MDDE631 Assignment 2:

Argument Paper: Foundations of Inclusive Leadership

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Around the world, educational institutions are striving to become more inclusive for all students (McGhie-Richmond, Irvine, Loreman, Cizman, & Lupart, 2013). The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) (as cited in McGhie-Richmond et al., 2013) highlights the importance of inclusive education in its statement that “inclusive education is . . . central to the achievement of high-quality education for all learners and the development of more inclusive societies” (p. 226). As such, educational institutions are making changes to many of their practices in order to create more inclusive environments.

The following paper investigates one particular case in regards to inclusion in an educational environment. It begins with the case study of a middle school, followed by a critique of the situation. Lastly, the context of the case study is considered and strategies are suggested to improve inclusion at the middle school in two sections: teaching and learning strategies, and attitudes in the educational environment.

**Case Study**

        G.H. Middle School (GHMS) is a dual-track (French immersion and English) school located in Penticton, British Columbia, which serves families from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds. In the current school year, 2016-2017, 560 students are attending GHMS and the school has 24 teachers, which includes two learning assistant teachers and a librarian. There is also one counsellor, two administrators, and nine educational assistants (EAs).

        Approximately ten percent of students (*n* = 53*)* at GHMS have special designations that require the student to have an individual education plan (IEP). These designations include learning, physical, intellectual, and behavioral disabilities, as well as autism spectrum disorder. Five teachers are faced with classes that go over the provincially set limit of four students with special designations per class and four more classes are at the limit. While a variety of supports are available to teachers, it is ultimately their responsibility to develop and sustain inclusive environments in their classrooms.

        The school’s goal is to create and support meaningful and authentic learning experiences and social interactions for all of their students. The school strives to minimize pull-out programs for remediation purposes of students with special designations. Several supports from the provincial, district, and school levels are available to aid teachers in implementing inclusive practices in their classrooms: individual education plans are developed for each student with a special designation; EAs are available to provide one-to-one or one-to-many student support; the learning assistance teachers are very knowledgeable in inclusive practices and work closely with classroom teachers; laptops and other adaptive technology is available on loan to students with designations from SETBC (www.setbc.org); and, GHMS has a technology support teacher (0.125FTE) to aid in setting up and maintaining technology for individual students with designations as well as whole-class technology initiatives that aid both students with designations and the entire class. The philosophy of inclusion is accepted by the majority of teachers and staff at the school. Students with designations are integrated into most regular classes, though there are still some pull-out remedial classes. Many teachers are working hard to adapt their classrooms and teaching to include all students.

        Although GHMS has many supports in place to aid with inclusive practices and the school is successfully including all students in several ways, there remains numerous areas in need of considerable improvement. Many students with designations struggle to have meaningful interactions with their peers and are often left out or ignored. For example, these students are repeatedly the last to be chosen by their peers when students are given a choice of who to work with. The learning experiences offered in classes are not always authentic or meaningful for students with designations and the expectations of these students are often unclear. For example, the portions of learning activities that involve higher order thinking skills may simply be removed for that student. Finally, the support of the EAs is seldom used to its fullest potential. Despite the inadequate amount of EA time available in the school, it is not uncommon to see EAs uninvolved in aiding student learning.

**Critical Analysis**

**Critique of the Situation**

The learning and social environment at GHMS is indicative of many other schooling environments for students requiring special accommodations or modifications to their learning.  While there are numerous examples of supports available to teachers to ensure the equitable and successful teaching of students with special designations, there are nevertheless many areas which require improvement.  First, interactions between students with special designations and their peers are often negative and as a result, do not foster learning and inclusive education for the school community as a whole.   For example, there is often discontent by peers when they are put into groups with special-accommodations students, as they often feel that these students slow the pace of their group work. Furthermore, students with special designations often do not intermingle with their peers during recess or lunch times, as they are not always accepted by their peers.  As a result, these students may go to the learning assistance room or find a spot to be by themselves or spend time on technology instead of interacting with their peers.  According to Ryan (2006b), students are often excluded when they are “physically absent” but also when they have “difficulty in gaining entry to a school’s various activities, experiences, and knowledge even when they are physically present” (p. 20).  This problem might be exacerbated by the fact that many times, students with disabilities are grouped together in classes to allow the Educational Assistant (EA) to work with groups of students requiring additional support at the same time, limiting their interactions with peers in the process.  To combat this issue of devaluing the social interaction between students with special designations and their peers, it is important that “the marginalized…be empowered so that they will be able to gain confidence” and develop their participation and collaboration skills (Ryan, 2006b, p. 7).

A second area requiring additional support includes learning experiences not being authentic and meaningful for students with special designations, accompanied by often unclear learning expectations.  As witnessed at GHMS and often in other educational avenues, students with special designations often do not learn to their fullest potential due to low and unclear expectations from teachers.  Although “sufficiently trained teaching staff [are] necessary to manage students with diverse educational needs” (Moreno et al., 2015, p. 108), there is nevertheless a lack of training and preparedness of teachers in adjusting learning activities and expectations.  This may be partially due to a lack of resources and knowledgeable staff, in addition pushback from educators due to the additional work perceived to relate to modifying curriculum for students with diverse needs.  In order to combat this issue of non-authentic learning experiences and unclear expectations being utilized for students with diverse learning needs, solutions are being implemented at GHMS and could similarly be enacted in other educational areas as well.  For example, class assessments are being completed with learning assistance teachers, where the strengths and weaknesses of classrooms are highlighted to develop a plan for better integration of all students.  Additionally, since “schools need to provide opportunities for people to be able to communicate effectively” for “everyone to be meaningfully included” (Ryan, 2006b, p. 11), co-teaching with learning assistance teachers rather than pull-out programs has been implemented in conjunction with classroom teachers with success.

A third area of improvement includes the need to ensure EAs are being utilized effectively in the classroom to support the learning of students with special designations.  Currently at GHMS, EAs are not always being utilized to their fullest potential, as they are often seen waiting for instructions and not engaging effectively with students who require their support.  This lack of direction in supporting student engagement, as witnessed in many other school districts, may result from several factors including inadequate training, a lack of autonomy or drive, as well as a lack of time to collaborate with classroom and learning assistance teachers regarding the accommodations required to support students with diverse learning needs.  Some current solutions that are being utilized to combat this issue include teachers working collaboratively with EAs by providing them with a teacher’s desk and working area in the classroom, and providing additional training for teachers and EAs to promote collaboration.  In this regard, as highlighted by Moreno et al. (2015), “future teacher training programs should encourage more positive behaviors towards integrating disadvantaged students, who present disabilities and a greater need of support” (p. 108).

**Practical Strategies in the Teaching and Learning Environment**

Ryan (2006a) points out that “teacher leadership can be formal or informal” (p. 67) in that leadership by teachers who work at the school can either be exemplified within formal positions and roles, or within more informal capacities.  Examples of informal leadership would include volunteer work, activities outside of the normal work day hours or developing improvements in the workplace without being asked.  Formal leadership would be leadership within orchestrated roles and during work-related activities.   Both categories of leadership can be seen essential within the broader umbrella of teacher leadership.

At GHMS, teachers and EAs should be encouraged to pursue informal leadership activities, and be actively praised when they do so.  Without the pressure of being “forced” into doing extra work, an inclusive working and teaching environment can be created which builds on teachers’ own interests.  As a result, students at GHMS would feel the genuine involvement of their teachers because they would be choosing the activities with which they would get involved with.  It is quite easy for students to note the differences between the teachers that “punch the clock” versus the ones that open up and dedicate themselves to the school, especially towards areas that they are passionate about.  “Teachers are not always keen to participate in decisions that do not directly concern them” (Ryan, 2006a, p. 68), so by involving teachers in areas that are already of interest to them, their efforts will be sustained.  This is where many solutions will come from, so soliciting all stakeholders is important.  Empowering the EAs in particular, to speak up and be part of working groups to develop solutions will lead to an environment where everyone feels validated and worthwhile.

Ryan (2006a) cautions us that “for teacher leadership to succeed, teachers and administrators need to approach changes with certain kinds of attitudes, or it will be difficult, if not impossible, for them to cope with substantial change” (p. 71).  In the case of GHMS, the mindset and mandate of both teachers and administration must be towards inclusive practices that benefit all students, and not just those that have necessary accommodations.  The segregation practice of taking students aside for additional help can actually work against those with disabilities by ostracizing them from their peers.  Lowering the bar in some cases so that students can succeed, has the potential to further complicate their social interactions and worsen the inauthenticity of their experiences.  The focus from both teachers and administration must be on levelling the playing field, rather than making changes to manage those with challenges; only then can an inclusive teaching and learning environment be created.

Professional development also plays a central role in bringing awareness and instituting positive change.  Ryan (2006a) states that professional development courses “that are locally run and directly relevant to real situations seem to offer teachers and administrators the most useful knowledge” (p. 73) so ideally, these courses should be created at the local level.  Specific in-services involving administration, EAs and teachers can see a huge impact for the students at GHMS.

Moreover, the modelling of leadership behaviours is important within the school environment, but student leadership is also extremely important.  Ryan (2006a) points out that “students are having more say in the actual running of schools and in the curriculum and how it is taught” (p. 78).  It is important to not forget the student body when making decisions, as they can be consulted both in identifying issues but also in creating solutions.  This necessitates a humble and patient administration, to listen to those students who feel they are being disadvantaged but also leadership who are open to student suggestions for solutions.  “Students have valuable knowledge of classrooms and school processes that can be used to make schools better places” (Ryan, 2006a, p. 79) and at GHMS, if the student body can be mobilized to contribute to the process of change, unbelievable things can take place.

**Attitudes in the Workplace and Educational Environment**

While it is clear that GHMS is striving for inclusion and most of the staff are willing and ready to adopt an inclusive setting, there are still issues that are taking place with the inclusion of all in education.  Whether it be with students not being ready to include their peers, or EAs not working with the students who need assistance in the classroom, this theme can be seen across education and throughout many other workplaces.  Society does not want to believe it or pretends that we are taking steps in the right direction toward eliminating this issue of exclusion.

        The leaders of many companies and even government bodies enact rules and regulations which state that inclusion in the workplace should be a common practice and that everyone should be on a level playing field.  However, Cepin and Naimi (2015) have shown that while these initiatives are being put in place, they are not always being done with pure intentions, but rather to show the world that they are doing it.  The importance of regarding each person as an individual and not necessarily changing the rules for them, but adjusting a workplace for them, is being used as a tool to demonstrate global supremacy in fields of work (Cepin & Naimi, 2015).

        If a school such as GHMS is going to be successful in becoming an inclusive school and ensures that all staff and students are buying into the philosophy of inclusion, there needs to be a formal plan of action initiated at the highest levels of education that is genuine.  It is necessary for the Ministry of Education in this case to not only put the initiative in place, but also to provide training and assist in the implementation to assure that it will be successful (Cepin & Naimi, 2015).  By providing a framework that has been examined and thought through, schools such as GHMS will not only have a goal to become more inclusive, but will have a means to achieve this goal.

        Training also needs to be at the forefront of integrating an inclusive environment into any place of work, especially when trying to maximize student learning.  Boyle and Hernandez (2016) stated in a study in Chicago of nearly 80 school principals that 32% of them had not received any training with regards to special education and 10% had not received any inclusive practice training.  When considering an inclusive learning environment, principals are not necessarily the top of the hierarchy of learning but typically within each school, they are leading the way for the way their school incorporates different learning styles.  Research indicates that while most schools do have some sort of professional development in place for their staff to learn how to provide an inclusive learning environment for their students, this does not constitute 100% of schools and it is not necessarily a regular point of emphasis in staff development (Boyle & Hernandez, 2016).

        Another obstacle that some schools are facing with inclusive education is that not all staff members are committed to having the mindset that all students need to not only be treated equally, but provided with individual learning plans to best suit their educational needs (Boyle & Hernandez, 2016).  Changing this mindset can only be done through training and providing staff with appropriate plans and information.  These actions will allow the schools to change the overall outlook on inclusive education and access their major strength: the staff’s attitudes toward their practices (Boyle & Hernandez, 2016).

        The final barrier that should to be addressed with schools such as GHMS stressing the importance of an inclusive nature of education is funding for programs to accommodate all students.  Boyle and Hernandez (2016) state that many principals feel that their schools are not readily equipped to assist students with disabilities, which is a major issue.  This issue circles back to the fact that some educational institutions are stating that inclusion needs to be a part of all education.  However, these ideas can be seen as insincere if there is not funding or training put in place to provide the learning environment with assistance.

**Conclusion**

 Mullick, Deppeler, and Sharma (2012) describe inclusive education as a continuous process. This suggests that inclusion in any educational environment will never be perfectly achieved. The challenges that the stakeholders of GHMS face are common to educational institutions working towards more inclusive practices. The authors of this paper identified three major themes through which inclusion can be improved at GHMS: teacher attitudes towards inclusion; the involvement of all stakeholders in the decision-making and implementation of inclusive practices; and, professional development regarding inclusion. Even though GHMS already has many supports and policies in place in regards to inclusion, the strategies suggested throughout the paper offer concrete ways for GHMS to improve its practices and the attitudes of its stakeholders in order to move to deeper levels of inclusion.

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**Discussion Questions**

1. In your personal experience, have you encountered any instances of individuals with special needs being treated unfairly in the workplace or educational settings?  What was the response of the individual, or those around him/her who also witnessed this event?
2. The Canadian Human Rights Act states that the duty to accommodate an employee is mandatory, and only in instances of “undue hardship” is it not necessary. Within the educational realm, what instances could you foresee that meet this definition? **Source**: <http://www.chrc-ccdp.gc.ca/eng/content/duty-accommodate>
3. Have you ever experienced someone who has disabilities attempting to take advantage of accommodations/modifications that are put in place for them?  How did you respond to this?  What was the outcome of the situation?
4. One of the three areas of greatest concern for GHMS is the struggle for students with special needs to develop meaningful relationships with their peers. If students were primarily responsible for developing and implementing strategies for this to improve, how do you think their ideas would differ from those of the adult stakeholders?