

School Principals and Parents Who Achieve Optimum Results: Lessons Learned from Six North American Schools that have Implemented Inclusive Practices

Directores Escolares y Padres que Logran Resultados Óptimos: Lecciones Aprendidas de Seis Escuelas Norteamericanas que han Implementado Prácticas Inclusivas

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Inclusive education contributes to numerous benefits for students with and without disabilities, including enhanced academic achievement and relationships with peers. Strong and engaged site leadership and trusting family partnerships are two features that the Schoolwide Integrated Framework for Transformation (SWIFT) Center based at the University of Kansas, uses to help schools transform into fully inclusive schools. This manuscript describes findings from 11 focus groups conducted with parents of students with and without disabilities from six American schools recognized for their inclusive practices. The results of this study revealed several ways in which school principals and parents of students can partner to contribute to the life of schools and positive outcomes for all stakeholders.

Keywords: Inclusion, Leadership, Partnership, Parent, Principalship.

La educación inclusiva aporta numerosos beneficios a los alumnos con y sin discapacidades, incluyendo mejores logros académicos y relaciones con sus pares. Un liderazgo escolar fuerte y comprometido, además de alianzas y relaciones de confianza con las familias son dos características que el Centro SWIFT (*Schoolwide Integrated Framework for Transformation Center*) de la Universidad de Kansas, utiliza para ayudar a las escuelas a transformarse en establecimientos totalmente inclusivos. Este artículo describe los resultados de 11 grupos focales llevados a cabo con padres de alumnos con y sin discapacidades en seis escuelas norteamericanas, reconocidas por sus prácticas inclusivas. Los resultados de este estudio revelaron varias formas en que los directores y los padres de los alumnos de las escuelas pueden aliarse para contribuir a la vida escolar y a obtener resultados positivos para todas las partes involucradas.

Descriptores: Inclusión, Liderazgo, Colaboración, Padres, Dirección escolar.

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Introduction

Inclusive schools educate all students in learning environments that practice equity-based inclusion of all children, where every student is valued as a member of his or her neighborhood school and is provided the supports needed to achieve social and academic success (Sailor, 2014). Inclusive education has multiple benefits for students with and without disabilities including increased academic achievement and positive relationships (Cosier, Causton-Theoharis, & Theoharis, 2013; Cushing & Kennedy, 1997; Sermier Dessemontet & Bless, 2013). Research indicates that trusting parent-professional partnerships and strong and engaged school leadership enhance inclusive practices and stakeholder outcomes (Goddard, Tschannen-Moran, & Hoy, 2001; Sweetland & Hoy, 2000).

Trusting parent-professional partnerships occur when parents and such school professionals as teachers and principals respect and trust one another, rely and depend on one another, and engage in shared-decision making (Haines, McCart, & Turnbull, 2013). Parent-professional partnerships result in multiple benefits for students, including enhanced educational gains, academic and behavioral achievement, and increases in school attendance (Bryan & Henry, 2012; Giovacco-Johnson, 2009; Goddard et al., 2001; Lawson, 2003; Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Trusting partnerships also result in positive outcomes for educators, such as improved instruction (Haines et al., 2013), and for parents (e.g., satisfaction with child's school, enhanced parenting skills, improved social connections, reduction in stress; Blue-Banning, Summers, Frankland, Nelson, & Beegle, 2004; Burke & Hodapp, 2014; Haines et al., 2013; Hill & Taylor, 2004).

Despite these benefits, parent-professional partnerships are not often actualized in schools. This absence of partnership is often due to such barriers as parental distrust of professionals, a lack of information about partnerships and inclusion, and negative perceptions among school professionals regarding parents of students with disabilities (Blue-Banning et al., 2004; Cooper, Riehl, & Hasan 2010; Cullen, Gregory, & Noto, 2010; Hill & Taylor, 2004). These barriers are often exacerbated in inclusive schools when teachers lack professional development on parent-professional partnerships and effective teaching strategies for all learners (e.g., differentiation, co-teaching, universal design for learning; Cullen et al. 2010). Additionally, many parents are fearful that their children will not get the support they need in inclusive settings or will experience bullying (TASH, 2012). Trust and strong school leadership can mitigate many of these barriers and facilitate parent-professional partnerships in inclusive schools (Ainscow & Sandhill, 2010; Waldron & McLeskey, 2010).

Trust promotes cooperation and communication (Baier, 1986); whereas distrust leads to anxiety (Tschannen-Moran, 2014), deception, and attempts at control (Govier, 1997). Trust among school professionals and parents is essential to the advancement of the school and student well-being, especially when a school is undergoing transformation or using an innovative practice such as inclusion. The actions of administrative leaders (e.g., communicating positively, following through with commitments, creating inclusive policies) influences trust within a school staff and among school professionals and parents (Ainscow & Sandhill, 2010; Auerbach, 2010; Tschannen-Moran, 2001, 2014). Further, administrative leaders who engage staff in professional development

related to partnering with parents, establish expectations for partnership, and create opportunities for positive interactions increase the likelihood of trusting parent-professional partnerships (Tschannen-Moran, 2014). Strong and engaged site leadership and trusting family partnerships are two features that the Schoolwide Integrated Framework for Transformation (SWIFT) Center uses to help schools build effective and inclusive schools.

1. SWIFT Center

SWIFT Center is an American technical assistance center based at the University of Kansas that builds schools' capacity to provide academic and behavioral support to improve outcomes for all students aged five to fourteen years of age, including those with significant support needs, through equity-based inclusion (Sailor, McCart, Bezdek & Satter, 2014). SWIFT technical assistance efforts help schools to transform themselves in five domains: administrative leadership, multi-tiered system of support, integrated educational framework, family and community engagement, and inclusive policy structure and practice. Each domain is represented by two evidence-based features known to enhance student outcomes (see figure 1). Strong and engaged site leadership and trusting family-professional partnerships and are vital features of the larger domains *administrative leadership* and *family and community engagement*, respectively, that form the foundation SWIFT.

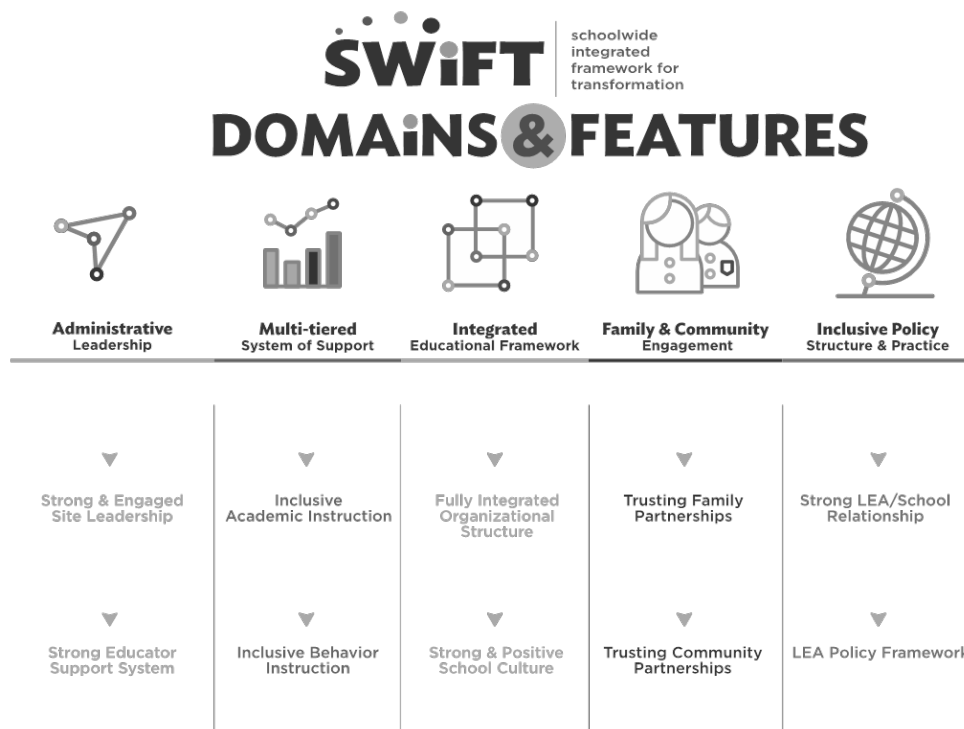


Figure 1. SWIFT domains and features

Source: Produced by the authors.

SWIFT Center asserts that strong and engaged site leadership occurs when school principals and leadership teams implement sustainable inclusive practices and continuously ensure teaching, learning, and shared decision-making (see www.swiftschools.org). The Center describes trusting family-professional partnerships as those that contribute to positive student outcomes and occur when (a) family members and school staff have respectful, mutually beneficial relationships with shared responsibility for student learning; (b) family members have options for meaningful involvement in their children's education and in the life of the school; and (c) the school responds to family interests and involvement in a culturally responsive manner. This manuscript examines the intersection of these SWIFT features by reporting the perspectives of parents of students with and without disabilities who attend six schools selected by the SWIFT Center for their inclusive practices. Specifically, we sought to answer two research questions: (a) what strategies or methods do school principals employ to create an inclusive school culture and (b) what are the implications of principals' actions and school culture on trusting parent-professional partnerships?

2. Method

SWIFT Center researchers engaged in appreciative inquiry research in six knowledge development site schools located in both urban and rural communities to inform the Center's technical assistance efforts (Shogren, McCart, Lyon, & Sailor, 2015). Members of SWIFT Center's National Leadership Consortium (a group of educational leaders and researchers from around the nation) nominated 37 schools and selected five elementary schools and one middle school to study for their exemplar practices related to one or more of SWIFT's features (including strong and engaged site leadership and trusting family-professional partnerships). These schools were located in five U.S. states (California, Florida, Massachusetts, Missouri, and Wisconsin).

2.1. Participants

SWIFT Center researchers from the family and community engagement team conducted 11 focus groups with parents of children attending the selected schools. Six of the groups consisted of parents of children with disabilities (e.g., learning disabilities, speech and language impairments, physical disabilities, intellectual and developmental disabilities) and five included parents considered by school administrators as "leaders" (e.g., parents who were involved in classroom-, school-, and/or district-level activities). The participants were overwhelmingly female (49 mothers and 9 fathers), and the size of the groups ranged from four to 12 participants. One focus group also included a Spanish-language translator for a parent whose first language was not English.

2.2. Data collection

Two researchers from the SWIFT Center Family and Community Engagement team conducted each of the 11 focus groups. Focus groups lasted an average of 1.5 hours. One researcher served as the primary facilitator by (a) obtaining informed consent from all participants, (b) explaining the nature of the research and leading introductions, and (c) using a focus group protocol with targeted questions and follow-up probing questions to guide group discussions. The focus group protocol included questions related to how school professionals created trusting family-professional partnerships (e.g., "Tell me

about your relationship with your child's teacher.”). The second researcher took field notes, ensured that the recording device was functioning appropriately, and monitored the time. All focus group audio recordings were transcribed to ensure accurate and rich raw data with which to begin the analysis.

2.3. Data analysis

Researchers from the family and community engagement team used the qualitative software Dedoose (2013) to assist in categorizing and organizing the professionally transcribed focus group data during the analysis phase. To begin the analysis, two members of the research team opened coded the same two transcripts to determine general categories to use in developing an initial codebook (Creswell, 2009). Once an initial codebook was established, the research team proceeded to use it to code additional transcripts, meeting frequently to discuss the transcripts and revise categories or add subcategories as needed to elucidate the codes and establish a final version of the codebook.

Next, two researchers from the team then used the final codebook to engage in axial coding of all transcripts. Through axial coding, researchers analyzed the focus group data using the final codebook, determining both the adequacy of the codes and conceptualization of the categories in relation to one another (Charmaz, 2006). In this stage, the central phenomenon or theme is identified and the researchers return to the data to gain insight into the specific categories that relate to or explain the central phenomenon or theme that emerged (Creswell, 2009).

3. Results

This qualitative study resulted in numerous findings related to factors that facilitated trusting parent-professional partnerships, including (a) school culture of inclusion (b) administrative leadership, (c) attributes of positive partnerships, (d) opportunities for family involvement, and (e) positive outcomes for all students (Francis, Blue-Banning, Turnbull, Haines, Gross, & Hill, in press). For the purpose of this manuscript, we focus on participants' perceptions of the ways in which school leadership, specifically, school principals, created a school culture where all families felt included. Our analysis indicated that although individual approaches differed, school principals used similar methods to create inclusive school cultures, which, in turn, created opportunities and motivation for parents to engage in parent-professional partnerships. In the next section we discuss (a) principals' roles in creating an inclusive school culture, (b) parents' transformative experiences, and (c) parents as partners in inclusive schools.

3.1. Principals' roles in creating an inclusive school culture

Participants across all groups used numerous positive terms to describe school culture including “supportive,” “community,” “valued,” “collaborative,” “welcoming,” “family,” “respect,” “wonderful,” “genuine,” “fun,” and “friendly.” Although participants warmly recalled many positive experiences with school teachers and staff, they spent a notable amount of time discussing the importance of the school principal in “setting the stage” for parent-professional partnerships to flourish. All participants felt that they knew and trusted the principal at their children's school. Participants also described feeling a deep connection to the school, feeling like everyone “belonged.” Principals across schools used numerous methods to create a sense of belonging by establishing an inclusive

culture within the schools, including (a) creating a welcoming presence in the school, (b) supporting events at the school, (c) identifying and addressing student and family needs, (d) maintaining high expectations and standards for school staff, and (e) distributing leadership among school professionals and parents.

3.1.1. Creating a welcoming presence in the school

Participants at one school described how approachable and “casual” the principal was, including the “relaxed” way in which the principal communicated and dressed (e.g., the principal typically wore khakis and sandals instead of a suit and tie). Participants from many schools indicated the importance of principals knowing the names of the students and parents and being “in the halls” (as opposed to in the office), which facilitated friendly and informal conversations. Many parents noted feeling initially surprised by the warmth and outgoing nature of the principals. Participants contrasted their experiences with the principals at their children’s current schools to negative experiences at other schools (e.g., parents felt that they were not respected, that the school did not care for their children), as well as their own experiences as students when the principal was viewed as a reserved disciplinarian who they saw only when they got in trouble.

3.1.2. Supporting events at the school

Participants across all schools also boasted about the “wonderful” school-sponsored events and activities that the principals supported for families and students to attend. Examples of the events and activities included parades, dances, flash mobs, family fun runs, back to school events, and concerts. Participants at one school described how the principal partnered with parents and the community to reenergize a school event to support literacy

We had horses, like miniature horses here... And the horses wear costumes (related to books)... and they (staff) read a story and the kids got to be part of the story with each little horse. And they would call up certain kids and then they all got to come by and pet the horses. One, you know, one person or a small group of people could not pull that off. That was absolutely a community involvement - parental involvement there too.

Principals not only supported these activities by helping with planning, organization, and fundraising, but they also attended all events, enthusiastically talking with parents, taking photos, and, oftentimes surprising parents and students with an amusing antic. For example, for the first day of classes after summer break at one school’s staff members dressed up in themed costumes to welcome back students and their parents.

3.1.3. Identifying and addressing student and parent needs

Participants also recalled ways principals identified and tackled the needs of family units (e.g., the needs of parents, students, siblings), such as addressing bullying promptly and effectively, providing such needed resources as transportation to school, and ensuring that the school was accessible to students with disabilities and/or students from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds. One principal was highly engaged in collaborating with parents and students to address community issues, including graffiti and diminishing public resources (i.e., community pool). Another principal of a school located in a rural community spearheaded an effort to collect food, backpacks, clothes,

coats, and other basic necessities for students and their families. Students could access these materials at the school throughout the year, as needed.

3.1.4. Maintaining high expectations and standards for school staff

Participants also discussed the importance of principals maintaining high expectations and standards for school staff, including demonstrated competency in teaching all learners (including those with disabilities or from varied linguistic/cultural backgrounds) as well as expectations for partnering with families and parental involvement in the education of the student. Principals across schools demonstrated expectations in varied ways, such as communicating through emails and newsletters, hiring the “right people,” and “letting people go that aren’t working out” or “who do not want to be here or should not be here.” These actions were important to participants because they could “see that there is actually change” when an educator is not meeting established expectations. On the other hand, principals also celebrated parents and school professionals for “coming through” by recognizing efforts and achievements through positive notes sent to family homes.

Although the methods varied, principals across all schools consistently modeled the standards and behaviors they expected of teachers and parents. All principals engaged in honest, frequent communication with school staff, parents, and students. They asked for help when they needed it and shared successes as well as struggles. They consistently made student-centered decisions designed to improve student outcomes and quality of life.

3.1.5. Distributing leadership among school professionals and parents

All principals also engaged in distributed leadership among school professionals and parents. Each school had a building leadership team facilitated by the principal and composed of teachers, school staff, parents, and other stakeholders (including related service providers such as occupational therapists). These teams met to analyze school-wide data and brainstorm approaches to build on strengths, address areas of concern (e.g., academic attainment, attendance, teacher/parent satisfaction), and enhance student outcomes.

Principals also extended leadership opportunities to parents through involvement in school committees that make decisions related to funding allocations, hiring new educators, selecting new curricula, and reviewing school policies. Principals also surveyed and held listening sessions with parents to gain input from individuals who could not or preferred not to formally join a committee. Principals, school professionals, and parents from some schools also attended school board meetings and other district- and state-wide legislative meetings together to advocate for policies they believed would benefit students. Finally, principals welcomed ad hoc suggestions and ideas from parents. One participant described how the principal at her child’s school reacted to ideas from parents, “Yes, yes, yes, if you can make it work, let’s do it.’... [The principal] helps guide to what the school most needs, but it’s never a shut down, ‘No, we don’t do that here.’” A principal from another school supported parent, community, and student-led initiatives by connecting them to appropriate resources and helping them navigate policy logistics associated with the school, district, or community. For example, one urban school had a pizza oven and community garden available to school professionals, students, and parents. All of these ideas were student or parent initiated and supported

by the principal. In conjunction with the multiple methods principals' used to create an inclusive school climate, participants strongly emphasized the positive impact that this warm, welcoming school climate had on their own engagement in their child's school.

3.2. Parents' transformative experiences

Multiple participants across groups compared their prior experiences at non-inclusive and non-supportive school environments to their current experiences at their child's present school. At prior schools, parents recalled uncomfortable, "scary," and even combative experiences with non-inclusive school administrators that involved formal "mediation situation(s) with a lawyer." One father described his experiences attempting to collaborate with his child's previous school principal and staff as a "super, super battle." This father recalled spending hours before meetings with school professionals researching state and federal laws to prepare "arguments" that he would use to advocate for "exactly what the kid needs as opposed to what the school can save money on."

These same parents described being "taken off guard" by the differences in school culture and parent-professional partnership at their children's current school. They described how the actions of school principals (described in the previous section) disarmed and relaxed parents who, in previous schools, felt they had to prepare to "battle" against the administration to ensure an appropriate education for their children. Participants described the difference in "spirit," "culture," and "philosophy" at Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings in their child's current school where parents were treated "as (the) expert" in their child instead of a burden to the teacher. These parents also discussed how, in contrast to the required "goal-oriented" nature of meetings at previous schools, the nature and content of meetings at current schools went "so much over and above...(what is required under) federal law." They perceived principals at their children's current schools as champions for their children, instead of adversaries. Although parents with negative prior experiences admitted initial difficulty "get(ting) out of mode of (an) adversarial," the actions of school principals and the resulting inclusive school culture, built trusting relationships, which, in turn, encouraged and motivated parents to engage in partnerships with school professionals.

3.3. Parents as partners in inclusive schools

As school principals established an inclusive school culture and cultivated opportunities for trusting parent-professional partnerships to occur, parents, subsequently, reciprocated by partnering with school staff and contributing to the education of their students as well as to the life of the school. Parents acted as partners in (a) educational decision-making, (b) school-home communication, (c) school leadership, and (d) supporting parent engagement in schools.

3.3.1. Partners in educational decision-making

Participants reported feeling "powerful" and able to make change at their children's school. One participant discussed how she contributed to her child's education by offering school staff "different strategies as a parent that I use (in the home)" that the staff could incorporate at school. The culture of "openness" and "acceptance" that principals created at the schools made parents feel safe asking questions, offering suggestions, conveying their opinions (including objections), and participating in shared decision-making with educators without feeling like the "bad" guy. For example, one

mother described a conversation she had with her child's teacher about the reasons why she did not want to complete nightly homework with her son:

I spend two hours...with my son at night, I'm not gonna do it arguing with him, and you know [the teachers] get that, and it's not a problem. They listen to me just as much as I listen to them.

3.3.2. *Partners in school-home communication*

Participants also communicated regularly with school staff about their children to give staff a "head's up" and help ensure student success at school. For example, participants described letting educators know if the child did not get much sleep the night before or if a supportive family member was out of town. Methods for communication varied across schools and among parents and staff at a given school. Participants emphasized that successful communication was frequent, consistent, honest, informal, and in a way that felt comfortable for both the parent and professional. For example, one participant whose first language was not English preferred writing back and forth in a home-school journal in place of phone or in-person conversations because "it's very easy to understand reading in English, so I don't have to deal with [spoken English] I don't understand by the phone."

3.3.3. *Partners in school leadership*

Participants also described how parents at the school capitalized on the principal's willingness to distribute leadership and support new initiatives, "But you can bring [the principal] ideas about programs, things that you want to do. . ." Participants described how "parents are playing an active role in the shaping of [school] programs" at their schools by sharing ideas, making suggestions and serving on committees and in leadership groups. One participant described the "welcoming and effective" culture of a school leadership committee that includes parents

I don't get the sense that other school site councils or even parent councils are as parent-driven I would say as our meetings are and I think that the role the parents play in this school is much stronger than it is in other schools where I get the sense that some of our other schools are much more authoritarian in nature in terms of the principal dictates what's going to happen or what's going to be discussed and those school site councils are not as influential I guess I would say.

Several participants who assumed leadership roles also discussed the ways in which they reached out to families who could not or chose not to assume active leadership roles in the school to ensure that they felt connected to the process and that their views were represented. Some participants also shared strategies for schools and parents to gain active participation from a greater number of parent leaders, "Don't set a high expectation of 'I need a hundred parents, I need all of this.' Start with the core group. If it's just five or six people, start with that group and then try to build from there..."

3.3.4. *Partners in supporting parent engagement in schools*

Participants also discussed the ways that they facilitated or supported other parents to be engaged in the school. Examples of providing support for parent engagement include (a) helping provide childcare for school activities so that parents with multiple children can attend, (b) providing childcare for non-school activities to support families (e.g., "allow[ing] parents to go Christmas shopping"), (c) notifying parents about upcoming meetings and events through phone calls and emails, (d) videotaping "meetings and a lot

of... (parent) workshops on the IEP process, special education rights and then...post[ing] [the videos] on Youtube so that parents can watch them on line,” (e) creating parent support groups, and (f) facilitating parent book clubs. Participants from several schools described versions of a “warm welcome team” designed to welcome new families to the school and community. Parent leaders from these teams matched “veteran” families from the school with families new to the school based on the age of the students. They encouraged veteran families to “reach out” to new families and invite them to meet for lunch or coffee and schedule student play dates. Participants from rural schools reported taking extra steps to drive to meet or pick up new families who lived outside of town and who did not have transportation, Internet, or mobile phone service to ensure that they were not excluded.

4. Discussion

Strong and engaged school leadership and trusting parent-professional partnerships enhance inclusive practices and stakeholder outcomes (Goddard et al., 2001; Sweetland & Hoy, 2000). This study investigated the perspectives of parents of children with and without disabilities in six U.S. schools, recognized for implementing inclusive practices, regarding the ways in which school leadership, specifically school principals, created an inclusive culture and how that influenced trusting parent-professional partnerships. table 1 summarizes the ways in which principals and parents built trusting partnerships and collaborated to contribute to the life of the school and positive stakeholder outcomes.

Table 1. Principal and parent partnership activities

| PRINCIPALS |
|--|
| Creating a warm and welcoming school culture and environment |
| Engaging in frequent, friendly, informal communication with families |
| Planning and participating in school-sponsored activities and events |
| Identifying and addressing family needs |
| Maintaining high expectations for school staff |
| Modeling and following through with expectations |
| Distributing leadership to school staff and parents |
| PARENTS |
| Participating in shared decision-making with educators regarding student education |
| Providing educators information and strategies about students |
| Bringing new ideals or initiatives to the principal |
| Initiating, participating, and/or leading school committees |
| Contributing time, knowledge, and/or skills to school-sponsored activities/events |
| Cultivating parent participation among peers and representing parent interests in through leadership roles |

Source: Produced by the authors.

Conducting research in schools across the U.S., selected by the SWIFT Center leadership for implementing exemplary practices related to one or more of SWIFT’s features (see table 1), allowed us to investigate how strong and engaged school leadership influenced school culture and trusting parent-professional partnerships. Our findings indicate that the actions of principals and parents included on table 1 contributed to positive outcomes for stakeholders and contributed to the advancement of the school. When we hear “inclusive schools” we often think of students with and

without disabilities learning together. However, our findings indicate that in schools implementing inclusive practices, the inclusion is extended to school professionals and students' parents. This finding is relevant considering the influence that school culture has on school excellence and positive stakeholder outcomes, including teacher satisfaction, student outcomes, and parent engagement (McKinney, Labat, & Labat, 2015).

Our findings reflect literature on best practices school principals may use to develop a strong school culture and parent-professional partnerships. For example, McKinney and colleagues (2015) note that transformative leaders inspire others, identify and meet needs and wants, and distribute leadership. Our findings also confirm the value of strategies highlighted in previous literature, such as visiting classrooms, communicating high expectations, greeting students and parents, creating school traditions (e.g., back to school events), and communicating respectfully (Elmore, 2000; Robison, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). Recent literature on effective school principals also noted the importance of principals establishing a clear mission (Habegger, 2008; Leithwood, Patten, & Jantzi, 2010; Peterson & Deal, 2002). Principals from our study communicated a mission of inclusion and positive student outcomes. This mission laid the foundation for a schoolwide culture of inclusion. Finally, research confirms that principals facilitating and building on social capital by collaborating with parents enhances stakeholder outcomes (Epstein, Galindo, & Sheldon, 2011; Gurr, Drysdale, & Mulford, 2005).

In addition to confirming the findings of research on best practices leading to a strong school culture and parent-professional partnerships, this study also contributes to the field in numerous novel ways. For example, our study takes place in six inclusive schools across the U.S. and includes the perspectives of parents who have children with and without disabilities and who report varied levels of school leadership and engagement. Further, this study highlights how the actions of principals and partners intersect and result in trusting partnerships.

This study highlights how principals created inclusive, welcoming school cultures, which, in turn, encouraged parent-professional partnerships. The results of this study also uncovered a notable intersection of the SWIFT features strong and engaged leadership and trusting family-professional partnerships; principals and parents both contributed to positive relationships and positive outcomes for the school, families, and students. The activities principals and parents engaged in were reciprocal in nature - principals and parents exchanged complimentary ideas and actions. As a result, both parties not only contributed to, but also benefited from, the contributions and activities. All contributions were welcomed and valued from all parties. The role or contributions of one person was never perceived as more important over the contributions of another (this was even true of parents who did not assume leadership roles). This underlying culture of belonging and equality resulted in an inclusive school culture that valued all contributions and individuals.

The results of this study also indicate that positive, frequent, and honest communication among parties was at the core of these trusting partnerships. Figure 2 demonstrates how findings from this study highlight the intersection of the SWIFT features of strong and engaged leadership and trusting parent-professional partnerships and how they may contribute to the life of inclusive schools.

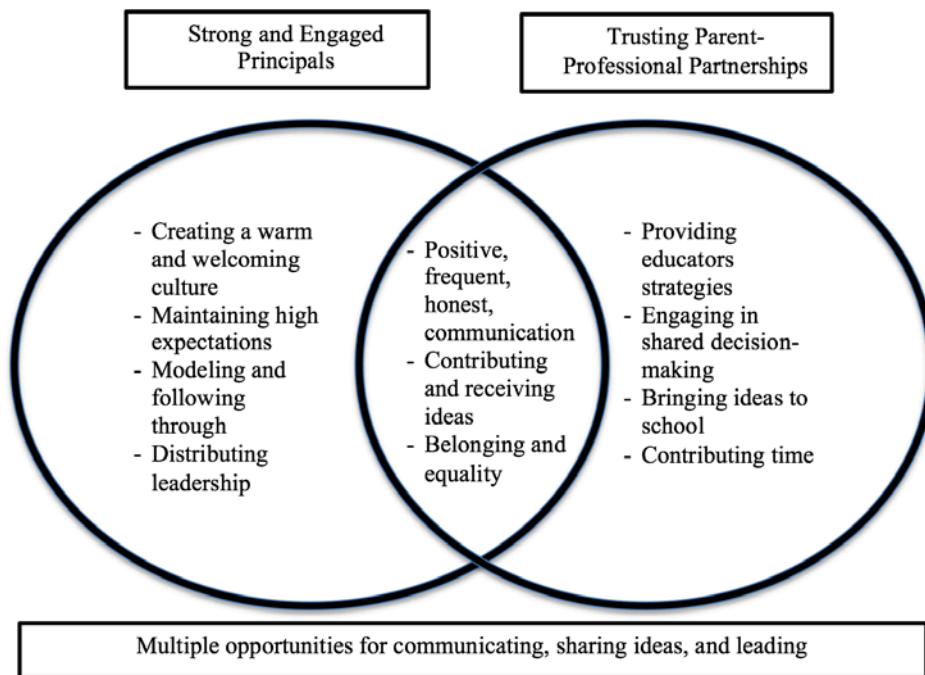


Figure 2. The intersection the SWIFT features of strong and engaged leadership and trusting family-professional partnerships
 Source: Produced by the authors.

4.1. Limitations

There are three primary limitations to this study. The first limitation relates to the selection process. We relied on school staff to purposely select participants (Maxwell, 2005) based on criteria we provided (e.g., characteristics of leaders, representative of school demographics). This process limited our ability to ensure that the participants included in the study accurately represented the criteria we provided. The second limitation is that our participants were parents of children attending five elementary and one middle school. This limits our understanding of parent perspectives to students who have yet to enter high school. The third limitation is that, in order to protect participant confidentiality and in adherence with our Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, we may only report limited participant and school demographic information. This restriction limits the generalizability of findings.

4.2. Future research

Given the diverse geographic representation of the schools included in our research, the findings from this study may be relevant to schools throughout the U.S. We believe individuals outside of the U.S. certainly can consider how the findings relate to schools in their local communities. However, notable benefits accrue from studying school systems that are geographically, programmatically, and demographically similar, including enhanced generalizability and relevance. Therefore, international researchers should consider conducting a similar knowledge development site study (i.e., identify schools implementing inclusive practices and emphasizing trusting parent-professional partnership) in their home countries to (a) dispel common myths of inclusion (e.g., students needs will not be met; students will be held back or fall behind; inclusion is too

costly); (b) explore how schools addressed barriers to inclusion; and (c) learn about promising inclusive practices, including strong and engaged school leadership and trusting parent-professional partnerships.

Despite a growing understanding of the benefits of inclusion and an emphasis for schools to practice inclusion, university teacher preparation programs still largely educate teachers either in special or general education. This practice of educating pre-service teachers (largely) in isolation from each other results in professionals who are unprepared to collaborate and support all students in inclusive environments (Sailor, 2009). Additionally, few university teacher preparation programs incorporate coursework dedicated to collaborating with parents and other members of the community to provide sufficient wraparound support for students as well as to build strong schools and communities.

As noted in the limitations section of this manuscript, our study was heavily weighted toward schools teaching students in primary schools. An additional area of future research includes researching inclusive practices in middle and high school settings (students aged 13 to 18 years). Although student achievement in the elementary grades (Goddard et al., 2001), middle school grades (Sweetland & Hoy, 2000), and high school grades (Hoy & Tarter, 1997) is likely to be higher in schools in which trusting partnerships exist than in schools in which partnerships and trust do not abound, inclusion and parent-professional partnerships tend to decrease as students age (Martinez, Conroy, & Cerreto, 2012). Further, a longitudinal study of elementary students attending schools implementing inclusive practices (such as the students attending schools involved in this study) and their parents to examine their educational experiences in new settings would enhance our understanding of the benefits of inclusion. Such a study would be especially informative if it examined ways students and parents address barriers to inclusion, including trusting parent-professional partnerships.

4.3. Conclusion

As our culture moves from the expectation of segregation as a means to meet exceptional students' needs to an expectation of inclusion throughout the school and community, research into the effective support of students with diverse needs is essential to ensure that inclusion is meaningful and successful as opposed to simply being place-based inclusion. Research has demonstrated the importance of family engagement in a student's educational outcomes and success. This study further contributes to that research by focusing on inclusive school settings and the role of the principal and parents in ensuring positive partnerships that facilitate the inclusion of not just the student, but the family as a whole, in the life of the school.

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