

## The Sustainability of Inclusionary Practices: A Case Study

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**Abstract.** In this article the authors describe a qualitative study that researched the sustainability of responsible inclusive practices in a public elementary school in Connecticut. Through focus group sessions that included teachers, administrators and support staff, five themes were identified that demonstrate importance in the sustainability of inclusion. The data revealed the following five consistent themes as integral to responsible inclusive practices: (1) Public Service with a Moral Purpose, (2) Culture and Commitment, (3) Data-Driven Decision Making, (4) Leadership Qualities and (5) Co-Teaching and Community Involvement.

**Keywords:** responsible inclusion; sustainability of inclusion; leadership qualities

### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to answer the question “what are the key factors that have sustained responsible inclusion?”. The Silver Lane Elementary School, located in the East Hartford Public Schools in East Hartford, Connecticut, was the site at which the study was conducted. Focus groups that were comprised of teachers, administrators and support staff were selected and represented a mix of veteran and non-tenured educators. Some of the educators at Silver Lane Elementary School were committed to inclusion initiatives for a longer period of time than other educators who became involved during the phase in which more inclusive practices were required and implemented at the school.

The data was analyzed by the researchers to determine definable and consistent themes. The following five themes were independently identified by each of the researchers through the transcript analysis: (1) Public Service with a

Moral Purpose, (2) Culture and Commitment, (3) Data-Driven Decision Making, (4) Leadership Qualities and (5) Co-Teaching and Community Involvement.

### **Public Service with a Moral Purpose**

The issue of moral purpose of a leader is particularly interesting as it includes the implementation by the school leader of aspects of its context: 1) raising the bar for student learning; 2) treating people with respect; and 3) altering the social environment for the better (Fullan, 2002).

Loehr and Schwartz (2003) base their leadership discussion on four principles one of which is; “to build capacity we must push beyond our normal limits, training in the way that elite athletes do” (p.13). School leaders need to work consistently at developing a school climate that fosters collegiality and cooperation. The metaphor of the athlete is important as it indicates the importance of diligent and consistent dedication to the advancement of the school in order to positively affect student achievement.

Fullan (2004) elucidates the importance for leaders to develop new leaders in order for continuity of direction. In order for reform or change to alter the context of schools, a critical mass of people who understand, accept and are willing to continue the change must be cultivated. Random change needs to become system change. System change ensures that programs will last beyond their inceptor or creators. Leaders who affect the entire district ensure that change and reform initiatives will be pervasive within the district. Continuity of culture and vision are important to sustain new ideas and concepts.

Fullan (2004) describes the necessity for leaders to be energy creators. The use of skillful and balanced management of energy is a key to effective leadership. Energy creators are enthusiastic and always positive, use critical thinking, creativity and imagination, stimulate and spark others, practice leadership at all levels, are able and willing to scrutinize their practice and willing to make their practice accessible to others and wish to improve on their previous best (p. 37).

In his powerful summary statement regarding energy creators as leaders, Fullan (2004) states, “We know the sources of energy creation: moral purpose, emotional intelligence, quality relationship, quality knowledge, physical well-being-all mobilized to engage the mind and heart in attempting to solve complex adaptive challenges” (p. 38). The importance of an emotional connection to leadership and the people with whom the leaders work is integral in her success. Brain research indicates that when humans learn new content, the emotional area of the brain is the first to receive new information. It is in this mid-brain that decisions are made as to the importance of the information. Leaders who consider the emotional intelligence of those whom they lead have a distinct advantage over those leaders who do not. The human resource in organizations is precious and should be cultivated. Through moral and emotional connections, the leader can make a difference in how her team receives and accepts new ideas and information.

Boylan (2016) states that “the increasing importance of educational collaborations and networks that blur organizations boundaries” (p. 57). The importance of engaging in collaborative leadership leads to an ethical approach

to school improvements for schools and the learners (p. 64). Altruistic and moral purposes are innate in collaborative leadership models. Moral leaders take on an identity that is driven by moral decision making. Boylan indicates that, “Movement leaders influence identity formation through the development of meaning for others” (p. 66). The new attitudes of all stakeholders begin to transform the school and foster educating and leading with a moral purpose.

Perkins (2003) reflects on leaders with organizational intelligence and reports that process smart and people smart are two separate and distinct characteristics of great leaders. A process smart leader has an exceptional knowledge base while a people smart leader identifies emotionally with people and their values. Transformational leaders effect change in group as well as in the individuals within the group (Heifetz, 2003). Perkins’ (2003) notion of developmental leaders is concerned with leaders functioning as “exemplars, facilitators and mentors within a group, helping to move it toward a progressive culture” (p. 219). Developing human interactions through support and effective communication is a key to becoming a true leader.

Referring again to types of challenges leaders face, adaptive challenges require the deep participation of the people with the problem. In other words, one must engage teachers and parents as representatives of the community in school reform. Teachers may not have the knowledge or training to implement reform tactics and can be part of the reason expected changes are not being implemented. Additionally, parents may not know or understand how to effect growth in their children. Effective leaders communicate with groups throughout the system, thereby ensuring effective understanding and acceptance of change of reform initiatives. By building communities of constituents and leaders through effective discussion and communication, a leader can positively affect the implementation of new ideas. People who feel included, who feel important, who are offered chances to express their thoughts and ideas are more likely to buy into change initiatives.

### **Data-Driven Decision Making**

Since the passing of the No Child Left Behind Act, school improvement initiatives have been fueled by data (Goren, 2012). This is the age of accountability within the American school system. To respond to this call for accountability, data-driven decision-making has emerged as one of the primary school improvement strategies (USDOE, 2010). With the increasing amount of data that is being collected by schools, educators are faced with the challenge of how to best make sense of it (Anfara & Donhost, 2010). In conjunction with the many other responsibilities that teachers hold, data analysis and its application to teaching and learning can be a very complicated, dense process for teams of educators. To assist educators with this complicated task, Anfara and Donhost (2010) outline five primary phases in the data-driven decision-making process. The five primary phases in the data-driven decision-making process are: (1) organizing for success, (2) building assessment literacy, (3) identifying data sources, (4) aligning data systems, and (5) altering instruction (Anfara & Donhost, 2010). These five phases are not meant to be sequential, but rather to highlight the important areas to be considered.

Anfara and Donhost (2010) assert that educators must organize for success by ensuring that they have time, teams and trust when engaging in any data-driven decision-making process. Assessment literacy is a crucial component in the process, as raw data by itself provides little information to educators. Educators must be proficient in the act of interpreting the data (Anfara & Donhost, 2010). This brings more meaning and purpose to the data-driven decision-making process (Schildkamp & Kuiper, 2010). Educators must also be cautious when identifying data sources, as there are many shortcomings associated with state accountability tests (Peterson, 2007). Anfara and Donhost (2010) promote the use of periodic assessments to increase student achievement and enhance data-driven decision-making practices. To ease the data-based decision-making processes, data systems within the building level must be aligned. Otherwise, educators find themselves in a very complicated process of trying to make sense of disparate, unaligned data systems, since there are so many sources of data available to them (Anfara & Donhost, 2010). The final component outlined by Anfara and Donhost (2010) in the data-based decision-making process is the use of data to inform instruction. Collecting and analyzing data is not enough to ensure improvement of student learning or teaching practices. The data must be used to alter instruction. This component may be the most complex piece of the process, as the connection between data and instructional practice changes is the most absent in the literature (Anfara & Donhost, 2010). Goren (2012) highlights this aspect in his research when he asserts that our understanding of how data lead to improvement in education is vastly immature.

Goren (2012) asserts that educators must have a deeper and better understanding of data, its use, how practitioners make sense of the data, and conditions that are most conducive for using data well. To do so, it is necessary to understand the context in which data is used within the school system as well as the meaning that teachers make of data (Timperley, 2008). Goren (2012) also argues that educators must take a closer look at what data are actually measuring and why. Once performance measures are introduced to the public, they take on a life of their own, and their intended purposes get merged with public interest.

Today's principal is expected to be able to gather, examine, translate and use data in order to improve instruction (Fox, 2013). In addition to these responsibilities, the principal must also support data-driven decision-making among his or her staff. Principals play a fundamental role in promoting the valuable and resourceful use of data for school improvement (Skalski & Romero, 2011). The leadership practices that principals embrace set the tone for how data will be used by the school staff. They can establish a culture that embraces data-based decision-making practices by all employees.

Due to the tremendous amount of data that educators must sift through and the use of data to evaluate the performance of students, teachers and administrators, it is all too often the case that educators have learned to become defensive and shut down when it comes to data usage. Principals can help educators to overcome this protective stance by modeling the advantageous uses of data to inform the educational process and also by creating a culture that makes it secure for educators to acknowledge that some practices are

unsuccessful (Skalski & Romero, 2011). Skalski and Romero (2011) also support the role of the principal in providing teachers with the structured times to meet for discussions of the data.

Most educators are faced, not with a lack of data, but rather decisions regarding which data make the most sense for them. The principal must assist the data-based decision-making processes in his/her school by helping the staff to identify which data are most informative. He or she can do this by asking about the needs of his or her staff members and students while also asking how the data can be used to address those needs (Skalski & Romero, 2011).

A principal can also support data sharing among their teachers by creating opportunities for teachers to share data between grade levels and providing professional development as well as support for his or her teachers (Skalski & Romero, 2011). Additionally, the principal must keep data reports understandable to parents and staff so that the reports can be used in a meaningful way for program improvement and enhancement of student learning. By maintaining objective and just teacher accountability, the principal can ensure that data are not used to penalize teachers for things that are outside of his or her control (Skalski & Romero, 2011). All of these efforts can contribute to a school culture that uses and values data.

Fox (2013) identifies the following nine attributes of an appropriate mind-set for data-driven decision making in a principal: (1) The principal believes data is vital for sound decision-making and effective problem-solving. (2) The principal understands the classroom is the critical point of impact for student learning. (3) The principal believes one of his or her primary responsibilities is to establish a culture of continuous improvement. (4) The principal focuses on variables over which the school has control. (5) The principal understands that data is a means to an end, rather than an end in itself. (6) The principal distinguishes between change and improvement. (7) The principal establishes a “but-free zone” for problem solving. (8) The principal understands the difference between a situation and a problem. (9) The principal realizes “hope” is not a strategy.

### **Leadership Qualities that Promote a Positive School Culture**

Successful school leaders evidence certain personal and professional qualities that enable them to guide the work of those to whom are under the authority of administration. Research about inspired leadership and those qualities that effective leaders possess is abundant. The Council of Chief School Officers (2002) named strategies for school improvement as manifested through successful principal leadership. They are setting high expectations for all students, sharing leadership and staying engaged, encouraging collaboration among staffing, using assessment data to support student success, keeping the focus on students, addressing barriers to learning, reinforcing classroom learning at home, employing systems for identifying interventions and defining special education as the path to success in the general education program (Fullan, p. 3).

Significant change in school culture, student achievement, professional practice and community and parental involvement is contained in the research on effective leadership in school settings. According to Ouchi (2003) the keys to

developing and sustaining effective school leaders are that every principal is an entrepreneur, every school controls its own budget, everyone is accountable for student performance and for budgets, everyone delegates authority to those below, there is a burning focus on student achievement, every school is a community of learners and families have real choices among a variety of unique schools (Fullan, p. 10). Matthews (2015) states that best practices in inclusion involves the general aspects of school reform and requires a distribution of leadership actions, delegated work and expertise across a school (p. 1001).

Day, Gu and Sammons (2016) discuss transformational leadership. They state, "Transformational leadership has traditionally emphasized vision and inspiration, focusing on establishing structures and cultures that enhance the quality of teaching and learning, setting directions, developing people and (re)designing the organization" (p. 224). Their research cites studies that have determined that it is essential to engage teachers in dialogue that enables them to participate in decisions about learning and the craft of teaching. Effective leadership includes practice that focuses on the internal states of organizational members as well as addressing instructional leadership (p. 225). The need for transformational leaders in a culture of outcomes based learning is still pervasive. The school administrator's attention to school culture is important for the promotion of school improvement (p. 231). School ethos and high expectation for faculty are considered integral to effective transformational and instructional leadership strategies (p.246). Shared leadership and the distribution of leadership responsibilities extended trust and fosters a more highly personalized and enriched curriculum (p. 249). Day, Gu and Sammons state, "The work of successful principals is intuitive, knowledge informed and strategic. Successful principals build cultures that promote both staff and student engagement in learning" (p. 253).

Fullan (2004) reports that solutions to developing and sustaining effective school leaders require a systems approach to school reform and a practical strategy to engage new concepts with an action plan. Fullan (2004) illuminates the "new theoreticians" as people working on real problems and solutions at the school level. His discussions include the concept of the different challenges faced by school leaders. Adaptive challenges are those issues that have solutions outside of the normal and tried methods of operation while technical problems can be solved within the context of that which is currently happening in schools. He lists eight elements of leadership which may influence sustainability of new ideas and solutions. They are completing public service with a moral purpose, creating a commitment to changing context at all levels, developing the lateral capacity and building solidarity through networks, incepting intelligent accountability and vertical relationships, crafting a culture for deep learning to take place, having a dual commitment to short-term and long-term results, ensuring cyclical energizing for all and the applying long lever of leadership (Fullan, 2005).

## Method

Using a case study design, the purpose of this study was to answer “what are the key factors that have sustained responsible inclusion for the school?”.

### Study Group

In order to avoid the possibility of teachers perceiving coercion by administrators, a statement was included in the consent form that outlined the voluntary nature of participation in the focus groups. The groups were comprised of educators who had more extensive experience with inclusionary practices and those who did not. The representative sample included six general educators, two special educators, one executive coach, one education specialist, two special education paraprofessionals, one speech-language pathologist, and one administrator.

### Instruments and Process

Each of the focus group sessions were approximately one hour in duration. Each group was asked the same questions which promoted dialogue and reflection and maintained reliability and validity. The research literature on sustainability of school reform guided the researchers on the development of questions asked in the focus interviews. The questions were given to practicing school leaders for their review and suggestions from administrators were used to edit the questions. The focus group questions are included in table 1.

**Table 1**

**Focus Group Questions**

What is the history of inclusionary practices in the school?
How did the school decide to become inclusive?
Who were the original planners and “change agents” and are they still part of the school today?
How were decisions made about inclusion?
How were parents part of the planning process?
What kind of training and consultation were provided to teachers and staff and is that professional development still ongoing?
What types of problem solving mechanisms are available to staff?
Do you have co-teaching and how is it maintained in the school?
How do you as a leader sustain your school’s inclusion initiative?
How do you maintain energy and renewal for yourself to sustain your focus on all learners?
How do you incorporate the need to improve reading and math scores with inclusive practices?

All of the focus group sessions were audio recorded and transcripts were typed by a research assistant from the University of Scranton. Following each of the focus group sessions, a summary form was completed by each of the researchers who managed the focus group. The summary form included details

about the locations and time schedules of the interviews, information on the educators who participated in the sessions, and descriptions of the content and emerging themes. The summary form was completed in a timely manner after the sessions were concluded and were then attached to the transcripts.

### Themes

Data gathered from the focus group interviews was analyzed by each of the researchers through an independent coding and theme identification process. Through robust discussions among the researchers, the following themes were revealed: public service with a moral purpose, culture and commitment, data-driven decision making, leadership qualities, and best practices. Please see Tables 2 through 6 for reference to themes, categories, and subcategories.

### Public Service with a Moral Purpose

The first theme was identified as public service with a moral purpose. This theme includes the establishment of a caring learning community involving all constituents (educators, school personnel, parents, students, community members) within the public school setting. The vision of this theme involves the guiding principle of teaching all children from the heart. Educators and staff have a moral obligation to provide the necessary tools for all students to be successful in school. All constituents have an equal responsibility for student success. Special and general education students are the shared responsibility of all service providers.

**Table 2**  
**Theme: Public Service with a Moral Purpose**

Theme	Categories	Subcategories
Public Service with a Moral Purpose	Student Centered Focus	That which happens has a great effect on students
	Heart Centered Vision	Teachers instruct children from the heart
	Inclusive Philosophy	Educators need to provide the necessary tools for all students to be successful in school
	Moral Obligation	Educators have an obligation to all students that supersedes legality. All students receive excellent and appropriate services regardless of whether or not they have an IEP.
	Student Responsibility and Reflective Practice	Students take ownership of their learning. They learn to make life choices and to self-advocate.
	Professional Development	All service providers, including paraprofessionals receive substantive and ongoing professional development



## Culture and Commitment

A collaborative culture where professionals share strategies and communicate in a natural, positive manner about the progress and successes of all students is pivotal in the theme of culture and commitment. Helping students to understand their strengths and needs while becoming thinkers, problem solvers and self-sufficient learners is a strategic aspect of a collaborative culture. In this culture, educators empower children to become all that they are created to be. Through courageous conversations, educators facilitate a positive community for all stakeholders. A collaborative culture is driven by a philosophy that includes sharing strategies to promote student success. Through shared responsibility, strong leadership, and the development of equal partnerships, all teachers are responsible for the success of all students. There is a pervasive culture of collaborative communication among school staff in which teachers are ambassadors and a voice for the program. Faculty and staff dedication helps to keep the program vital, although educators know that there will be both successes and failures. Teachers focus on student progress and empower students to become thinkers, problem solvers and self-sufficient learners by assisting students to better understand their strengths and learning needs.

**Table 3**  
**Theme: Culture and Commitment**

Theme	Categories	Subcategories
Culture and Commitment	Collaborative	There is a collaborative culture
		Teachers and stakeholders practice sharing strategies.
	Ambassadors	Teachers are ambassadors and a voice for the program.
	Communication	There is a pervasive culture of natural communication among school staff.
	Dedication and Intensity	All faculty and staff are dedicated to the success of the program.
	Leadership	Strong and effective leadership is key to the success of the program.
	Focus on Student Progress	There is a need for all students to be more successful.
	Shared Responsibility/Equal Partnership	Stakeholders take equal responsibility for special education students.
	Empowering Thinking Children	All stakeholders are assisting students to understand their challenges and become thinkers/problem solvers/self-sufficient.
	Staff Keep it Alive	The staff realize full inclusion is a process and will have successes and failures.
	Proactive Pre-Teaching	There is movement away from re-teaching to pre-teaching; resetting the student so that he/she can learn successfully.

## Data Driven Decision Making

The theme data-driven decision-making is defined as the practice of collecting and reporting out on data. Data drives teaching practices, including co-teaching. An ongoing process of assessment enables teachers to reflect on grouping strategies and make adjustments. In the collection and reporting process, the principal makes presentations to the teachers and data is analyzed by a team. The teachers present at the board of education meeting to appeal for financial resources to support effective practices. Data team meetings provide staff with an opportunity to participate in the decision-making process whereby individual student achievement is analyzed. In a collaborative co-teaching environment, data-driven decision-making involves everyone on the team, including administrators, teachers, the school board, parents, paraprofessionals, and the student making adjustments to the curriculum and instruction based on the data that has been collected. Teachers and principals collect and analyze data through data-team meetings where all school staff has a choice and a voice in the process. After an initial presentation from the principal and a completed analysis by the data team, the teachers present at school board meetings to appeal for additional money in support of resources needed to drive student progress. The data drives the co-teaching practices, as teachers reflect on and make changes in an ongoing process in the classroom. Teachers make formative assessments and create instructional adjustments based on individual needs.

**Table 4**  
**Theme: Data-Driven Decision Making**

Theme	Categories	Subcategories
Data-Driven Decision Making	Collect Data and Report Out	Teachers collect data
		The principal makes a presentation to teachers – the team analyzes the data.
		The teachers present at the board of education and appeal for financial support to what has been effective.
	Data Team Meetings	The meetings provide school staff with choice and voice.
	Individualized Decision Making Process	Each child’s data results are analyzed.
	Data Drives Practice	The data drives the co-teaching practices.
Educators reflect on and change grouping strategies.		
The process is ongoing.		

## Leadership Qualities

Effective leadership that empowers teachers and staff is another theme that emerged in the transcripts. Professional development communities are established to encourage buy-in from school personnel. The school

administrators provide resources to all educators and staff in order to promote equal education for all children. The school leader values her staff and acknowledges their ideas as well as their strengths. Resources such as co-planning time and financial support are provided in order for the educational program to be successful.

**Table 5**  
**Theme: Leadership Qualities**

Theme	Categories	Subcategories
Leadership Qualities	Empowering Teachers	The process uses teachers in a collaborative way so that the principal can get input and make decisions.
		The process energizes the school staff.
		The process makes school staff feel valued.
		Empowerment acknowledges the knowledge and abilities of staff.
		The process is a give and take process between collaborators.
		Empowerment encourages leadership through professional development opportunities.
	Decision Making	The principal must occasionally make the hard decisions - i.e., "this is how it's going to be"
	Promotes "Buy-In"	The principal encourages school staff willingness - i.e., "a reason or relationship".
	Providing Resources	All teachers receive resources including general and special education teachers.
		Professional development for general education teachers on special needs services and strategies.
	Scheduling Time to Collaborate/Co-Plan	Many models are reviewed.
		Time for co-planning is deliberate and built into the schedule.
		The schedule becomes more fluid.
	Promotes Range of Options	There are many delivery options.

### Co-Teaching and Community Involvement

The best practices identified in the research study were co-teaching and strong and effective parent-school relationships. Co-teaching is based on co-ownership of the classroom between the educators responsible for instruction and assessment. Collaboratively developing an IEP based on the academic and common-core standards is a salient element of best practices. Administrative

input into developing a schedule which allows teachers to have co-planning time is essential. Through mutual respect and collegial participation, co-teachers learn to work well together to foster a passionate attitude toward their students. Part of the school culture is the development of strong parent-school relationships which enable the constituents to share strategies that foster student success. Parents talking to teachers and teachers talking to parents create a child-first philosophy where the “students’ faces drive the process”. The focus is on continuous development of student strengths and the efficient delivery of related services, which helps every child to reach his or her highest potential.

**Table 6**  
**Theme: Co-Teaching and Community Involvement**

Theme	Categories	Subcategories
Co-Teaching and Community Involvement	Co-Teaching	Co-teachers work well together.
		The teachers are passionate.
		Building a reasonable schedule allows for co-planning time.
		Embedding IEP goals into the general education curriculum is a key component.
		The teachers have co-ownership of the classroom.
		Standards-Based/Common Core
	Parent-School Relationships	This collaboration makes a difference for a school.
		Sharing strategies, talking, and decision making is part of the process.
	Child First	The students’ faces drive the process.
	Related Services	All stakeholders are not focusing only on student challenges but become familiar with the aligned curriculum.

## Conclusion

The data that was analyzed from the focus groups revealed the five identified themes which enhance the sustainability of inclusionary practices in an elementary school setting: (1) Public Service with a Moral Purpose, (2) Culture and Commitment, (3) Data-Driven Decision Making, (4) Leadership Qualities and (5) Co-Teaching and Community Involvement. The stakeholders in this culture that is designed to promote inclusion have successfully implemented the concepts and practices identified in the themes. This case study provides an exemplary model for school leaders to implement and sustain responsible inclusionary practices.

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