognition of just how critical the building leader is in promoting school improvement and student achievement (e.g., Hallinger & Heck, 1996; Keller, 1998; Murphy & Louis, 1994). The concept of "instructional leadership" is being replaced by the concept of "transformational school leadership" (Leithwood, 1994) as we develop a clearer understanding that commitment strategies, rather than control strategies, are critical skills for leaders who are working to improve schools. Reflective inquiry is a dynamic and positive process that lends itself to the many questions and problems that emerge on a daily basis for both teachers and principals in search of more effective practices. As such, it merits time and application in programs that prepare both teachers and administrators (Brubacher, Case, & Reagan, 1994; Bullough, 1989).

Second, we were struck by the clear vision that these principals were able to maintain on integrating what, in many other buildings, are seen as separate "general" and "special" education initiatives. While the field is beginning to explore more collaborative approaches to education in teacher preparation programs (Blanton, Griffin, Winn, & Pugach, 1997), it is evident that most prevalent practices in personnel preparation do not support the efforts of school leaders such as those involved in this study. It is critical that we move beyond change at the level of individual buildings and districts, and think more systemically about how to effectively align classroom, school, district, and university teacher preparation practices. These schools exemplify the notion that an inclusive perspective to schooling has implications far beyond the mere placement of students with disabilities in settings with their typical peers (Consortium on Inclusive Schooling Practices, 1996). Structures, policies, attitudes, and practices are all affected by inclusive thinking.

To achieve an inclusive culture focused on meeting the needs of all learners, it is important that school leaders make explicit the embedded values of diversity, membership, and collaboration in every aspect of their school's operation–from purchasing textbooks and computers, to the deployment of staff, to how decisions are made, to how professional development activities are structured. As noted by the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future (1996), "The need for excellent teaching grows ever more pressing . . . . America's future depends now, as never before, on our ability to teach" (pp. 2-3). Effective principals create the conditions necessary for staff and students to be successful. They do this by exemplifying the characteristics of our participant principals and by ascribing to many of the practices we have described in this report.

There are additional implications from this study for the preparation of principals. As districts move to implement the provisions of recently reauthorized federal special educational policy, principals will need to be prepared to address these requirements at the building level. Educational administration programs in higher education often provide only cursory attention to special education policy and its implementation. As programs move to develop course content and fieldwork that is reflective of today's schools, we recommend that colleagues in special education be included in the dialogue. Their understanding of what the real questions are, and our sense of what approaches and strategies are likely to be most workable, emerge from field-based partnerships (McGregor & Salisbury, 2000). Working together with practitioners and administrators to understand and resolve implementation issues has been mutually beneficial. While labor-intensive, often messy, and not without problems, we recommend practitioner-directed inquiry as a sound and useful approach to research.

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