

**Principals' Perspectives on Facilitating Inclusive Education,
An international investigation**

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ABSTRACT:

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This paper highlights the administrative orientations and practices of principals facilitating inclusive school programming in Italy, South Africa, New Zealand and Thailand. For the purposes this discussion of educational leadership, the definition of inclusive education is broader than placement options or delivery of services for students with disabilities. Inclusive education, stated nicely by Sands, Kozleski, & French (2000) "propounds the idea that inclusive school communities are both a process for and outcome for social justice, equity, and democracy within the educational system" (p. 5). In this investigation, I focus on the social meanings and understandings of disability within elementary inclusive school settings ---from the perspective of school principals -- and attempt to "reveal hidden meanings, silences, contradictions, sites of power . . . dominant themes and forms of discourse" (Cannella, 1997, p.16) related to the leadership styles of elementary school principals.

Qualitative methodology guides this study, including participant observations and in-depth interviews with elementary school principals in Italy, South Africa, New Zealand and Thailand. Through interpretivistic data analysis, I explore the philosophical positions and practices of principals organizing inclusive education within their school context. Throughout the paper, I expound on how they conceptualize their leadership roles in facilitating inclusive education and how their ideas and understandings interface with teaching, learning and school reform. While the themes are emergent, I use my own interpretations and relevant literature to inform the analysis.

Using Bolman and Deal's (1997) work on reframing organizations, I present the way the principal-participants think about and organize inclusive programming in five major categories: structural, functional, human resource, cultural, political. Here is an example of a principal who illustrates a "human resource framework", emphasizing social and interpersonal relationships of school personnel, particularly related to training (Giangreco, Prelock, Reid, Dennis, & Edelman, 2000).

"What I mean by inclusion, as well as the faculty, is that all kids are heterogeneously grouped while considering dis/ability, race, gender, SES, cultural background, and so on. Our team doesn't simply define inclusion as special needs learners and special skilled teachers. Our diverse (student) population demands that we create collaboration models for sharing our varied expert (teaching) knowledge.

Each of the participants talk about their position regarding inclusive education in new and to some extent progressive ways relative to the traditional notions of schooling students with and without disabilities. They are clearly adopting new responsibilities and philosophies to schooling, while leaving behind earlier notions of homogeneous grouping. In so doing, the principals' own beliefs substantially influence school-wide acceptance and behaviors toward inclusion. The implications from the investigation provide insight to other school leaders across cultures in guiding their actions in facilitating elementary inclusive programs.

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