Leadership for Inclusion and Inclusive School Leadership

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The educational landscape in Ireland is changing at a rapid rate with an influx of pupils from different faiths, cultures and an increase of children with additional needs attending mainstream schools. In particular, special education has experienced a number of changes and reforms in recent times. With these changes comes the need for school principals to be proactive and innovative in developing their own leadership skills to respond to the rapidly changing landscape.

inclusion   principal   leadership   autism   autism class   primary schools

1. Introduction

While reviewing the literature, it becomes evident that there is no unanimous agreement on a definitive definition in the quest for the ideal inclusive leadership style or competency. Nevertheless, the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCPRD) emphasises that at the heart of inclusive education lies "the committed leadership of educational institutions," which is crucial for introducing and ingraining the culture, policies, and practices necessary to achieve inclusive education at all levels [1] (p. 4). The relationship between student outcomes or attainment is clearly linked to leadership [2]. Given that school principals have an impact on student outcomes [3] it stands to reason that gaining an insight into the experiences, perspectives and perceptions of the principal will support the inclusion of autistic pupils [4].

2. Leadership for Inclusion in an Irish Context

Murphy [5] contends that more research is needed within the realm of inclusive leadership in Ireland in order to support its increasing diversity and to sustain leadership in the long-term. Ireland's approach to special educational needs in the past was a system whereby general education and special education developed simultaneously but parallel to one another [6][7]. The importance of the principal in the enactment of inclusive pedagogy in Irish schools is clear [8]. Research has found that Irish principals "demonstrated a clear commitment to inclusive education … in their schools" [9] (p. 1002). Principals play a pivotal role in ensuring resources are used prudently to support all students [10]. Shevlin and Banks [7] reviewed the current model of special education provision. They suggest that a different model may be in place in the future. This highlights the importance for Irish principals in the development of a framework for inclusive leadership that can adapt to any changes necessary to ensure pupils are supported in the best way possible.

3. Language of Inclusive Leadership

A discrepancy that arises from the literature is the phraseology of inclusive leadership versus leading for inclusion. While the interchange of the wording appears simplistic and unremarkable, the phrases denote different ideals. Are principals leading in an inclusive manner or is their leadership leading to inclusion? It could be argued that the result is the same, although the process differs. This differential may be evident within the skills used by the principal in their leadership. The language used to define the skills employed by a leader to carry out their duties varies within the literature. Cobb [11] likens the work of a principal to that of a Shakespearean actor who performs as required for a given audience. The skills needed by principals and leaders can be framed within "domains" [11] [12]. This term is indicative of ownership or a territorial expression suggesting that leadership is an absolute. This idea of singularity negates the idea of shared leadership as central to the running of any school [12]. Óskarsdóttir, Donnelly [13] use the term "models of leadership" (p. 527) in reference to inclusive leadership. This terminology denotes the idea of modelling a standard for leadership that can be imitated by others. The idea proposed emerges from a review of a variety of different leadership models and focuses on those best suited to support inclusion. Competencies is another term visible within the literature to describe the skills used by a leader to enact their leadership. Competencies can be defined as a person's ability to do something well or effectively [14]. While the term is certainly apt for what researchers hope leaders strive for, what is less clear is how inclusion is achieved. Inclusive schools are described as needing "input variables" and "essential processes" to operate [15] (p. 1351). When looking towards inclusive leadership researchers need to explore the competencies and leadership styles that best promote this type of leadership.

4. Roles That Principals Play When Leading for Inclusion

When identifying the role of the leader within the research researchers must first look to what is specifically required of a leader to undertake within the area of inclusion. Fitzgerald [16] discusses the role of the principal within the framework of the Inclusion of Students with Special Educational Needs Guidelines [17]. Long [18] discusses leadership as a key factor in the provision of an inclusive education. Much of the literature speaks to leadership as being central to inclusive education [19]. Cobb [11] states that the work which principals do in relation to special education is "crucial" (p. 221). Within the literature, the roles and responsibilities that the principal must undertake are vast and it can be difficult to countenance a specific list. Five roles that emerged from the meta-analysis of inclusive leadership literature for inclusive program delivery within these domains are those of: visionary, advocate, innovator, interpreter and organizer [11] (p. 221). Fitzgerald [19] outlines key positions that a leader must assume within the school: "arbiter, rescue[r], auditor, collaborator and expert" [19] (p. 454). Cobb [11] suggests that within the area of staff collaboration, the principal must take on the roles of "visionary, partner, coach, conflict resolver and organizer." [11] (p. 223). Under the domain of parental engagement, Cobb [11] identified three principal roles: partner, interpreter and organizer (p. 227). Kinsella [15] contends that there are five core processes of inclusion: communication, consultation, collaboration, co-ordination and collaborative enquiry. Given the wide-ranging tasks associated with leading for inclusion and in an effort to identify the most common roles within the research, the results are tabulated in the **Table 1** from a number of recent research studies.

Table 1. Roles principals play according to the literature.

	Inclusive Programme Delivery. Cobb (2015) [11]	Staff Collaboration. Cobb (2015) [11]	Parental Engagement. Cobb (2015) [11]	SENCO1 Role in Post-Primary Schools in Ireland. Fitzgerald (2017) [19]	Organising Inclusive Schools. Kinsella (2020) [15]	SENCO & Principal's Experiences. Fitzgerald and Radford (2020) [9]
Visionary	✓	✓		✓		
Partner/Collaborator/mentor		✓		✓	✓	✓
Coach		✓				✓
Conflict resolver/Arbiter		✓	✓	✓		
Advocate	✓					
Interpreter	✓		✓			
Organiser/coordinator	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Consulter					✓	
Communicator					✓	
Rescuer				✓		
Expert				✓		✓

The most common role identified across a variety of literature was principal as organizer/coordinator. Kinsella [15] contends that the organizational psychology paradigm is key to organizing inclusive schools. Within this paradigm the principal can be identified as the organizer of the program used for inclusive delivery. They organize how the school develops special education delivery within their context. The principal organizes the resources, timetabling and programs of staff professional development. They organize and carry out staff recruitment and foster staff teamwork through reflection and collaboration [9]. They assist parents by organizing supports and responding to the needs of the given cohort of children at any one time [11]. Fitzgerald [19] agrees that principals are responsible for organizing staff development and improvements in pedagogy. The identification of the organizer as a key role of the principal in inclusive education must be considered when developing a framework for inclusive leadership within the sector.

Another role that appears commonly across the literature is that of principal as partner/collaborator/mentor. This describes the principal as an intermediary for parents and the services or government departments, to decipher and understand how to access the services that their child may need. Having examined the most common roles for inclusive leadership, it is necessary to review what current models of inclusive leadership exist in current practice.

5. Defining a Model of Inclusive School Leadership

Models of leadership are used to describe leadership practices rather than specific roles. They attempt to conceptualize or define leadership through particular characteristics or their utilization within leadership. Three key leadership styles are purported to be the most appropriate for the inclusive school namely transformational leadership, distributed leadership and instructional leadership [13].

6. Transformational Leadership

Transformational leadership as a style emerges frequently within the leadership for inclusion research [2][13][20]. This type of leadership is traditionally associated with the ability to affect change and innovation by impacting people and cultures within schools [21][22]. This type of leadership may be important for a school leader who is trying to influence a change of culture within a school such as developing an inclusive culture. Woodcock and Hardy [23] describe inclusion as a *re-culturing* process which looks to change the values of the school. This cultural change affects how teachers see their work and their pupils [24]. A leader must firstly identify their own vision and apply this to a vision for the school and its community. This is akin to the idea that leadership is a practice in influencing others to follow the path to a shared goal [25].

A principal who wants to change and develop a school culture needs a strong background of professional development and experience, in order to justify what many may not believe in. It is this bravery that will make the difference and transform a school over time to best serve its pupils [26].

7. Distributed Leadership

Distributed leadership has been considered the "gold standard" of school leadership and has grown in popularity in recent years [27]. While there is a lack of consensus as to a definition of distributed leadership [28], in this instance it may be understood as an idea for sharing workload and responsibilities [29]. It is claimed in research that distributed leadership is the "default leadership response implemented by schools to manage increased pressure", for example during the COVID 19 pandemic crisis [28] (p. 388). Spillane [30] cautions that distributed leadership is not just the sum of its characteristics, but also the result of the interactions between people and their situations. Jones and Harris [31] further this point by connecting the development of social capital and distributed leadership. This leadership type proffers that every member of the school is a leader in their own right Óskarsdóttir, Donnelly [13]. This can have a positive impact on student achievement and teacher job satisfaction [32]. It concentrates on expertise and not position reflecting schools as professional organizations where the knowledge base is wide [33]. The shared responsibility within a school increases the prospect of investment from staff and may increase the likelihood that an inclusive culture could be formed within a school. Hickey, Flaherty [28] found that there is ambiguity around the understanding of the sharing of leadership amongst staff. Distributed leadership can be misjudged or oversimplified as dividing out the work or delegation of simpler tasks where leaders may be perceived by staff as not carrying out their role to the full extent [34].

The lack of empirical evidence of the impact and effectiveness on educational outcomes from distributed leadership may be considered as one of this model's weaknesses [30]. However, if this model is encouraged by the principal, it would allow for leadership development within staff [32]. They will become leaders in their own professional journey and a culture of collaborative professional learning and development can ensue [13][33].

8. Instructional Leadership

This model of school leadership emphasizes the importance of curriculum through goal setting and evaluation of teaching and learning [13][35]. Much of the research shows that the most effective way to improve learner experience is to improve teachers' pedagogy [36]. Instructional leaders do this by putting the structures in place to allow teachers to improve their practice through collaboration and innovation [22][37]. A challenge for many principals is that they want to be instructional leaders but are overwhelmed by their administrative responsibilities [38]. There is a danger that they may be viewed by teachers as imposing ideas unless teachers are a key part of the process. Collaboration and the leaders' role in facilitating it, is seen as a key attribute of the instructional leader [2]. Positive collaboration can lead to improvements in teaching such as the use of the Individualized Educational Plan (IEP) with pupils and therefore impacts on learner experience [2]. As an instructional leader the principal needs a strong background in pedagogy themselves, so that they may have a thorough understanding of the curriculum. They have high expectations for all students including those with additional needs [39].

9. Combining Models of Leadership

While leaders themselves would identify that they may have a dominant leadership style, this style may vary depending on the situation [40]. Variance in the employment of different styles can be seen in the literature. While various styles were identified, no particular style was highlighted as being more inclusive than any other. What appears to be more commonly evident, is the idea of combining styles of leadership in order to better implement inclusive education [2]. Óskarsdóttir, Donnelly [13] has considered an Inclusive leadership style which combines the previously mentioned three styles and highlights how these co-exist with three necessary practices for leadership: building a vision, human development and organizational development. The idea of organizational development as a key practice reflects the previous literature that identified it as an integral role and responsibility of the principal for inclusive leadership. Setting direction speaks to the idea of culture and developing the inclusive culture of a school for its community. Human development speaks to developing the human resource capital within the school through professional development and organizational systems. It is clear to see from this vision of inclusive leadership that a variety of skills is required to carry out the myriad of tasks involved.

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